

Wilcox: 'Expose yourself to counter propaganda'

• WILCOX, from p. 4

He compared a fanatic's infatuation with an ideology to romantic infatuation.

"In a romantic context when we become infatuated with another person we idealize them. We tend to emphasize their good points and overlook their faults. We tend to rationalize their behaviors. We tend to interpret things positively."

Fanatics, he said, usually are unable to understand their own motives in joining these groups.

"People who become blind to their own motives are basically strangers to themselves," he said.

Their motives are often an attempt to satisfy a need not directly related to the ideologies of the groups they join. Wilcox made a strong distinction between a "reason to believe" and a "need to believe," saying an extremist is characterized by a "need to believe."

"With the need to believe, the belief is comforting, it fulfills some important psychological function. The emphasis is upon feelings and anxiety reduction."

"Most people, and particularly political ideologues or members of various cults and related movements, believe what they believe simply because it makes them feel good," he said.

Individual motives for adopting ideologies and joining ideological groups differ, but Wilcox outlined nine basic categories.

The first, the need to feel morally superior, Wilcox said was nearly universal.

"Moral worth is acquired from beliefs and causes," he said. "One can achieve status in the eyes of oneself and other people by believing and championing good causes, whether it's being kind to animals or shooting black people, depend-

ing upon the culture you're a part of."

A second motive, closely related to the first, is low self-esteem.

"Very few ideological fanatics are very satisfied with themselves. Inwardly they tend to be perfectionists. It's easier to imagine a perfect world than it is to imagine a perfect self. Their political activism is basically a perfuming operation."

Wilcox cited envy and resentment as the primary motive for many leftists and social reformers, and for classical anti-semitism.

"The implicit message is that anyone who is more successful than I am must have gotten there by some dishonest or exploitative means," he said.

Propaganda addiction is another motive he said was fairly common among members of extremist groups. Certain personalities are especially vulnerable to a skillful emotional appeal, he said.

"Some people really get caught up in this, it's hard to believe. Their whole body just seems to respond to what's going on around them."

Once, he said, he played a record of George Lincoln Rockwell, leader of the American Nazi Party, at a meeting of the Socialist Labor Party.

"He (Rockwell) gave a very stirring speech. His message was terrible but he delivered it about as well as I think anybody could."

"One fellow in the room was just transfixed. This guy had been a member of the Socialist Labor Party for years, he was a confirmed Marxist, and he was transfixed. He listened."

"Later on I noticed him taking down the address of the American Nazi Party off the record jacket."

Three years later, Wilcox said he found the man had moved to another part of the country and become a member of the

American Nazi Party.

A fourth reason Wilcox gave for joining an extremist group is to overcome feelings of helplessness. This, he said, is "fairly common among some of the more nutty political extremists."

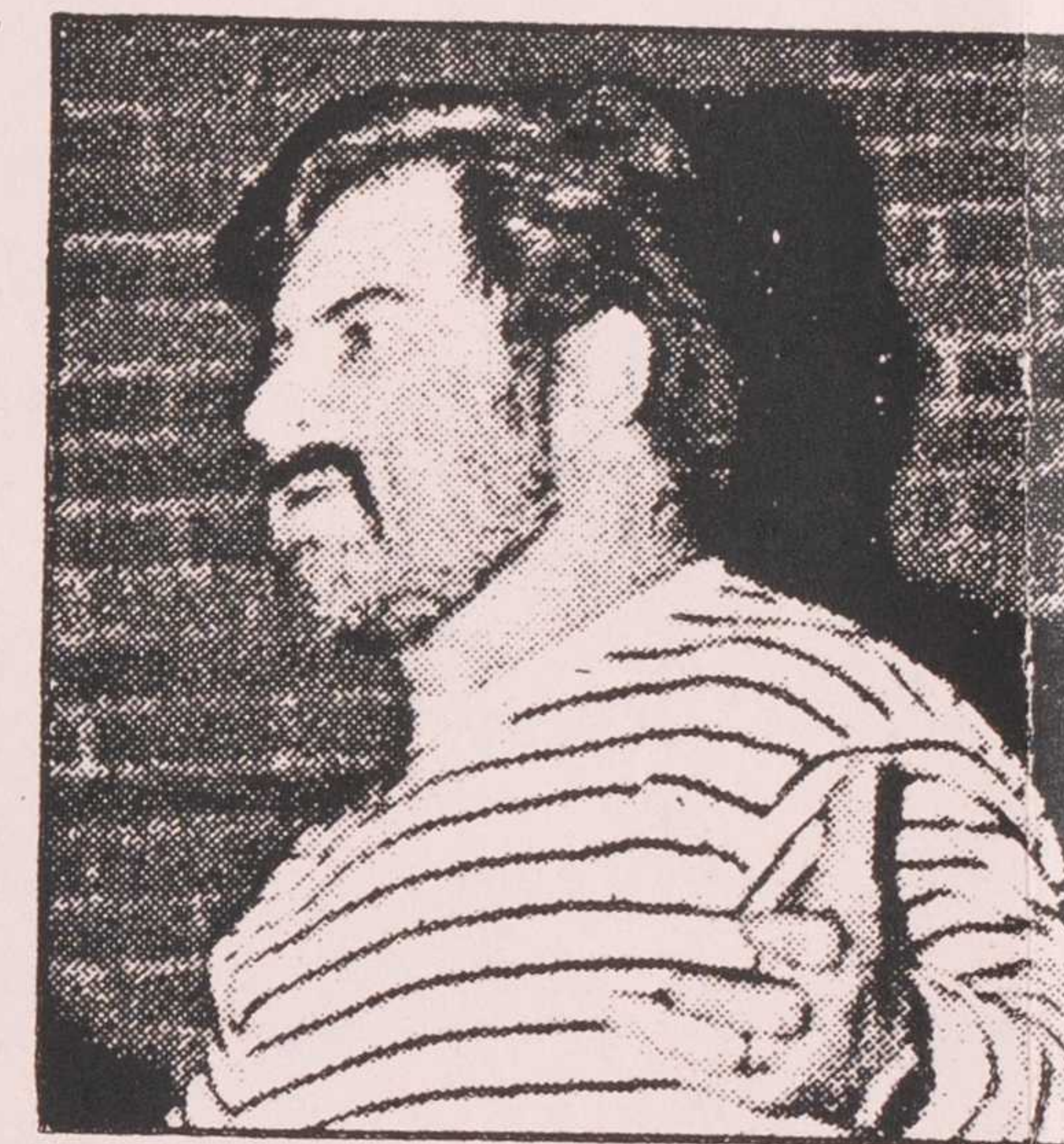
Another reason he gave is the need to feel unique or special. Many fanatics, he said, are people who are outcasts for some reason.

"Unusual belief systems tend to rationalize a felt sense of alienation from others because one is different," he said.

"The political cause or the cult accepts them. It assigns special meaning to their

'When they want to silence the opposition, this is a dead giveaway these people are up to no good.'

— Laird Wilcox



strangeness."

People also join ideological movements as a diversion from personal problems, he said.

"Many hardcore fanatics and activists have lives that are full of turmoil," he said.

Social pressure is another reason people join extremist groups. Many people, Wilcox said, acquire their beliefs through a "kind of osmosis" from the people around them.

Wilcox cited one young man who became a member of the Ku Klux Klan because "he worked in a body shop and

several other people in the body shop belonged to the local Klavern, and he felt that he could get along better with his co-workers, and maybe get a raise and promotion if he became like them. So he joined the Ku Klux Klan, for as trivial a reason as that."

Some people develop belief systems through an extension of the parent-child conflict, he said, becoming rightists or leftists because their parents were or were not.

"I really never met a hardcore radical — left or right — that I ever felt was completely grown up. They tended to be impa-

tient, whining, complaining children," he said.

A final reason Wilcox gave for joining an extremist group is suffering from paranoid delusions. These people, he said, are usually paranoid first and political second, and are too suspicious and fearful to accomplish much.

"Having extreme political feelings and opinions is very much a part of the human condition," he said.

"I learned a long time ago not to hate people or denigrate them because they had unusual political ideas."