

Local

In age of Trump, profile of Maryland white nationalist grows

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By J.F. Meils | AP October 19

COLLEGE PARK, Md. — When Hillary Clinton warned about the dangers of the “alt-right” in an August speech, she was referring to people like Poolesville, Maryland, native Matthew Heimbach.

Directly, it turned out.

“Hillary noted me by name on her website,” said Heimbach, a self-described white nationalist who sounded giddy at the mention.

At 25, Heimbach’s profile as a racial provocateur is on the rise. Despite his age he has been agitating about race for years, long before Trump ran for president. Though he is an avowed Trump supporter, Heimbach is first and foremost a product of Maryland, a liberal state still struggling to come to terms with its Confederate-friendly past.

“(Trump) is taking hate groups mainstream and helping a radical fringe take over the Republican Party,” Clinton said in a speech on Aug. 25. “The names may have changed. Racists now call themselves ‘racialists.’ White supremacists now call themselves ‘white nationalists.’ The paranoid fringe calls itself ‘alt-right.’ But the hate burns just as bright.”

Heimbach says he is not a racist, despite calling himself one in a 2014 “Nightline” interview that he argues was edited to quote him out of context. He also claims he is not anti-Semitic, but posed at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington with a sign that read: “Six million? More like 271,301.”

The reference to Heimbach on Clinton’s campaign website appears on a page dedicated to explaining Trump’s ties to the “white supremacist ‘alt-right.’” The following quote from a 2013 Heimbach speech called “I Hate Freedom” is featured: “The ‘freedom’ for other races to move freely into white nations is nonexistent. Stay in your own nations, we don’t want you here.”

Part of what sets Heimbach apart from others who traffic in race-based appeals is his willingness to argue his case with anyone, particularly those repulsed by his ideas.

“He’s very media savvy,” said Ryan Lenz, editor of the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Hatewatch blog. “He knows how to talk to people and make himself seem what he is not. He uses media to elevate his image. Meanwhile, he is hiding from the realities of his hate. And believe me, Matthew Heimbach does hate.”

Heimbach’s actions at a Trump rally in Louisville, Kentucky, on March 1 make it hard to argue with Lenz. In one of the first videos of violence at a Trump campaign event, Heimbach, who is baby-faced, heavy-set and with close-cropped black hair, is seen repeatedly shoving Kashiya Nwanguma, a black female protester, on the auditorium floor.

He was not arrested and charged in the incident, but was later sued in civil court by Nwanguma. In response to the charges, Heimbach said: “They’re another attempt by the far left to bog us down by using law-fare (sic),” playing on the word “warfare.”

In June, Heimbach organized but did not attend a joint rally in Sacramento, California, of his Traditionalist Worker Party and a local skinhead group that turned bloody when anti-fascist counter protesters arrived. Ten people were injured, two with critical stab wounds according to the Sacramento Fire Department.

Where Heimbach goes from here will answer the question of whether he is an anomaly made prominent by Trump, or a future far-right leader who remains on the political scene after this year’s presidential election.

“If Hillary wins, the Republican establishment will be totally discredited,” he said. “The ‘alt-right’ will be the only option for the white working class. We will become their de facto voice.”

Heimbach is actively preparing for the possibility.

In 2018, he plans to run for a state legislature seat in Paoli, Indiana, where he moved in 2013.

And Heimbach believes he can win. “There is a clear path to electoral victory,” he said. “If I can just get a sizeable percentage of people who are disgusted with Democrats and Republicans to vote again, I can win the seat.”

There is also his charisma to consider. Speaking with Heimbach — who is widely described as friendly, well-spoken and accessible — is disorienting. He is genial, smooth and adept at presenting his views as simple solutions to complex problems, and not an improbable return to race-based segregation.

Yet all his purported solutions lead to the same thing white supremacists have been seeking for years: a homeland for whites only within the United States.

“America is big enough to divide,” said Heimbach, citing the breakup of the Soviet Union into different ethnic-based republics as a model for what could happen in the U.S. “We’ll take any patch of dirt. We’re not asking for people to follow us. We’re asking to opt out.”

He intends to pursue this end by political means. In addition to his own candidacy in 2018, Heimbach plans to field a slate of Traditionalist Worker Party candidates for local, state and county offices in regions he considers friendly to his cause, specifically

in rural Appalachia.

“We don’t have to win to win,” said Heimbach, referring to the idea of preventing Republican candidates from holding on to their seats. “If you support free trade, amnesty, gun regulation, more money to Israel, if we can go ahead and knock you out of office, we’re going to have a disproportionate impact on American politics.”

Heimbach’s Traditionalist Worker Party has yet to field a candidate in any race. However, Heimbach said he has already recruited seven candidates to run for state or local offices in Kentucky, West Virginia and Indiana. For now, Western Maryland is not in Heimbach’s sights, but he hopes to run candidates there one day.

“Western Maryland doesn’t like being under the control of Annapolis,” said Heimbach. “We’d like to work with people there to have their own state, or join West Virginia so they can be a part of state that more reflects their values.”

“There’s no easy answer to why someone becomes radicalized,” says Patrick James, a researcher and project manager for the Profiles of Individual Radicalization project at the University of Maryland. “But they tend to come from a middle-class background.”

Heimbach’s father, who did not return calls for comment, was a history teacher at the local high school in Poolesville, Maryland. The town’s population is 5,000, almost 90 percent of whom are white and with a median family income of \$150,000, nearly double the state median, according to the Maryland Department of Planning.

At Poolesville High, Heimbach became interested in history and learned about Maryland’s seditious side during the Civil War. Although Maryland never seceded from the Union, its proximity and ties to the South were well known. Its state song, “Maryland My Maryland,” was written in 1861 at the start of the Civil War and includes a lyric about how the state “spurns the Northern scum.”

Poolesville was founded by a man named John Poole, whose house is now a historic site in town. According to Heimbach, there is a framed quote on the wall in the house from a Union commander that reads: “Poolesville was most treasonous town in the entire south.”

During high school, Heimbach also discovered Confederate ancestors in his family tree and claimed that Poolesville had voted for segregationist George Wallace repeatedly. According to the Montgomery County Board of Elections, which could only locate polling going back to the 1976 presidential primaries the last time Wallace ran for President, Poolesville cast only 29 votes for him out of a total of about 400. However, there is evidence of a local Poolesville group that tried to stop desegregation there in 1956.

“There was a huge part of our local history that was ignored based on political correctness,” said Heimbach.

After high school, he attended Montgomery College just 30 minutes away from Poolesville. It was where he began to despise what he called the “social justice warriors” on campus. By the time he transferred to Towson University in 2011, Maryland’s liberal side had gotten under his skin.

“If you can’t make it at Towson with political differences, you can’t make it anywhere,” said Richard Vatz, the Towson professor who briefly served as a faculty adviser to a student group Heimbach started there called Youth for Western Civilization.

Heimbach saw it differently. “Towson was Montgomery College on steroids,” he said.

So was it old vs. new Maryland that led Heimbach to be called part of a “hate movement” by a candidate for president?

“More often radicalization is driven by some kind of emotional need,” says James, “a quest for significance, the need to be someone.”

In response, Heimbach said: “I think that’s dismissive of the legitimate political, economic and social concerns of white millennials.”

Emotional or otherwise, Heimbach’s attention-seeking efforts began in earnest at Towson, where he formed the White Student Union, escalating his race-based provocations by chalking a series of slogans around campus that included, “White Pride,” “White Guilt is Over” and “Celebrate Your European Heritage.”

Despite Towson's standing as the safest school in the Maryland collegiate system for crimes per capita in 2014, Heimbach and other members of the White Student Union embarked on campus night patrols in 2013 to prevent black-on-white crime. The ensuing attention included a widely seen profile by Vice Media that landed Heimbach firmly on the larger white nationalist scene.

Upon graduation he doubled down, joining the neo-Confederate League of the South, attending events with the Aryan Terror Brigade and the neo-Nazi National Socialist Movement. He twice addressed the annual conference hosted by Stormfront, one of the biggest Internet forums for hate speech. He has also traveled abroad, visiting with far-right groups in Europe, including Greece's Golden Dawn, the Czech Workers' Party and the New Right Party in Romania.

All of it in apparent preparation for what is happening now, or per Heimbach's master plan, in 2018.

By then, it will be more clear whether he is the next David Duke, to whom he's so often compared, or merely as Lenz said: "The consummate glad hander of the racist right."

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