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William H. Regnery II, 80, Dies; Bankrolled the Rise of the Alt-Right

The reclusive heir to a Midwestern textile fortune, he sought, through funding and organizing, to upgrade and update white supremacy.



William H. Regnery II, right, with Richard Spencer in 2016, as seen in the 2020 documentary “White Noise.” Mr. Regnery installed Mr. Spencer as head of the National Policy Institute, a think tank bankrolled by Mr. Regnery that espoused white supremacist views.

By Clay Risen

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William H. Regnery II, a reclusive heir to a Midwestern textile fortune who bankrolled some of the leading organizations and figures behind the rise of the alt-right and championed efforts to win adherents to a modernized notion of white supremacy, died on July 2 at his home in Boca Grande, Fla. He was 80.

A cousin, Alfred Regnery, said the cause was cancer.

Mr. Regnery rarely granted interviews or spoke in public, and he sought to work behind the scenes, through funding and organizing. He came to his far-right views late in life, at least publicly, saying he had grown disenchanted with the “ebullient optimism” of the Republican Party in the early 1990s.

Instead, he wrote in a 2015 memoir, “Left Behind,” he saw “nascent political correctness stifling debate, unrestricted immigration changing the demographics of the country, affirmative action penalizing whites, and open housing curtailing freedom of association.”

In response, he began to lay the intellectual groundwork for a new movement built around strengthening what he believed was America's founding white identity, embracing eugenics, sharp immigration restrictions and even the splintering of North America into racially pure "ethnostates."

In 2001 he founded the Charles Martel Society, named for the Frankish king who defeated a Muslim army at the Battle of Tours in 732, an event that many white supremacists credit with saving Western civilization. The society's main output is *The Occidental Quarterly*, which publishes academic-sounding essays with titles like "Reflections on Some Aspects of Jewish Self-Deception."

Membership in the society is confidential; Mr. Regnery intended it to be something of a safe space for like-minded extremists. To give his views a more public face, in 2005 he spent \$380,000 to create the National Policy Institute, a think tank designed to inject white-supremacist ideas into mainstream political conversations.

But the institute languished for its first decade, even after Mr. Regnery hired the alt-right figure Richard Spencer, a charismatic former Ph.D. student, in 2011.

The institute organized a "European identitarian congress" in Budapest in 2014, and both Mr. Regnery and Mr. Spencer traveled to Hungary to attend. But the conference was a bust: The Hungarian government banned the meeting, and Mr. Regnery was detained upon arrival at the airport and deported the next morning. Mr. Spencer, who arrived in the country by land, was also deported.

Their fortunes turned a year later, as Donald J. Trump, early in his presidential campaign, began to energize the far right with his calls for immigration restrictions and other policies long advocated by the institute.

Mr. Regnery saw Mr. Trump's victory as his own. At an institute conference in Washington just after the 2016 election, he said, "I never thought in my life I would experience an event such as this, and I am now persuaded that with your courage the alt-right side of history will prevail."

Mr. Regnery preferred to keep out of the spotlight and let Mr. Spencer speak for the institute. But in a 2017 interview with *Buzzfeed News*, he took credit for the seemingly sudden rise of the alt-right.

"My support," he said, "has produced a much greater bang for the buck than by the brothers Koch or Soros Inc."

Buzzfeed called him "the most influential racist you've never heard of."



Mr. Regnery, seen outside his home in Boca Grande, Fla., in 2017, once said the only way to save America's white identity was for it to break up into several smaller nations, one each for the country's various ethnic groups.

William Henry Regnery II was born on Feb. 25, 1941, in the Chicago area and grew up in Hinsdale, Ill., a suburb. His father, William F. Regnery, worked for the family textile business, Joanna-Western Mills. His mother, Elisabeth (Brittain) Regnery, was a homemaker.

He is survived by his wife, Judith (Page-Timson) Regnery; his brothers, Peter and Patrick; two sons from a previous marriage, William F. and David Regnery; two of his wife's children, Robert and William T. Regnery, whom he adopted; two children with Mrs. Regnery, Jonathan Regnery and Johanna Durkin; and 12 grandchildren.

Mr. Regnery was not the only member of his family active in conservative politics. His grandfather, William H. Regnery, was a founding member of the America First Committee, which sought to keep the United States out of World War II. His uncle Henry founded Regnery Publishing, which produces books by a range of conservative voices, including William F. Buckley Jr., Ann Coulter and Mr. Trump.

Mr. Regnery attended the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied political science and joined the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, a conservative student organization co-founded by Mr. Buckley. He left before graduating to work on Senator Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign.

In the 2017 interview with BuzzFeed, one of the few times he spoke to the news media, he claimed that his efforts on behalf of Mr. Goldwater included what he called "Operation Dewdrop," in which he attempted to deter Democratic voters in Philadelphia by hiring a plane to seed the skies with dry ice, in the hopes of making it

rain. He failed — though, he recalled, he burned his fingers on the ultracold dry ice containers.

Mr. Regnery later returned to Chicago, where he worked for Joanna-Western Mills. He became the company's president in 1980 but was ousted a year later, after several quarters of poor financial performance. According to his own account, he spent the rest of his career in a variety of businesses, while also dabbling in Illinois politics.

In his memoir, he recounted how he first began to turn against the Republican Party after listening to a speech in 1993 in which the economist Milton Friedman declared that the end of the Cold War meant that the free-market economic doctrines of the Reagan era had won. In an early sign of that break, according to a 2017 profile in *Mother Jones*, Mr. Regnery ran unsuccessfully for Illinois secretary of state in 1994 on the Term Limits and Tax Limits Party ticket.

Five years later, he convened a Who's Who of white supremacists for a conference in Florida, where he delivered a speech, "For Our Children's Children," in which he said the only way to save America's white identity was for it to break up into several smaller countries, one each for the country's various ethnic groups.

His racism grew more explicit. He announced plans in 2004 to start a whites-only dating site. It never happened, but he continued to worry that white people were in danger of extinction: In 2006 he delivered a speech in Chicago in which he said, "The white race may go from master of the universe to an anthropological curiosity."

By then he had severed most of his ties with mainstream Republicans, and they with him. That same year the leadership of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, which he had joined in college, removed him from its board.

Mr. Regnery may have seen the election of Mr. Trump as his ticket back into the party, with the National Policy Institute and Mr. Spencer as his vehicle. It didn't happen.

In the years since Mr. Trump's victory, the institute has faced mounting financial and personnel problems, especially after Mr. Spencer helped organize the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Va., in 2017, in which a white supremacist, Alex Fields Jr., drove his car into a crowd of counterprotesters, injuring several and killing one.

By 2020 the institute's website was moribund, with no new content in months, and the Internal Revenue Service had revoked its tax-exempt status. In May a judge in Illinois ordered the institute to pay \$2.4 million to Bill Burke, who was injured by Mr. Fields, but it is unclear where the money will come from.