



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on March 1, 2012

“Sovereign Citizen Movement” Continues to Attract Attention

During his trial several other charges against him were dismissed including attempts to use the [861 argument](#), a claim that section 861 of the tax code exempts certain activities from the income tax and that is used unsuccessfully by tax protestors to avoid paying income taxes, as well as fraudulent attempts to obtain income-tax refunds from the IRS — Snipes referred to himself as “a non-resident alien” despite the fact that he is a U.S.-born citizen.



These are some of the tools the “sovereign citizen movement” (SCM) teaches in its quest to free members from various onerous and perceived unconstitutional laws and to declare themselves independent of the government. They [take the position](#) that they are “answerable only to common law” and therefore are not subject to any statutes at the federal, state, or municipal levels. They do not officially recognize U.S. currency and declare themselves to be “free of any legal constraints.” One of those restraints is the obligation to pay income taxes, which they consider to be illegitimate, hence the failed “861 argument” in the Snipes case.

A few of the estimated 100,000-300,000 “members” occasionally go off the deep end and when confronted with reality, use threats of force and even violence in defense of their beliefs. According to the [Los Angeles Times](#), Shawn Rice was a “sovereign citizen” who, upon being served a warrant for money-laundering, strapped on a bulletproof vest, armed himself, and then barricaded himself in his home in Seligman, Arizona. He was arrested after a 10-hour standoff and now is awaiting trial.

Several recent clashes, some of them fatal, have raised concerns within the FBI, which is now focusing on SCM members, along with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the National Terrorism Center (NTC).

In April of 2010, the FBI [issued an alert](#) explaining that “sovereign citizens are anti-government extremists who believe that even though they physically reside in the country, they are separate or ‘sovereign’ from the United States. As a result, they believe they don’t have to answer to any government authority, including courts, taxing entities, motor vehicle departments, or law enforcement.” The FBI warning went on to say:



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Not every action taken in the name of the sovereign citizen ideology is a crime, but the list of illegal actions committed by these groups and individuals is extensive (and puts them squarely on our radar) ... sovereign citizens

- commit murder and physical assault;
- threaten judges, law enforcement professionals, and government personnel;
- impersonate police officers and diplomats;
- use fake currency, passports, license plates, and driver's licenses; and
- engineer various white-collar scams, including mortgage fraud and so-called "redemption" schemes.

Most notable was the incident involving Jerry Kane and his 16-year-old-son Joe during a [routine traffic stop](#) on May 20, 2010 in West Memphis, Arkansas, which ended with two police officers and Jerry and his son dead from gunshot wounds. Kane considered himself a "sovereign citizen" and was engaged in holding seminars around the country that taught others not only how to use various tactics to escape from the system but also how to harass politicians and other government officials who dared to inflict their will on them. Kane didn't carry a driver's license, and his SCM license plate, in the West Memphis incident, caused the officers to stop and question him.

Kane made his position crystal clear at one of his seminars [when he said](#),

I don't want to have to kill anybody. But if they keep messing with me, that's what it's going to have to come out, that's what it's going to come down to is I'm gonna have to kill. And if I have to kill one, then I'm not going to be able to stop.

In a segment on the *CBS* program *60 Minutes* last May, an author investigating the movement, J.J. MacNab, was asked about the typical SCM member. She responded, "The average sovereign citizen today is 30 to 35 years old and is in economic dire straits. They've probably lost their job. They've probably lost their wife." The interviewer asked MacNab, "Are they paranoid?"

MacNab: Many are.

60 Minutes: Conspiracy theorists?

MacNab: Most are.

The interviewer then asked Alfred Adask, who claims to be a "sovereign citizen" for over 28 years, "Why is the sovereign citizen movement growing?" He answered,

What's driving people to it is they're beginning to understand that the government has moved away from fundamental principles that this nation was built on. Where are those limits in limited government? The sovereignty movement is attempting to rediscover those limits and reassert them.

Sovereign citizens often file bogus property liens on targeted officials, which aren't uncovered until years later when a piece of property is being sold. They file fake tax forms that are designed to ruin an "enemy's" credit rating or cause them to be audited by the IRS.

It's unfortunate that the "sovereign citizen movement" appears, on the surface, to understand some of the concerns of legitimate conservatives in the freedom fight but have, for various reasons, twisted and confused and misapprehended those concerns to their own ends, sometimes with tragic consequences.



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Economist Gary North was explicit about what a proper response to the SCM should be: “Fringe groups that take up arms against the state attract people without good sense. It is wise to avoid them.”

Photo of Wesley Snipes: AP Images



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