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Boston Man in Costly Fight With Scientology

By DOUGLAS FRANTZ

Leaving her home in Boston one morning early this month, Therese Minton was shocked to find her husband's photograph on fliers stuck to cars and trees in their Beacon Hill neighborhood. Beneath the photo was text that began: "The face of religious bigotry. Your neighbor Bob Minton is not all that he seems."

A few nights later, as children arrived for the birthday party of one of the Mintons' two young daughters, three Scientologists picketed quietly outside the home, handing out the same flier.

And the same night of his daughter's party, Mr. Minton was among about 40 anti-Scientologists marching in front of the church's spiritual headquarters in Clearwater, Fla., to mark the second anniversary of a Scientologist's death, for which the protesters blamed the church.

These are among the latest skirmishes in an escalating war between the Church of Scientology and Robert S. Minton Jr., a retired investment banker, who has spent \$1.25 million to finance some of the church's most outspoken critics. Mr. Minton became a dedicated foe of the church after learning of what he considered its heavy-handed efforts to silence the critics.

The battleground in this conflict is varied, running from the streets of Boston and Clearwater to the Internet, and its oratory is a clear illustration of the fervor on both sides.

In addition to the fliers, the church has private investigators digging through Mr. Minton's past, and Mr. Minton says he suspects that two men he saw following his school-age daughters twice in October were church operatives, though he says he has no proof.

"I realize that these are the tactics that this church uses to try to intimidate people it can't control," Mr. Minton said. "They do intimidate me. I'm not a total fool. But I'm not going to walk away either."

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Church officials vehemently denied authorizing anyone to follow Mr. Minton's children and said that he made up those incidents to get press attention. But they acknowledged picketing his house and using private investigators to examine his background. They said both steps were legal and necessary.

"Sometimes it requires aggressive litigation and investigation to uncover the depths of the nefarious plots that have been attempted to destroy Scientology," said Michael J. Rinder, a director of the Church of Scientelogy Internetical

Scientology International.

Mr. Rinder and other church officials questioned Mr. Minton's motives and contended that his actions and those of the people he is helping constitute hate crimes that would not be tolerated against another religion. "The people that we know of whom Minton has funded have expressed their intentions to destroy the Church of Scientology, not merely to



Kirsten Eistner for The New York Times

Robert Minton, a retired investment banker, outside his home in Boston, where Scientologists picketed during his daughter's birthday party.

'criticize,' " Mr. Rinder said. "If he wants to fund it, fine. He will have to live with the bigotry he foments and be accountable for the harm he enables to occur."

In a letter to Mr. Minton last month, a church lawyer demanded that he stop financing opponents of Scientology and warned that his actions had "crossed the threshold of legality."

After consulting his own lawyers, Mr. Minton said he was told that he had done nothing illegal. He said he remained determined to continue his

A church encounters a critic with deep pockets.

financial campaign.

Mr. Minton seems an unlikely participant in this battle over the nature and practices of Scientology. He retired in 1992, at age 46, after earning a fortune trading in the debts of third-world countries. He and his wife had planned a quiet life with their two daughters. He is an assistant Little League coach and is active in raising money for his daughters' private school.

Mr. Minton said he had never heard of Scientology until the spring of 1995 when he learned of the church's activities through the Internet. Although he said he did not question Scientology's beliefs, he said he objected to its treatment of some members and its efforts to silence critics on the Internet. "The more I learned about the Church of Scientology," he said, "the more I couldn't believe that this organization existed in the United States."

What Mr. Minton said particularly struck him as excessive was a series

of court-authorized raids by church lawyers and United States marshals on private homes in 1995. Computers and related material were confiscated from former Scientologists who had published high-level church scriptures on the Internet. The raids were part of copyright-infringement suits filed by the church against the former members.

Though Scientology disseminates much of its voluminous scripture to the public, certain high-level documents describing its religious techniques are copyrighted and protected by extensive security. The church won a \$2,500 judgment against one person whose home was raided and preliminary injunctions to stop publication in the other cases.

Scientologists believe that people live many lifetimes and accumulate many traumas. They believe that counseling courses, known as auditing, can clear away those old traumas and help Scientologists lead more productive lives. Church members often pay substantial fees for the sessions, which has generated debate about the church's mission.

In the spring of 1996, Mr. Minton posted a \$360,000 reward on the Internet for information leading to the revocation of the tax exemption that Scientology received in 1993 after a two-year inquiry by the Internal Revenue Service determined that it was a bona fide church. The reward expired unclaimed that fall, but by then Mr. Minton was committed.

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"He's a man of principle and a very tenacious person," said Robert P. Smith, a Boston financier, who worked with Mr. Minton on many business deals.

Over the objections of his wife and former business associates, Mr. Minton decided to finance some of the most vocal and persistent opponents of Scientology. He lent \$440,000 to a former Scientologist who has been trying for a decade to collect a civil judgment he won against the church.

Mr. Minton and his wife bought a \$260,000 house on an island in Puget Sound and provided it to two former Scientologists who are persistent critics of the church.

Some recipients of Mr. Minton's largesse operate Internet Web sites that are fiercely, and sometimes profanely, opposed to Scientology. Church officials say that some of those people have advocated violence against Scientologists.

But the payment that seems to have angered Scientology officials and lawyers most is the \$100,000 that Mr. Minton gave recently to Kennan Dandar, a lawyer in Tampa, Fla., who represents the family of Lisa McPherson in a wrongful-death civil lawsuit against Scientology.

Ms. McPherson's death two years ago after a 17-day stay under the care of Scientologists in a church-owned hotel in Clearwater has become a rallying point for church critics. It was her death that Mr. Minton and others marked with their protest march earlier this month, and he was among several participants whose neighborhoods had been posted with leaflets. The local prosecutor is expected to decide in the coming weeks whether anyone will be charged in connection with the death.

Mr. Minton, who said he promised to provide another \$250,000 for the McPherson case, if necessary, said the money was intended to level the playing field between Mr. Dandar, who runs a small law practice with his brother, and the church, which has hired a small army of lawyers.

The judge in the McPherson case said Scientology's lawyers were permitted to explore the motivation for the financing of the case. The church's lawyers said Mr. Minton's role taints the litigation by substituting Mr. Minton's agenda for that of the McPherson estate.

"This is no longer a case about Lisa McPherson," said Laura L. Vaughan, a church lawyer. "It is an improper attempt to put the entire religion on trial."

Mr. Dandar said that he contacted the Florida Bar Association before accepting the \$100,000 and was told it was permissible as long as the family approved it and Mr. Minton did not control any aspect of the case. An ethics officer with the bar group said in an interview that Mr. Dandar's interpretation was correct.

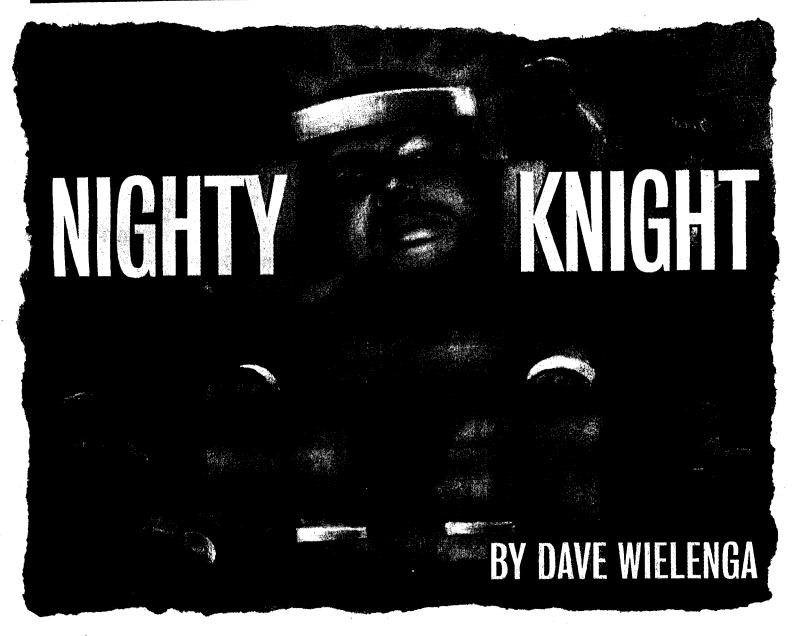
But church officials see Mr. Minton as the latest in a long line of people who have unfairly attacked Scientology since its creation in 1954.

J. Gordon Melton, director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion, an independent research group in Santa Barbara, Calif., said Scientology had probably received the most persistent criticism of any church in America in recent years. But he said the Scientologists bear some of the responsibility.

"They don't get mad, they get even," Mr. Melton said. "They turn critics into enemies and enemies into dedicated warriors for a lifetime." December 18-24, 1997

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A N G E L E S



SUGE KNIGHT IS IN JAIL. DEATH ROW RECORDS IS IN DISARRAY. ITS ARTISTS ARE JUMPING SHIP. NOW GUESS WHICH VULTURES ARE LINING UP TO SNACK ON THE CARCASS

Gilstrap checks out the Scientology Santa in Hollywood



Film: Peter Rainer calls the ultra-expensive *Titanic* a cornball success

Fault Lines:
Disney Hall's chief
fundraiser heads for
the back door

Scotch and soda: The por cartoons of th Yummy Fur

Peter Gilstrap

Walkin' in a Hubbard Wonderland

As you might expect, the Church of Scientology's annual Christmas show in Hollywood is about more than just Christmas

They warned me. They told me, "Whatever you do, don't do that!" Their eyes rolled, their heads shook slowly back and forth as they muttered things like, "You'll be sorry..." These were reporters talking, mind you, hard-nosed journalists who ordinarily scoff at risk.

But I wasn't going to infiltrate the Klan. I wasn't going undercover with the Talaban. What I was going to do, the fearsome story that I was about to cover, was the 14th annual L. Ron Hubbard Hollywood Winter Wonderland.

I'd worked with a reporter at a paper back east who had once written a column about the Church of Scientology. The church didn't like it. They'd taken him to court, done an investigation on him, claimed he was part of a massive conspiracy against Scientology and that he'd been a militia member. I can tell you that the worst thing this guy was guilty of was wearing dress shoes with those little leather tassels.

It's true that L. Ron himself was no fan of the media. In "The True Story of Scientology" he writes that reporters are the "Merchants of Chaos." Also, "There is no good press. There is only bad press about everything. To yearn for 'good press' is foolhardy in a society where the Mer-chants of Chaos reign."

But surely, I reasoned, this is just a Christmas pageant, the Hollywood Winter Wonderland. How much chaos could I possibly wrench out of that?

On the day we can fully trust each other there will be peace on Earth-L. Ron Hubbard

That's the message they've got prominently displayed here at the Winter Wonderland, a jolly oasis of pine trees and shag carpets of fake snow right next door to the Scientology building in the middle of all the dreck and tourists on Hollywood Boulevard. There is another joyous Christmas message here in the form of an enormous billboard that dwarfs the "trust each other' thing: "Know Yourself, Know Life Buy the Book wherever paperbacks are sold.'

Oh, but there's plenty of Christmas cheer in the overcast air, as seasonal music wafts from the PA and parents and kids and street people and rock

types and cops and other Hollywood Boulevardiers mill about waiting for Santa. It's a curious scene, Currier and Ives meets Weegee.

Who's that over there with the huge feet and the red nose and the fright wig? Why, it's Silly Willy the Clown! I go talk to Silly Willy, who says he is not a Scientologist,

merely a "clown for hire" who "just has faith in the Lord." This is his second year at the Winter Wonderland, twisting balloons into fun shapes for the kids. I ask Silly Willy if he is bothered by the bad rap Scientology seems to get, if it could reflect on his nondenominational clown image.

"As a matter of fact," replies Silly Willy the Clown, "last night we had some people over and they were asking me, 'is it true that Scientology is a cult?' I said, 'You know what? No.' Because the people that I know that point the finger and say that are either into religion or no religion, but yet they don't take the time to find out who [Scientologists] are or what it's about. If they would

take the time to find out what it's about they

would say, 'Hey, it's not a cult.'"
I ponder Silly Willy's bulbous nose and tremendous white lips curled upward to indicate extreme happiness. Finished pondering, I ask the funster pundit what Sci-



Scientology Santa: So be good, for goodness sake.

entology really is all about.

"To me, it's just about life in general and how to make a better life," Silly Willy offers. "Not just for our own personal per-

The kids range in age from about six to about 14, and they exude so much good vibe ju-ju it's frightening

sons, but for this whole planet. Who wouldn't want a better planet than what it

And that includes clowns? "And that includes clowns."

I wander away from Silly Willy as he begins sculpting his narrow balloons, shaping them into what looks like a cross with breasts attached to the top. A woman named Kaye Conley, whose business card identifies her as Director of L. Ron Hubbard Public Relations, approaches me. She is smiling, friendly; I am not afraid. Conley explains how this whole thing began.

and a group of kids gets up to entertain us with cheery Christmas song. They are called Kids Onstage, and, according to Conley, "most of them are Scientologists and they're great!" The kids range in age from about six to about 14, I'd guess, and they exude so much good vibe ju-ju it's frightening. They smile broadly, constantly, they bob up and down, weave back and forth, do little dance moves. They possess that rare quality of someone who has been starched with happiness and desperately needs you to know it, that comes across in cast members of Up With People, Disney parades and Ice Capades.

But, hey, if you like that sort of thingthey're great!

blades

Gradually, the distinct sound of chopper

through the sky

becomes stronger and stronger as all heads turn to the north and we see it: The Scientology Santa Copter" bearing the long-awaited Scientology Santa. The black machine (which, speaking as a Merchant of Chaos, seems rather ominous) comes in low and circles once, twice, three times as Santa leans out and waves. He has some kind of a

speaker set up, and

yells "Ho ho ho.

slicing



Free Silly Willy: A Christmas clown, doin' it for the kids.

"It first started when Mr. Hubbard wanted to donate a 65-foot Christmas tree-he specified it before he passed away—to the kids of Hollywood." The tree is there, every foot of it, drawing the kids of Hollywood to Hubbard's personal specifica-

tions. Of course, he knew more than a little about what kids like. Before creating his very own church and authoring Dianetics. L. Ron wrote hundreds of less philosophical works like Buckskin Brigades and Murder at Pirate Castle.

I tell Conley that I will be writing about the Winter Wonderland, and wonder if the Church of Scientology will come down on me.

"Yeah, right!" she manages to say between guffaws.

So I have nothing to fear?

"Absolutely not!" Ha ha ha ha...

I am comforted by this, and make my way through the crowd to the portable churro stand with the "Mean People Suck

sticker on it and buy a nice warm pretzel.

The Santa Copter hovers above the eight-story Scientology building, presumably dropping Santa off, and then—sure enough—there he is waving over the side at us! And he's got two elves with him. There are black ropes hanging down the building's red brick wall, and Santa and his elves fix these ropes into their special

Christmas mountaineering harnesses and begin rappelling toward earth. They move like pros, kicking away from the wall gracefully and gliding ever further down until they perch on the Know Yourself, Know Life billboard. Shameless showman George M. Cohan, whose star is right there on the sidewalk in front of the Wonderland, would heartily approve of this fabulous Christmas spectacle.

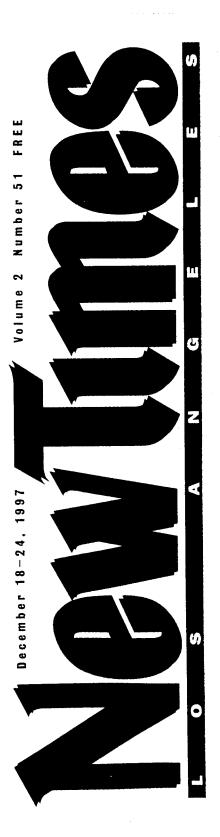
Next to me is a group of young boys. One of them says, "Maybe Santa will fall and break his neck!" They are all destroyed by laughter, no doubt headed for careers in journalism.

Before you can say Tom Cruise, Santa has disappeared and reappeared, taking a seat in the Winter Wonderland paradisc where he will greet the kids and, for five bucks, allow himself to be photographed with them. The line forms quickly as Santa does what Santas do; he jiggles and chortles and spreads his legs wide to offer plenty of knee and lap to the excited tots. The Polaroid camera flashes again and again, as the classic Christmas promo process is repeated.

Meanwhile, the Kids Onstage are singing passionately about something Christmas-oriented, beaming their smiles and well-coached voices of young Scientology out at us.

Finally, I must leave the Hollywood Win-Continued on page 6

The Scientologists have erected a small stage,



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Silstrap

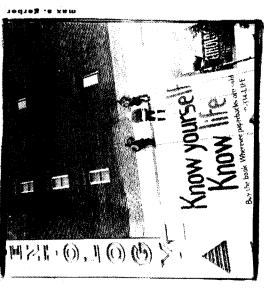
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ter Wonderland. Departing from the gigantic Christmas tree, the snow, the carols, and the Santa that is part human fly, I enter plain old Hollywood, which has been lurking just inches away. The Christmas spirit is quickly gone, though the spirit of giving lingers on among the Scientologists standing in front of their building, who want to give me a stress test.

Why not? I'm feeling so good after the Wonderland experience that my personal stress monkey is well off my back, passed out under that 65-foot tree. A young Scientologist instructs me to sit down and grasp two metal cylinders wired to a blue plastic device called an Electropsychometer, or E-Meter. They are sticky, thick with the hand prints of countless other stress-test

takers. The E-Meter will help "locate areas of spiritual distress or travail," according to the book *What is Scientology?* A lie detector for the soul, packaged by what looks like Mattel.

The guy asks if I have had an upsetting experience lately. I say no. He seems to be following a script he has memorized and continues, telling me to think about it—the upsetting experience I told him I didn't have. But wait—the needle is moving. Triumphantly, he asks what I was thinking of. I tell him I don't know, maybe a headache I had a while back.

At this moment my friend Max the photographer walks up and stands there watching. The young Scientologist looks like he's seen a ghost and points to the camera hanging from



Up against the wall. Santa and elves rappel to earth.

Max's neck.
"What's that?" he demands of

x. A camera. "A camera?" Yeah. "What are you doing with it?"

Nothing. I'm standing here watching this guy take a stress test.
"Are you with the media?"

At this point I butt in and tell him we're with New Times; distressed, he turns to an older Scientologist for unspoken guidance. Enough. I place the cylinders back next to the E-Meter and thank them for the stress test, though after this test I feel a little stressed.

uns test treet a nuce stressed.

All I can say is, on the day we can fully trust each other there will be peace on earth.

Scientology Decoded

OffBeat readers, take heart. The cryptic Scientology notation described here last week has been decoded.

The notation, "1.1", was in a fax — mistakenly sent to our machine — from an employee of Scientology-affiliated textbook publisher Applied Scholastics to a Santa Ana merchant, directing her on what to write in a letter to the Weekly's editor. (We've been flooded with pro-Scientology mail since we published an article critical of a series of five textbooks inspired by the teachings of church founder L Ron Hubbard ["The Learning Cure" by Sara Catania, November 14-20].) The fax warns: "Be careful of typos, etc. This is a 1.1 publication and you know they'll nail us for any boo boos.'

The notation, as many readers kindly alerted us, comes from the late L. Ron Hubbard's mental Tone Scale, which ranges from 40 (serenity of beingness)

to negative 40 (total failure). According to the online Scientology handbook (www.sci entologyhandbook.org/ full.htm), 1.1, "the most dangerous and wicked level," means "covert hostility"— a common designation bestowed on the Church's perceived enemies. Applied Scholastics president Ian Lyons confirmed the notation's meaning,

Also, due to an editing error, OffBeat last week stated that the Church of Scientology won a Supreme Court case limiting the right of critics to reprint internal Church documents (on the Internet, for instance). In fact, the ruling came from a Federal District Court Judge in Alexan-

dria, Virginia,

Back at the Weekly, we are holding out for an upgrade to 1.9, just plain "hostility."

