

KIRK LYONS

Kirk Lyons is a white supremacist lawyer who co-founded and serves as the “chief trial counsel” for the Southern Legal Resource Center (SLRC), which has effectively become the legal arm of the neo-Confederate movement.



EXTREMIST INFO

Born: 1956

Location: Black Mountain, NC

Ideology: [Neo-Confederate](#)

About Kirk Lyons

Billing itself as a defender against “heritage violations” — attacks on the culture and symbols of the Confederacy — the SLRC was formed in 1996 by Lyons and his brother-in-law Neill Payne, and it has handled a number of cases involving the Confederate battle flag. But controversy has dogged the SLRC because of Lyons’ extensive extremist background, which includes his infamous wedding at the Aryan Nations compound in a ceremony officiated by longtime Aryan Nations leader and [Christian Identity](#) preacher, [Richard Butler](#).

The son of an Air Force officer who says he befriended people of all races, Lyons as a young man seemed headed for a fairly ordinary career. He put himself through the University of Texas and then went on to law school at the University of Houston. After passing the bar exam on his second try, Lyons took a job as a personal injury lawyer at a small Houston firm.

But one night in 1985, he says, two men dressed in trench coats and fedoras showed up at his apartment and asked Lyons to take a ride. One of the men was [Louis Beam](#), a former Klan leader who was “ambassador-at-large” for the

neo-Nazi Aryan Nations (AN), and a man Lyons had met while in law school. As they drove, Beam told Lyons that he feared he was about to be indicted in an impending federal case against white supremacist leaders. Beam asked Lyons for help in getting bail should he be arrested.

Beam was finally arrested in 1987, along with 13 other notorious white supremacist leaders, on federal charges of sedition. It was then that Lyons made a life-changing decision. Quitting his personal injury practice, he went to Fort Smith, Ark., to defend Beam in what would become widely known as the "Fort Smith sedition trial." Ultimately, the government's case proved to be a weak one and, in 1988, Beam and all of his co-defendants were acquitted. Suddenly, Lyons was a celebrity on the radical right. Lyons spoke that fall to the Aryan Nations World Congress, hosted by Richard Butler, one of the men acquitted in Arkansas. There, he touted his vision of a non-profit foundation that would defend the kind of men such as those at the AN World Congress who Lyons saw as "patriots" and "dissidents." The Patriots Defense Foundation (PDF) would not take shape until late 1989, but Lyons started work immediately.

In October 1988, he took up the defense of [James Wickstrom](#), the former "director of counterinsurgency" for the rabidly anti-Semitic Posse Comitatus and a man who spoke of hanging his enemies from "ALL the telephone poles." In 1989, Lyons was the featured speaker at a "Rocky Mountain Family Bible Retreat" hosted in Colorado by Pete Peters, a leading ideologue of the racist and anti-Semitic Christian Identity religion. That same year, he marched at the head of a Tennessee parade of 400 Klansmen, neo-Nazi skinheads and other hard-liners. On the legal front, Lyons assisted in the successful 1989 defense of Douglas Sheets, a former White Patriot Party member accused of murdering three men in a North Carolina gay bookstore.

Around the same time, Lyons was identified as a member of the [National Alliance](#), the neo-Nazi group headed by [William Pierce](#), who wrote *The Turner Diaries*, the race-war novel Timothy McVeigh used as a blueprint for the Oklahoma City bombing. In a 1989 issue of the members-only *National Alliance Bulletin*, Pierce wrote that "Houston member Kirk Lyons, an attorney ... has organized the Patriots Defense Foundation as a start toward doing for our people what the Jews have done for our enemies." Pierce then suggested that members send donations to the PDF.

In September 1990, a kilt-clad Lyons, only recently divorced, married the daughter of Charles Tate, at that time the second-in-command at AN. The service was held in the group's church, and, at Lyons' request, was a Scottish affair complete with bagpipes and an exchange of the tartans of the Lyons and Tate clans. His new wife, Brenna Tate, had grown up on the AN compound with her parents. Brenna's brother, David Tate, was an imprisoned member of the terrorist group The Order serving a life sentence in Missouri for the murder of a state trooper. Presiding over Lyons' wedding ceremony was none other than hatemeister Richard Butler. Lyons' best man was his old friend, former Klansman Louis Beam.

In 1991, the PDF's name was changed to CAUSE, which stands for Canada, Australia, the United States, South Africa and Europe – the places where Lyons judged the rights of the white majority to be under attack. Not long after the name change, the entire operation was relocated to Black Mountain, N.C. CAUSE didn't mince words. In a 1993 ad in *White Aryan Resistance's* racist newsletter, CAUSE described itself as "America's only pro-White law firm." A 1995 CAUSE solicitation for donations in *Soldier of Fortune* magazine read, "Help stop [U.S. Atty. Gen. Janet] Reno and her Gun Grabbing Goons." During this period, Lyons also represented Fred Leuchter, a Holocaust denier and an engineering student who claimed the Nazis could not have gassed Jews to death in their concentration camps. (Leuchter eventually was indicted in Massachusetts for practicing engineering without a license. He signed an agreement with the licensing board that he would no longer represent himself as an engineer.) Lyons spoke in Atlanta along with other well-known white supremacists on a U.S. tour by John Tyndall, then head of the neofascist, whites-only British National Party. And he attended a meeting of the [Institute for Historical Review](#) (IHR), a notorious Holocaust denial outfit.

Lyons worked hard to make a name for himself and CAUSE by defending antigovernment extremists in the 1990s. In 1992, CAUSE attempted to inject itself into the case of Randy Weaver, an Idaho white supremacist against whom a bench warrant was issued after he failed to appear in court to face illegal weapons charges. But before

CAUSE could act, Weaver surrendered after the intervention of another extremist, [Bo Gritz](#). Early the next year, the standoff between Branch Davidians and federal agents in Waco, Texas, began and Lyons finagled to represent Davidian cult leader David Koresh. Lyons filed what he modestly described as "a historic, never before filed, [request for a] temporary restraining order," asking a judge to order federal agents back. It was dismissed. Perhaps the only notable success Lyons had in this period came in June 1996, when he was allowed by the FBI to try to mediate in the armed standoff between federal agents and the white supremacist Montana Freeman. Lyons eventually helped convince the Freeman to end their 81-day standoff without bloodshed. For a brief moment, he was in the national limelight.

By the mid 1990s, however, CAUSE was in trouble. Donations were drying up, and a feud over accusations that one of Lyon's clients, German citizen Andreas Strassmeir, was involved in the Oklahoma City bombing left Lyons alienated from many of his former allies.

In 1996, Lyons, along with brother-in-law Neill Payne and one other man, started a new organization, the Southern Legal Resource Center (SLRC), a name very similar to the Southern Poverty Law Center (Lyons' title was the same as that of one of SPLC's founders, as well). The address and phone number were the same as CAUSE's, and the staff was also basically the same, but the mission had changed. On its website, the SLRC was described as "a non-profit legal foundation waging a counter-offensive to preserve Southern Heritage." It called for a halt to the "Ethnic Cleansing of Dixie." The SLRC's focus, above all, was on the Confederate flag. "The Southern Legal Resource Center is a nonprofit foundation that specializes in First Amendment issues for Southern heritage," Lyons told a reporter at the time. "The flag is a civil rights issue."

CAUSE continued as an empty shell, finally shutting down in 1998. Lyons, now styled as SLRC's "chief trial counsel," focused his energies instead on the neo-Confederate cause. It was not a new one for Lyons. For more than 20 years, he had been a member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, a Southern heritage group. He wore a button proclaiming his membership in the Military Order of the Stars and Bars, a related group open only to descendants of Confederate officers. He had also long been an enthusiastic Confederate battle re-enactor. Now, he began to speak at pro-flag rallies around the country, including events in Columbia, S.C., and Montgomery, Ala. In those two cities, Lyons shared the podium with members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, the white supremacist [Council of Conservative Citizens](#), the hate group [League of the South](#), the Heritage Preservation Association and others.

In the last few years, Lyons has defended the rights of students to wear T-shirts emblazoned with the Confederate battle flag; of teachers to display the flag in classrooms; and of military personnel to join [neo-Confederate](#) organizations. In the process, he has become the darling of the neo-Confederate world. Neo-Confederate websites now commonly urge their followers to donate to the SLRC.

While the SLRC has raised money and made a name for itself by filing lawsuits in defense of Southern heritage, Lyons' legal strategies have not proven very effective in court. In 2001, for instance, the SLRC sued the Hays County (Texas) School District for denying people the right to display the Confederate battle flag in high school stadiums. Lyons contended that his clients had had their First Amendment rights violated. He also argued, based on SLRC's novel theory that the plaintiffs' "national origin" was "Confederate Southern American," that the Hays County officials had violated the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964. The judge dismissed the case, noting with evident distaste: "It would appear the plaintiffs have filed a complaint requesting a temporary injunction when they did not want one, obtained publicity because of the allegations, sued the wrong parties and in all probability have no cause of action against any party." The judge ordered the SLRC to pay defendants' legal fees, which according to an SLRC newsletter totaled \$9,173.

Since the late 1990s, Lyons has been a key player in an attempt to turn the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV) from its original mission of defending the memory of Southern Civil War combatants to extreme-right political activism. In 2000, Lyons had laid out a strategy for radicalizing the organization in a speech to the neofascist American Friends of the British National Party in Arlington, Va. Speaking from the same podium as former Klan leader David Duke, Lyons told the audience of racist activists that the SCV needed to get rid of its "grannies" and

“bed-wetters” and get serious about the political struggle. “The civil rights movement I am trying to form seeks a revolution,” Lyons told his colleagues. “We seek nothing more than a return to a godly, stable, tradition-based society with no ‘Northernisms’ attached, a hierarchical society, a majority European-derived country.”

In 2002, Lyons, who had already won election to a lower SCV post, stood for election to head one of the SCV’s three geographic divisions. In the run-up to the August 2002 SCV convention, the SLRC’s close links to the SCV became apparent. Fully three hours of SLRC seminars were scheduled as part of the convention. By the time the convention got going, however, Lyons and his racist background had become a public issue, with newspapers and national television news depicting his candidacy as a battle for the soul of the organization. SCV officials quietly canceled the SLRC seminars. In the end, Lyons was defeated by a moderate candidate in a 17-vote squeaker. But Lyons’ close ally, Ron G. Wilson, whose daughter worked for the SLRC, managed to win the SCV’s highest office — commander in chief. The election of Wilson and a number of his allies effectively handed the leadership of the SCV to an extremist faction.

Soon after, Wilson appointed Lyons to sit on the SCV’s Long-Range Planning Committee, while Payne landed a seat on the Resolutions Committee. Early in 2003, Wilson launched a purge of most of those SCV members who had publicly opposed him and Lyons. Lyons also moved to radicalize the group even more, suggesting in a 2003 E-mail that Klan members should be allowed in the SCV. This set off a struggle over the SCV that continues to this day, has led to the loss of thousands of members, and badly damaged the group’s reputation.

In 2003, Lyons took on the case of seven longtime DuPont employees in Richmond, Va., who had been forbidden by the chemical giant to wear or display the Confederate battle flag at work. In one court filing, he described “Confederate Southern Americans” as a diverse people, with their own religion and culture, who were being discriminated against because of their national origin. The argument didn’t fly: After rejecting Lyons’ claims multiple times, the court fined him for litigation abuse at DuPont’s request.

Over the years, Lyons has been involved in other legal fights over Confederate flag bans, helping to defend flag-wearing public school students in Burleson, Texas, and Anderson County, Tenn. Neither of these litigations was ultimately successful.

The SCV’s 2006 elections solidified the power of Lyons and the SLRC within the organization. Two SLRC board members won posts on the SCV’s executive board, and the group adopted a new constitution drafted mostly by Lyons. These events prompted many of the heritage group’s remaining moderates to abandon ship.

Another quixotic battle in Lyons’s war on Southern “heritage violations” took place in 2010. The attorney posted videos online urging his compatriots to eschew the traditional racial classifications and instead identify themselves as “Confed Southern Am” on their census forms. “If there can be Cajun Americans, if there can be Serbian Americans, there can be Confederate Southern Americans,” Lyons said. He vowed that the group, which deserved identification as a legitimate minority thanks to the South’s purported independence during the Civil War, “will not sit in the back of the bus anymore.”

Lyons has also served as a major booster of the SCV’s annual Sam Davis Youth Camp. Thanks in large part to his efforts, youngsters can learn to resist “the liberal, politically correct view of history” through “thoughtful instruction” on “our Southern history and culture.” The campers are taught, among other historical “truths,” that the so-called “War for Southern Independence” had nothing to do with slavery, and that Abraham Lincoln, author of the Emancipation Proclamation, was unusually racist for his time. Lyons serves on the SCV committee that oversees the program, lobbies to have SCV funds dedicated to camp scholarships, and has his own children participate.

Perhaps most controversially, Lyons has helped bring the Farnum family, a singing group with Christian Identity connections, to perform at the camp. Christian Identity is a virulently racist and anti-Semitic religion that claims Jews are biologically descended from Satan and minorities are not human and do not have souls, having been created by God on the same day as “the beasts of the field.” Responding to SPLC inquiries about the Farnums, Lyons called them “a wonderful family” and “a blessing to the camp.”

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