

The Troll: A fake flag burning at Gettysburg was only his latest hoax

Shawn Boburg

Adam Rahuba, a former concert promoter, works part-time as a food-delivery driver and a DJ. At 38, he spent most of the past year staying on a friend's couch in a small town north of Pittsburgh.

A Washington Post investigation found that Rahuba is also the anonymous figure behind a number of social media hoaxes — the most recent played out in Gettysburg on Independence Day — that have riled far-right extremists in recent years and repeatedly duped partisan media outlets.

Rahuba once claimed that activists were planning to desecrate a Confederate cemetery in Georgia, The Post found. He seeded rumors of an organized effort to report Trump supporters for supposed child abuse. And he promoted a purported grass-roots campaign to confiscate Americans' guns.

These false claims circulated widely on social media and on Internet message boards. They were often amplified by right-wing commentators and covered as real news by media outlets such as Breitbart News and the Gateway Pundit.

The hoaxes, outlandish in their details, have spurred fringe groups of conspiracy-minded Americans to action by playing on partisan fears. They have led to highly combustible situations — attracting heavily armed militia members and far-right activists eager to protect values they think are under siege — as well as large mobilizations of police.



Left Behind USA

June 18 at 4:49 PM · 🌐

We'd like to thank some wonderful Antifa artists who will giving free face-painting and reading material to children attend this event.

We'll also be giving away free small flags for children to s into the fire.

• ANTIFA PRESENTS •



The Facebook page @LeftBehindUSA promoted a purported flag burning at Gettysburg on the Fourth of July. (Obtained by The Washington Post)

Since the election of President Trump, Rahuba's hoaxes have focused on leveraging fears of antifa, loosely affiliated activists who oppose fascism and have sometimes embraced property damage and violent protest. His July 4 hoax, a purported burning of the American flag, was billed as an antifa event. Hundreds of counterprotesters, including skinheads, flocked to Gettysburg National Military Park to confront the nonexistent flag burners.

[\[Militias flocked to Gettysburg to foil a supposed antifa flag burning, an apparent hoax created on social media\]](#)

A Post examination of Rahuba's activities provides a rare inside look at the work of a homegrown troll who uses social media to stoke partisan division. It shows that in an era of heightened sensitivity about disinformation campaigns carried out by foreign nations, bad-faith actors with far fewer resources can also manipulate public discourse and affect events in the real world.

A previous Post story raised questions about the identity of the person behind the Gettysburg deception. In response, several of Rahuba's former acquaintances contacted reporters and said they suspected he operated Left Behind USA, the social media account that promoted the fake event. The Post examined dozens of accounts and websites, some linked to him by name and others used anonymously to promote hoaxes. Similarities in content, design and other details were apparent.

Post reporters located Rahuba last week at a friend's apartment in Harmony Township, Pa., where he acknowledged in an interview that he was behind 13 aliases and social media accounts that promoted hoaxes as far back as 2013.

"I guess I'm outed," he said.

Zoeann Murphy and Whitney Leaming/The Washington Post

Rahuba has a long history of provocative online commentary, including a website he created years ago that made light of 9/11. A self-described democratic socialist and supporter of former presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, Rahuba said he antagonizes far-right extremists mostly for his own amusement.

"I've found myself very annoyed with the rise of right-wing populism," he said. "So I thought I'd do my own thing to push back against them."

Rahuba laughed when asked whether he considered himself a member of antifa.

"I am antifa," he said. "But I think you're antifa as well ... as is everybody with common sense. But as a part of an organized group? Absolutely not."

He said he was not concerned about potential backlash from his identity being revealed. "I'm all in," he said.

This week, two members of the House Intelligence Committee, Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi (D-Ill.) and Rep. Peter Welch (D-Vt.), wrote to the FBI and the CIA asking whether the agencies were investigating who was behind the Gettysburg hoax and similar false claims in nine other cities this summer.

“Over the past few months, local misinformation about apparently nonexistent antifa gatherings and ‘invasions’ has proliferated in communities throughout the United States, sowing social and political division,” the lawmakers wrote.

In an interview, Krishnamoorthi said he was concerned that responses to the hoaxes could “spiral out of control.”

The agencies declined to comment. Legal experts said Rahuba’s hoaxes did not appear to violate criminal laws and would likely be protected under the First Amendment. The Post found no indication that Rahuba was involved in any of the other hoaxes cited in the letter, and Rahuba said he was not.

Some of Rahuba’s hoaxes have taxed law enforcement agencies and put bystanders in danger. In Gettysburg this year, a local pastor wearing a Black Lives Matter T-shirt was surrounded by armed counterprotesters until officers accompanied him out of the park for his own safety. Three years ago, an armed man who went to Gettysburg in response to a purported flag burning Rahuba had promoted on Facebook accidentally shot himself in the leg with a revolver.

Rahuba dismissed concerns that his efforts had harmed people or put them at risk.

“The message here was that any idiot on the Internet can get a bunch of people to show up at a Union cemetery with a bunch of Confederate flags and Nazi tattoos on their necks that just make them look foolish,” he said.

He also had little sympathy for the man who shot himself. “There’s some comedic value to that happening,” Rahuba said.

Bikers, members of militias, the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups, many with guns, massed at the Gettysburg battlefield on July 4. (Andrew Mangum for The Washington Post)

Part of the right-wing response at Gettysburg battlefield on July 4 to the rumored flag burning by antifa. (Andrew Mangum for The Washington Post)

Confederate flags were a common sight among those who turned up at Gettysburg battlefield expecting to thwart a burning of American flags. (Andrew Mangum for The Washington Post)

TOP: Bikers, members of militias, the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups, many with guns, massed at the Gettysburg battlefield on July 4. (Andrew Mangum for The Washington Post) BOTTOM LEFT: Part of the right-wing response at Gettysburg battlefield on July 4 to the rumored flag burning by antifa. (Andrew Mangum for The Washington Post) BOTTOM RIGHT: Confederate flags were a common sight among those who turned up at Gettysburg battlefield expecting to thwart a burning of American flags. (Andrew Mangum for The Washington Post)

Trolling since high school

Rahuba, a lifelong resident of the Pittsburgh area, said he began trolling in high school. Using a dial-up modem, he and a group of friends posed as a 12- or 13-year-old girl in online chat rooms to lure older men to meetings, he said. In his telling, the men arrived to find Rahuba and his friends mocking them.

“It made me realize that people will believe the most unrealistic nonsense on the Internet,” he said.

Rahuba was a concert promoter in Pittsburgh in the early 2000s. Former friends and acquaintances said he was not particularly political but enjoyed provoking people on the Internet.

For a time, he ran a website called 911wasfunny.com, where he made light of 9/11 and other tragedies. “September 11th was funny. If this offends you, you need to lighten up,” a passage on Rahuba’s website stated. “Those people deserved what they got, mostly because people from NY are pompous jerks.”

He acknowledged that he was behind the site in a 2007 [story](#) in the New York Post that ran under the headline “9/11-Site Sicko One Sorry Sob.” Rahuba later took the site down.



Adam Rahuba, the Internet troll and hoaxer, in Pittsburgh on July 15. (Justin Merriman for The Washington Post)

In 2009, his life seemed to take a turn. He married and took a job as a financial adviser at his wife’s family firm. But his marriage ended four years later, and he began working as a weekend DJ while trying to cobble together a living through various online ventures, according to a review of his online activities.

One such venture was selling T-shirts with controversial messages. He explained his business model in a 2014 YouTube video using his real name.

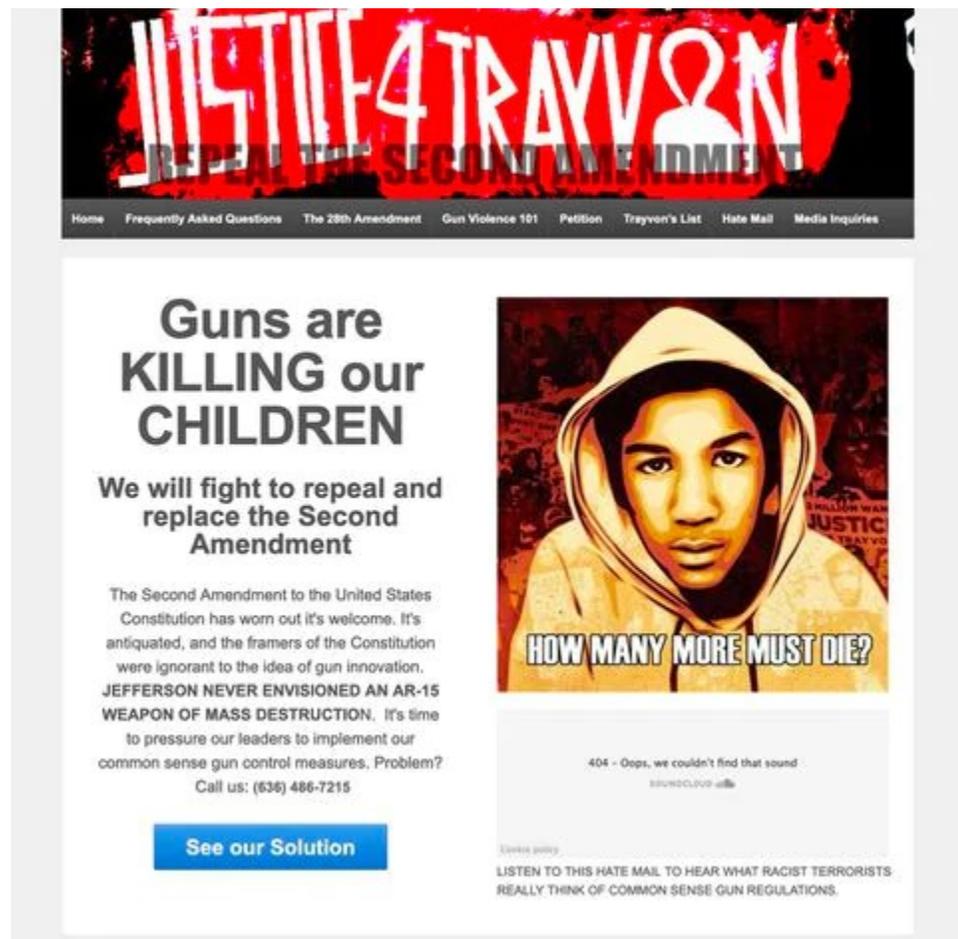
“Controversy creates cash,” he said. “One of the best ways you can generate traffic to your website, to generate attention to anything, is by pissing a lot of people off.”

Also in 2014, he began advertising services to artificially inflate signs of traffic on

blogs and other websites. In one promotional video, he offered to provide social media users “4,500 free Twitter followers.” In another, he offered to post 25 comments on a blog for \$5.

“Can’t go wrong,” he said in the video. “It gives the appearance of activity on your blog.”

In 2013, a year after the shooting of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin by a neighborhood watch coordinator in a gated community in Florida, Rahuba saw an opportunity to antagonize gun-rights activists and make money at the same time.



Material

created by Rahuba with the aim of upsetting gun owners shows 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, who was fatally shot in Florida in 2012. (Obtained by The Washington Post)

He set up a website that promoted Trayvon’s Amendment, a purported grass-roots movement to change the U.S. Constitution. The website was initially registered in Rahuba’s name with his Pittsburgh address, but about a week later, the name was changed to “Horse Head,” with an address in St. Louis, records show.

In a YouTube [video](#) under the pseudonym Richard Cabeza, Rahuba concealed his face in a black ski mask as he read a list of the group’s demands. They included repealing the Second Amendment, designating the National Rifle Association a terrorist organization and imposing heavy taxes and penalties on gun owners.

In the interview with The Post, Rahuba confirmed that he had adopted the pseudonym Richard Cabeza, a wordplay that becomes vulgar by combining the diminutive form of the first name with the English translation of the Spanish word

he used as a last name.

“Obvious fake name,” he said.

The website was widely shared and debated on pro-gun rights message boards and forums. Rahuba sold ads on his website, he later wrote on an Internet message board.

“That one was really fun,” he wrote on Reddit under the username GeorgeUUSmith. “I put ads on the website and made like \$3000 in a week.”

Rahuba told The Post that the figure was accurate.

‘Trolling Trumpsters’

Rahuba’s hoaxes grew increasingly farcical in the following years, some succeeding even though the names of the accounts and pages purporting to promote them left little doubt as to their true purpose. One Facebook page was called “Trolling Trumpsters.”

Rahuba told The Post that he was responding to the far-right’s embrace of baseless conspiracy theories such as QAnon, which holds that Trump is secretly combating a ring of powerful sex predators in politics and elite circles.



A Rahuba creation that gained notice in right-wing news media. (Obtained by The Washington Post)

“I see the QAnon lunatics getting riled up about things very easily, and ... low-hanging fruit,” he said.

At the same time, his politics also began to shift to the left. A longtime Democrat, he changed his party affiliation in 2015 to the Socialist Party, according to voter records. Rahuba, who has struggled financially and now collects food stamps, said his difficulties obtaining adequate health insurance were a factor in the change in his views.

In May 2017, Trolling Trumpsters called for the desecration of a Confederate cemetery in Marietta, Ga. Word of the purported event was widely shared on social media.

Bill Bearden, a member of a local chapter of the Sons of the Confederacy in nearby Haralson County, said in an interview that he traveled 50 miles to protect the cemetery after learning from the Facebook page of plans to destroy gravestones and statues. Bearden was joined by dozens of heavily armed people, including militiamen, members of the Ku Klux Klan and other Confederate sympathizers, according to a local television [report](#).

“We took it as a legitimate threat,” Bearden told The Post. “It may have turned out to be a hoax.”

A month later, in June 2017, Rahuba’s Facebook page began promoting his first event in Gettysburg, “Burn a Confederate Flag to Trigger Trump Fans Day.”

The hoax received an unexpected boost after a Pennsylvania news website called [Harrisburg100.com reported on the event](#). The far-right websites [Gateway Pundit](#) and [Breitbart News](#) soon picked up the story.

“Should members of the ‘Antifa’ movement carry out their plan to desecrate the graves of soldiers who fell at Gettysburg, they will join the Taliban, ISIS, and Turkish Islamists who have launched a campaign to destroy historic sites and desecrate graves of their enemies,” the Breitbart story stated.

On its website, Fox News also published a story about “reports of possible disruptive or even violent actions by the militant left-wing group AntiFa at Gettysburg National Park,” though it noted that an antifa group called the reports “most likely false.” The story has since been deleted.

Among the armed counterprotesters who went to the park on the day of the supposed protest was Benjamin Hornberger, the man who accidentally shot himself. Park rangers applied a tourniquet to his leg and he was taken to a hospital, according to news accounts. Hornberger, who was 23 at the time, unsuccessfully ran as a Republican for Congress the following year. He did not respond to an interview request.

Rahuba later claimed responsibility for the hoax on an Internet message board.

“At this point in my life, I consider it performance art,” he wrote under the username GeorgeUUSmith.

An ambulance crew helps 23-year-old Benjamin Hornberger, who accidentally shot himself at Gettysburg National Military Park in 2017 while there to prevent a flag burning that was Adam Rahuba’s first such hoax at the site. (Christine Vendel/ Penn Live)

Benjamin Hornberger receives attention after accidentally shooting himself in the leg at Gettysburg in 2017. (Christine Vendel/ Penn Live)

LEFT: An ambulance crew helps 23-year-old Benjamin Hornberger, who

accidentally shot himself at Gettysburg National Military Park in 2017 while there to prevent a flag burning that was Adam Rahuba's first such hoax at the site. (Christine Vendel/ Penn Live) RIGHT: Benjamin Hornberger receives attention after accidentally shooting himself in the leg at Gettysburg in 2017. (Christine Vendel/ Penn Live)

'We had to spend the resources'

Rahuba said that he has mostly worked alone, opening social media accounts as others were shut down for violating platforms' rules. But in September 2019, he said, he worked with another troll whom he declined to identify. He created memes for a Twitter account called @joinantifa that he said was controlled by the other person.

One meme he created showed a picture of attendees at a Trump rally and asked: "Know any MAGA parents? Child Services will investigate any anonymous claim even without proof. Child Service agents tend to be liberal."

Patrick Howley, founder and former editor in chief of the far-right website Big League Politics, retweeted the meme to his 42,000 followers.

"Self-identified ANTIFA operatives are filing false reports on Trump-supporting parents," he wrote. "Lots of sources say this is happening — don't let them say this was a joke."

Within days, Twitter disabled the @joinantifa account.

In February, Rahuba created the Twitter account Left Behind USA. He wrote on the account that his name was Alan Jeffs, a pseudonym that he also used on other accounts. Rahuba later told The Post he came up with the name while watching a documentary about [Warren Jeffs](#), the president of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who was convicted of child sexual assault.

The Christian Science Monitor and a student newspaper at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism quoted Alan Jeffs in the spring, [noting](#) his frequent tweets in support of Sanders on a Twitter account called @BernieOrElse.

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Rahuba also raised money on GoFundMe, where he identified himself as Alan Jeffs in May and said that he posted as @Left Behind USA and @BernieOrElse. "For over a year now, I've been unable to work due to intensive therapy after a suicide attempt," he wrote. He said he needed money for a new car to help rebuild his life. Donors gave him \$560.

Rahuba told The Post that most of the money was used to license graphics from a stock website for use on his next hoax in Gettysburg. In June, he set up a Facebook page called Left Behind USA and began promoting the Independence Day flag burning event.

Rahuba also set up an Internet-based phone number and published it on his Left Behind USA account, knowing he would be inundated with angry calls. He gave The

Post access to the hundreds of voice mails he received in the weeks before the Gettysburg event.

“Y’all going to get to real ... surprised in Gettysburg,” one caller said. “I cannot wait to participate, you n-----loving f---s,” one said.



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Another caller said he hoped the event would result in a mass shooting. “I hope someone shoots every one of you motherf-----s. I pray to God in heaven for someone to shoot everyone involved in that event,” the person said.



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A Facebook page called Central PA Antifa [denounced](#) the event as fake. Rahuba's Facebook and Twitter accounts were shut down a week before the protest, but many militia members and biker groups pledged to go nonetheless to guard the cemetery and a monument honoring Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee.

A local middle school was transformed into a makeshift command center to help coordinate the 16 federal and local law enforcement agencies monitoring the event. The state provided 100 Pennsylvania State troopers to assist, including mounted officers and a helicopter, according to Gettysburg city manager Charles Gable.

“What we were left with was a threat and with such we would be negligent if we didn't address it. We had to spend the resources that we spent,” Gable said.

Numerous militia members at the park told The Post they felt their presence had scared off actual antifa flag burners.

Rahuba said that after his Left Behind USA accounts were shut down, he assumed that the event would fizzle. That weekend, he said, he went camping with his girlfriend.

Alice Crites contributed to this report.

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