Growing, lurking threat: “Paper terrorism”

Massive financial schemes by anti-government zealots and sovereign citizens have states scrambling for protection

BY JILLIAN RAYFIELD

How do you stop one anti-government extremist from coordinating a trillion dollar “paper terrorism” scheme involving a raft of false financial documents, or deal with another who sues prosecutors for allegedly conspiring against him by using poor grammar?

This is the question that state governments and federal agencies are faced with, ever since a surge of people who consider themselves “sovereign citizens” began acting on their belief that all aspects of law and government are illegitimate. The Southern Poverty Law Center estimates that in 2011 there were approximately 100,000 “hard-core” believers in sovereign citizen ideology, though it’s a tough number to nail down because the movement is so disparate. For the same reason — and because, by their nature, members of the movement don’t believe in laws — it’s
also tough to draft legislation to specifically target those crimes favored by sovereign citizens.

Some of those crimes involve filing fraudulent tax returns, liens and foreclosures, frequently known as “paper terrorism.” In fact, insofar as the sovereign citizen movement has leaders, it’s in the form of so-called “gurus” who peddle materials on how to conduct these schemes. One prominent sovereign leader, Tim Turner — who refers to himself as “president” of the “Republic for the United States of America” [sic] — was recently convicted for “attempting to pay taxes with fictitious financial instruments,” among other things. In addition to his own alleged tax crimes, Turner also purveyed a “series of seminars claiming he could help his clients get out of paying mortgages, credit cards and income tax bills using a series of sovereign tricks,” the SPLC reports.