

# OPINION

## The "Witch Hunt," the "Backlash," and Professionalism

—by Kenneth Lanning

The sexual victimization of children is a highly emotional issue. Publicity and controversy over complex topics such as repressed memory, satanic ritual abuse (SRA), and suggestibility of children have divided and polarized many child advocates, the media, and the American public. Especially in controversial cases, those at one extreme often claim that children are easily manipulated and that the allegations are part of a "witch hunt" led by overzealous fanatics or incompetent and money-hungry "experts." Those at the other extreme often claim that victims do not lie about sexual abuse, that everything alleged happened exactly as alleged, and that protestations to the contrary are part of a powerful "backlash" led by child molesters or those denying the extent and reality of child sexual abuse. The continuing media coverage, movies, articles, and opinions about cases such as the McMartin case in Manhattan Beach, California, exemplify this highly polarized controversy.

One problem in discussing this situation is the selection of terms to identify these extremes. I have reluctantly decided to use the terms they call each other: the "witch hunt" and the "backlash." The terms, however, are subjective, judgmental, derogatory, and poorly defined. To address this problem, I will attempt to define the terms as used in this discussion.

The "witch hunt" is characterized by the tendency to exaggerate child sexual abuse, to emphasize believing the children, and to criticize the criminal justice system only for the lack of investigation or for acquittals. When child sexual abuse is alleged, they assume it has happened and try to prove it.

The "backlash" is characterized by the tendency to minimize child sexual abuse, to emphasize false allegations, and to criticize the criminal justice system only for aggressive investigation or for convictions. When child sexual abuse is alleged, they assume it has not happened and try to disprove it.

I enjoy the distinction of having been accused of being part of both the witch hunt (a zealot spreading exaggerated stories of child sex rings) and the backlash (a satanist infiltrating the FBI to prevent the uncovering of SRA).

Of course, because of the vagueness of these definitions, nothing said about the witch hunt or the backlash is true of all individuals who might be considered members of either. In describing

their characteristics, each extreme is presented as a caricature of itself.

### Common characteristics

In spite of their profoundly opposing views, the witch hunt and the backlash are very much alike: two sides of the same coin. Some of the characteristics they share are discussed in the following section.

#### Cross labeling

Each side labels and defines the nature and characteristics of the other. Neither side, however, uses this label to identify itself. No one in the witch hunt, for example, believes that he or she is participating in a witch hunt, and no one in the backlash believes that he or she is participating in a backlash. In fact, each side vehemently denies it. Both sides are quick to use the derogatory labels of witch hunt or backlash to refer to the other side, but resent the use of these terms against them. Most important, each side takes great delight in talking about and criticizing the other.

#### Polarization

Each side tends to take an all or nothing approach to complex issues. One is either with them or against them. From each side's point of view, dialogue with the other side is consorting with the enemy and constitutes guilt by association and betrayal. Each side disseminates written material and brings together individuals of like beliefs. When someone from one side is invited to participate in the other side's publications or conferences, it is primarily as a token to be ridiculed for his or her "absurd" views. Both sides attack anyone who seems to take a position in the middle.

#### Attack the messenger

Each side focuses its attacks and criticism on the person of the messenger rather than on the substance of the message. It is easy to claim (and difficult for the groups to prove otherwise) that the witch hunt is composed of fanatics with personal agendas, antifamily views, and one-world government plans, or that the backlash is composed of pedophiles and satanists attempting to conceal their activity. One way to personally attack and dismiss a messenger is to simply label him or her as part of the witch hunt or the backlash.

#### Appeal to emotion

Each side relies heavily on raw emotion and frequently brings forward victims, adult survi-

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continued on next page

# The "Witch Hunt," the "Backlash," and Professionalism

continued from page 8

vors, and falsely accused parents to describe in graphic detail their personal tragedies. In the public debate between emotion and reason, emotion almost always wins. Regardless of intelligence and education, and in spite of common sense and evidence to the contrary, adults tend to believe what they want or need to believe. The more emotionally involved someone is, the greater the need. Not many issues are more emotional than sexual victimization of children.

## Distortion of facts

Each side conveniently fails to define its terminology, or inconsistently uses the terms it does define. When volume is needed, a child is anyone under 18 years old. When impact is needed, a child is under 12 years old. Both sides frequently cite information out of context and selectively quote only that portion of an article that supports their views. They fail to verify information and cannot resist using hearsay, rumor,

gossip, myth, and legend. In spite of their well-known inaccuracies, newspaper articles and television tabloid or news magazine programs are often used as prime sources of information. Rarely does either side seek the full and original research. They generalize from a few cases to all cases, and make the unusual and atypical seem common and typical. These distortions are now quickly and widely disseminated to eager believers by fax, e-mail, the Internet, and other online computer services.

## Conspiracy theories

Both sides seem to need to believe that the other side is part of a national or international, well-disciplined organization with a carefully orchestrated and implemented master plan and strategy. Any meeting or contact of three or more people with similar views is seen as proof of this conspiracy. They believe their side simply meets, trains, and disseminates information, while the other side conspires, brainwashes, and disseminates propaganda. For some, this conspiracy theory incorporates the notion that they are the special target of persecution by the other side. They find it difficult to understand that each side, and every group in between, suffers from the same disorganization, dissension, and disagreements. Because it is difficult to prove the negative, it is essentially impossible to disprove these theories. It is only when we are accused of being part of a conspiracy that we know does not exist that we

can prove the accusers wrong; however, we can prove it only to ourselves.

## Claim to special knowledge

Those on each side somehow know with absolute certainty the facts of any case. They know things that the investigation, prosecution, and courts cannot determine with certainty. They infallibly know who is guilty and who is innocent. They are certain of this in spite of the fact that most of what they "know" is based on gossip, rumors, or media accounts.

## Selective use of the criminal justice system

Each side decides when an investigation, conviction, or acquittal has meaning. Using and citing court decisions only when it suits their purposes, they quote court decisions as proof of their positions only if someone they believe is guilty is convicted. If someone they believe is innocent is convicted, then the court decision is irrelevant, ignored, or attacked. If the conviction is overturned on appeal, the court decision is again praised and cited. They also decide for themselves which court orders should be obeyed and which children should be hidden in the "underground" in violation of court order.

## Manipulation of and by the media

Both sides aggressively try to influence the media. They will cooperate with any level of the media if they believe their views will be aired and supported. In their zeal to manipulate the media, they forget that the media often manipulate them. The media often fluctuate between witch hunt or backlash stories depending on which way the wind is blowing. Today, backlash stories seem to have the upper hand. But this too will change. Much of the media also seem to gravitate toward emotional rather than professional responses when covering these issues.

## Self-deception

Both sides believe that they do none of the above and the other side does all of the above. "We" are objective and right. "They" are deviant and wrong. Both sides accuse the other of doing these things, but are outraged that someone would accuse them of the same. They cite every example of exaggeration and bias of the other side, but ignore and deny that they do the same. Both sides condemn and protest unfair,

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continued on next page

# The "Witch Hunt," the "Backlash," and Professionalism

continued from page 9

distorted personal attack by the media, but only if the media is attacking their own side. Without realizing it, both sides believe, hear, and see what they want to believe, hear, and see.

## Professionalism

For child sexual abuse intervenors concerned about the witch hunt or the backlash, the best approach is not imitate their tactics but to respond with professionalism. We may not totally agree about what constitutes professionalism; however, most would agree that the following characteristics are consistent with integrity and professionalism.

### Deal with issues, not personalities

Professionals understand that individuals who disagree with them are not necessarily bad or evil. They recognize and admit the merit in the dissenting views of others. Because no one person's views or opinions are unique, professionals minimize the focus on individuals and maximize discussion of issues. In this article, I have deliberately avoided "naming names" or citing specific detailed examples. This would serve no purpose except to inflame and polarize. Even the use of the terms "witch hunt" and "backlash" is derogatory and should be kept to a minimum. Professionals understand that the extremists on both sides will eventually self-destruct. The extremists will get caught in their own distortions and exaggerations, the media will turn on them, and their credibility will be destroyed, which is good reason not to follow their lead.

### Evaluate hidden agendas

We can examine a complex problem such as the sexual victimization of children from three major perspectives: personal, political, and professional. The personal perspective encompasses the emotional: how the issues affect our individual needs and wants. The political perspective encompasses the practical: how the issues affect our getting elected, obtaining funding or pay, and attaining status and power. The professional perspective encompasses the rational and objective: how the issues affect abused children and what is in their best interest. Often these perspectives overlap or are applied in combination. Because most of us use all three, sometimes

which perspective is in control may not be clear.

The personal and political perspectives tend to dominate emotional issues like child sexual abuse. The personal and political perspectives are a reality and will never go away. In fact, many positive things can and have been achieved through them. It is my opinion, however, that abused children need more people addressing their needs from the professional perspective and fewer from the personal and the political perspectives.

This raises the complex and difficult question of whether individuals with strong political or personal agendas can even be professionals. While many can rise above their direct or indirect victimization and their individual or practical needs, some are deluding themselves in claiming to have done so.

### Strive for objectivity

Objectivity is most critical for professionals in law enforcement and prosecution. Professionals need to keep an open mind and try to control their emotions. The idealization of children, common at child abuse conferences, fuels emotionalism. Children are not innocent angels from heaven; they are human beings with human needs and flaws. Professionals dealing with child abuse

are not the guardian angels of America's children; they are dedicated, hardworking individuals trying to do an important job. This desire to idealize children leads to the question of whether investigators and prosecutors who identify themselves as "child advocates" can claim or appear to be objective fact finders.

As professionals, we cannot assume that someone is guilty just because an allegation is made. We cannot assume that someone is innocent just because he or she is a "pillar of the community"

or because the person making the allegation is a young child or a dysfunctional adolescent. Criminal justice professionals must identify or develop fair and objective criteria for evaluating the accuracy of allegations of sexual abuse and for filing charges against the accused. Alternative explanations need to be considered and explored. Neither blindly believing everything in spite of a lack of logical evidence nor simply ignoring what seems impossible or improbable and accepting

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continued on next page

# The "Witch Hunt," the "Backlash," and Professionalism

continued from page 10

what seems possible is professional behavior. Avoiding cases because they are complex, difficult, or "bizarre" is not acceptable either.

## Consider the middle ground

Most complex issues have room for difference of opinion. Reality is often somewhere between the two extremes. Most people would agree that just because one detail in a victim's story turns out to be accurate does not mean that every detail is accurate. But many people seem to believe that if you can disprove one part of a victim's allegation, then the entire allegation is false.

There is a middle ground—a continuum of possible activity. Some of what victims allege may be true and accurate, some may be misperceived or distorted, some may be screened or symbolic, and some may be "contaminated" or false. The problem and challenge, especially for law enforcement professionals, is to determine which is which. This can only be done through professional and objective investigation. To either totally believe or totally disbelieve everything is always easier than acknowledging the complexity of a situation. One way to defuse extremist attacks is to occasionally admit that in some cases mistakes were made.

## Critique yourself first

This may be the most difficult responsibility of a professional. It is easier to admit the mistakes of others, especially when admitting your own might expose you to a lawsuit. Professionals should spend more time thinking about what they are doing and less time worrying about what the extremists are doing. We need to make sure our own houses are in order and our information is accurate and reliable before criticizing others. The most effective way to counteract the influence of the witch hunt and the backlash is not to attack them, but to do one's job in a competent, objective, professional manner.

## Strive to improve knowledge and skills

Professionals recognize the need to grow and improve their knowledge and skills. They read a variety of books and articles, including some that present alternative or different views. They attend seminars and conferences with minds open to a diversity of thoughts and ideas. They engage in honest dialogue with responsible individuals with differing views. Those who listen only to opinions that agree with their own may find it difficult to grow professionally. Professionals try to

stay current on the latest research in their fields. They join organizations such as APSAC. As its name implies, APSAC should be a model for professional standards and behavior.

## Evaluate and use information properly

Professionals do not use newspaper articles and television programs as their primary sources of information and research findings. Anyone significantly involved in a publicized case knows that many of the details reported in the press are not accurate. Yet we all assume the details of other reported cases are accurate, especially if those details happen to agree with our opinions and beliefs. Professionals should verify original sources of information and properly reference research. For example, although cited again and again, the FBI has not said, nor has it data to support the claim, that one in four females are sexually abused as children. This may or may not be accurate, but the FBI is not the source of this statistic.

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Professionals should resist the temptation to overcome denial or influence opinion by exaggerating or misrepresenting the problem. The documented facts are bad enough, and need no embellishment. Professionals should clearly define their terms and then consistently use those definitions unless indicating otherwise. Operational definitions for terms (e.g., child, sexual abuse, ritual abuse) used in cited research should be clearly communicated and not mixed to distort findings. Loss of credibility can be devastating. Once someone is caught using distorted or misleading information and labeled an extremist, no one has to listen to what he or she says no matter how brilliant or profound.

## Summary

The "backlash" has had both a positive and negative impact on the investigation and prosecution of child sexual abuse cases. In a positive way, it has reminded criminal justice intervenors of the need to do their jobs in a more professional, objective, and fact-finding manner. In a negative way, it has cast a shadow over the validity and reality of child sexual abuse and has influenced some to avoid properly pursuing cases.

Much of the damage caused by the backlash is actually self-inflicted by the witch hunt, and by some well-intentioned child advocates. The mistakes of some overzealous intervenors and the insistence by a few of the literal accuracy

continued on next page

# The "Witch Hunt," the "Backlash," and Professionalism

continued from page 11

of unfounded bizarre allegations of "satanic ritual abuse" make up the primary fuel that currently runs the backlash and enables it to influence public opinion. On the other hand, the debate over the validity of such grotesque allegations has obscured the well-documented fact that children can be reliable witnesses, and that there are such things as child sex rings, bizarre paraphilias, and cruel sexual sadists. Even if only a portion of what these victims allege is factual, it may still constitute significant criminal activity.

Professionals dealing with child sexual abuse must address the legitimate issues raised by the backlash and not just personally "attack the messengers." Professionals must also admit the existence of and address the damage done by the witch hunt. It could be argued that the witch hunt has in fact done more harm to sexually abused children than the backlash has done. In

my opinion, the best way to counteract the influence of the backlash and the witch hunt is not to become defensive or to imitate their tactics, but rather to recognize the existence of both while simply doing one's job in a professional manner.

To advocate professionalism is not to deny that we can have and express strongly held beliefs and opinions. However, we must carefully consider and evaluate the basis for those beliefs and opinions. The characteristics of professionalism set forth here are difficult to attain, but well worth striving for. To use an emotional argument to defend an objective response, abused children deserve no less than truly professional intervention.

*Kenneth Lanning, MS, is a Supervisory Special Agent at the FBI Training Academy in Quantico, Virginia, recipient of APSAC's 1996 Outstanding Professional Award, and a member of APSAC's Advisory Board*

## CALL FOR NOMINATIONS APSAC Board of Directors

APSAC is seeking nominations of members to stand for election to the Board of Directors for three-year terms beginning on June 1, 1997 and ending on May 31, 2000. Nominees must have been APSAC members for at least one year, and must have agreed to be nominated before their nominations are submitted.

Board members' contributions of time, energy, and talent play an enormous role in APSAC's success. To be as effective and powerful as possible, APSAC needs the active participation of all members of the Board of Directors. Members who are enthusiastic and supportive but unable to perform the duties of a Board member are highly valued and can serve APSAC in many capacities, but should not be nominated to serve on the Board unless they can devote the time necessary to discharge a Board member's duties. These duties include but are not limited to attending at least one Board meeting each year, chairing a committee or subcommittee, waiving speaking fees for at least two APSAC-sponsored training events each year, and actively working to generate members and revenue for the association.

APSAC's Nominating Committee (consisting of all members of the Executive Committee not standing for re-election, and five members at large appointed by the President) will select among nominees based on a number of criteria, including (1) diversity in discipline, area of expertise, culture, and geography; (2) a consistent record of service to APSAC; (3) excellence in professional reputation and practice; and (4) stature in and contributions to the field.

**Nominations are due at APSAC's offices on February 7, 1997.** Complete nominations consist of a nomination form, a 200- to 400-word letter of nomination outlining the candidate's qualifications for serving on APSAC's Board of Directors, and a copy of the candidate's resume or curriculum vita. Call 312-554-0166 to receive a nomination form.