

Texas GOP chair stays silent on allies' connections to antisemitic extremists

Matt Rinaldi has been defiant amid calls for him to cut ties with political ally Jonathan Stickland after meeting with white supremacist Nick Fuentes. Rinaldi is also accused of embracing antisemitic leaders of a new young Republicans organization.

BY **ROBERT DOWNEN** OCT. 27, 2023 9 AM CENTRAL

SHARE

Faced with ongoing scandals this month involving his allies' ties to antisemitic extremists, the leader of the Republican Party of Texas has come out strongly — to attack other conservatives who've criticized his friends.

For three weeks, Texas GOP Chair Matt Rinaldi has been defiant in the face of calls from members of his own party to cut ties with Defend Texas Liberty leader Jonathan Stickland, who recently hosted avowed white supremacist Nick Fuentes at his office for nearly seven hours. And he's gone after those who've been critical of Defend Texas Liberty, a political action committee that is funded by two of the Texas GOP's most prolific donors.

Separately, Rinaldi is at the center of a parallel controversy involving a group for young conservatives that he recently embraced despite warnings about its leaders' openly antisemitic views and ties to white nationalist figures.

For some Republicans, the dual scandals have raised serious questions about the party's willingness to denounce racists — and its leader's proximity to those who embrace them.

“He has put his friends' interests above what is in the best interest of the party,” said Mark McCaig, an attorney and chair of the Texas Republican Initiative. “He is more concerned about protecting them and their gang.”

To be sure, Rinaldi was quick to distance himself from Fuentes. The Texas Tribune spotted Rinaldi earlier this month at the office building where Fuentes, an Adolf Hitler admirer who

has called for a “holy war” against Jews and encouraged his followers to beat women, was being hosted by Stickland.

Asked about the Oct. 6 meeting, Rinaldi told the Tribune that he had no idea Fuentes was inside and would never meet with him. As for Stickland? Rinaldi said he would wait until more facts came out before commenting on his longtime political kin.

“I’m not going to make assumptions based on what I’m told by a reporter,” he said on Oct. 8.

Since then, neither Rinaldi nor the Republican Party of Texas has commented on Stickland, even as other major figures — including Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and Kyle Rittenhouse — have issued statements that confirmed the Tribune’s reporting. Nor has Rinaldi responded to concerns from fellow Republicans and some party executive committee members who’ve called for a break with Defend Texas Liberty, which has donated \$257,000 to the party since 2021.

Instead, Rinaldi has reserved his ire for House Speaker Dade Phelan, accusing the Beaumont Republican of politicizing antisemitism before demanding his resignation. Phelan has also demanded Rinaldi step down as the party’s leader and give money the Texas GOP received from Defend Texas Liberty to pro-Israel charities.

Since news of the Fuentes meeting broke, Rinaldi has posted or amplified attacks on Phelan or the Texas House on X, formerly Twitter, more than 40 times. He has not, however, publicly criticized Stickland or Defend Texas Liberty at all — even as new information continues to emerge about their close ties to white supremacists.

On Monday, the Tribune reported that, in just the last month, at least five current and former Fuentes associates have worked with groups that are closely tied to Stickland, Rinaldi and Defend Texas Liberty. That includes True Texas Project, whose leaders have sympathized with the racist gunman who murdered 22 people at an El Paso WalMart in 2019, and who are set to host Rinaldi for a fundraiser and softball game this weekend.

On Wednesday, the Texas Observer reported that a swastika-clad neo-Nazi who was spotted handing out antisemitic flyers in Fort Worth this month had previously interned for Luke Macias, a longtime GOP consultant and Rinaldi ally who just replaced Stickland as president of Defend Texas Liberty, according to the group’s website.

And this week, the Tribune reported that the president of Texans For Strong Borders, Chris Russo, has for years been a prominent figure in Fuentes’ racist movement, and has continued to post on anonymous, hate-filled social media accounts as his group — with help from Rinaldi and Defend Texas Liberty — has emerged as an influential voice that’s pushed lawmakers to crack down on legal and illegal immigration.

Rinaldi and the Texas GOP did not respond to multiple requests for comment for this story.

'A moral obligation'

The controversies come amid an internecine fight between the state's far right and the Texas GOP's more moderate, but still deeply conservative, wing. That strife has exploded into all-out war since the impeachment and acquittal of Attorney General Ken Paxton, a Rinaldi ally who has received nearly \$4.65 million from West Texas oil billionaires Tim Dunn and Farris and Dan and Farris Wilks. Those billionaires also fund Defend Texas Liberty and, before that, bankrolled Rinaldi's career in the Texas House.

Defend Texas Liberty has been one of the most important players in the state party's ongoing civil war. Campaign finance records show that, since 2021, it has given nearly \$15 million to right-wing movements and candidates. The group made headlines this summer after giving \$3 million to Patrick, months before he presided over Paxton's impeachment trial. Defend Texas Liberty also gave \$3.6 million to Don Huffines, a former state senator who helped push Gov. Greg Abbott to the right by attacking him on immigration and other issues during last year's Republican primary.

Meanwhile, the Texas GOP's far right has continued to embrace groups and individuals that others have warned are a bridge too far. Fuentes was the best-known of those extreme figures; but his visit and the ensuing controversy were punctuated by a separate-but-related scandal involving the party and white supremacists.

That ordeal dates back to August, when the 66-year-old Texas Young Republican Federation voted to end its partnership with the Texas GOP until Rinaldi — who the group accused of initiating a "smear campaign" and partnering with far-right figures to undermine their newly-elected leadership — was removed from his position.

Things escalated last month, when Rinaldi pushed for the Texas GOP to bring a newly-formed spinoff group into the party despite warnings that its leaders included avowed white nationalists.

The warnings proved to be right: Days after the Tribune first reported on Fuentes' visit with Stickland, an independent journalist reported that leaders of the new young Republicans group had praised Hitler online, and published photos of some of its leaders outside of an event for Fuentes' vitriolically antisemitic "groyper" movement.

"There was a time in my life when I hated Nick Fuentes and his white supremacy views," one of the group's leaders, Rylie Rae Ferguson, reportedly wrote on social media last year. "Now I

recognize that he is one of the smartest people in our country and we need white nationalism. Oh how the tides have turned.”

Responding to the controversy, the new group’s leadership said in a statement that it “condemns bigotry in all forms” and had removed the individuals in question.

But before that, other young Republicans said they made clear to Rinaldi and the leaders of the new group that they were in bed with extremists. Those concerns were rebuffed, a move that one person said is emblematic of a broader problem and power struggle that has allowed extremists to flourish in Republican circles.

“There is a tendency among the populist right to essentially say, ‘It doesn’t matter how awful the person is, as long as they are on our side,’” said Matt Wiltshire, finance director for the Young Republican National Federation. “We believe that we have a moral and ethical duty to be uncompromising in our stance that there is right and there is wrong.”

One of those removed was Konner Earnest, who led the group’s Parker County chapter and also recently became involved with the European American Community, a white nationalist group that argues American citizenship should be based on European ancestry.

Earnest has other ties to Rinaldi and Defend Texas Liberty: He was spotted outside the Fuentes meeting with Stickland, and has appeared in videos for Russo’s Texans For Strong Borders, which has received considerable financial support from Defend Texas Liberty. Earnest has also written anti-immigration articles for Texas Scorecard, a prominent right-wing media website that is financed by Defend Texas Liberty’s billionaire funders.

Rinaldi does not appear to have released any public statement or made any comment on social media about the young Republicans scandal.

Meanwhile, the Texas GOP’s executive committee remains at an impasse over how to respond to the party’s ongoing white supremacist problem.

Last week, after Stickland was quietly removed as Defend Texas Liberty’s president, roughly one-third of the executive committee’s 64 members, including Vice Chair Dana Myers, signed a letter saying that the party had a “moral obligation to speak boldly, publicly, and clearly on this matter” and demand an explanation for the Fuentes meeting.

“Fuentes’ views and Stickland’s tactics are abhorrent and totally antithetical to the principles of the Republican Party of Texas and to the conservatives who have trusted [Defend Texas Liberty] for the cause of liberty and patriotism,” they wrote. “Whether this was caused by a

lapse in judgment, conscious disregard, poor leadership, or a faulty moral compass -- Stickland and [Defend Texas Liberty] must ultimately accept responsibility.”

The members also called on the Texas GOP — as well as its donors — to cut all ties with Defend Texas Liberty and the myriad groups it funds until Stickland is "removed and disassociated from [Defend Texas Liberty] and its benefactor organizations and a full accounting of the meeting is provided."

Since then, the party’s disagreements have continued to escalate in public view, as Rinaldi and his allies remain largely silent on the scandal. Two weeks ago — and after a Tribune reporter reached out to more than a dozen members of the party’s executive committee regarding Defend Texas Liberty — the Texas GOP removed contact information for executive committee members from its website.

The Texas GOP did not respond to a request for comment on the move, which has been publicly blasted as an attempt to keep members from being contacted by the public.

“You don’t stand for ‘we the people’ unless they have access to you,” said [Cat Parks](#), a former executive committee member and vice chair of the Texas GOP. “It’s not like controversy didn’t happen during my tenure.”

For now, it’s unclear what comes next for the Texas GOP and its relationship with Defend Texas Liberty, which released a two-sentence statement saying it opposes Fuentes’ “incendiary” views but has yet to provide any other details on the meeting. Stickland may no longer be leading the group, but his removal is likely cosmetic given that he also owns [Pale Horse Strategies](#), a consulting firm that is used heavily by Defend Texas Liberty-funded groups and candidates.

Members of the party’s executive committee have said as much this week, and reiterated their calls for the party to speak out against Defend Texas Liberty and Stickland.

The Texas GOP “must renounce [Defend Texas Liberty] until a full explanation of the Fuentes meeting is provided, those responsible are held accountable and there’s new entirely new leadership (not just the same players swapping job titles),” executive committee member Rolando Garcia wrote this week on social media.

“Don’t excuse the inexcusable just to spite your political enemies,” he added.