

The truth rundown

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Part ONE of THREE

The leader of the Church of Scientology strode into the room with a boom box and an announcement: Time for a game of musical chairs.

David Miscavige had kept more than 30 members of his church's executive staff cooped up for weeks in a small office building outside Los Angeles, not letting them leave except to grab a shower. They slept on the floor, their food carted in.

Their assignment was to develop strategic plans for the church. But the leader trashed their every idea and berated them as incompetents and enemies, of him and the church.

Prove your devotion, Miscavige told them, by winning at musical chairs. Everyone else — losers, all of you — will be banished to Scientology outposts around the world. If families are split up, too bad.

To the music of Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody they played through the night, parading around a conference room in their Navy-style uniforms, grown men and women wrestling over chairs.

The next evening, early in 2004, Miscavige gathered the group and out of nowhere slapped a manager named Tom De Vocht, threw him to the ground and delivered more blows. De Vocht took the beating and the humiliation in silence — the way other executives always took the leader's attacks.

This account comes from executives who for decades were key figures in Scientology's powerful inner circle. Marty Rathbun and Mike Rinder, the highest-ranking executives to leave the church, are speaking out for the first time.

Two other former executives who defected also agreed to interviews with the St. Petersburg Times: De Vocht, who for years oversaw the church's spiritual headquarters in Clearwater, and Amy Scobee, who helped create Scientology's celebrity network, which caters to the likes of John Travolta and Tom Cruise.

One by one, the four defectors walked away from the only life they knew. That Rathbun and Rinder are speaking out is a stunning reversal because they were among Miscavige's closest associates, Haldeman and Ehrlichman to his Nixon.

Now they provide an unprecedented look inside the upper reaches of the tightly controlled organization. They reveal:

- Physical violence permeated Scientology's international management team. Miscavige set the tone, routinely attacking his lieutenants. Rinder says the leader attacked him some 50 times.

Rathbun, Rinder and De Vocht admit that they, too, attacked their colleagues, to demonstrate loyalty to Miscavige and prove their mettle.

- Staffers are disciplined and controlled by a multilayered system of "ecclesiastical justice." It includes publicly confessing sins and crimes to a group of peers, being ordered to jump into a pool fully clothed, facing embarrassing "security checks" or, worse, being isolated as a "suppressive person."

At the pinnacle of the hierarchy, Miscavige commands such power that managers follow his orders, however bizarre, with lemming-like obedience.

- Church staffers covered up how they botched the care of Lisa McPherson, a Scientologist who died after they held her 17 days in isolation at Clearwater's Fort Harrison Hotel.

Rathbun, who Miscavige put in charge of dealing with the fallout from the case, admits that he ordered the destruction of incriminating evidence. He and others also reveal that Miscavige made an embarrassing miscalculation on McPherson's Scientology counseling.

- With Miscavige calling the shots and Rathbun among those at his side, the church muscled the IRS into granting Scientology tax-exempt status. Offering fresh perspective on one of the church's crowning moments, Rathbun details an extraordinary campaign of public pressure backed by thousands of lawsuits.

- To prop up revenues, Miscavige has turned to long-time parishioners, urging them to buy material that the church markets as must-have, improved sacred scripture.

Church officials deny the accusations. Miscavige never hit a single church staffer, not once, they said.

On May 13, the Times asked to interview Miscavige, in person or by phone, and renewed the request repeatedly the past five weeks. Church officials said Miscavige's schedule would not permit an interview before July.

At 5:50 p.m. Saturday, Miscavige e-mailed the Times to protest the newspaper's decision to publish instead of waiting until he was available. His letter said he would produce information "annihilating the credibility" of the defectors. Beloved by millions of Scientologists, church spokesmen say, Miscavige has guided the church through a quarter-century of growth.

The defectors are liars, they say, bitter apostates who have dug up tired allegations from the Internet and inflated the importance of the positions they held in Scientology's dedicated work

force known as the Sea Org. They say it was the defectors who physically abused staff members, and when Miscavige found out, he put a stop to it and demoted them.

Now they say the defectors are trying to stage a coup, inventing allegations so they can topple Miscavige and seize control of the church.

The defectors deny it. They say they are speaking out because Miscavige must be exposed.

Rathbun says the leader's mistreatment of staff has driven away managers and paralyzed those who stay. "It's becoming chaos because ... there's no form of organization. Nobody's respected because he's constantly denigrating and beating on people."

"I don't want people to continue to be hurt and tricked and lied to," Rinder said. "I was unsuccessful in changing anything through my own lack of courage when I was inside the church.

"But I believe these abuses need to end ... This rot being instigated from inside Scientology actually is more destructive to the Scientology movement than anything external to it."

BEATINGS: Random, whimsical

At 49, Miscavige is fit and tanned, his chiseled good looks accented by intense blue eyes. His frame is on the short side at 5 feet 5, but solid, with a matching, vise-like handshake.

The voice, resonant and strong, can transfix a crowd of thousands. Many call him "COB," because he is chairman of the board of the entity responsible for safeguarding Scientology, founded by L. Ron Hubbard in 1954.

"He is one of the most capable, intelligent individuals I've ever met," Rathbun said. "But L. Ron Hubbard says the intelligence scale doesn't necessarily line up with the sanity scale. Adolf Hitler was brilliant. Stalin was brilliant. They were geniuses. But they were also on a certain level stark, staring mad."

Rathbun, Rinder, Scobee and De Vocht say they participated in and witnessed madness, from musical chairs to repeated physical abuse.

What triggered Miscavige's outbursts? The victims usually had no clue.

"If it wasn't the answer he wanted to hear, he'd lose it," De Vocht said. "If it was contrary to how he thought, he'd lose it. If he found it to be smart aleck, or it was a better answer than he had, he would lose it."

Rathbun and Rinder list the executives they saw Miscavige attack:

Marc Yager: At least 20 times.

Guillaume Lesevre: At least 10 times.

Ray Mithoff: Rathbun said Miscavige "would regularly hit this guy open-handed upside the head real hard and jar him. Or grab him by the neck and throw him on the floor."

Norman Starkey: "Right in the parking lot, (Miscavige) just beat the living f--- out of him, got him on the ground and then started kicking him when he was down," Rathbun said.

He said he saw Rinder "get beat up at least a dozen times just in those last four years ... some of them were pretty gruesome."

Said Rinder: "Yager was like a punching bag. So was I."

He added: "The issue wasn't the physical pain of it. The issue was the humiliation and the domination. ... It's the fact that the domination you're getting — hit in the face, kicked — and you can't do anything about it. If you did try, you'd be attacking the COB.

"It was random and whimsical. It could be the look on your face. Or not answering a question quickly. But it always was a punishment."

Scobee said Miscavige never laid a hand on her or any other woman, but she witnessed many attacks, including the time the leader choked Rinder until his face turned purple. Rinder confirmed that account.

De Vocht estimated that from 2003 to 2005, he saw Miscavige strike staffers as many as 100 times.

Rathbun, Rinder and De Vocht admit that they, in turn, hit others. In January 2004, Rathbun pummeled Rinder and had to be pried off by several church staffers.

"Yes, that incident happened," Rinder said. "It wasn't the only time that Marty or I was involved in some form of physical violence with people."

He recalled holding a church staffer against a wall by the collar and pressing into his throat.

Rathbun said he attacked many people, many times, including throwing Lesevre across a table, boxing Starkey's ears, and tackling Yager down a flight of stairs — all, he said, on Miscavige's orders. He said he threw another staffer against the hood of a cab at Los Angeles International Airport. As a crowd gathered to watch, he cocked his fist and told him to improve his attitude.

De Vocht said he "punched a couple of guys" during one of many sessions where managers confessed their wrongdoings to their peers, a gathering that got raucous and physical. Embarrassed about it now, he says he easily rationalized it then: "If I don't attack I'm going to be attacked. It's a survival instinct in a weird situation that no one should be in."

The four defectors each said the leader established a culture that encouraged physical violence.

"It had become the accepted way of doing things," Rinder said. "If COB did it, it was okay for everybody else to do it, too."

Rinder said Rathbun was Miscavige's enforcer. "If Dave didn't want to go do any dirty work himself, he sent Marty to do it for him."

Rathbun doesn't deny it. It's difficult to get the truth, he said, "unless you talk to somebody who's got some dirt on their hands. And I freely admit I got dirt on my hands, and I feel terrible about it. That's why I'm doing what I'm doing."

Rathbun wasn't exempt from Miscavige's attacks. "He once grabbed me by the neck and banged my head against the wall."

Nobody fought back.

"The thing is, he's got this huge entourage," Scobee said. "He's the 'savior' of everything because he has to bail everybody out because we're all incompetent a-----, which is what he repeatedly tells us.

"You don't have any money. You don't have job experience. You don't have anything. And he could put you on the streets and ruin you."

Church spokesman Tommy Davis said the defectors are lying. Responding to Rinder's contention that Miscavige attacked him some 50 times, Davis said: "He's absolutely lying."

Yager, Starkey, Mithoff, and Lesevre all emphatically told the Times that Miscavige never attacked them.

Davis produced court affidavits in which Rathbun and Rinder, while still in Scientology's top ranks, praised the leader as a stellar person and vigorously denied rumors he had abused staff.

Davis pointed to a 1998 Times story in which Miscavige denied the same rumors. Rathbun backed him, saying that in 20 years working with Miscavige, he never saw the leader raise a hand to anyone.

"That's not his temperament," Rathbun said then. "He's got enough personal horsepower that he doesn't need to resort to things like that."

Says Rathbun now: "That was the biggest lie I ever told you."

Davis played video of a confrontation between Rinder and a BBC reporter in London in 2007, just before Rinder left the church. The reporter repeatedly asked about the Miscavige rumors, which Rinder heatedly denied as "rubbish."

Now Rinder says that he lied to protect the church, and that his loyalty to Miscavige was misplaced. He said he did then what Miscavige's staff is doing today: "Just deny it. Nope. Not true. Never happened."

The Church of Scientology describes itself as working for "a civilization without insanity, without criminals and without war, where the able can prosper and honest beings can have rights, and where man is free to rise to greater heights."

Scobee says Miscavige does not practice what Scientology preaches. He liberally labels church members as enemies, which forbids any contact with family and friends still in Scientology.

"You cannot call yourself a religious leader as you beat people, as you confine people, as you rip apart families," she said. "If I was trying to destroy Scientology, I would leave David Miscavige right where he is because he's doing a fantastic job of it."

Character assassination

That's what the defectors are doing to Miscavige, according to a team of two church lawyers and two spokesmen.

Rathbun, Rinder, De Vocht and Scobee: All of them failed at their jobs, broke Sea Org rules and were ethically suspect, the team said. Stack these four failures against a man of Miscavige's stature and it's clear who is credible and who is not.

"It's not a question of they have a version and we have a version. It's that this never happened," said Monique Yingling, a non-Scientologist lawyer who has represented the church for more than 20 years. "There is a story here, and it's not what you've been told."

As the lawyers and spokesmen defended Miscavige and sought to discredit his detractors, they produced materials from the four defectors' "ethics files" — confessions, contritions, laments that the church keeps to document their failures.

The documents illuminate a world of church justice outsiders rarely see. This ethics system keeps Scientologists striving to stay productive. It relies on the notion that at any given time, every human activity can be reduced to a statistic and everything — a group, a person, someone's job or marriage — can be measured and placed in one of 12 "conditions."

The lower conditions include "Confusion," "Treason" and "Enemy." The highest condition is "Power," followed by "Power Change" and "Affluence."

Moving up the ethics ladder requires that the subject pen confessions or soul-searching memos called "formulas," which are said to better the individual as he or she examines what went wrong. These memos also can give the church a ready source of written material to use against members who would turn against Scientology.

More documents are generated when a person wants to leave, or "blow."

In 1959, Hubbard wrote a policy stating that a person leaves as a kind of noble gesture when he can't help himself from injuring the church. To justify leaving, Hubbard believed, the person thinks up bad things to say about the church.

Anyone who leaves has committed "overts" (harmful acts) against the church and is withholding them. The church is obligated to make such people come clean, Hubbard said, because withholding overts against Scientology can lead to suicide or death by disease. They must write down their transgressions to remain in good standing when they leave.

Yingling and Davis said the church doesn't relish using documents from ethics files. But after the four defectors spoke out against Miscavige, the lawyer and spokesman said they had no choice.

They produced documents showing Scobee violated Sea Org rules on "romantic involvement outside of marriage." Scobee said the church is exaggerating.

She acknowledged violating the rules by committing a sexual act in a supervisor's room, but noted the man involved was her future husband. Another document said she "started a relationship" with a man not her husband in 1988. Scobee said it was a non-Scientologist electrician who asked her to run away with him. She said she declined and reported it to a supervisor but was disciplined anyway.

A document from July 2003 cited poor performance and declared her unfit to work at the California base.

Scobee counters that the church kept her in positions of responsibility for more than 20 years. She was pictured in a 1996 church magazine as one of the "most proven" and "highly dedicated" senior executives in Scientology.

"The point is, it doesn't matter if I was God or if I was a sloppy janitor," Scobee said. "What I saw is what I saw."

De Vocht was in a condition of "Treason" when he authored a memo in 2004 saying he made a land deal in Clearwater that lost the church \$1 million. In a 2002 letter to Miscavige, he confessed to squandering \$10 million in church funds through waste and overspending on two projects.

Asked about those documents, De Vocht said the writings in the ethics formulas reflect the distorted culture created by Miscavige, not reality. "You say whatever you have to, to appear to be cooperative. It's not a voluntary action. It's a cover your a--, get with the program thing or you're going to get beat up."

Praising Miscavige was part of the formula, De Vocht said. "He's our pope, our leader, and he can't do wrong. ... If you say, 'I'll do everything I can to get it right,' then you can be okay. You don't have an option other than to bow down and say, 'You're right and I'm wrong.'"

The church says that Rinder, Scientology's top spokesman for decades, is an inveterate liar. In its ethics files, the church says, Rinder admits that he lied 43 times over the years.

"It was a real problem, Mike's propensity to lie Obviously he had an issue with the truth," said Davis, Rinder's successor as spokesman.

After denying Miscavige hit him or anyone else, Rinder is lying now, Yingling said. "He left because he was demoted ... He is bitter now and he has in his bitterness latched on to the one allegation he so vehemently denied for so many years."

Added Davis: "One of the things he was known for saying was, 'Well, if I'm so bad, why keep asking me to do things?' You know the answer to that question?... The ultimate answer to that question is 'Mike, you know what, you're right. Why keep asking.' And we stopped asking. And then he left and nobody came for him."

Like the other defectors, Rinder says he's sure he wrote whatever is in the ethics files, but he says the admissions are meaningless, they were just whatever his superiors wanted to hear. "All of these things were written to try and get into good graces or curry favor."

Davis said Rinder has not been able to deal with his fall from spokesman for an international church to his current, workaday job.

"Mike left. I think we can all agree he is bitter," Davis said. "This is a guy who ran with the big dogs in the tall grass ... it's a very exciting life. And now he is selling cars, and it must be a hell of a shock."

The church released numerous pages of files it kept on Rathbun. Among them: a 1994 letter that said he had completed a Truth Rundown — one of many types of confessionals — and apologizing for leaving the church briefly the year before; three confessions for striking and verbally abusing staff dozens of times; and documents where he admits that he mishandled situations.

In a 2003 document, Rathbun writes a "public announcement" detailing two decades of flubs, including: making himself out to be more important than he was, making more work for Miscavige, mismanaging staff and messing up major assignments, including the church's long-running battle with the IRS.

Rathbun says he wrote what Miscavige wanted to hear.

The church made special note of an affidavit dated June 6, 2009 — after the Times asked the church about Rathbun — authored by a Sea Org member whose name the church blacked out. She criticized Rathbun for being violent and abusive and playing a role in her family's recent effort to wrest her out of Scientology.

Rathbun says yes, he tried to help the family, because the woman voiced strong doubts about returning to Scientology.

Like De Vocht's, many of Rathbun's confessions are marked by bountiful praise of Miscavige. He writes, for example, that the leader "single-handedly salvaged Scientology."

Scientology's international management cadre lives and works on the church's 500-acre compound in the arid hills opposite Mount San Jacinto from Palm Springs.

Rathbun orchestrated a "reign of terror" there in 2002 and 2003, church representatives say, masquerading as an ethics officer while Miscavige was in Clearwater handling legal and other matters. They say the leader returned in late 2003, summarily demoted Rathbun and began to clean up his mess.

Rathbun says he was away from the base for almost all of 2002 and 2003, handling lawsuits and other sensitive matters at Miscavige's behest. When he returned to the base in late 2003, he said, it was Miscavige who had established a "reign of terror."

The church said Rathbun has inflated his importance in Scientology; they say that after 1993, he never had a title.

But in a 1998 Scientology magazine, Rathbun is featured as the main speaker at a major event at Ruth Eckerd Hall attended by 3,000 Scientologists. The magazine said he was "inspector general" of the entity charged with safeguarding Scientology. Also, the church provided the Times a court document from March 2000 that listed Rathbun as a "director" of the same entity.

If Rathbun's responsibility was as limited as the church says, the Times asked, how did he get people to submit to a reign of terror? Davis, the church spokesman, erupted.

"He's the one who's saying that Dave Miscavige beat these people," Davis screamed. "And he's saying that Dave Miscavige beat the exact same people that he beat. And that's what pisses me off. Because this guy's a f----- lunatic and I don't have to explain how or why he became one or how it was allowable.

"The fact is he's saying David Miscavige did what he did ... And now I'm getting a little angry. Am I angry at you? Not necessarily. But I'm g-- d--- pissed at Marty Rathbun. Because he knows that he was the reign of terror."

Landing in Clearwater

Fall 1975. An outfit calling itself the United Churches of Florida announced it would rent the Fort Harrison Hotel from the Southern Land Development Corp., a company with plans to buy the historic building.

No one — not even lawyers for the seller — could find out anything about Southern Land. Not even a phone number.

When the sale closed on Dec. 1, Southern paid \$2.3 million in cash for the landmark property, where for 50 years locals held weddings, New Year's bashes and civic events.

The newcomers promptly closed the hotel to the public. Uniformed guards armed with mace and billy clubs patrolled the entrance.

On Jan. 28, 1976, a public relations team from Los Angeles came to Clearwater and announced that the real buyer was the Church of Scientology of California.

The deception put a scare into the sleepy town with gorgeous beaches. Clearwater Mayor Gabe Cazares was incensed by the group's evasive and then heavy-handed tactics.

"The Fort Harrison has been here for a half century and now, for the first time, it is actually a fort," he lamented. "It's frightening."

Locals grew anxious as they heard that Scientology was a cult with a belligerent streak. It had sued the State Department, the Justice Department, the IRS, the CIA, the LAPD — any agency that pried or denied its requests.

Why did Hubbard choose Clearwater? He had run the church for years from a ship, the Apollo, and wanted a "land base." He sent scouts on a mission: Find a big building, near a good airport, in a warm climate.

A property in Daytona Beach made the short list. So did the Fort Harrison.

It was to be Scientology's "flagship." Hubbard sent dispatches on how "Flag" should be run, everything from marketing plans to the staff's grooming and dress. It would be "huge, posh and self-supporting," Hubbard wrote, "a hotel of quality that puts the Waldorf Astoria to shame."

Hubbard trademarked a motto for the hotel: "The friendliest place in the whole world."

He would die a decade later, but already the next generation of church leaders was forming.

The Young Turks

Hubbard called it "fair game." Those who seek to damage the church, he said, "may be deprived of property or injured by any means by any Scientologist without any discipline of the Scientologist. May be tricked, sued or lied to or destroyed."

Mayor Cazares raised questions about the new group inhabiting the Fort Harrison, calling it a cult and trading lawsuits with the church. The Times and the Clearwater Sun investigated.

Scientologists followed Hubbard's playbook and went after enemies. They tried to frame Cazares in a fake hit-and-run accident. They intercepted Times' mail and falsely accused the paper's chairman, Nelson Poynter, of being a CIA agent.

By the spring of 1976, Hubbard — the "Commodore" — was realizing his vision for the Fort Harrison. Scientologists from around the world checked in for long stays. They spent thousands

on counseling called "auditing," which seeks to rid the subconscious mind of negative experiences, leading to "higher states of spiritual awareness."

Mike Rinder, a 20-year-old Australian, ran the hotel telex, sending and receiving dispatches from Scientology outlets around the world.

David Miscavige, a 16-year-old from suburban Philadelphia, dropped out of 10th grade on his birthday that April and came to work at the Fort Harrison. He tended the grounds, served food and took pictures for promotional brochures.

In no time, the cocksure Miscavige was supervising adults. In 1977, after just 10 months in Clearwater, he was transferred to California, where he joined the Commodore's Messenger Organization, an esteemed group of about 20 who took on "missions" assigned by Hubbard.

Late in 1978, Miscavige was put in charge of the crew remodeling Hubbard's home on a Southern California ranch. Among the group was a 21-year-old former college basketball player who had joined the church a year earlier in Portland.

Thirty years later, Marty Rathbun says he can picture the first time he laid eyes on the teenage boss, strutting about, "barking out orders." No mistaking David Miscavige.

The early power plays

In the mid 1970s, the IRS hired a clerk-typist named Gerald Bennett Wolfe. What they didn't know was that he was a Scientology plant — code name "Silver."

He broke into an attorney's office at IRS headquarters in Washington and copied government documents for months, with help from the Guardian's Office, the church's secretive intelligence arm.

The IRS had revoked Scientology's tax exemption some 10 years earlier, saying it was a commercial enterprise. Scientology fought back, withholding tax payments, unleashing its lawyers and using Silver to infiltrate the agency.

But his undercover mission backfired. On July 8, 1977, the FBI raided Scientology headquarters in Washington and L.A., seizing burglary tools, surveillance equipment and 48,000 documents.

In October 1979, Hubbard's wife, Mary Sue, who directed the Guardian's Office, and 10 other Scientologists were convicted on charges of conspiring to steal government documents or obstruct justice. Her husband, named an unindicted co-conspirator, went into seclusion at his ranch near La Quinta, Calif.

By then, two of the young men from the remodeling detail were trusted aides to the self-exiled church founder. Rathbun delivered Hubbard's mail and messages; Miscavige was his "action chief."

In January 1981, Miscavige asked Rathbun to join him on a road trip to the Super Bowl. Driving eight-hour shifts from L.A. to New Orleans, they got to know each other along the way.

Later that year, Hubbard gave Miscavige a critical assignment: Resolve the crush of lawsuits and investigations that threatened the church. Miscavige chose Rathbun and three others to help handle the job.

Rathbun says he spent six months prioritizing cases and developing strategy.

"I put together units to handle cases, one in Clearwater, one in New York, one in Boston, one in Toronto," he said. "They would answer to me. I was sort of becoming in charge of the legal operation."

Miscavige, meanwhile, was disposing of internal rivals and building power. At age 21, he talked Hubbard's wife into resigning.

It didn't hurt to have Hubbard's approval. His son had filed a lawsuit claiming that the company overseeing Hubbard's assets, headed by Miscavige, was siphoning his fortune. Hubbard responded with a declaration stating that he had "unequivocal confidence in David Miscavige, who is a long-time devoted Scientologist, a trusted associate and a good friend to me."

Rinder, in turn, became a trusted associate to the emerging leader. Miscavige pulled his childhood acquaintance out of Clearwater to help dissolve the Guardian's Office, the arm of Scientology that had stolen the IRS files and committed other offenses.

He installed Rinder as head of the new international Office of Special Affairs. Part of Rinder's new job was to spread a revised narrative about Scientology: The church's new leaders were appalled to learn of the Guardian Office's dirty tricks. That was not, they said, what Scientology was all about.

Besting his rivals

On Jan. 27, 1986, thousands of Scientologists gathered at the Hollywood Palladium in Los Angeles, where a solemn Miscavige delivered the news: The founder had moved on to a new level of research that would be "done in an exterior state ... completely exterior of the body."

At 74, L. Ron Hubbard was dead.

Miscavige yielded the microphone to church attorney Earle Cooley, who did not mention Miscavige by name, but helped cement him as future leader. Cooley disclosed that Hubbard, who had died of a stroke, left the bulk of his estate to Scientology, giving final instructions that were "his ultimate expression of his confidence in the management of the church."

He left no explicit succession plan, leaving open the question of who would lead the church.

Months later, Miscavige, Rathbun and another executive took control of the Religious Technology Center, the RTC, which Hubbard created as the highest ecclesiastical body in the church. They dismissed the staff and pressured the head of the office to step down.

Miscavige became the RTC's chairman of the board, a title he still holds. Rathbun took the high-ranking post of inspector general for ethics.

The last rivals for control of Scientology were Pat and Annie Broeker, who had assisted Hubbard in his last years. The founder had elevated them to "loyal officer" status, a higher rank than Miscavige, a captain.

The Broekers also had custody of Hubbard's last writings, the cherished upper levels of Scientology auditing that he wrote by hand while in seclusion. For a church that depends in large part on auditing fees, the papers were a gold mine not only spiritually, but financially. Miscavige wanted them.

Rathbun reveals what they did:

The day Pat Broeker and Miscavige flew cross-country to meet church lawyers in Washington, Rathbun positioned a team of about 20 men outside the Broekers' ranch in Barstow, Calif.

During a layover in Chicago, Miscavige called with the signal for Rathbun to phone the ranch caretaker. Rathbun told her that Miscavige and Broeker had called with a message: The FBI planned to raid the ranch in two hours. If they didn't get Hubbard's papers out, they might be lost forever.

The woman let Rathbun and his guys in.

"It worked like a charm," he said.

Miscavige's rise was complete. At 26, he answered to no one in Scientology.

For Rathbun, the point of the story is that Miscavige maneuvered his way to the top, he was not the chosen one. But Scientologists believe he was anointed. "And when they believe that, they're willing to do almost anything."

It was a conversation days after getting their hands on Hubbard's last writings that Rathbun says showed him that Miscavige saw himself not as a political climber but as a chosen leader.

Miscavige seemed in awe of his new responsibilities, so Rathbun tried to buck him up. "I said my basketball coach in high school had these inspirational sayings. One, from Darrell Royal of the Texas Longhorns, stuck with me. He said, 'I don't worry about choosing a leader. He'll emerge.' "

"That's false data!" Miscavige shot back.

Said Rathbun: "He rejected that so fast. Boy, when I suggested he was anything other than anointed, he jumped down my throat."

Scientology vs. the IRS

By the late 1980s, the battle with the IRS had quieted from the wild days of break-ins and indictments. But Miscavige was no less intent on getting back the church's tax exemption, which he thought would legitimize Scientology.

The new strategy, according to Rathbun: Overwhelm the IRS. Force mistakes.

The church filed about 200 lawsuits against the IRS, seeking documents to prove IRS harassment and challenging the agency's refusal to grant tax exemptions to church entities.

Some 2,300 individual Scientologists also sued the agency, demanding tax deductions for their contributions.

"Before you knew it, these simple little cookie-cutter suits ... became full-blown legal cases," Rathbun said.

Washington-based attorney William C. Walsh, who is now helping the church rebut the defectors claims, shepherded many of those cases. "We wanted to get to the bottom of what we felt was discrimination," he said. "And we got a lot of documents, evidence that proved it."

"It's fair to say that when we started, there was a lot of distrust on both sides and suspicion," Walsh said. "We had to dispel that and prove who we were and what kind of people we were."

Yingling teamed with Walsh, Miscavige and Rathbun on the case. She said the IRS investigation of Miscavige resulted in a file thicker than the FBI's file on Dr. Martin Luther King. "I mean it was insane," she said.

The church ratcheted up the pressure with a relentless campaign against the IRS.

Armed with IRS records obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, Scientology's magazine, Freedom, featured stories on alleged IRS abuses: lavish retreats on the taxpayers' dime; setting quotas on audits of individual Scientologists; targeting small businesses for audits while politically connected corporations were overlooked.

Scientologists distributed the magazine on the front steps of the IRS building in Washington.

A group called the National Coalition of IRS Whistleblowers waged its own campaign. Unbeknownst to many, it was quietly created and financed by Scientology.

It was a grinding war, with Scientology willing to spend whatever it took to best the federal agency. "I didn't even think about money," Rathbun said. "We did whatever we needed to do."

They also knew the other side was hurting. A memo obtained by the church said the Scientology lawsuits had tapped the IRS's litigation budget before the year was up.

The church used other documents it got from the IRS against the agency.

In one, the Department of Justice scolded the IRS for taking indefensible positions in court cases against Scientology. The department said it feared being "sucked down" with the IRS and tarnished.

Another memo documented a conference of 20 IRS officials in the 1970s. They were trying to figure out how to respond to a judge's ruling that Scientology met the agency's definition of a religion. The IRS' solution? They talked about changing the definition.

Rathbun calls it the "Final Solution" conference, a meeting that demonstrated the IRS bias against Scientology. "We used that (memo) I don't know how many times on them," he said.

By 1991, Miscavige had grown impatient with the legal tussle. He was confident he could personally persuade the IRS to bend. That October, he and Rathbun walked into IRS headquarters in Washington and asked to meet with IRS Commissioner Fred Goldberg. They had no appointment.

Goldberg, who did not respond to interview requests for this story, did not see them that day, but he met with them a week later.

Rathbun says that contrary to rumor, no bribes were paid, no extortion used. It was round-the-clock preparation and persistence — plus thousands of lawsuits, hard-hitting magazine articles and full-page ads in USA Today criticizing the IRS.

"That was enough," Rathbun said. "You didn't need blackmail."

He and Miscavige prepped incessantly for their meeting. "I'm sitting there with three banker's boxes of documents. He (Miscavige) has this 20-page speech to deliver to these guys. And for every sentence, I've got two folders" of backup.

Miscavige presented the argument that Scientology is a bona fide religion — then offered an olive branch.

Rathbun recalls the gist of the leader's words to the IRS:

Look, we can just turn this off. This isn't the purpose of the church. We're just trying to defend ourselves. And this is the way we defend. We aggressively defend. If we can sit down and actually deal with the merits, get to what we feel we are actually entitled to, this all could be gone.

The two sides took a break.

Rathbun remembered: "Out in the hallway, Goldberg comes up to me because he sees I'm the right-hand guy. He goes: 'Does he mean it? We can really turn it off?' "

"And I said," turning his hand for effect, " 'Like a faucet.' "

The two sides started talks. Yingling said she warned church leaders to steel themselves, counseling that they answer every question, no matter how offensive.

Agents asked some doozies: about LSD initiation rituals, whether members were shot when they got out of line and about training terrorists in Mexico. "We answered everything," Yingling said, crediting Miscavige for insisting the church be open, honest and cooperative.

The back and forth lasted two years and resulted in this agreement: The church paid \$12.5 million. The IRS dropped its criminal investigations. All pending cases were dropped.

On Oct. 8, 1993, some 10,000 church members gathered in the Los Angeles Sports Arena to celebrate the leader's announcement: The IRS had restored the church's tax exemption, legitimizing Scientology as a church, not a for-profit operation.

"The war is over," Miscavige told the crowd. "This means everything."

Recharged on the Freewinds

The euphoria was short-lived. With the tax cases ended, court records became public. Newspapers wanted to know why Miscavige and his wife together made around \$100,000 while at the time most church staffers made but \$50 a week. Miscavige was furious, and got angrier still when Rathbun argued it would be an insignificant story.

Shortly after, Miscavige's wife, Michelle, came to Rathbun's office and, without a word, removed the gold captain's bars from his Sea Org uniform. Miscavige called him an SP, a suppressive person, and Rathbun was forced to confess his sins before his own staff.

Rathbun was done. "I thought to myself: You know what? That's it. What am I doing here?"

From the safe in his office at the California base he took three 1-ounce pieces of gold, worth about \$500 each, slipped on a bomber jacket, ate breakfast in the mess hall and drove east toward Pensacola, to visit a friend. Miscavige tracked him down and arranged to meet in New Orleans.

"He begged me to come back," Rathbun recalled, adding that Miscavige offered the carrot of a two-year stint aboard the Freewinds, a Scientology cruise ship where parishioners get the highest levels of counseling while sailing the Caribbean.

Rathbun said Miscavige told him:

You've worked hard, you deserved a reward. Go spend time on the ship. Get yourself right, get in touch with what made you love the church in the first place. Hone your skills, come back as the best auditor on the planet.

It was just what Rathbun needed to hear: "I couldn't have been more thankful."

He came aboard the Freewinds late in 1993. He worked odd jobs, devoured Hubbard's writings and spent eight to 10 hours a day receiving counseling and training to be an auditor.

After two years at sea, he reported to Clearwater, to Flag, where the church bases its best auditors and offers upper levels of training. But the quality of auditing had slipped. Rathbun's assignment was to help bring it back up.

Late in the summer of 1995, a woman exited an auditing room at the Fort Harrison Hotel, raised her arms above her head and shouted with delight — a breach of the all-quiet protocol on the auditing floor.

"Who's that?" Rathbun asked a supervisor.

"That's Lisa McPherson."

Death in slow motion

By [Thomas C. Tobin](#) and [Joe Childs](#), Times Staff Writers

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The night after Lisa McPherson died, the leader of the Church of Scientology sent word for one of his top lieutenants to wait by a pay phone at the Holiday Inn Surfside on Clearwater Beach.

When Marty Rathbun answered the ringing phone in the lobby, David Miscavige let him have it:

Why aren't you all over this mess? The police are poking around. Do something.

“Yes sir,” Rathbun said.

McPherson, a 36-year-old parishioner in apparent good health, had spent 17 days in a guarded room at the church's Fort Harrison Hotel. Scientology staffers tried to nurse her out of a mental breakdown, but she became ill. She drew her last breaths in the back seat of a van as they drove her to a hospital in the next county.

Her death on Dec. 5, 1995, triggered nine years of investigations, lawsuits and worldwide press coverage. Alive on the Internet, it stains Scientology's reputation still.

Now, for the first time, comes an inside account from the upper ranks of Scientology — from the man who directed the church's handling of the case.

Rathbun, who defected from Scientology's staff in late 2004, admits that as prosecutors and attorneys for McPherson's family prepared subpoenas, he ordered the destruction of incriminating evidence about her care at the Fort Harrison.

He and others who have left the church disclose for the first time that Miscavige was involved in McPherson's Scientology counseling. Just weeks before her mental breakdown, they say, it was the leader himself who determined that she had reached an enhanced mental state that Scientologists call “clear.”

For years Rathbun was adamant that the church did nothing wrong. Now he says that McPherson's care was a debacle from the start. It was a “perfect storm of incompetence and irresponsibility” within the church, he said. “You couldn't justify it.”

He disclosed that the church was prepared to pay almost any price to make the case go away. He said he sent an emissary to McPherson's funeral in Dallas with authority to give her mother, Fannie, whatever she wanted. The approach was rebuffed because the family didn't trust the church.

“Whether it was financially or any other thing, we’re taking care of that woman because it was on our watch. If she needed \$5 million, we would have come up with \$5 million.”

Church officials say Rathbun is a bitter ex-member who inflated his importance in Scientology and whose motives are suspect. They say Miscavige demoted Rathbun in 2003 in part for missteps he made in the McPherson case.

A settlement agreement with the woman’s family forbids them from providing specifics, said Monique Yingling, a long-time Scientology attorney and friend of Miscavige. Still, she said that Rathbun botched the case from the start, and “possibly caused the whole thing.”

A little fender-bender

McPherson joined Scientology in Dallas, her hometown, when she was 18. She worked for a marketing company owned by Scientologist friends; the company moved to Clearwater in 1994 to be near the church’s spiritual headquarters, and McPherson came, too.

Shortly before 6 p.m. on Nov. 18, 1995, her Jeep Cherokee ran into a boat trailer stopped in traffic on S Fort Harrison Avenue.

McPherson, frantic, walked up to the driver pulling the trailer, put her hands on his shoulders and asked, “Where’s the people? Where’s the people?”

Firefighters had her move her car to the side of Belleview Boulevard. She signed a statement saying she did not want medical care. As officers and paramedics tended to other duties, they saw McPherson had stripped off her clothes and was walking along Belleview.

They took her to Morton Plant Hospital, where doctors discussed having her committed for psychiatric evaluation under Florida’s Baker Act.

But Scientology considers psychiatry and psychiatric drugs evil. The church believes it offers less intrusive and more humane treatment for problems of the human mind.

Adamant that McPherson not be exposed to psychiatry, about 10 church members showed up at the hospital and said they would take care of her. She said she wanted to leave with her friends and signed out against a doctor’s advice.

Church staffers checked her into the Fort Harrison and assigned her to Room 174 of the cabanas, a group of less formal rooms facing the street behind the hotel. Four members of the church’s medical office were assigned to watch McPherson. Staffers from various departments were pulled in to help — including a payroll officer, a file clerk, a secretary, a personnel director, security guards and two librarians.

Supervising was Janis Johnson, a doctor unlicensed in Florida, who was a church medical officer.

For more than two weeks, they tried to calm, feed and medicate McPherson. They gave her chloral hydrate, a mild sedative. A staff dentist, unlicensed in Florida, mixed aspirin, Benadryl and orange juice in a syringe and squirted it down her throat.

The staffers kept logs of what they did. Trying to calm McPherson, a staffer tried to force three Valerian root caplets down her throat, but McPherson spit them out. “My idea of closing her nose so she has to swallow so she can breathe through her mouth is only marginally successful,” the staffer wrote.

McPherson slapped and screamed at her caretakers. She babbled, she vomited her food. She destroyed the ceiling lamp and broke glass in the bathroom. She jumped off the bed, fell on the floor, ran around the room.

She pondered a light bulb, saying, “You have to follow the light, as light is life.”

“She was like an ice cube,” one caretaker wrote. “She refused to eat and spit out everything she took. Her breath was foul ... had a fever to my touch.”

By the evening of Dec. 5, McPherson had lost about 12 pounds. Johnson, the church doctor, telephoned David Minkoff, a Scientologist and a doctor at Columbia New Port Richey Hospital. Minkoff said to take McPherson to Morton Plant Hospital down the street.

But Alain Kartuzinski, a church counseling supervisor, told Minkoff he feared that McPherson would be exposed to psychiatric care at Morton Plant, and Johnson assured Minkoff that McPherson’s condition was not life-threatening.

What they didn’t tell Minkoff: McPherson was limp and unable to walk. Her breathing was labored, her eyes fixed and unblinking. Her face was gaunt, a sign of severe dehydration.

Minkoff agreed to see her. With McPherson in the back seat of a van, her caretakers drove 45 minutes to the Pasco hospital, passing four other hospitals on the way.

They rolled her into the ER splayed across a wheelchair. She had no pulse, no heartbeat and was not breathing. Minkoff pronounced McPherson dead.

He took Johnson aside and yelled at her.

“I was shocked out of my wits,” he said later. “I really wasn’t in the mode of finding out what happened. I was more in the mode of, ‘How could you bring this person up to me like this?’”

Miscavige’s role

Scientology employs a unique brand of counseling called auditing. In a quiet room, an “auditor” asks the parishioner prescribed questions while monitoring a device called an electro-psychometer, or e-meter. Scientologists say there is a “charge” associated with areas of upset in a person’s life, such as marital conflict or a childhood accident.

When such topics come up, the e-meter's needle responds. The act of locating the troubling episode dissipates the charge and the needle floats back and forth. The person is supposed to feel better.

One goal is to reach "clear," a state where the mind's negative images are gone and the person is said to be rid of all fears, anxieties and irrational thoughts.

John Travolta, Kirstie Alley and Tom Cruise are among the celebrities who have extolled the benefits of Scientology. Parishioners from around the globe travel to Clearwater to be audited by the best. Scientologists come for the deluxe accommodations and the top-flight, "Class 12" auditors, whose services, Rathbun said, cost \$1,000 an hour.

But back in 1995, Rathbun says, even the church thought most of its Class 12 auditors were not worth the money. They were burned out, their sessions rote and uninspired, like a doctor with a poor bedside manner.

"These guys are all overweight, they're obese, they've got back problems. They don't sleep enough," he said. "And one of the problems, I realized, is for 15, 20 years they're cash cows."

He said they were "just getting milked nonstop."

Rathbun and others say Miscavige was in Clearwater in 1995 to launch "The Golden Age of Tech," an initiative aimed at raising the quality and precision of auditing at Scientology's mecca.

Rathbun said he was assigned to help. Miscavige would look in on parishioner auditing sessions from a control room with video feeds from multiple counseling rooms.

One of the parishioners was Lisa McPherson.

"He's watching live with the videocameras every session that she's in and (supervising), saying 'Do this next, do that next' and so forth," said Tom De Vocht, a top church executive in Clearwater who has since left the church and is speaking out for the first time.

The folder containing records of McPherson's auditing history came in and out of Miscavige's office, said De Vocht, whose office was next door and who had overseen a renovation of the leader's living quarters.

Don Jason, then a high-ranking officer at the Clearwater spiritual headquarters, said he saw Miscavige take off his headphones and say McPherson had achieved the state of clear in a previous session. Jason, 45, said he saw the leader write a note that McPherson's auditor would read to her, informing her of her new status.

Scientologists who are "clear" don't go psychotic, Jason said, so for a person to have a breakdown so soon after was a "huge problem."

Church officials say De Vocht and Jason are wrong. “I can tell you that’s utterly, totally false,” said Angie Blankenship, a top administrator in Clearwater from 1996 to 2003.

“I was here. Chairman of the board (Miscavige) wasn’t even here at the Flag land base during that time. He’s a liar. Never happened.”

Yingling and church spokesman Tommy Davis also said Miscavige was not in Clearwater at the time, and they say they have minutes of meetings he attended in California to prove it. They also question how De Vocht and Jason, almost 14 years later, could remember anything about a woman who then was just another parishioner.

Jason said the moment stood out because staffers require special training and refresher training to be able to identify when someone becomes clear. “So it did strike me as like, ‘Wow’?” that Miscavige had that expertise.

Not only that, “I was standing right next to him when it happened,” said Jason, who left the church in 1996 but still finds Scientology valuable.

“This is a huge deal,” De Vocht said of Miscavige’s involvement. “There’s no way not to remember it.”

De Vocht said he worked closely with Miscavige during that time. He said the leader zeroed in on McPherson because she was having issues with her counseling and was the friend of a prominent church member.

He said he saw Miscavige view McPherson’s auditing sessions through a video feed and write notations in her counseling folder.

“I watched him personally,” De Vocht said. “A whole bunch of people watched him personally.”

The church’s representatives said there are no notations by Miscavige in McPherson’s file. In any case, they say, Miscavige would have been qualified to supervise McPherson’s case had he been so inclined. “He is an expert in every field,” said Jessica Feshbach, a church spokeswoman.

Rathbun recalled walking through a hallway to the auditing rooms at the Fort Harrison and a woman bursting through a door.

“She’s going, ‘Aaaaaah! Yahoo!’ She’s screaming at the top of her lungs,” he said.

It was McPherson, cheering about the news that she had been deemed clear.

Her accomplishment was celebrated in a ceremony at the Fort Harrison in September 1995. By mid November, she would be back at the hotel, babbling to her caretakers.

Introspection rundown

When Rathbun learned that McPherson had died, he interviewed the 15 to 20 Scientologists who had cared for her.

“It was like walking into a disaster area,” he said. “They all looked devastated. They lacked sleep. Some of them had scratches and bruises from getting hit by Lisa. All of them were extremely emotionally distraught because each one of them put it on their shoulders that they had done something wrong.”

Their feelings were justified, Rathbun said. “The whole thing was done wrong. I can’t tell you what a technical crime this was” in terms of Scientology methods.

The caretakers had given McPherson an “introspection rundown,” a procedure created by Scientology founder L. Ron Hubbard. The goal is to isolate and calm a psychotic person enough to be audited. She is to be kept in a silent environment with no one around to “re-stimulate” mental images that might upset her.

Yet church staffers came and went from McPherson’s room, as did guards using walkie-talkies, Rathbun said. One staffer cried in a corner. Others held McPherson down while trying to medicate and feed her.

Instead of calming, McPherson grew agitated and self-destructive during her 17-day stay.

Rathbun said he has participated in several introspection rundowns, and none lasted more than a day or two.

He said it was obvious to him that McPherson was the victim of “out-tech,” a term for Scientology malpractice.

Rathbun had another problem: Kartuzinski, the auditing supervisor, and Johnson, the medical officer, had lied to Clearwater police. They said McPherson had not received an introspection rundown, and they said there was nothing unusual about her stay.

“That’s the hand I’m dealt,” Rathbun said. “I’ve got two false sworn statements to law enforcement agents” on top of how badly the Scientologists handled McPherson.

It was such a “dog’s breakfast” of facts, he said, his first instinct was to do something entirely out of character.

“I really truly, sincerely wished that I was in a position where I could just follow my heart,” he said. “Because my heart in December 1995 was to go straight to the state attorney’s office and say, ‘My God. There’s been a terrible accident ... We want to take responsibility.’?”

But that wasn’t in the playbook. His nearly two decades immersed in Scientology culture had taught him: When under siege, close ranks, never admit fault.

“I said, ‘Lose ’em’ and walked out of the room,” he recalled, adding that the decision to destroy the records was his own.

“Nobody told me to do it and I did it,” he said. “The truth is the truth and right now I’m going to confession, and I really think it’s something that hurt the church more than it hurt the people that were trying to get recompense.

“But it is what it is, and I know it could potentially be a crime.”

In a recent interview, State Attorney Bernie McCabe said it was clear the records were missing because the church handed over entries for every day of McPherson’s stay except the final two before she died. That the church appeared to be hiding something only fed McCabe’s sense that something was amiss.

Prosecuting Rathbun is not an option, because the time to bring destruction of evidence charges expires after three years, McCabe said. “We’re done.”

Stress ratchets up

On Nov. 13, 1998, McCabe’s office charged the church’s Clearwater entity with two felonies: criminal neglect and practicing medicine without a license.

The church now faced the prospect of trials and embarrassing testimony in both criminal and civil court.

Miscavige delegated dealing with lawyers and reporters to Rathbun and to Scientology’s chief spokesman, Mike Rinder. But the church leader kept hold of the controls, working to forge Scientology’s message from behind the scenes.

Rathbun revealed that while he and Rinder conducted phone interviews, Miscavige often was at their side, directing what to say and gesturing wildly when he thought they got it wrong.

A key legal issue in the McPherson family’s wrongful death lawsuit was whether Miscavige could be added as a defendant. Church lawyers argued that he should not be named in the suit because he dealt only with ecclesiastical matters. The family countered that Miscavige “totally controls” and “micromanages all of Scientology.”

In December 1999, a Tampa judge ruled that Miscavige could be added as a defendant.

For the church leader, it was “a big snapping point,” Rathbun said.

“That was like the explosion of all explosions that he was now potentially going to get deposed and his name would be embroiled in that litigation. He became progressively more antagonistic, violent, irrational.”

William C. Walsh, a Washington, D.C., human rights lawyer who has represented Scientology for years, said the account is far-fetched.

“One thing I do know is Dave Miscavige, and I’ve known him from December 1999 on and way before that,” Walsh said. “And I never saw any change in his personality when he became a defendant in the case. He didn’t become more antagonistic. He did not become more violent. And he’s never been irrational.”

Said Yingling: “He wasn’t happy to be a defendant. That’s true. But he took it in stride with everything else that was happening in the case.”

Rinder and Rathbun recall an afternoon on the third floor of a small office building overlooking N Fort Harrison Avenue, when they say Miscavige attacked Rinder. They say the leader shouted obscenities at Rinder, grabbed him and, while holding him in a headlock, twisted his neck and threw him to the floor.

Of the dozens of attacks Rinder says he endured, this one was the most painful.

“I remember my neck was out of place, and for maybe 30 minutes I couldn’t speak because my larynx had been squashed against the back of my throat,” he said.

Clamped in the headlock, Rinder said his thoughts tracked a familiar arc: *What did I do to cause this?*

When Miscavige dresses you down or, worse, punishes you physically, “You get into trying to figure out what you have done to him,” Rinder said. “And that’s the thing with the beatings. What did I do to cause this to happen to me?”

Overprepare. Attack, attack

Reminiscent of how Scientology fought the IRS to restore its tax exemption, the church would not be outworked defending itself from the criminal charges in the McPherson case.

Scientology spent millions of dollars, and church lawyers filed thousands of pages of medical studies and consultant reports that said McPherson’s care at the Fort Harrison could not have caused her death.

The case collapsed after Wood, the medical examiner, unexpectedly changed her official finding on the manner of McPherson’s death. Previously “undetermined,” she changed it in February 2000 to an “accident.”

Prosecutors dropped the charges four months later, citing Wood’s conflicting and confused interpretations of the evidence.

Conspiracy theorists suggested that the church somehow “got to” Wood.

Rathbun denies it. He says the medical examiner changed her conclusions in the face of the reams of scientific information from church experts.

“There was no blackmail on her,” Rathbun said. “There was no intelligence. It absolutely was all evidence. I swear to God.”

Wood, reached at her home, declined to comment.

McCabe said it was his impression that evidence and expert testimony swayed Wood. “One thing you quickly come to realize when dealing with (Scientologists) is that they are persistent,” he said. “And they were persistent with her.”

In May 2004, four years after the criminal charges were dropped, the church settled with McPherson’s family, ending their lawsuit. The terms remain secret.

In a speech to the International Association of Scientologists, Miscavige proclaimed victory over government officials, over the press and over others who he said tried to use McPherson’s death to bring down the church.

He said the roots of the attack stretched from the German government, which opposed Scientology, to the Clearwater police, which investigated the church for two decades.

“They were just looking for anything to get us,” he told the crowd. “We always knew we’d win.”

Quoting Hubbard, he listed the qualities that would always hold Scientology in good stead. “Constant alertness, constant willingness to fight back.”

Winning but losing

Though Scientology prevailed on the legal front, the McPherson case set back a long-running effort by the church to cultivate a benign, mainstream image.

Among the details that emerged: In McPherson’s last five years, she had spent at least \$176,700 on Scientology services and had \$5,773 in the account she kept at the church. She died with \$11 in her savings account.

The case reignited passions about Scientology and its practices, bringing pro- and antichurch protests back to the streets of Clearwater after years of relative calm.

Some people paid a price.

Minkoff, the Scientologist doctor who pronounced McPherson dead, was disciplined by the state of Florida. Without having met McPherson, he had written prescriptions for her during her stay in the Fort Harrison.

Kartuzinski, the supervisor in charge of her stay at the Fort Harrison, was banished for years to work in the church's laundry in Clearwater.

Scientology parishioners were called on to dig deeper into their pockets. The church's Clearwater entity, the Flag Service Organization, typically took in \$1.5 million to \$2 million a week, Rathbun and others said, providing a picture of Scientology's revenues never before disclosed.

Miscavige decided the exorbitant legal bills from the McPherson case were to be paid from the Flag operation, Rathbun said, so church registrars urged parishioners to come in for more auditing and other services.

“It was a matter of, ‘Step things up, get people in,?’” he said. “They brought in a lot of money during that period.”

Yet another group would pay in a different way. According to Rathbun and other high-ranking defectors, Miscavige grew more violent and erratic as the McPherson case wore on.

Said Rathbun: “Working under David Miscavige from 2000 forward was a steadily deteriorating situation.”

Ecclesiastical justice

By [Thomas C. Tobin](#) and [Joe Childs](#), Times Staff Writers

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The four high-ranking executives who left Scientology say that church leader David Miscavige not only physically attacked members of his executive staff, he messed with their minds.

He frequently had groups of managers jump into a pool or a lake. He mustered them into group confessions that sometimes spun into free-for-alls, with people hitting one another.

Mike Rinder, who defended the church to the media for two decades, couldn't stomach what was happening on the inside.

The tactics to keep executives in line "are wrong from a Scientology viewpoint," said Rinder, who walked away two years ago. "They are not standard practice of Scientology. They are just not humanitarian. And they are just outright evil."

Church spokesmen confirm that managers are ordered into pools and assembled for group confessions. It's part of the "ecclesiastical justice" system the church imposes on poor performers.

Rinder and the other defectors couldn't cut it in the tough world of Scientology's Sea Org, a group whose members dedicate their lives to service of the church, the church says. Rather than accept their own failings, the defectors are putting a sinister twist on something that is normal.

The Sea Org is a "crew of tough sons of bitches," said church spokesman Tommy Davis, an 18-year veteran of the group.

"The Sea Org is not a democracy. The members of it agree with a man named L. Ron Hubbard. They abide by his policies . . . and we follow it to the T, to the letter, to the punctuation marks. And if you disagree with that and you don't like it, you don't belong. Then you leave."

A better thetan

The order came about 10 p.m. on a winter's night: Report to the swimming pool.

From around the church's postcard-pretty base in the mountains east of Los Angeles, some 70 staff members turned out in their Navy-style uniforms. David Miscavige was unhappy with the troops, again.

The punishment the leader had in mind was not new to members of the Sea Org. Hubbard, the church's late founder, "overboarded" Sea Org members in the 1970s when he ran Scientology from a ship named the *Apollo*.

Miscavige had the staffers line up at the diving board in their uniforms, and one by one, jump into the pool. Before each person went in, Norman Starkey, once the captain of the *Apollo*, called on them to be better spiritual beings. He recited a traditional Sea Org saying:

We commit your sins and errors to the deep and trust you will rise a better thetan.

Miscavige ordered the group to go to an office in their wet clothes and stay put until they figured out where they had failed.

Tom De Vocht says he can't recall what angered Miscavige that chilly night early in 2005. But he well remembers the doubts that crept into his head as he sat wet and shivering.

What am I doing here?

De Vocht had joined the church with his mother when he was just 10 and rose to a top executive post at Scientology's spiritual headquarters in Clearwater. But in the months after that mass dunking, he no longer recognized the organization.

Neither did Rinder, who went into the pool that night with De Vocht.

Two others already had acted on their doubts. Marty Rathbun, one of Miscavige's top lieutenants for years, left in 2004. Amy Scobee, who held several executive posts, left in 2005.

The four defectors, speaking publicly for the first time, each served more than 25 years in the Sea Org.

"Right, wrong or indifferent, I felt I was doing something for the good of man, and I'll never give that back," said De Vocht, who left in 2005. "But the longer I was in it, it got crazier and crazier as Dave took over."

Normal vs. abnormal

Confession is ingrained in Scientology culture. Admit all your bad thoughts and transgressions, leave nothing out, and you will feel free, unburdened, joyful.

The four defectors say Miscavige took the practice to a new level. They said he convened group confessions that came to be known as "seances."

The executives would confess sins they had committed against Miscavige, reveal their bad thoughts about Scientology and make personal disclosures, including sexual fantasies. If someone couldn't come up with a transgression, the others bullied him into admitting something. Anything.

"And Dave would sit there and listen to it and enjoy the hell out of it," said De Vocht, who recalled one seance when he said Miscavige struck executive Marc Yager and threw him to the floor, then singled out Faith Schermerhorn, a midlevel administrator who is black.

"He goes, 'By the way, (Yager) thinks black people are n-----, and he doesn't want Scientology to help blacks. Go kick him.' So (Yager) is down on the ground and she's kicking him," De Vocht said.

"Everybody in that damned room — people are wild and out of control," he said. "I punched somebody. Everybody was punched. And screaming and yelling. It just got like, *What the hell is going on here?* "

The church provided the *St. Petersburg Times* with sworn declarations from Yager and Schermerhorn denying that the incident happened. In Yager's declaration, he said he is not prejudiced and Schermerhorn is a friend.

Schermerhorn wrote that she has never heard Miscavige use the n-word: "As a matter of fact, I know that Mr. Miscavige has been the person in Scientology who has done the most for black people."

Rinder said a group confession early in 2004 stands out for him because Rathbun, his longtime friend, ended up attacking him.

"You stand up and there's 50 people in the room all screaming and shouting, 'What did you do? And you did this and you did that.' And I'm standing there saying, 'No, I didn't do that,' " Rinder said.

The group ganged up on him. He had to have done something: *Come on. Own up. Come on.*

"And then when I said nothing, that's when Marty leaped on me," Rinder said. "And that's psychotic. There is a term for it in Scientology. It's called Contagion of Aberration. . . .

"When you get a group of people together, they will stimulate one another to do things that are crazy."

Davis, who succeeded Rinder as church spokesman, said the term "seance" is not used in Scientology and Miscavige never encouraged violence. But it's not surprising that Rathbun attacked Rinder, Davis said, because Rathbun physically attacked other managers all the time.

Rinder said the ugly moment was an example of the corrosive atmosphere at Scientology's base near Los Angeles. "There's an attempt to play people off, one against the other. And you know that and you see it," Rinder said.

Rathbun's attack "wasn't motivated by hatred toward me, it was motivated by some attempt at preservation for him."

Davis cited church founder Hubbard's policy that encourages members to confront and "come clean" when they have done something to bring down their group. It's one hallmark of a successful organization.

"It's not for the purposes of punishment," Davis said, "and it's certainly never for the purpose of trying to make the person feel guilty for it."

The church says Rathbun and De Vocht acted so inappropriately — roughing up staffers — that they were required to confess publicly. "They were definitely guilty, definitely in violation of the mores of the group," said spokeswoman Jessica Feshbach.

"And were they confronted by peers and asked, What's going on? Absolutely. Because that is the responsibility of the group."

Letting down the group also can result in overboarding, church spokesmen said. It's a Sea Org ritual akin to traditions in other religious orders.

Starkey, the 66-year-old former captain of the *Apollo*, said plenty of people have been overboarded in his 50 years in Scientology.

If a Sea Org member messes up, "you throw him over the g-- d--- side of the ship," Starkey said.

"He falls into the water, he swims around, climbs up the ladder, gets off at the dock, walks back in again. He never does that again. He knows that that is the way we operate. That is what the Sea Organization is like."

Church lawyer Monique Yingling said overboarding is part of ecclesiastical justice. "They're not backing away from it or ashamed of it," she said. It has been done hundreds of times, with precautions taken to make it safe.

In the example De Vocht and Rinder recounted, church spokesmen said, the pool was heated, towels were provided, a lifeguard was present. And Miscavige wasn't even there.

De Vocht and Rinder say he was. "He was standing right there, laughing," Rinder said. "It was very entertaining for him."

Rinder said he doesn't remember any towels at the ready, that night or any of the 10 or so other times he says large groups of staffers were escorted to the lake under guard and required to jump in fully dressed.

He disputed Yingling's contention the "overboarding" incident as described, with a large group of people, is accepted church practice. He said it's meant to address an issue with an individual.

Which is how church spokesman Davis said he punished a subordinate.

"It was a guy who was blowing it and kept blowing it and kept blowing it — making mistakes, underperforming," he said. "It was my responsibility to uphold the ethical standards of the Sea Org. Yeah, absolutely, I tossed the guy in."

If the defectors could not hack such punishments, Davis said, they could have left years ago. "The g-- d--- front door wasn't locked. And if they had a problem with it they could have walked out."

Intense and hands on

The defectors were not only soft, they couldn't maintain the accelerated work pace Miscavige established, the church says. Rathbun flubbed so many assignments, such as his handling of the Lisa McPherson wrongful death lawsuit, that Miscavige had to take over, distracting him from more important duties, spokesmen said.

With Rathbun gone, Miscavige focused on growth plans: "2004 was a paradigm shift, the point where everything changed," Davis said. "Where Mr. Miscavige was able to get on to what he always wanted to get on to."

Davis played DVDs of Scientology ads now on cable TV. He outlined a multimillion-dollar international expansion program to open an array of "ideal orgs," each with course rooms, displays that explain Scientology to the uninitiated, facilities for community outreach groups, and rooms for auditing, the core counseling of Scientology.

The church revamped its Web site, improved the books that are the foundation of Scientology and restored the grainy films of Hubbard's landmark lectures. All of this accomplished in the past four years, all led, planned, designed and created by Miscavige.

The spokesmen described him as a "hands-on" leader working in video editing bays, proof-reading manuscripts, helping write scripts, staying up each night to listen to every one of Hubbard's 3,000 lectures and setting up a construction office to outfit the 66 new buildings the church has acquired since 2004.

Miscavige is intense, church spokesmen said, but he never behaves in degrading, crude or violent ways, and he never altered church policy. The church brought more than a dozen international managers to Clearwater to speak to the *Times*. All said they worked with Miscavige for years and spoke of his kindness and compassion.

All of them deny the defectors' allegations that Miscavige hit them.

"They're such lies," said Ray Mithoff, his voice shaking. "I've known the man for 27 years."

Said Mark Ingber, a Sea Org member since 1968: "I've never been beaten to a pulp in my life. Mr. Miscavige is my friend."

The best and worst

One night before Christmas 1997, Miscavige's wife, Michelle, telephoned Rathbun and Rinder. The leader wanted to see them. Right away.

From different parts of the California compound, they jogged to his quarters.

They say Miscavige bustled through the screen door in a terry cloth bathrobe and without a word grabbed Rinder around the neck, slapped him, slugged him and threw him against a tree.

Rinder ended up in ivy, mud on his uniform, his lip bleeding. Miscavige led them to the officers' lounge, poured Rinder a glass of Scotch and said it would make him feel better.

The leader of Scientology turned and walked toward his quarters.

People would flinch when Miscavige walked by, De Vocht said.

"That's how routine it was," he said. "His whole entire outlook was that everybody was out to get him. Anything and everything anybody else touched was going to be screwed up, and he had to do it himself. He didn't trust anybody."

Scobee described working in her office cubicle along the wall of a large conference room. Miscavige was seated alone on one side of the table facing several staffers, including Jeff Hawkins.

"So I'm not paying attention and all of a sudden I see David Miscavige jump up on top of the table — the conference room table," Scobee said.

He lunged at Hawkins, she said, and the two of them landed at her feet. Miscavige "stayed on top of him and was choking him and hitting him and grabbing his tie. Buttons were flying and change falling out of Jeff's pockets. And I'm sitting here going, 'Oh my God!' "

Hawkins has spoken and written publicly about the 2002 incident.

Church executive David Bloomberg tells a far different story. Bloomberg said that he was seated next to Hawkins that day and that Hawkins became belligerent with the leader. Hawkins fell out of his chair and ended up putting a scissor lock on Miscavige's legs.

"Mr. Miscavige did not touch Jeff Hawkins," Bloomberg said.

At his best, Miscavige inspires staffers, Rathbun said, recalling times the leader invoked a dispatch Hubbard wrote in the 1980s: The planet's fate rests on the shoulders of "the desperate few."

Miscavige used it to stir a sense of mission and make you feel special, Rathbun said.

"He'd make you feel like you were really important. And that's why you would do stuff for him."

But the defectors said Miscavige's tendency to change plans, micromanage and undermine the chain of command paralyzed the management team and stifled growth in the years before they left. To pump up revenue, Rathbun said, Miscavige repackaged old Scientology books and services and marketed them to parishioners as must-have, new products.

He cited the church's recent blitz urging members to buy new versions of "the basics," a collection of Hubbard books that are the foundation of Scientology. In 2007, Miscavige told Scientologists who had bought and studied the books for decades that the volumes were flawed, with whole passages missing, out-of-order or written by editors.

No wonder people complained about not being able to understand them, the leader said. The church put the volumes in their proper state and was selling them anew.

Said Rathbun: "He's telling (parishioners) literally to their faces, 'You didn't understand the first thing about Scientology because you couldn't possibly have because the books were screwed up.'"

The 18-volume set now sells for \$450, down from the 1986 price of \$738.

Davis, the church spokesman, describes the reworked collection as a sensational development, a historic recovery of Hubbard's work comparable to the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls.

Said Yingling, the church attorney: "It was received with such joy by the Scientology public at large."

Rathbun, De Vocht and Scobee said they were privy to weekly internal data reports that showed a gradual decline in key statistics, including the value of church services delivered and the number of auditing hours and courses completed.

"These are the statistics that are supposed to matter," Rathbun said. "All that stuff's been going down."

De Vocht described Miscavige's decisionmaking as erratic. He said the leader often changes course, resulting in situations like Scientology's multimillion-dollar "Super Power" building in downtown Clearwater. The mammoth structure, finished on the outside, has sat vacant for six years.

After repeated design changes, work on the interior restarted this month.

Davis and Yingling trumpet Scientology's worldwide expansion. The past five years, the church has acquired 80 properties; three new churches — called orgs — opened this year, with five more on track to open by year's end.

Is this the real life?

They called it the Hole.

For months, the small building at the California base was like a prison for more than 30 of the highest-ranking officers in the Sea Org.

They could leave only once a day, for a shower, otherwise they stayed put. Food was brought in. They slept on the floor, men around the conference table, women in the cubicles and small offices ringing the room.

Miscavige called meetings at odd hours, 2 a.m., 4 a.m. Day after day, the exhausted executives puzzled through management structure and the pricing system for church services, trying to guess what their leader wanted.

He rejected their ideas, cursed them, branded them "suppressive persons" who put their church at risk. He demanded they go back at it; they could not leave until they got it right.

Sometimes Miscavige would let someone out of the Hole or throw in somebody else. Rinder says he was there from the start. In January 2004, Miscavige added De Vocht to the mix.

"Everyone gathered around the table. He's throwing things, yelling at people, beating people up," De Vocht remembered. "It was a weirdo scene, let me tell you."

Later that month, Miscavige threw a bigger name into the Hole: Marty Rathbun.

The leader told the others not to listen to a word Rathbun said, he was not to be trusted: *I know you all have come to respect this guy over the years, but he is the guy that's f----- me up.*

A few days earlier, Rathbun says, Miscavige had pushed his head against a wall and slapped him hard across his left ear for not being tougher on the staff. He figures that must be what landed him in the Hole.

The building consisted of small offices and a conference room tucked into two double-wide trailers. When Miscavige tramped down the corridor, the hollowness of the floor made a klunk, klunk, klunk sound.

Four days into Rathbun's stay, the klunking signaled Miscavige's arrival, flanked as always by his wife, who took notes, and an assistant with a recorder so that everything the leader said could be transcribed and distributed across the base.

Miscavige announced that they were going to play musical chairs to determine who among them was the most committed to the tasks at hand. All but the winner would be reassigned to Scientology's far-flung outposts.

Some staffers cried at the thought of being separated from family. Others made ready, positioning chairs around the 30-foot long, maple conference table.

Miscavige used a boom box to play *Bohemian Rhapsody*, by Queen.

Is this the real life?

Is this just fantasy?

Caught in a landslide

No escape from reality

When the music stopped, the uniformed Sea Org members jostled for chairs, knocking each other aside. Two men fought so hard a chair came apart in their hands.

Losers were told where they were being assigned, husbands and wives finding that they were to be thousands of miles apart. Rinder said Miscavige taunted one husband for showing a soft side by consoling his tearful wife.

"Oh yeah," Rinder said. "It was fun and games."

Again, church officials said, the defectors are making the normal seem abnormal. Miscavige was merely trying to make a point, they said, citing a Hubbard policy that says frequent personnel transfers are like "musical chairs" and can harm a group's progress. Miscavige wanted the group to see for themselves how destructive that can be.

Yingling said Miscavige had been away from the base and returned to find that in his absence, Rathbun had transferred hundreds of staffers. "That's why nothing was getting done," she said.

Rathbun and Rinder said it was the opposite: Nothing was getting done because Miscavige took top managers from their posts and ordered them to the Hole. Rathbun said Miscavige berated him for not transferring more people.

From evening into the wee hours of the next day the game of musical chairs dragged on, sometimes interrupted by the leader lecturing the group on their incompetence.

"It's like *Apocalypse Now*," Rathbun said. "It's bizarre."

The game ended with two women competing for the last chair.

"It was definitely a physical struggle and they were grappling and wrestling," Rathbun recalled. "Then (Miscavige) leaves and says, 'Okay, good. We'll see you f----- tomorrow.' "

Miscavige never carried out his threat of mass transfers.

One beating too many

The next night, Miscavige ordered his executives to jog from the Hole to a building where staffers made CDs of long-ago lectures by Hubbard.

With the group still huffing from their 400-yard run, Miscavige grilled De Vocht, who had overseen renovations to the building. He slapped De Vocht, threw him to the floor and began to choke him.

De Vocht can't recall why he was attacked. Maybe he hesitated with an answer. Maybe he gave a look the leader didn't like. Whatever the reason, he accepted his drubbing in silent, degrading submission.

Miscavige grew angrier if you expressed pain or resisted, the defectors said.

"You're literally sitting there thinking, I'm not going to hit this guy," De Vocht said. "It happens so suddenly, what do you do? And then if you want to go after him, how many other people are going to pummel you? You've got to realize this place is so cultish it's scary."

Scobee says the executives at the California base were trapped. They dared not speak to each other about Miscavige's behavior, afraid they would be found out in confessions known as "security checks."

A person who said something negative about Miscavige might withhold it in her own confession, Scobee said, but someone else would invariably report it in theirs.

"So you don't want to go against him," she said. "It wasn't even an option, as amazing as it seems. Now, after being out, I would so do everything different."

For Sea Org members, there's a personal struggle as well. "You put your life into the church and you do think that is your route to freedom," Scobee said. "There are a lot of great things about it ... and you don't want to throw that away. You don't want to risk it."

Why not just leave?

Easy to say, according to Rinder.

Scientology preaches self-reliance. You alone control your environment, your condition in life is no one else's doing but your own.

But just as strongly, Scientology holds that if you leave the church, something is wrong with you. Somewhere in your past is an "overt," a transgression.

"It becomes a big sort of dichotomy," Rinder said. Staying in an unhappy situation is no way to control your environment. "But if I leave, I'm doing something wrong, too. It's like a catch-22."

For Rinder, the Scientology experience he knew and loved had become something foreign, a work climate increasingly strange and abusive.

It also was at crosscurrents with the kinder, gentler public posture the church sought to build over the past 20 years, a message that Rinder, as chief spokesman, conveyed time and again: The church purged the lawbreakers and dirty tricksters of the 1970s and reinvented itself.

"We just stopped doing things that I and others considered to be foolish and harmful and off policy," Rinder said.

Except at home.

"Now, the irony is what's being done on the inside is foolish and harmful and abusive," he said.

Rathbun saw and delivered many beatings over the years. But he said Miscavige's attack on De Vocht the night after the musical chairs game clarified his thinking.

Four days earlier, when Miscavige put Rathbun in the Hole, he instructed everyone not to talk to him. But De Vocht quietly defied that order, asking Rathbun to help them figure out what to do to please Miscavige. Now De Vocht was being beaten.

"I'm watching this go down, and I just had this incredible connection ... this humanity connection with Tom," Rathbun said. "I subscribe to the Popeye philosophy: 'I can take so much but I can't take no more.'"

"I still have a thread of dignity and I see it being crushed in people around me. What am I going to do? Am I going to become one of them, too?"

As the rest of the group herded back into the Hole, Rathbun broke off and ducked into some bushes. He went for his motorcycle, a Yamaha 650, wheeled it to the back gate of the compound and hid in the brush for about 20 minutes. When the gate opened for a car, he sped away.

Rathbun said he felt rage and loss, mixed with an odd excitement.

"I'm kind of exhilarated that I've made the step, and I'm hauling a-- because I'm thinking someone's following me."

ABOUT THE STORY

Mark C. "Marty" Rathbun left the Church of Scientology staff in late 2004, ending a 27-year career that saw him rise to be among the organization's top leaders. For the past four years, he has lived a low-profile life in Texas. Some speculated he had died.

In February, Rathbun posted an Internet message announcing he was available to counsel other disaffected Scientologists.

"Having dug myself out of the dark pit where many who leave the church land," he wrote, "I began lending a hand to others similarly situated."

Contacted by the *St. Petersburg Times*, Rathbun agreed to tell the story of his years in Scientology and what led to his leaving. The *Times* interviewed him at his home in Texas, and he came to Clearwater to revisit some of the scenes he described.

Seeking to corroborate Rathbun's story, the newspaper contacted others who were in Scientology during the same period and have left the church: Mike Rinder, one of Rathbun's closest associates for two decades; Tom De Vocht, whom Rathbun named as key to his decision to leave; and later, Amy Scobee.

Rathbun and Rinder were well known to the reporters, who had interviewed them dozens of times, sometimes combatively, through years of controversy in Clearwater. They also hosted the reporters in Los Angeles in 1998, when Miscavige granted the only print media interview he has given.

Two reporters met Rinder in Denver, where he now lives, but he declined to be interviewed. About a month later, two Washington-based lawyers who work for the church showed up unannounced in Denver, informed Rinder that they had heard about the newspaper's visit and asked what he had revealed.

They reminded him that as one of the church's top legal officers, attorney-client privilege did not end when he left the church. They told him he could hurt the church by going public.

Weeks later, after the church provided the newspaper with a 2007 video of Rinder heatedly denying that Miscavige hit him and others, Rinder decided to talk to the *Times*.

De Vocht was interviewed in Winter Haven. Scobee was interviewed in Pinellas County, when she and her husband came to visit relatives.

The reporters interviewed the four defectors multiple times, and met with church spokesmen and lawyers for 25 hours.

On May 13, the *Times* asked to interview Miscavige, in person or by phone, and renewed the request repeatedly the past five weeks. Church officials said Miscavige's schedule would not permit an interview before July.

Joe Childs, Managing Editor/Tampa Bay, ran the *Times* Clearwater operation dating to 1993 and supervises the newspaper's Scientology coverage.

Thomas C. Tobin has covered the Church of Scientology off and on since 1996.