Mathematics professor Jonathan Farley has a hell of a resume, having served in varying academic capacities at Harvard, Cal Tech, Stanford's Center for International Security and Cooperation and MIT, among other institutions of learning, as well as having received the Harvard Foundation's Distinguished Scientist of the Year Award, Oxford University's Senior Mathematical Prize, and other, similarly dull-sounding yet prestigious groups. He has been referred to by prominent neuroscientist and longtime Harvard administrator Dr. S. Allen Counter as "one of the world's most impressive young mathematicians," was one of only four Americans to be named a Fulbright Distinguished Scholar in the 2001-2002 nomination round, founded a firm that provides consultations on films using elements of math, and has provided notable contributions to U.S. counterterrorism capabilities by way of his applied research regarding something I'm not really going to look into. The city of Cambridge has even named a day in the fellow's honor.

As well as he's done so far, Dr. Farley would have almost certainly managed even greater things were it not for a widespread campaign among neo-Nazis and Confederacy apologists to harass the professor and put some dents in his career prospects by way of death threats and disinformation. These things happen, of course, but in this case the extent of the attacks was such that they actually achieved their purpose; after finding that some unknown individuals were contacting administrators at several universities and government agencies where he'd been taken on or considered for employment, he eventually gave up on the U.S. in favor of Europe, where he now teaches algebra at Johannes Kepler University in Linz. And many of the thousands who were involved in this campaign against an academic with real contributions to make to the world were mobilized in the first place by a prominent conservative pundit who has thus far managed to pass himself off as a respectable mainstream journalist despite an ever-growing body of evidence to the contrary.

The nonsense in question began in 2002 with one of those irritating controversies over Confederate iconography; in this case, various administrators at Vanderbilt had expressed an interest in removing the word "Confederate" from one of its dormitories. Farley, who was then teaching mathematics at the university, wrote an op-ed piece for The Tennessean to the effect that officers and enlisted men of the Confederacy ought to have been executed for treason after the war and their property dispersed among former slaves. Being a black academic of a leftist bent, Farley was perhaps not the best person to deliver that particular message to a region in which the most destructive and poorly-conceived insurrection in American history is still celebrated as some sort of neat thing. The threats on his life, challenges to duels, racially-charged e-mails, and denouncements by public figures of various sorts began immediately, as these things tend to do. And just as it seemed that the whole incident might soon run out of steam, the story began to go national.

On December 3rd of that year, The Washington Times ran a "news" piece by features editor Robert Stacy McCain, a rising figure among the conservative commentariat who had successfully made the transition from sports to politics. A couple of passages merit particular scrutiny, beginning with this seemingly innocuous sentence fragment:

Mr. Farley has complained of threatening e-mails and phone calls...

Another way of phrasing this would have been, "Mr. Farley has received threatening e-mails and phone calls," as this was by then a verifiable fact; Farley had by this point forwarded many of the more sinister messages to Tennessee police. I've seen a selection of them and have managed to determine that several of the death threats came from presumably armed military veterans living within a half-hour of Memphis, whereas others came from out-and-out white supremacists with ties to violence-advocating organizations like the National Vanguard. Still, no one appears to have been charged or even investigated, which is why I will soon be releasing the names and associated threats in order that everyone may see for themselves how easy it is to get away with threatening to kill a prominent black man in Tennessee.

Now, take a gander at the following excerpt from the same article:

Tim Chavez, a columnist for the Tennessean, described one 66-year-old reader's frustration over Mr. Farley's views: "This just burns me because I don't know what to do about it," the man said. "If someone compared your ancestors to mass murderers, what would you do?"

If you're a neo-Confederate, you'd probably write a semi-literate e-mail to the effect that the offending black man is "just an ignorant nigger," as was the case with Madisonville bed-and-breakfast proprietor Russell Walker. Or you might explain to him that he "will reap the whirl wind for your transgressions" and further advise him to "[g]et a Bodyguard [sic] or carry gun [sic] you will need it," as did Army veteran C.S. "Chris" Barwick of Maryland, who still maintains an e-mail account with his chosen military branch. You might opine that "all niggers should be exterminated from this earth, starting with loudmouthed, smelly, worthless, smart-alecky, boot-lipped jigaboos like you," as did some random fellow whom I've yet to identify. Or you might engage in some or another variant on all of these things, as did the hundreds of other proud southern folks - lawyers, business owners, veterans, and educators - who filled Farley's e-mail box with sentiments of comparable cuteness. The reader may have also noted that, according to McCain's phrasing above, the anti-Farley crowd is merely "frustrated," as opposed to, say, responsible for hundreds of racist e-mails and phone calls.

McCain, though, was more interested in Farley's own transgressions against civility than he was with the death threats that he'd received. This brings us to our next excerpt:

In response to complaints from [Sons of Confederate Veterans] members, Mr. Farley has posted e-mail replies that "drip venom," [SCV leader Allen] Sullivant said. Replying to one SCV member, Mr. Farley vowed to "form our own armies to expose and smash you. ... Very simply, we represent good and you represent evil."

That's certainly some drip-prone venom right there, but it's important that we look evil square in the face, even in the case of something as disturbing as a mathematician replying angrily to potentially dangerous racists who'd like to see him dead. It's also important that we honor the suffering of SCV members such as the one who wrote to Farley: "wait a minute,,,you arent even a fucking american,,,go back where you came from, was it the islands or the mother country,,,,,d." For the record, Farley is indeed an American, although his parents were immigrants and, for all I know, terrorists. I actually forgot to ask him.

If McCain's Times piece seems to be lacking in traditional journalistic objectivity, this could be explained in a number of ways. Maybe he's a sloppy journalist. Or maybe his piece was biased against the black professor in question because McCain himself is a white supremacist who, at the time he wrote the article, was also writing under an assumed name for the white nationalist publication American Renaissance, linking to that site as well as to the neo-Nazi outlet Overthrow.com in messages he posted on the conservative forum Free Republic, hanging around with neo-Nazi agitator William White and other admitted racists, serving as a member of the all-around wacky League of the South, and doing God knows what else that he's actually managed to conceal. Also, he's a sloppy journalist.

He's actually not an unskilled commentator, though, which is why he's managed to develop a large blog following over the last couple of years while also writing regularly for American Spectator and a variety of other conservative outlets and meanwhile be cited, defended, and otherwise elevated to supposed respectability by dozens of prominent conservative bloggers such as Glenn Reynolds of Instapundit. Had he been merely some random blog jockey who turned out to be a racist, this would be of no concern to anyone. But McCain has managed to find a reasonably prominent place among the conservative commentariat and associate himself with a number of individuals who themselves are now confronted with the unpleasant evidence of their own poor judgement. Few of them are willing to acknowledge this, of course; their collective response has been to denounce Charles Johnson - once among the most prominent of conservative bloggers, co-founder of Pajamas Media, and the fellow who helped lead the way in such early victories of citizen journalism as Rathergate - out of anger over his recent work in uncovering and accumulating the large body of evidence that now exists to prove that McCain is the white supremacist he always appeared to be.

McCain himself has been responding to his critics in an inevitably ridiculous manner; in full disclosure, , he's taken to making bizarre comments about both myself and a political action committee for which I serve as director of communications, making announcements along the lines of, "Barrett Brown: He'll get his in turn," threatening to drive to the offices of The Charleston Gazette in order to perpetrate some sort of physical retaliation for that paper having identified him as a white supremacist, and otherwise conducting himself in a strange and goofy manner.

Meanwhile, McCain is still attempting to explain away his demonstrable sentiments. He wrote the other day that he has "neither any personal nor political interest in the marital preferences of others and have many friends of all races, some of whom are of mixed ancestry and some of whom are in mixed marriages," but in an e-mail he composed a while back, he proclaimed that the "media now force interracial images into the public mind and a number of perfectly rational people react to these images with an altogether natural revulsion. The white person who does not mind transacting business with a black bank clerk may yet be averse to accepting the clerk as his sister-in-law, and THIS IS NOT RACISM, no matter what Madison Avenue, Hollywood and Washington tell us.” And in an interview with Alan Colmes that took place after that e-mail was revealed, he said he didn't know if being disinclined to do business with a black bank clerk constitutes racism, either.

Robert Stacy McCain can perhaps play an important role in the national conversation insomuch as that there are tens of millions of virulent racists among our citizenry as a whole whose views have not been adequately represented in the mainstream media for half a century. McCain could serve as their voice.