

New Light on the KKK

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Sit-ins at lunch counters by black students began in Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1, 1960. Blacks had traditionally not been served there or anywhere in the South at that time. Within a week the sit-ins spread to Durham and Winston-Salem. Eleven of the first sit-ins were within 100 miles of Greensboro. After many arrests, and assaults by white hoodlums, on July 25 all Greensboro stores targeted by the sit-ins agreed to serve blacks on an equal basis. Local governments in those three cities plus Raleigh (the capital), High Point, and Salisbury had by then created biracial “race relations” committees, which in most cases led to negotiations, considerable stalling, but finally desegregation of local stores.

David Cunningham, a sociologist at Brandeis University, tells us that North Carolina was “a state widely perceived as a bastion of Southern liberalism.” It had elected two governors, Terry Sanford in 1960 and Dan Moore in 1964, considered moderate: although officially opposed to integration (essential to election in a state where the voter registration rate of blacks was half that of whites), they were not part of the massive resistance to school integration and later to the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts we associate with such governors as George Wallace of Alabama or Ross Barnett of Mississippi. In 1953 North Carolina had even passed an “anti-masking” law, after which the klan¹ marched robed but with faces uncovered.

In the decades following the defeat of Reconstruction (1877), and the effective end of black suffrage (by amendment to the North Carolina Constitution in 1900), the introduction of Jim Crow (segregation) laws was seen as “essential for social stability and ... economic prosperity.” The suppression of blacks guaranteed low wages for both blacks and many less-skilled whites. But after World War II, economic growth required a different, more progressive environment to encourage investment from the North. Soon “the industry-friendly pro-growth tenor of state politics severely limited the support—financial and otherwise—of strong segregationist candidates” in North Carolina as well as in some other Upper Southern states. Moderation (the preservation of segregation “by means other than outright resistance to federal statutes”) would seemingly provide ways of dealing with both civil rights protests and white backlash.

And yet moderate Greensboro was a hot-bed of klan activity. In response to the *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation decision (1954), a “third wave” of klans developed rapidly in the late 1950s.² In 1960 the United Klans of America (UKA), cobbled together from several earlier groups, surfaced as the dominant klan organization in North Carolina. By 1965 the North Carolina UKA was larger than the total UKA membership in the other 18 states where it had members. A year later it claimed 10,000 to 12,000 members in some 200 klaverns or chapters—more than half of UKA membership in all the Southern states. Mississippi had only 76 klaverns, a mere 5.2 percent of the total of all UKA klaverns in the South.

How can we explain this apparent paradox—the largest klan in the most “progressive” state? And the weakest UKA in the most hard-core segregationist one? And what led to the rapid collapse of the UKA after only a few more years—a rise and fall that oddly paralleled the early success and decline of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the organization that came out of the sit-ins, also by 1970? Cunningham focuses on the UKA in this book. In his earlier work, *There’s Something Happening Here: The New Left, the Klan, and FBI Counterintelligence* (Univ. of California Press, 2004) he devotes some attention to SNCC among other civil rights and new left groups.

What was happening, not that startling to most civil rights veterans, takes us first to Mississippi (with close parallels in other Deep South states). Who needed the UKA, when the entire state apparatus from the governor down to the local sheriff was totally segregationist and completely hostile to civil rights activities? In 1956 the Mississippi legislature created the State Sovereignty Commission, whose agents “carried out the most extensive state spying program in U.S. history,” compiling secret files on more than 87,000 people and organizations in order to preserve Mississippi’s sovereignty, that is, its right to remain segregated. As early as 1957 it began to recruit black informers. Indeed it even recruited, using a contract detective agency, a vice-president of the Mississippi NAACP. After Ross Barnett was elected governor in 1960, the Commission began to fund the (white) Citizens’ Councils, which were considered less uncouth than the Klan, making them a “quasi-official arm of state government.”³ “Mississippi’s segregationist field,” Cunningham relates, “was crowded with players” including the murderous White Knights of the KKK, which outnumbered the UKA and contained within its ranks many local law enforcement officials.

North Carolina was different. The UKA was the only “‘true’ organized segregationist game in town....” In a state where staunch segregationists had few outlets, given a political environment where “mainstream” institutions were prepared to bend, albeit slowly, to the demands of civil rights organizations, the UKA became “the central outlet willing to resist the fall of Jim Crow segregation.” In Greensboro, moreover, unlike some other North Carolina cities, in particular Charlotte, policing of the KKK was limited to preventing violence, rather than actively harassing, much less suppressing it. Charlotte, in contrast, “instituted reforms more rapidly and completely,” Cunningham tells us. Charlotte’s business and political elites, supported by many citizens plus active policing, made it impossible for the UKA or even the Citizens’ Council to get a foothold. But in other parts of the state, particularly in the agricultural “black belt” of eastern North Carolina, the UKA flourished. In seven counties in the northeast of the state, an average of 40 percent of the population was black, double the rate of the rest of the state, whereas in western North Carolina, in the Appalachian area, 95 percent of the population was white, and the UKA was barely able to hold on. The UKA understood this dynamic quite well. As one klansman pointed out, “there ain’t no niggers in the mountains.” Paradoxically, in a few counties where blacks constituted a *majority* the UKA was weak for the simple reason that there weren’t enough whites with the resources to maintain a klavern.

Blacks were barred from employment in the textile industry because white women worked there. But as some other companies became willing to employ blacks, even while maintaining job assignment by race, having both blacks and whites in the same workplace exacerbated the fear of “miscegenation.” As anti-discrimination policies threatened to desegregate job assignments, this led to a realistic fear that whites would lose out in the competition for better jobs. It is no surprise, then, that UKA recruitment was successful in most of the eastern part of the state, where “large swathes of white residents felt their social, economic and political standing acutely threatened by civil rights reforms.” The UKA’s strength lay, in Cunningham’s summation, “in its insistence on elevating racial identity as the political, moral and social center of American citizenship.” The UKA held little attraction for professionals and others striving for respectability.

The klans’ fortunes depended in part on the different states’ willingness to tolerate them, meaning a refusal to do more than policing outright criminal acts, if even that much. A *laissez-faire* attitude, as in North Carolina in the early 1960s, meant that the UKA was able to recruit, hold rallies, and march—hoods and all. The FBI was similarly ambivalent, refusing to intervene when mobs, klan-led or not, attacked civil rights demonstrators or blacks attempting to register to vote. Yet, within a single year, 1965 to 1966, the UKA’s dues-paying membership dropped from 12,000 to half of that, and by the Spring of 1968 the FBI estimated that less than 1,000 klansmen were still active in North Carolina. What happened?

There were a number of factors, of course. There was the usual in-fighting (some instigated by police

agents). But Cunningham points to one factor as critical: “the fall of the UKA is predominantly a policing story.” Following the murder of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner by members of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan at the beginning of Freedom Summer (the voting rights campaign in Mississippi) in 1964, President Johnson and his attorney general, Robert Kennedy, ordered FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to get off his butt and go after the klans throughout the South. The FBI in Mississippi at that time was all-white, and most agents were native to the state. It is well established that they took no action in the critical two days between the disappearance of the three and the time of their murders, although Cunningham does not pursue this matter.

Prior to that moment, the Bureau’s attitude seemed to be that civil rights groups, by virtue of their very existence, aroused the KKK to action, so that policing the former would be the most effective way to inhibit the growth of the latter. Hoover had had experience with the KKK in the 1920s, and although he was a racist and anti-Semite, he was also notoriously fastidious, and the KKK, “a group of sadistic, vicious white trash,” offended him. He nevertheless saw the civil rights movement, pro-Communist in his view, as the greater danger. But he also grasped the idea that vigilantism, whether klan or SNCC or Black Panther, was a challenge to the state’s (synonymous with the FBI) legitimate monopoly of the use of violence, and he proceeded to extend his 1956 Counterintelligence Program (Cointelpro) to white hate groups. He sent 153 special agents to Mississippi, and set up a new field office in Jackson, the state capital.

Hoover then proceeded to use the same (illegal) tactics against the various klan organizations that had already been well honed in the FBI’s efforts to undermine—and in a few cases substantially contribute to the destruction of—civil rights groups. The FBI did the usual: in North Carolina they disrupted the UKA by writing anonymous letters in order to sow dissent, for example stating that its leaders were exploiting their members financially and that their night missions were a cover for adultery. The FBI sent out fake meeting notices to confuse the members, its agents persuaded media not to advertise klan social events, local officials to block rally permits, newspapers to refuse klan ads, and the like. Indeed by early 1966, with hundreds of klansmen on the payroll, a number of “highly-placed informers exerted control over the UKA’s top-level decisions.” The UKA’s top chaplain, George Dorsett, a long-time informer, managed to foment a split and formed a rival klan group; “FBI handlers ... helped draft the group’s first recruiting letter.” The objective was to tightly rein in, not eliminate, klan activity, which served also to prevent klansmen from going underground. So there were klan units in fact controlled by the FBI.

After a white civil rights volunteer, Viola Liuzzo, was murdered by a carload of klansmen during the 1965 Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, voting rights march, President Johnson insisted on quick action and the perpetrators were swiftly arrested. This thanks to the fact that one of the passengers in the klan car was an FBI informer, Gary Rowe, who had been on the payroll since 1960. By 1966, according to Cunningham’s earlier book, about 6 percent of total klan membership consisted of FBI informers.

Meanwhile—to the astonishment of civil rights activists—none other than the House Committee on Un-American Activities, better known as HUAC, initiated hearings on the klans of the South. The hearings made it clear that North Carolina was “far and away the most highly organized klan state in the nation,” to the consternation of state officials and local media. Cunningham provides some details in *There’s Something Happening Here*. “Between July 1965 and February 1966 over two hundred Klan members were called” before the Committee, most of them taking the Fifth. Upon refusing to provide klan records, three top klansmen went to jail for a year, “providing an opportunity for Cointelpro actions to exploit the resulting disarray in the UKA leadership hierarchy.” The HUAC hearings cost the UKA \$100,000 in legal fees. The Black Panther Party and other civil rights and peace groups were not alone in suffering a crippling diversion of resources from normal

activities due to judicial proceedings.

While state law enforcement agencies in the Deep South were pretty much laissez-faire about the klans, when they were not directly complicit, North Carolina was again different. The State Bureau of Investigation and the State Highway Patrol, as well as local police forces, Cunningham claims, “did not infringe directly upon UKA members’ constitutionally protected freedom of speech or assembly,” they merely harassed klan activities to such a degree that “all available organizing opportunities” were virtually closed off. Local police removed “unpermitted signs,” arrested leading klansmen for a range of driving violations, and the highway patrol monitored rallies, wrote down license plate numbers, and persuaded farmers not to allow klan rallies on their properties. In 1968 the *Raleigh News & Observer* actually published the highway patrol’s collection of license plate numbers with the names of their owners, which led to numerous UKA resignations.

By the 1970s UKA membership had declined to less than a thousand. “Much of its base fled to right-wing political candidates...” as the Republicans’ “Southern Strategy” opened up outlets for racists. Then in 1981 a lynching in Mobile, Alabama, led to a civil suit against the UKA, and an all-white jury awarded \$7 million to the victim’s wife. The UKA signed over its property. In 1987 the UKA folded for good.

“To varying degrees,” Cunningham concludes, “local sheriffs, the [state bureau of investigation] and Highway Patrol, the governor’s secret anti-klan committee, the FBI and [HUAC] all sought to suppress the KKK’s activities,” and at least at the formal organizational level, they succeeded. Meanwhile, Cointelpro did its share to assure the downfall of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which in 1973 was declared effectively dead by the FBI. Very little of these unconstitutional tactics raised many eyebrows at the time; the American Civil Liberties Union was almost AWOL when it came to violations of the klans’ rights. In March, 1966, it did criticize a court order barring the UKA from holding a rally near Maxton, North Carolina. This was to be held on the anniversary of an earlier rally (January 18, 1958) in which a klan group had targeted local Lumbee Indians. (That rally was famously routed by armed Lumbees.)

In his earlier book Cunningham described the FBI’s “central concern with policing expressions of political radicalism” going back to the 1920 Palmer Raids. In a delicate understatement he concludes that agents “arguably failed to limit themselves to constitutional means.” He attempts to distinguish between the FBI’s legitimate use of intelligence to pursue a criminal investigation, and counterintelligence “to repress a target’s ability to legally act.” But he admits that the FBI used illegal methods even in pursuing criminal investigations (including one involving the klan’s 1963 church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama), and of course Cointelpro was illegal from the start regardless of the political target, right or left. The FBI’s informers were often indistinguishable from *agents provocateurs* and the inescapable conclusion is that a good chunk of political activity by the klan as well as by groups such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) would not have been possible without the help of the government.⁴

By no means should it be thought that the FBI, or law enforcement agencies in the “moderate” states were “equal opportunity,” balanced forces against both klans and civil rights and new left groups. Generally these agencies considered the klans more of a nuisance than a threat, whereas virtually all civil rights organizations were deemed by many local police and sheriffs as subversive, Communist, and/or Jewish-inspired or controlled, as well as a danger to the American Way of Life. As Cunningham pointed out in *There’s Something Happening*, the FBI’s strategy vis-à-vis white hate groups was to steer them to “selected ‘acceptable’ groups (those not actively engaged in violence) [which] ... involved actually strengthening acceptable White Hate alternatives....” Its strategy towards New Left organizations such as SDS and civil rights groups like SNCC was to “delegitimize and eliminate” them.

Moreover, no police agency North or South ever ordered a klansman out of town on threat of death, as happened countless times to both black and white civil rights volunteers attempting to organize in local black communities in the Deep South. Nowhere was a klan march attacked by police clubbings, dogs, and tear gas (as was the Selma, Alabama, march of 1965, among many others). No klan demonstrators were ever rounded up, held in a stockade, and hosed down in freezing weather (Orangeburg, South Carolina, March, 1960). No klansman was ever murdered by vigilantes assisted by the local sheriff's office (Mississippi, June, 1964). In North Carolina, however, aside from many arrests, and sometimes standing aside while hoodlums attacked civil rights demonstrators (and in 1979 murdered five anti-klan marchers), law enforcement seems to have been nearly alone in the South in abstaining from massive violence against civil rights activists.

What was the legacy of the UKA following its organizational demise in 1987? It had begun to move towards electoral politics in 1968. It supported George Wallace that year; he was edged out by Richard Nixon, 39.5 percent to 31.25 percent, with Hubert Humphrey coming in a dismal third in North Carolina. Cunningham holds that the UKA played an important role in "the ascendance of a new and powerful wave of conservatism that heralded the South's transition to the Republican Party." Senator Jesse Helms was symptomatic of this shift. A notorious reactionary (anti-civil rights, anti-feminist, etc.), he had been a typical Southern Democrat, but changed to Republican and was elected as such in 1972. He served five terms in the Senate.

As Cunningham makes clear, "The Klan ... did not operate in a vacuum. [it was] woven into the fabric of Neshoba County [Mississippi] and hundreds of other communities," so that even today its legacy "permeates the whole cloth of communities." The continuing influence of KKK-white-Christian-identity thinking on the reactionary politics of the South is one aspect of this legacy; the other stems from the klans' "trappings of violence." Cunningham points out that communities where the UKA had been active suffered significantly higher rates of violent crime and homicide (not only against black citizens) for years after its demise.

Many liberals thought that segregation would be tamped down as Northern capital and personnel moved south. Segregation, the theory went, was inconsistent with the rational deployment of human resources. However, it seems today that rather than the North converting the South, it was the reverse. White Northerners who moved south resisted "policies designed to remediate structural barriers to equal opportunity, including busing and affirmative action," and the Republican Party, beginning with Richard Nixon, took advantage of these sentiments. In fact, Cunningham reminds us, "the Klan's influence endured most clearly in affluent communities." It was only through the civil rights movement that the culture of the South began a process of change that is, as we can see from recent attempts to stifle the black franchise, far from complete. The klans were unsuccessful in stopping that process, but in the long term, as Cunningham shows us in this insightful and informative book, they did succeed in slowing it down.