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By

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BA in History, Loyola University Chicago, 2018

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the

College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts in History

Department of History

University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

May 2020

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A Thesis Approved on

April 16, 2020

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A historian learns from the past and the present. So, I want to thank the people and institutions in my life that made this thesis possible. Thank you, Mrs. Freeman, Mr. Devine, and Dr. Kyle B. Roberts, for fostering my love for history as a child and as a young adult. Dr. Lara Kelland and Dr. Cate Fosl remain pivotal mentors on my journey towards becoming a public and oral historian. Thanks to all the staff members and guests at the Frazier History Museum, Portland Museum, The Filson Historical Society, and the Louisville Slugger Museum & Factory for giving me hands-on experience in the Commonwealth of Kentucky and making me feel right at home. If it wasn’t for Brian Buford setting up a meeting with Dean Otto at the Speed Art Museum, I would’ve never encountered Bruce Skinner and Eleanor Bingham whose documentary is the cornerstone of my research. Finally, last but not least, a special thanks to Dr. Christine T. Ehrick, Dr. Tyler Fleming, and Dr. Kyle Barnett for agreeing to be on my thesis committee!
ABSTRACT


Olivia E. Raymond

April 24, 2020

The 1970s in the United States of America ushered in transformative policies that reshaped the nation. In her landmark essay, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past” (2005), Dr. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall reveals how Black activists inspired “a long movement of movements.” However, often forgotten in narratives of new activism from this era is the resurgence of white reactionary social movements. This thesis argues that mass media is central to mainstreaming radical far-right ideology to a national audience. It explores the political ramifications of sensationalist coverage of the Ku Klux Klan in mass media, specifically in newspapers and on television, as well as the KKK’s media strategies. Moreover, it discusses why the 1970s was a fertile breeding ground for extremism, drawing parallels to the recent spate of white supremacist violence in America exemplified by the Unite the Right rally held in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017.
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INTRODUCTION:
MASS MEDIA & THE OPTICS OF POPULISM

“...[M]ake no mistake, the age of innocence is over for whites politically. We are becoming a displaced minority in our own country thanks to Democrat policies...We need to fight back!”

— Jason Kessler

In August of 2017, white nationalist activist and Charlottesville native, Jason Kessler, reawakened the long-standing debate around race and racism in the United States of America with a deadly crash. He gained notoriety across the country for organizing the first Unite the Right Rally held in Virginia. On August 11, in the dead of night, Kessler and an estimated group of hundreds of sympathetic followers marched down the steps of the University of Virginia (UVA), encircling a statue of former President Thomas Jefferson while shouting slogans such as “You will not replace us,” and the popular variation in white power circles “Jews will not replace us,” holding flaming Tiki torches. They were met with hundreds of counter-protestors, and the clash of ideologies would result in the first phase of bloodshed as brawls broke out amongst the mixed crowds. Jalane Schmidt of UVA, a scholar of religion in the African Diaspora, recounts that some of her own students held a banner reading “VA Students Against White Supremacy” before being beaten by far-right extremists. She also

2 Andy Campbell, “Hate Has Flourished in 2 Years Since ‘Unite The Right’ Rally in Charlottesville,” Huffpost, August 12, 2019, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/charlottesville-anniversary-hate-flourishes-unite-the-right_n_5d506f6be4b0fd2733f1f3d4.
3 Ibid.
notes that Kessler and his gang were not arrested or shot at by police, and that they held a permit issued by the city of Charlottesville to rally the following day.4

By August 12, 2017, the so-called “Alt-Right,” or, “Alternative Right” had fully descended on the Southern town. The movement was coined in 2010 by “…white supremacist Richard Spencer...defined by the Associated Press just after the 2016 election as a movement based on a [mixture] of white nationalism and hard-edged populism…” which positions itself as an option to the right of mainstream right-wing ideology.5 Composed of a variety of sanctioned hate groups that espouse white power ideology under the “alt-right” banner—including Klansmen, Neo-Nazis, and many more—the Unite the Right demonstrators gathered in Lee Park to protest the movement to remove a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee.6 The anti-Confederate movement that so enraged them was sparked by Black activist Zy Bryant when she was in high school, as she petitioned the city of Charlottesville to rid itself of Confederate symbols in public, tax-payer funded spaces.7 Her battle was but a mirror of a much larger messaging war, as municipalities across the nation began to reckon with the Neo-Confederacy and the ghosts of the Civil War. However, Charlottesville would become the explosive center of that nationwide debate when James Alex Fields, Jr.—then twenty-years-old—deliberately drove his car through a crowd of counter-protestors at the Unite the Right Rally, resulting in the death of Heather Heyer and

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4 Andy Campbell, “Hate Has Flourished in 2 Years Since ‘Unite The Right’ Rally in Charlottesville.”
6 Andy Campbell, “Hate Has Flourished in 2 Years Since ‘Unite The Right’ Rally in Charlottesville.”
7 Ibid.
traumatic injuries for dozens more. In a now deleted tweet on the social media platform Twitter, Kessler wrote that, “Heather Heyer was a fat, disgusting Communist. Communists have killed 94 million. Looks like it was payback time.” Kessler, Fields, and scores of other Unite the Right participants have now been locked in legal battles for years or thrown in jail, and the fallout from the tragic events remains a heavy cloud on the United States’ psyche.

The main response seems to be trifold. First, to combat the resurgence of white supremacist violence in the aftermath of the rally, the government has begun classifying it as domestic terrorism, and is constantly reassessing its scope and breath in the United States of America. This is apparent in the FBI’s recent shift in tone when it comes to white supremacist violence and the historic passage of anti-lynching legislation on the federal level after a century of lobbying. The second, less visible response is the transformation of Heather Heyer into a martyr for the anti-racist cause, reminiscent of other assassinated historical figures now valorized in contemporary politics like Martin Luther King, Jr. The third, least visible, and arguably most troublesome outcome of the events is the construction of a master narrative that sees the rally as an aberration. Kessler, to some, does not represent them. The rally is said to be outsiders coming in. Racism, it seems, is always someone else’s problem to solve. However, as Professor Schmidt expertly explains, Kessler is a homegrown “domestic terrorist.” He was a local activist, born and bred in Charlottesville who, in her mind, chose a white founding father and a white Confederate general for a reason, first gathering on August

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8 Andy Campbell, “Hate Has Flourished in 2 Years Since ‘Unite The Right’ Rally in Charlottesville.”
9 “Jason Kessler,” The Southern Poverty Law Center.
10 Andy Campbell, “Hate Has Flourished in 2 Years Since ‘Unite The Right’ Rally in Charlottesville.”
11 at the same place where slaves once lived. Their gathering in Charlottesville, Virginia was a political statement and something of a religious ritual all at once, as white nationalists demanded that their gospel of white displacement not only be heard, but that their presence and claim on America should also be felt, eventually consecrated with blood.

We, as a nation, often look at these incidents as one-off events, or clusters of violence in the “backwards” South which have no bearing on the rest of the United States. But the problem with such a narrative is that it’s a reinforcing feedback loop that doesn’t address the root of the cause of our issues. The master narrative of racism in this country is that it’s always over there, somewhere far away, an outsider’s problem, or vanquished altogether. That’s until something like Charlottesville occurs. Then people scramble, confused, grasping at straws, unable to reconcile a painful reality with the story they have told themselves and have been told. Just under the surface, a second narrative is always present, the subordinated reality of victims of racism that says race is at the heart of our problems as a nation, and that we have inherited a haunted, racist history that if not dealt with effectively, will result in more suffering in the very near future. In Charlottesville, until bodies started flying, reporters and other media figures treated the gathering as a novelty worthy of making the news, but not something sinister in nature. Afterwards, they struggled to make sense of the violence. But, in many ways, reporting on the Alt-Right, and white reactionary movements in general, results in violence because it has no historical memory that challenges America’s racist past and how that past has shaped the present and our future. By giving extremists such as Kessler wall-to-wall coverage, the mainstream news media normalizes his beliefs as acceptable even

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11 Andy Campbell, “Hate Has Flourished in 2 Years Since ‘Unite The Right’ Rally in Charlottesville.”
when condemning him and his followers because he is viewed as newsworthy, and therefore, a part of the fabric of society by the audience. Sensationalist coverage of events like the Unite the Right Rally, which is then syndicated across the United States, may boost ratings and sell papers and get listeners to tune in, but at what cost? Mass media is a conglomeration of technology that disseminates information and entertainment to national and international audiences, the “masses.” The press and news media, when it utilizes mass communication networks in its role as the “Fourth Estate,”—an advocate for the public good and a watchdog against corruption—is important. But, often times, news presented vis-à-vis mass media networks can directly contribute to a sort of collectivized amnesia in which average citizens are shocked to see outbursts of white supremacist violence, when in fact, this violence is deep-rooted, ongoing, and has never truly gone away.

Where did the master narrative of racism in this country come from, and how is it related to coverage of events through mass media such as newspaper publications and television programming? In her landmark essay, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past” (2005), Jacquelyn Dowd Hall presented what she called the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement and why it’s so dangerous yet seductive. Her thesis marked a crucial shift from compartmentalizing the Black freedom struggle into a sudden burst of activist energy in the mid-twentieth century disconnected from ongoing historical trends. It’s especially useful when trying to conceptualize how far-right extremists have been able to mainstream themselves over time, because far-right social movements often resurge in opposition to movements meant to extend civil liberties to marginalized communities.

Hall’s thesis directly contradicts the popular memory of the Civil Rights Movement. Popular memory, or public memory, is not the same as history, but is often conflated as such. That’s
because public memory is the way in which historical events move from a personalized experience held by an individual, to a collectivized, communal experience the represents that past.12

The study of memory draws on a plethora of subjects, and a multitude of “artifacts” such as material culture like flags, monuments, and religious traditions prevalent in a nation-state.13 The current popular memory of racism in the United States is very much tied to a Neo-Confederate heritage, or tradition, that took shape after the American Civil War which is continuously challenged by new scholarship and activism in the middle, and on the left, of the American political spectrum. The most recent articulation of this multifaceted racist master narrative is the one analyzed by Hall, and it goes a little something like this: the wave of transformative policies enacted in the late 1950s and 1960s happened in a vacuum, ended racism and inequality in our country, and was the result of moral citizens—mostly men—who made America great again by pushing out un-American cultural forces such as segregation almost exclusively in the South. “By confining the civil rights struggle to the South, to bowdlerized heroes, to a single halcyon decade, and to limited, noneconomic objectives, the master narrative simultaneously elevates and diminishes the [civil rights] movement.”14 Like an epic myth told over generations, the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement has a stranglehold on our collective imagination, pigeonholing the impact of Black freedom movements and racism over generations.

13 Ibid.
Hall argues that the Civil Rights Movement, “... has been distorted and reified by a New Right bent on reversing its gains.” She classifies the New Right as, “...an alliance of corporate power brokers, old-style conservative intellectuals, and “neoconservatives” (disillusioned liberals and socialists turned Cold War hawks),” who came about as the “Old” Right lost the messaging war in the 1960s. After former President Lyndon B. Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, it seemed that Democrats and the Old Left—a coalition of communists and liberals formed under former President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the early twentieth century during the Great Depression—had emerged victorious, on the side of the so-called moral arc of history. But, the New Right was triumphant in consolidating power by, “...[insisting] that color blindness—defined as the elimination of racial classifications and the establishment of formal equality before the law—was the [civil rights] movement's singular objective.”

Conceding that Jim Crow was a racist institution, the New Right claimed it was a thing of the past, primarily enforced in the South, and, “[i]n the absence of overtly discriminatory laws...African Americans...bore the onus of their own failure or success.”

Some in the current Republican party and New Right have taken this claim a step further by casting, “...fellow conservatives...[as] the true heirs to Martin Luther King Jr. and the black freedom struggle...” because they refuse to feed into the, “...“victim” mentality foisted...” upon Black Americans by, “...contemporary civil rights leaders, affirmative-action programs, and

16 Ibid, 1237.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
multicultural education.” Liberals, in their eyes, are the real racists because they insist on seeing race in a post-racial society with the present day Democratic Party—who they ahistorically claim supported segregation by ignoring former President Richard Nixon’s (R) “Southern Strategy,” and the realigning of the two-party system’s platforms—now, “...[conspiring] to keep African Americans economically disadvantaged, undereducated, and reliant on federal programs as part of a liberal effort to shore up their power and influence.”

These beliefs are core to the New Right’s ideology.

One does not have to accept the conservative framework of the Black freedom movement completely to see how it has embedded itself into American’s popular memory of the era. Another force that solidified this national myth, Hall argues, is mass media which turned the protests sweeping the nation during the 1960s into, “...one of the great news stories of the modern era.”

Journalists’ interest waxed and waned along with activists’ ability to generate charismatic personalities (who were usually men) and telegenic confrontations, preferably those in which white villains rained down terror on nonviolent demonstrators dressed in their Sunday best... [Bought] into American living rooms by the seductive new medium of television and replayed ever since, such scenes seem to come out of nowhere, to have no precedents, no historical roots. To compound that

20 Ibid, 201.
21 Echoes of this type of rhetoric still creep into our discourse and are predominant on the political right. In 2020, the spread of COVID-19 resulted in mandatory stay-at-home orders across the country to combat the virus. In response, small pockets of unpopular astroturfed anti-quarantine protests sprung up demanding states open up. Astroturfing is the practice of a powerful entity or entities coordinating a message—in this case, that there is popular support for ending the closures—and attempting to make its participants appear grassroots. According to Mother Jones and other news outlets, Stephen Moore, a Trump Administration economic advisor, stated, “I call these people the modern-day Rosa Parks—they are protesting against injustice and a loss of liberties.” It’s yet another example of how the Civil Rights Movement, and its legacy, are co-opted by the New Right.
distortion, the national press’s overwhelmingly sympathetic, if misleading, coverage changed abruptly in the mid-1960s with the advent of black power and black uprisings in the urban North. Training a hostile eye on those developments, the cameras turned away from the South, ignoring the southern campaign’s evolving goals, obscuring interregional connections and similarities, and creating a narrative breach between what people think of as “the movement” and the ongoing popular struggles of the late 1960s and the 1970s.

In other words, what started out as a sophisticated public relations campaign on the part of Civil Rights activists was used against them, as the New Right championed their staged actions such as militant commitment to nonviolence as the only correct model for protesting the establishment. They took what Hall asserts is a “long civil rights movement” taking shape in the New Deal Popular Front coalition of the 1920s and 1930s that inspired a “movement of movements” in the 1960s and 1970s—itself a concept lifted from Van E. Gosse’s “A Movement of Movements: The Definition and Periodization of the New Left” (2002)—and truncated it into what she calls the “classical” Civil Rights Movement. And like any classic that enters canonical records, the “classical” Civil Rights Movement fed to Americans by mass media, and in particular news media, has limited the radical expression of our citizens. Mass media is one facet of a grand project to whitewash the past, down to the way history is taught in elementary schools. The New Right has successfully caused many Americans to see the turn to Black Power,—embodied by the Black Panthers and Black Arts Movement (BAM)—second-wave feminism, the Chicano Movement for Mexican-Americans, Red Power for indigenous peoples, and Yellow Power for Asian-Americans, including Pacific Islanders, in the 1970s and 1980s as militant, degenerate, and unworthy successors to the gains won in the 1960s. This belief is not held only by those with more conservative

24 Ibid, 1235.
predilections; more liberal minded people can and do buy into this master narrative. But it has been more useful for those on the right of the political spectrum because it absolves their voters from the hard and uncomfortable task of facing racism and inequality head on, even if more left wing voters and politicians pay more lip-service to eradicating racism than putting in the actual work.

The revisionist history this master narrative universalizes, aided by mass media, is not only wrong, it is dangerous, denying marginalized peoples in the United States a claim to a long quest for equality and freedom. The artificial break between the “classical” and the “current” Civil Rights Movement made, “…race-conscious remedies devised in the late 1960s and 1970s to implement the [civil rights] movement’s victories, such as majority-minority voting districts, minority business set-asides, affirmative action, and two-way busing…” inauthentic and unnecessary in the white majority’s eyes, “[f]oisted” upon, “…an unwitting public by a “liberal elite” made up of judges, intellectuals, and government bureaucrats,” policies which, in the New Right’s view, “…not only betrayed the movement's original goals…[they also] had little effect on the economic progress blacks enjoyed in the late 1960s and 1970s, which was caused not by grass-roots activism or governmental intervention but by impersonal market forces.”

Hall’s theory of social change is not without problems, and while the “long movement” has become a central, almost unquestioned tenet of academia, it is worthwhile discussing if the term itself lends to problematic analysis. That, however, is for another

project to handle. This project builds on Hall’s research, while recognizing that over-reliance on Hall’s claims can lead to yet another useless master narrative of the past. More specifically, this paper examines Hall’s point at the very beginning of her article that, “[a] so-called white backlash sets the stage for the conservative interregnum that, for good or ill, depending on one’s ideological persuasion, marks the beginning of another story, the story that surrounds us now.”27 She sees the “long backlash” as intertwined with the “long movement,” and anticipates that when the New Right falters, a movement further to the right may take its place. By minimizing the importance of historical trends, and promoting a “feel good” narrative of the Civil Rights movement and “the movement of movements” it inspired, it becomes easier to scapegoat whole swaths of the populace as complicit in their own oppression because they refuse to work hard enough for “MLK’s dream.” It’s much more difficult to turn inward and evaluate how systems outside of ourselves make it hard for us all to thrive. So, demagogues sweep in and give easy answers to hard questions, pointing to Black people, leftists, immigrants, Jews, Catholics, women, and any group that already holds a lower position in society as the cause for society’s ills. White supremacists of all creeds have learned to use the language of the New Right under the banner of economic populism to advocate for far-right causes in plain sight. To understand how white supremacy, the New Right, and populist demagogues were able to craft a “long backlash” by creating a master narrative of the arc of social justice in the United States, one must look back to the 1970s where these forces coalesced with the help of news media.

Freedom Studies” (2013) by Clarence Lang for examples of pushback against Hall’s provocative and influential thesis.
How does Hall’s claims apply to groups like the KKK, and more specifically, what is the relationship between right-wing social movements, mass media, and the recent wave of reactionary politics? As discussed previously, mass media is generally defined as communication that reaches a large, often international audience, including but not limited to television, radio, films, newspapers, and more recently, the advent of the internet. Robert Pennington, a professor of communications argues that, “[c]ulture is the filter or screen that provides a template for organizing sensation.”

While “culture” is an extremely expansive term much like “populism” that will be teased out later on in this project, let us take culture to mean the conditions one is born into, the identities they’re born with, and the expectations thus placed on a person by the society they grow up in. If culture is the means by which we process what is happening in the world, mass media is the vehicle by which reality is delivered to us. But mass media is created by humans; and, humans are subject to cultural forces. “Mass media define[s] institutions and other components of society, including itself, according to both abstract attributes and tangible characteristics. Through mass media, people learn the extents and limits of political, social, economic, religious and other institutions.”

Thus, it follows that, “[t]he so-called free press is a myth; although free of regulation, media [is] always constricted and constrained by…[culture].” How so? If one accepts the premise that mass media is not constructed in a vacuum, and that culture dictates how we create, consume, and understand the messages being sent to us, while the press may be free of direct governmental control in the United States, it is controlled by one’s cultural

29 Robert Pennington, “Mass media content as cultural theory,” 102.
context and the restraints placed on mass media by capitalism, such as the need to turn a profit. It is important to understand the role of the media, especially the news media in upholding master narratives in our country. While the events of Charlottesville are shocking, they are but the culmination of an ongoing rightward shift in this nation. Furthermore, the Alt-Right and its oldest predecessor in the United States, that of the KKK, effectively manipulates the media to take what should be marginal, alternative far-right messaging and places it before viewers who do not have the full history before them. They hear terms like “Make America Great” and “America for Americans” coming out of the mouths of Nazis, Klansmen, and the like. However, because of a half-century long shift in the political climate, without proper vetting of who is saying what, viewers are able to take people like Kessler and the Klansmen David Duke before him at their word, that they are just looking out for the “common man” when no one else is. Inevitably, though, violence follows in their wake.

Why is it so imperative that mass media learns how to grapple with figures on the far-right? Media scholar John D.H. Downing coined the term “radical media” in 1984, a field of scholarship closely related to alternative media more broadly that concerns itself with how—mostly leftist—sub-cultures are able to build communication networks that subvert dominant outlets. In plain English, Downing studied how people who hold anti-establishment views talk to one another and inspire social change. But a gaping hole in these studies is what he terms “repressive radical media,” where groups like the Klan would fall. He wrote that by, “...analyzing repressive radical media, we are compelled to give an account that engages with the vitality of authoritarian populism.” Furthermore he contends that the “ultra-Right” uses

similar radical media strategies as the “far Left,” often grassroots and limited to more immediate circles. What differentiates them is the ultra-Right’s willingness to, “...embrace commonplace, simple means of mass communication...[f]or...a number of hot-button issues—especially race/ethnicity/immigration, women’s rights, and homophobia... [S]ome mainstream media [figures] are happy to propagate many of the ultra-Right’s positions, although not necessarily by giving them access in person to their columns or studios.”  

He goes on to argue that the “far Left” does not have the same ability to fund itself and appear on a wide spectrum of mainstream mass media networks, because even if mainstream networks are wary of platforming the “ultra-Right,” they are totally closed to the “far Left” in America. What does this mean in practice? While the average citizen may find Nazism or Klannish culture abhorrent on its face, they may find themselves aligned with their xenophobia, homophobia, racism, and so on. So, while they may not agree that “Jews will not replace us,” a white American may agree that too many foreigners are taking over jobs that should belong to them. So, hearing far-right voices in the media is more palatable to them than hearing someone on the far-left, making media networks more willing to bring them in, and for audiences to tune in.

If culture defines mass media, and vice versa, it is not hard to see how figures on the far-right understand that if they can just take their message to a less radical sub-set of the population, crossing over the hurdle of low circulating radical media networks, to that of international mainstream mass communication networks, stripping away dogma and presenting themselves as authoritarian populist champions focusing on a narrow subset of

33 Ibid.
divisive issues, they will be able to one day outnumber those opposed to them. Downing references, “...[t]he explosion of ultra-Right AM radio talk shows in the United States during the Clinton presidency,” such as Rush Limbaugh and his cohorts, who air their message across American airwaves virtually unopposed because there are no viable left-wing competitors cut from the same dogmatic cloth. In essence, Downing reveals how far-right politics have a much easier time being mainstreamed on mass communication networks. We live in a center-right nation that historically has shunned anything that even hints at leftist policy due to the Cold War and subsequent “Red Scare.” Furthermore, the Neo-Confederacy is baked into our popular memory and orients our politics. Even America’s public sphere is shaped by the Civil War, as witnessed by the recent anti-Confederate statue movement springing up in states that never fought for the Confederacy in the first place. Right-wing politics and revisionist history surround us, amplified by mass media. If we accept that culture and mass media complement one another as Pennington argues, we see how the far-right has centered its strategy on presenting their politics as right-wing populism because the optics are more acceptable than a swastika or a burning cross, when in fact, they are trying to move the country even further to the right.

In this paper, Charlottesville is inherently intertwined with not only the history of hate in this country, but a legacy of terror. The epicenter of this history is set nearly a half century earlier, in the 1970s, a decade that would become the training grounds for the modern white nationalist movement. By applying Hall’s analysis to a hate group such as the Ku Klux Klan, one can begin to understand that rather than a wave of violence or an aberration, Charlottesville is a harbinger for worse to come if the nation does not reckon with the lie that

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34 John D.H. Downing, “Repressive Radical Media,” 93.
we live in a color-blind society, and that racism is a thing of the past. While their targets contain multitudes of intersecting identities, white nationalists like Kessler and his “forefathers” have reduced all non-White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant (WASP) Americans into a permanent outsider status that needs to be removed like a malignant tumor. Over the years, some ethnic and religious minorities like Italians, the Irish, and Catholics have been more or less accepted as acceptable by the far-right, but it’s only when they have been deemed “assimilated” enough to join as honorary “whites” in American society. “Whiteness” itself is now a rallying cry among far-right extremists to boost their numbers in a demographically shifting nation. Not only do white nationalists not want other races, ethnicities, and religions to “replace them,” white nationalists want to be able to define who is and who is not an American. And, for over one-hundred and fifty years, the KKK has been at the forefront of hate in this nation and provided a blueprint for subsequent movements. They were one of the first hate groups that learned how to circulate “radical media” to their hardcore followers, while grabbing headlines and staging events that would give their beliefs a veneer of respectability to the masses. They decoded the optics of populism and have continued to innovate over the years.

This thesis contends that, just as mass media and the New Right has created a master narrative of the Black freedom struggle in the United States, it has also obscured the long backlash against marginalized people across the nation through sensationalized coverage of white reactionary movements. Moreover, the most iconic symbol of hate in this country, that of the Ku Klux Klan, has remained a media darling for over a century, undermining the fact that their mere existence is a clear and present threat. This project will examine the waves of KKK activity in the United States, and why the 1970s proved to be a fertile breeding ground
for extremist political thought on the far-right. Buttressing this analysis is a made-for-television documentary *The New Klan: Heritage of Hate* which first premiered in 1978 on PBS. It was recently restored in 2017 and made available to the public. In the documentary, Civil Rights activist Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr., and former Grand Wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, David Duke, are seen debating the Black and white divide present in the 1970s. By comparing and contrasting two giants in the “long movement” and “long backlash,” we gain a better understanding of how radicalism on the far-right rises as civil rights expands, as well as how white nationalist are able to mainstream themselves by positioning themselves as the New Right fighting the New Left, when in fact, they’re the far-right hoping to take over the New Right in order to crush everyone to the left.

David Duke, a former Nazi, Klansmen, and preeminent white nationalist, successfully leveraged the media’s thirst for a charismatic leader with a white face in the 1970s through a combination of media strategies and public relations campaigns devised in early iterations of the KKK mapped onto new technologies like the television. While he would initially lose his first race for public office on the Democratic ballot in 1975, by 1988, now as a Republican, Duke would shock the same media that showered him with attention by winning a seat in Louisiana’s House of Representatives. On the other hand, Jesse Jackson, like many Black activists of the era, was shifting from Civil Rights to Black Power in subtle and overt ways. However, even though he would go on to run historic campaigns for the Democratic presidential ticket in 1984 and 1988 with his “Rainbow Coalition,” Jackson found himself against an increasingly antagonistic media machine. This project will not dive into the dynamics of mass media in the 1980s, but will use the activist Jackson in the 1970s to showcase how the New Left was attempting to revel how figures like Duke were wolves in
sheep’s clothing, casting themselves as populists when they were really opportunist
advocating for a hostile takeover of the political spectrum to their left. What makes this early
debate stand out is that the audience can see in real time how the far-right was able to make
inroads in discrediting what the Civil Rights Movement was really about by co-opting the
language of the New Right. Mass media and the news media ended up being complicit in
mainstreaming hate because they made voices like Duke acceptable in our public discourse
around race and nationalism for a time. Even more shocking is that Duke, an avowed Nazi
and a Klansmen at that time, was able to court the media in such a way he was given an equal
platform with Rev. Jackson.

If all press is good press, the question remains, how can the news media effectively
cover white supremacist violence without providing them a vehicle to nationalize and
normalize their message? There are no easy answers to this question, and the research
presented here is but brief case studies of one hate group that is a small part of a much larger
movement. Furthermore, the radical media produced by the KKK and its sympathizers, as
well as popular culture’s contributions is only sparsely addressed in academic literature, with
the bulk of the research focusing on two mass media mediums: newspapers and television.
Despite the perplexing limitations of this research, it’s important because it helps to fill the
scholarly void of research on America’s far-right media networks and strategies. This project
presents a few topics in tandem: first, the history of the Ku Klux Klan and its relationship to
mass media; then, how the 1970s sparked a “revival” headed by a college-educated and
media-savvy Klansmen named David Duke; finally circling back to Charlottesville, Virginia
in 2017, examining how the “movement of movements” was, and is, confronted by
oppositional forces on the Right and far-right boosted by mass media. The Klan’s long battle
for the hearts, minds, and souls of white America begins shortly after the United States was torn apart by war. The American Civil War acted as a springboard for the creation of the Klan, but it’s also the origins of the Neo-Confederate master narrative nationalized by a dedicated group of academics and activist sympathetic to the Old South, which would form the foundation of the master narrative about the Civil Rights Movement, and set the tone for reactionary white violence and media coverage in America.
CHAPTER ONE:

A HERITAGE OF HATE

“The people must know before they can act, and there is no educator to compare with the press.”

— Ida B. Wells-Barnett

On April 9, 1865, beloved Confederate general Robert E. Lee surrendered to the Union at the Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia. Union General Ulysses S. Grant, interrupting a spontaneous celebration stated, “[t]he war is over. The Rebels are our countrymen again.” While skirmishes continued for several weeks, Lee’s surrender marked the symbolic end of the Confederate States of America. However, a strange thing occurred in the wake of the war. It has been said that “history is written by the victors.” When it comes to the American Civil War, the Confederacy, not the Union, has won hearts and minds. The Old South has long been glorified in the popular memory of the war, and the North demonized for leaving a proud people desolate and subjugated during the Reconstruction-era. How did this come to be? The Southern interpretation of the American Civil War was, and in some ways is, victorious because it dominated all facets of popular culture and mass media for decades. Furthermore, academic scholarship reinforced the revisionist myth of the Lost Cause. The Lost Cause, in turn, was how by the 1970s David Duke could go on national

television and blame Black people for structural inequality, and how later, at a rally in Washington D.C. in 2017 Jason Kessler could claim, “[o]ur entire country would be better off if the South had won the Civil War.” The master narrative of the Civil War, despite recent efforts by activists and academics alike, is that the South was unjustly villainized. The Ku Klux Klan, while laughed at by the 1970s, were some of the first in our society to take this myth and put it into practice, setting the stage for a conflict between competing claims to heritage that rage on even today.

Not all scholars of the Civil War study the KKK; however, there is significant overlap when it comes to discussing the origins of the Klan. So, it is useful to become acquainted with both fields of scholarship. The Lost Cause is the definitive narrative that emerged from the war and remained a national belief until quite recently. The Lost Cause is defined loosely by a set of truisms: slavery was not a sectional issue; the Confederacy was fighting a noble and patriotic battle; abolitionists and Radical Republicans were provocateurs; the Old South would have eventually phased out slavery; and the “tyrannical, industrial” North was to blame for the conflict, not the “harmonious, agrarian” South. Scholars have traditionally viewed the origins of the Lost Cause through the lens of the defeated and the cult of the Old South. They have drawn on a similar pool of primary source material from the era. Those primary sources are as follows: Is Davis a Traitor; or Was Secession a Constitutional Right Previous to the War of 1861? (1866) by Albert Taylor Bledsoe, The Lost Cause: The Standard Southern History of the War of the Confederates (1867) by Edward A. Pollard, Alexander Stevens’ two-volume polemic Constitutional View of the Late War between the

37 “Jason Kessler,” The Southern Poverty Law Center.
The work of Bledsoe and Pollard is of particular interest because they gave rise to the neologism “War between the States” and coined the term “Lost Cause.” From these primary sources, as well as many more, two distinct interpretations of the war have developed over the years. Both scholarly camps generally agree, and agreed, that the Lost Cause is a culturally binding white Southern “myth.” “Myth” here is not meant to imply a story that is false; a “myth” is “cultural glue” that binds a people together. But a major shift occurred in the mid-twentieth century as scholars split on what was the true cause of the Civil War: slavery, according to new scholarship, or state’s rights as established by the proponents of the Lost Cause. Today, many historians of this period fall into an “anti-Lost Cause” camp, viewing the Lost Cause as a deliberate effort by veterans of the Confederacy, middle- and upper class white war widows, and Democratic politicians to spread propaganda.

The Lost Cause would galvanize ex-Confederates to form the Ku Klux Klan, but they didn’t rise in a vacuum. The KKK’s origin story is tied up in a revisionist history popularized by southerners after the war, a popular memory held by many. Before the current anti-Lost Cause consensus took hold, the Dunning School of interpretation ruled. The first historians who studied the Reconstruction-era perpetuated the CSA’s ideological framework in academic circles. Pro-Southern and anti-Black, the members of this “…southern school of

39 The organization Sons of Confederate Veterans (https://scv.org) revived the magazine in the mid-1980s and presumably continues to publish Confederate Veteran digitally, but it is in-accessible to non-members protected by a passcode.
historians…” were mostly born in the New South, eager to resist “…arrogant, condescending, and smug…” intellectuals from the North who had written histories that favored the Union. William Archibald Dunning (1857-1922) was a professor of history at Columbia University. Dunning was influenced by political scientist John W. Burgess—also of Columbia University—who is regarded as the father of political science as a discipline in the United States. Both men were preeminent scholars trained by the best and brightest in Germany. Both men were also virulent racists. Dunning’s students were pioneers of gathering primary source material from the war generation, a practice at the heart of history as a discipline, but their racist views had a massive influence on their ultimate conclusions. Burgess, “…faulted Radical Republicans for enfranchising African American men…as a means to control southern state governments.” Dunning was in agreement, and this was reflected in the revisionist dissertations of his pupils. Though the Dunning School has fallen out of favor among historians, their interpretation of the war and Reconstruction was the prevailing popular memory for nearly a century. As a result of the Dunning School and non-academics that viewed the CSA’s cause as just, the Lost Cause doctrine was deeply embedded in the American psyche, political culture, and physical landscape, especially in the South. That is not to say there was no push back against the Dunning School by contemporaneous scholars. W.E.B Du Bois would write *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of*

the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880 (1935), the first significant break in academia from the Dunning School. However, this thesis examines the implications of the Dunning School through the evolution of right-wing politics as utilized by the KKK, so the history of resistance on the left and by Black America will not be adequately presented.

At the very same time the nation moved to end Jim Crow, historians moved to end the Dunning School’s reign. This was not a coincidence according to American historian David Chalmers, who wrote *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (1965, revised in 1987), and has continued to write against the Klan. Chalmers recounts that, “...[n]early a hundred years after the end of the Civil War and the Reconstruction, the academic professions in the South were as segregated as the school systems...” and that, “...[a]s with the history of slavery, a new generation of historians has rewritten the history of Reconstruction.”45 Chalmers was a part of the first generation of scholars who began questioning the narrative arc set up in the halls of Columbia University. From the 1960s through the 1980s—no doubt as a consequence of the nation’s reckoning with Racial segregation—a new movement emerged. Around this time, historians such as Thomas L. Connelly, Gaines M. Foster, and William Garret Piston, “...[established] that the purpose of the “legend” was to foster a heroic image of secession and the war...”46 Thanks to the work of lauded Civil War historian James M. McPherson and others of his mindset, the central claims of the Lost Cause have been thoroughly challenged. These historians argue that the

cult of the Old South gained ground in the 1860s and 1890s, “…interwoven with the crusade against Reconstruction, the consolidation of white supremacy under Democratic rule in the 1890s, and the emergence of a “New South, committed to industrial and commercial progress.”

In other words, the New South had to find a boogeyman and found a perfect target in newly freed Black Americans and Northern “carpetbaggers.” They sought vindication and found it by wrapping their failed bid for secession in the guise of civil religion. “The Stars and Bars,” “Dixie,” and the army’s gray jacket became religious emblems, symbolic of the sacrifices made on its behalf…” to create a Sacred South and Immortal Confederacy. The death of Robert E. Lee galvanized the movement, shifting its tone from “funerary” to “celebratory.” By capitalizing on Lee’s death, Lost Cause proponents also lionized the Old South as a reactionary movement against the New South. In a world where the social and political order had been overthrown, the South needed a savior from the “evils” of Reconstruction. So, they constructed a false narrative of the Civil War to justify ending military rule, disenfranchising newly enfranchised Black men in their defeated states in the process. This is not unlike what right-wing populist demagogues on the Right and far-right

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would do in the 1970s, keeping Black people as targets, swapping out a lost war for lost jobs, and adding in new groups like recent immigrants from Latin America.

In the 1990s and 2000s, historians such as Karen L. Cox and Caroline E. Janney began to emphasize white women’s contribution to the myth. Previous academics had referenced war widows’ role in perpetuating the Lost Cause, largely through their novels depicting an idealized South and passive, “happy” slaves.\(^{52}\) The most famous cinematic version is *Gone with the Wind* (1939), an adaptation of Georgian Margret Mitchell’s 1936 novel of the same name. However, Janney emphasizes that, “…[n]ot only did women take the lead in monument building in the South[,]” Southern white women purposely confined many of the early monuments to the Confederate fallen in cemeteries, providing a perfect forum to air grievances over the war.\(^{53}\) The monuments highlighted the sacredness of their struggle, and would spread across the nation in a relentless drive to name buildings, statues, and parks after titans of the CSA.\(^{54}\)

The rise of the Neo-Confederacy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is directly related to the Lost Cause becoming the popular memory of the war. Similarly, the Klan has always drawn upon this revisionist history to stoke hatred against forces they see as connected to the destruction of the Old South and the degeneration of white culture like the abolition of slavery. Studying Civil War scholarship is necessary to unpack the rise of the KKK, but Ku Klux Klan scholarship is different enough it warrants its own historiography by way of how each “wave” of the Klan has been studied, coming to the current moment of the

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\(^{52}\) Robert J. Cook, “The Resurgent South and its Lost Cause,” 44.


\(^{54}\) See the Southern Poverty Law Center’s “Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy,” which tracks the spread of the Neo-Confederacy through material culture like parks and monuments.
“New Klan” born in the 1960s and 1970s. Where is this thesis situated in the historiography of Klan scholarship? This project seeks to examine the “New Klan” under David Duke and their media strategies adapted from the “Old Klans.” Furthermore, there is a dearth of scholarship that studies the Klan beyond its origins after the Civil War and height in membership during the 1920s and 1930s. To date, historians Felix Harcourt’s *Ku Klux Kulture: America and the Klan in the 1920s* (2017) and Linda Gordon’s *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (2017) are the most recent and robust scholarly texts that examines the Klan in relation to mass media, especially popular culture and news media more generally. However, they focus on the Klan of the 1920s rather than any recent activity. The article “The Ugliness of Trolls: Comparing the Strategies/Methods of the Alt-Right and the Ku Klux Klan” (2018) by philosopher Nathan Eckstrand comes close to what this study seeks to achieve, however it is more concerned with the “Alt-Right” more broadly than the Klan in depth. So, while it shows continuity with the future, even Eckstrand’s article does not address the New Klan adequately enough.

With all that said, what exactly is meant when talking about the Ku Klux Klan? Why is the Lost Cause so integral to explaining the KKK as a cultural phenomenon? Just like the academic trajectory of the Lost Cause, Klan scholarship took a drastic turn once the Dunning School lost its hold on academia. While the intricacies of the first, second, and third wave of the KKK are beyond the scope of this study, each version offers a link to how the KKK developed “Ku Klux Kulture” which mass media, in turn, sensationalized through increasing press coverage. Elaine Frantz Parsons, a historian of the nineteenth century, has published the most recent comprehensive study of the Reconstruction-era Klan, directly referencing, and at
some points challenging Allen W. Trelease’s seminal text *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (1971). Trelease was a part of the new wave of scholarship challenging the master narratives of the Civil War, the Lost Cause, and the KKK stemming from the Dunning School of Interpretation like Chalmers, so it’s important that a recent batch of scholarship looks back at his work among others.

The origins of the Ku Klux Klan are shrouded in equal parts fact and myth. Parson states that, “[t]he Ku-Klux began as a name...chosen by a group of young former Confederates in Pulaski, Tennessee, in May or June [of] 1866.”

55 Frank O. McCord, Richard Reed, John C. Lester, Calvin Jones, John Booker Kennedy, and James Crowe would make history when, according to legend, the men met at a bar and decided to create a fraternity, corrupting the Greek word “Kuklos,” meaning a band or circle, into Ku Klux, adding Klan to form a punchy alliteration.56

It is commonly believed that Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, a Tennessean by birth, was the first Grand Wizard—or leader—of the Reconstruction-era Klan; however, Parsons disputes this because she found little evidence for belief, though she agrees he was involved in some way.57 Historians have largely agreed that, “...[t]he first Ku-Klux was likely not founded for the direct purpose of racial conflict...” but as a nonpolitical entity, based on primary sources produced by the founders.58

As Parsons notes, “...[m]any former Confederates saw rebuilding a southern culture as an important social goal,” and that “...[a]ntebellum political mobilization had been closely tied to public

57 Ibid, 50.
58 Ibid, 32.
entertainments like parades and picnics.” 59 These were some of the first steps towards the creation of “Ku Klux Kulture,” linking politics with public entertainment, lynching being one of the most grotesque forms that would become more prominent in the early twentieth century, though by no means exclusively carried out by Klansmen. Another example of this was Confederate veterans reunions, and Reconciliation reunions to show unity amongst ex-Conederates and ex-Unionist, that were a staple across the South and parts of the North in the wake of the war. 60 In effect, the Ku-Klux, run of the mill Southerners, and even Northerners were establishing pro-Confederate public memory with these gatherings that never addressed slavery’s central role in the war, painting it as a “War between the States” and a “War between Brothers” over “state’s rights” which could now be forgotten in service of a more perfect union.

Utilizing an odd mix of romantic nationalism and blood and soil rhetoric, the Reconstruction-era Klan was a very modern organization because, “…[i]t was a major idea in the nationalist mid-nineteenth century that culture, and particularly language, was constitutive of regional identity, and the idea that a nation’s identity resided in its cultural traditions and language had been an important component of the development of southern identity.” 61 That is to say the Ku-Klux were tapping into the zeitgeist of the era, creating a new distinctly Southern culture through their organization, reshaping the South in opposition to what Reconstruction was supposed to do. One of the most interesting aspects of Parson’s updated analysis of the Ku-Klux is the claim that they were largely mischaracterized as an

59 Elaine Frantz Parsons, Ku-Klux, 35.
61 Elaine Frantz Parsons, Ku-Klux, 43.
enormous shadow organization that had taken the South by storm, when it fact, they were a relatively small, tight-knit group of friends before the media started attaching them to sensationalist crimes such as murder and grand political conspiracies. “...The Ku-Klux came to widespread national attention between January and May 1868, at the same time that it was emerging to local recognition. Word of mouth and personal networks were much less important, and national media networks much more important in the Ku-Klux’s local establishment…” Media networks here, in the context of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, refers to the practice of circulating stories from larger papers to daily affiliates across the nation. From the very start, mass media has played a central role in the making of the KKK. In this case, national newspapers in the North took a small phenomenon in the South—a group of ex-Confederates who wanted to reshape their world—and made them larger than life, a new Southern-wide menace. “Both racist idealizers of the early Ku-Klux and historians have imagined too much continuity and too smooth a transition between the Pulaski form and its appropriation…” which obscures how their “everyman” image, or idea of the KKK adopted by, “...the national press [of the era], would radically alter it, certain elements of the original Ku-Klux form would persist, fortifying, but also shaping and limit, the Ku-Klux’s cultural and political significance.” In other words, the newspaper as a medium played a significant role in the trajectory of the first Klan both for sympathizers who would valorize them and naysayers who sought to crush them. Without the Ku-Klux being written about in the major Northern newspapers of the day, it is possible they could have faded into obscurity

62 Elaine Frantz Parsons, *Ku-Klux*, 68.
63 Ibid, 70.
as yet another small gang of vigilantes committing, “…sporadic...nocturnal violence…”
common in, “…the postwar rural South.”

Parsons makes the case that, “…[f]ar from passive observers, northern papers played
a crucial role in the shaping and proliferation of the idea of the Klan…” and that,
“[n]ortherners and southerners, Democrats and Republicans, debated whether the Klan
represented both elite and low-class whites, or just one or the other; whether accounts of
Klan violence were accurate, exaggerated, or fabricated; whether freedman’s behavior
warranted or even necessitated such violent suppression; and whether southern whites’
support of the Klan warranted or even necessitated the federal government's violent
suppression.” Much like Hall pointed out in her essay, a master narrative of Reconstruction
was being created, and like the Dunning School, even if the first Klan would eventually be
suppressed, in the South and much of the North, their version of events, a white supremacist
myth, would win out in the end. The lasting myth that came out of the Ku-Klux supported by
the press was that the group was made up of well-organized hyper-violent Southerners, a “…
secret organization that had been orchestrating violence [throughout the South].” This is
very far from the truth, because in the beginning, they were little more than a rag-tag militia
and social club who, while violent and racist, were not an all-powerful Southern conspiracy
in the least.

A close study of the national headlines in Northern presses such as the New York
Times, Chicago Tribune, and Milwaukee Daily Sentinel, to name a few, reveals how victims
of KKK violence took up little of the “outraged coverage” being consumed by audiences in

64 Elaine Frantz Parsons, Ku-Klux, 5.
65 Ibid, 145-146.
the North. “Structurally embedded in most descriptions of the Ku-Klux attacks was the assumption that their meanings were fundamentally related to national, partisan politics.” It didn’t matter as much who they were attacking for newspaper publishers as much as their assertion the KKK were a grand Southern conspiracy orchestrating the violence. This kind of conspiratorial tone was not shocking for a nation still in the midst of the aftermath of its first civil war. Of note is the fact that, “…Democratic papers chose to discuss the Klan considerably less frequently than Republican papers did,” noting the difference in coverage in the Chicago Times in the mid-twentieth century as opposed to more pro-Republican papers. This partisan, asymmetrical divide present in the coverage of KKK activity would extend into the next wave to be discussed in this project. The warped coverage of the Ku-Klux was shaping the response to them, and the Klan was benefitting from outsized importance during the Reconstruction-era. The public discourse around the Reconstruction-era Klan would reach a fever pitch twice in the late nineteenth century. The first peak was attached to partisan accusations made during the impeachment trial of President Andrew Johnson, himself a Southern-born Democrat. Supporters of Johnson went as far as to accuse anti-Klan reporting as fraudulent, claiming, “…anti-Johnson conspirators were evoking the specter of the Ku-Klux to “frighten” citizens and other senators into supporting the impeachment.” Song, pamphlets, and even a 1868 detective story, “Masked Lady of the White House,” flourished prior to the hearings even as Democrats complained that, “...the Ku-Klux was a devious conspiracy on the part of Radical Republicans to build up a fraudulent case for the impeachment of Johnson by framing him for atrocities that they

67 Elaine Frantz Parsons, Ku-Klux, 153.
68 Ibid, 153.
69 Ibid, 171.
themselves had committed against freed people of color.” After the first wave of interest died down, “[t]he second wave of interest in the Klan would see an increase in the number of stories portraying Ku-Klux as victims of federal force, and a decrease in the number of stories depicting black victimization…” as the federal government invested resources to finally suppress the violence happening in the South. Yet again, the Ku-Klux, not their actual victims, received the lion’s share of print media coverage, and even began garnering sympathetic support in the end.

The Ku-Klux’s relationship with Northern presses during the late nineteenth century was a mutually beneficial one, as they gained notoriety across the nation and the publishers sold more papers. The Reconstruction-era Klan and the media frenzy that followed in their wake ignited a nationwide debate with all the beats of an engrossing drama. Newspapers, one of the first widely available mass mediums in the United States, turned a small group of ex-Confederates into a Southern empire of hate. But, when U.S. citizens, and citizens around the world reflecting on intolerance in the United States think about the face of hate in this country, fiery red crosses, lynched Black bodies, and white pointed hoods are often front in center in peoples’ imaginations. What they are imagining is the legacy of terror left behind by the second KKK, itself a construct of popular memory that did not align with the reality on the ground of the first. It all started with two novels, a film, and a lynching that would morph into a movement.

In the 1910s and the 1920s, the second Ku Klux Klan rose to prominence. Dubbed the “Invisible Empire,” this iteration of the Klan held considerable power in the economic,

70 Elaine Frantz Parsons, *Ku-Klux*, 171.
71 Ibid, 173.
political, and cultural spheres. The Invisible Empire of the early twentieth century was
different from the Reconstruction-era Klan for a number of reasons, some being that even
though they “...took pride in [their] namesake and [their] commitment to white
supremacy…[i]t was stronger in the North than in the South [spreading] above the Mason
Dixon Line by adding Catholics, Jews, immigrants, and bootleggers to its list of enemies and
pariahs, in part because African Americans were less numerous in the North…” at that
time.72 Women and children also held a curious role in this KKK as unofficial members and
boosters. Sociologist Kathleen M. Blee’s Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the
1920s (1991) remains the most comprehensive study of white women’s role in the KKK,
then segregated into the Women of the Ku Klux Klan (WKKK), their children members of
the “Ku Klux Kiddies,” the Klan’s youth movement.73 This Klan was concerned with
suppressing the vote and using violence to enforce white power, expanding their reach to
new demographics and geographic regions in the United States.

Partaking in brutal lynchings would be the 1920s KKK’s defining image, as white
America bought into the myth that Black men were raping white women, defiling the white
race as the whole. To them, lynching was an expression of Anglo-Saxon virtues by protecting
white womanhood and defining the limits of freedom and citizenship in America. White
southerners had once terrorized freed people of color to enforce their subordinated place in
society after the civil war. By the turn of the century, they wanted to keep segregation in

72 Linda Gordon, “Introduction: “100% Americanism,” in The Second Coming of the KKK:
The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition (New York, New York:
73 Journalist Erin Blakemore’s “Ku Klux Kiddies: The KKK’s Little-Known Youth
Movement” (2019) is a short primer on these sub-movements reminiscent of the Hitler Youth
and National Socialist Women’s League in purpose, if not in ideology.
place, “…justify vigilantism…” as the means by which they could, “[shore up]…systemic power.” That is not to say that lynching was restricted to hate crimes nor the exclusive work of the Klan, but they would become synonymous in popular imagination, a byproduct of a culture that found lynching acceptable, a news media that reported lynching as a fact of life with only passing consideration to the victims or seeking justice, and a hate group that made it respectable. However, before the Invisible Empire could seize power to enact their political agenda, a cultural revolution needed to take place and a publicity plan crafted.

_The Birth of a Nation_ (1915) by D.W. Griffith, and its source material _The Leopard’s Spots_ (1902) and _The Clansman_ (1905) by Thomas F. Dixon Jr. established the myth of the first Ku Klux Klan as all-American saviors. The Crusader imagery and white robes commonly associated with the KKK came out of these works of fiction and would have lasting staying power, a testament to film’s ability to act as a venue for cultural exchange as the North and South became enamored with this facet of “Kulture.” The blockbuster’s premiere also, in some ways, foreshadowed the Red Summer to follow in 1919 in which widespread “race riots” engulfed the nation. “Mainstream white American racial prejudice against African Americans was...compatible with the anti-black principles of the Invisible Empire…” therefore, a story of a valiant and heroic Ku Klux Klan protecting vulnerable white Southern society during Reconstruction found a receptive audience captivated by the


Griffith would go to his grave rebuking the claim that his film was a racist piece of propaganda rather than a historical drama, but the effect remains the same.

By all accounts inspired by the film, the second KKK’s first Imperial Wizard William Joseph Simmons led, “...a reborn Ku Klux Klan...” launched on, “...November 25, 1915, with a cross burning [ceremony] at Stone Mountain, Georgia.” The murder of thirteen-year-old Mary Phagan in Atlanta, Georgia, and subsequent lynching of her boss, Jewish businessman Leo Frank, accused and convicted of the crime in 1913, further emboldened the Depression-era Klan. Immortalized and revitalized by an innovative, epic silent film, and then given purpose by a brutal lynching still debated as driven by anti-Semitism, what becomes central to the ability of the Invisible Empire to expand is what scholar Felix Harcourt has called “Ku Klux Kulture.” The Invisible Empire’s “kulture” was a potent mixture of distorted religiosity wrapped up in blood and soil nationalism like the first meant to show the mass media that they were 100 percent patriotic Americans. “Americanism, more particularly 100 percent Americanism, was a rallying cry for the 1920s Klan, and members prostrated themselves in front of altars of Americanism, complemented by the flag…and the fiery cross...” Their Protestantism was defined in opposition to the tri-threats of, “...Catholicism, Bolshevism, and

77 In the blog post “David Duke and ‘Birth of a Nation’,” film historian and critic Frank Beaver claims that during an interview with David Duke in the late 1970s, he stated, “No film or TV program today can give the pro-Klan position as effectively as “The Birth of a Nation.”” Beaver then contemplates how the film has been used as a recruiting mechanism for the KKK. The Birth of a Nation was also a catalyst for the “Death to the Klan” march held in Greensboro, North Carolina by leftists in 1979 after a screening of Griffith’s film by local Klansmen.
78 Felix Harcourt, Ku Klux Kulture: America and the Klan in the 1920s, 2.
79 Kelly J. Baker, ““Take the Christ out of America, and America Fails!”: The Klan’s Nationalism,” in Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK’s Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930 (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 70-71.
Judaism,” all of which were seen as anti-American to the wider public as xenophobic rhetoric increased and federal legislation passed to limit “undesirable” immigration to the United States. The KKK saw themselves as the white knights Griffith depicted in his film, carrying out a messianic role as saviors of “true” Americans and exemplary standard-bearers of “100% Americanism.” But it was their use of mass media and radical media in the 1920s and 1930s that would set them apart with the aid of the broadcast era that carried sound and moving images to an even larger audience than print culture like newspapers could at the time. But first, the KKK had to gain members.

After limited success in Georgia and Alabama, in 1925, “...hoping to strengthen interest in the organization [Imperial Wizard] Simmons hired Edward Young Clarke and Elizabeth Tyler of the Southern Publicity Association…” who created the “Kleagle System” in which recruiters, or “Kleagles,” focused on recruiting wealthy elites and the general public who would pay dues that, in turn, expanded their capacity to publicize their activities. A proactive and ingenious money-making scheme, the Depression-era Klan was soon flush with money and its membership numbered in the millions. Newspapers began to take notice, and once again propelled the KKK into the national spotlight. For three weeks beginning on September 6, 1921 through the 26th, “...the Klan dominated the front page of a major New York daily and affiliates around the country.” The New York World’s now infamous exposé backfired spectacularly. Far from deterring the average white American from joining the group, scholars like Harcourt have argued it was pivotal to the resurgence of the Klan on a

80 Kelly J. Baker, ““Take the Christ out of America, and America Fails!”: The Klan’s Nationalism,” 75.
81 Felix Harcourt, Ku Klux Kulture: America and the Klan in the 1920s, 3.
82 Ibid.
national level by lending the organization credibility and respectability, with some readers going as far as to use blank applications reprinted in the *New York World* to join the Ku Klux Klan.

Despite their failure to stop the growth of Klan, *New York World’s* deep dive into the secrets of the KKK spawned similar coverage across the North, establishing a blueprint for anti-Klan coverage in print media in the 1920s and 1930s. Many journalists were in fact taking up what they thought was a righteous cause in their capacity as the “Fourth Estate,” but the ultimate “...aim was to increase sales with inflammatory coverage...” that sold papers, even if it decreased their audience from time to time for being too anti-Klan in a culture that agreed with the Klan’s beliefs, even if not all white Americans burned crosses, participated in lynch mobs, or wore Crusader-inspired regalia. The American Unity League (AUL) of Catholics and Jews launched a weekly called *Tolerance* in Chicago on September 17, 1922 dedicated solely to “exposing the KKK,” but the paper quickly folded due to sloppy coverage that inaccurately claimed a millionaire chewing gum manufacturer named William Wrigley, Jr. was secretly a Klansmen who subsequently sued. The partisan divide in coverage carried over from the first Klan as well, with the South largely resistant to publishing anti-Klan stories. The *Columbus Enquirer-Sun*, published by Julian Harris in the Klan’s new home state of Georgia, was the rare exception. Like the *New York World*, the southern paper won a Pulitzer Prize in 1926 for its bravery in reprinting their exposé, among other anti-Klan coverage such as revealing that Georgia’s Governor Clifford Walker was a Klansmen in the

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84 Ibid, 16.
85 Ibid, 18.
face of increased intimidation.86 Furthermore, there was also a lack of coverage in Black, Catholic, and Jewish owned publications, with the Black-owned *Pittsburgh Courier* complaining that the smallest action of the Invisible Empire resulted in fanning wall-to-wall coverage by the white press which was ultimately detrimental.87

The Klan responded to negative coverage by trying to create parallel pro-Klan mainstream publications. The Klan of the 1920s and 1930s also effectively made use of radical, low circulating mediums to shore up support with die-hard supporters, while presenting a non-violent and friendly face to the public. Two examples of this is their weekly papers and phonographic record fronts. *Fact!*, an anti-Catholic paper, became *The Fiery Cross* under King Kleage, and soon-to-be Grand Dragon of the Indiana Klan, D.C. Stephenson where the Klan held considerable control of the government and fanned out across the Midwest.88 Another example is a pamphlet released by The American stating, “[w]e have always believed that the best way to convince the world that the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan is an honest, efficient American organization is to openly and publicly announce it as such.”89 A publisher of phonographic records and sheet music based in Indianapolis, Indiana which billed itself as the “Best In Klant Music,” “[t]he American released a series of popular Klan tunes in 1924 and 1925 on the KKK and Hitch labels, including “The Bright Fiery Cross,” “Mystic City,” and “Why I Am a Klansman…” to a name a few.90 These are but two examples of the ways in which U.S. citizens were inundated

87 Ibid, 25.
88 Ibid, 32.
with “Ku Klux Kulture” even though, in many cases, these, “...Klannish cultural artifacts have been all but forgotten, along with their significance.”91 While their targets had expanded to encompass more marginalized people rather than just Northern agents of Reconstruction and new Black citizens, what was central to the appeal of the second Ku Klux Klan, just as the first, was their ability to decide who belonged in the United States, and who had rights to citizenship with impunity. What set the Invisible Empire apart from the Ku-Klux was the way they actively shaped their narrative through mainstream mass media newspapers and phonographs, while continuing to support more hardcore beliefs. In a post-World War I era where Henry Ford was regularly publishing anti-Semitic work from his home base in Michigan, it is not unusual that the Klan thought they could attract new members by playing on commonly held bigoted beliefs and giving them a Klan makeover.

The Reconstruction-era’s Klan’s relationship with the media transformed a small, far-right social group into American icons. The Invisible Empire would go on to produce “Kulture” consumed by millions, using mass communication networks that turned prejudice into action against marginalized communities. Be it Black Americans trying to escape the legacy of chattel slavery, Catholic immigrants being forced to conform to Protestant values, or European Jews attempting to avoid a millennium of persecution, the KKK simply played on existing stereotypes lurking in the minds of likeminded citizens. In turn, many white Americans found their beliefs reflected in an organization that claimed to be “100% American.” In a sense, the second KKK’s dedication to hiding their violent mission and influencing the broader public through cultural production was one of the most successful public relations campaigns in the world, converting old enemies in the North by the hundreds

of thousands into the KKK’s versions of Southern society. A shocking scandal and
embezzlement crisis would mark the downfall of the Depression-era KKK, with its support
dwindling until virtual disbandment in 1944 in the face of increased calls for unity in the
United States during WWII. But, their media influence was still apparent when an ultra-
violent branch broke off named the Black Legion, who began terrorizing and killing left-
wing union organizers, first in Michigan and then expanding into other industrialized
midwestern states. Actor Humphrey Bogart starred in a black and white film entitled Black
Legion (1937) which attempted to act as a cinematic anti-Klan exposé against fascism and
bigotry through social messaging, the trailer prominently featuring a cross burning and
working class whites with text scrolling across the screen reading “BEHIND THE
HEADLINES THAT SHOCKED THE NATION,” and “HAILED BY PUBLIC AND
PRESS AS “SENSATION-PACKED ENTERTAINMENT,” intertwining education and
entertainment for the audience in order to sell tickets. The Black Legion, and Black Legion
(1937), illustrate how the end of the second KKK would also spell the end of a unitary
organizational structure, and is also a tidy bookend to a Klan revitalized by film. The Birth of
a Nation (1915) set out to educate the public using the lens of the Dunning School, resulting
in an incendiary piece of propaganda that some argue launched a true empire of hate. Black

92 On March 15, 1925, Indiana’s Grand Dragon D.C. Stephenson brutally drugged, kidnapped,
and raped a state employee named Madge Oberholtzer who would testify against the powerful
leader and die from her injuries. Stephenson went on to name names of powerful state officials
who were Klan members. He also revealed an embezzlement scheme run by the Klan.
93 “The murder that brought down the Black Legion,” The Detroit News, August 4, 1997,
http://blogs.detroitnews.com/history/1997/08/04/the-murder-that-brought-down-the-black-
legion/.
94 Movieclips Classic Trailers, “Black Legion (1937) Official Trailer - Humphrey Bogart,
Ann Sheridan Movie HD,” YouTube Video, October 14, 2014,
https://youtu.be/0zeR0SPt9U0.
Legion (1937) was an attempt to show the evils of the Klan, now infinitely splintered, back to its roots as small roving bands of armed, white, militias, though no longer confined to the South.

The Klan has never been static in nature, adapting their hateful ideology for the times, and spreading to different sections of the United States under the leadership of local leaders called Grand Dragons. By the start of the third Klan, the KKK cannot be considered one group. They were pockets of organized terror working together and often fighting each other to claim legitimacy. So, when writing about the third wave of the Ku Klux Klan, one is writing about “klans.” The third wave of the KKK took off in tandem with the classical Civil Rights freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. Responding to white rage over attempts to desegregate the United States, many klaverns—local units of the larger movement—sprung up, with the majority re-concentrated south of the Mason-Dixon line like the first wave. All three waves flourished in eras of racial, economic, and political resentment and upheaval, and the Civil Rights era was one such powder keg of polarizing issues. Prior to the Klan cleaning up its image again after being plagued with scandals unrelated to their racial and religious terrorism, many anti-integration middle class and upper-class whites joined Citizens Councils to oppose racial integration of public schools falling the landmark Supreme Court ruling Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka in 1954. Despite the subsequent fragmentation of the Ku Klux Klan after the “fall” of the Invisible Empire, the third wave was able to exert an outsized influence on politics and culture. “Easily the most visible of the newly resurgent Klan organizations [of the Civil Rights Era] was Robert M. Shelton’s United Klans of
America (UKA)...” and, “[b]y 1964 Shelton’s UKA [based in Georgia like the Invisible Empire] had become the largest and most visible Klan group in the nation.”

Emboldened by a new wave of hate aimed as Black Americans, the third wave of the KKK, in essence, went back to its roots, centering anti-Blackness as anti-integration sentiment took root. Shelton’s “Klansmen USA” model, in particular, sought to unify the white South across class divisions under the dog whistle of “state’s rights” while committing extreme acts of violence like killing Civil Rights organizers, which would inevitably lead to their downfall as the FBI became increasingly involved. While the Klan was able to push its way into the political sphere like before, it found a harder time mainstreaming their “Kulture” compared to the first and second wave. So, much of the output was underground mediums or radical media. While the Klan has always exploited cutting edge technology with low barriers to entry, this Klan turned to them almost exclusively. The radio and white power music spread the Klan’s philosophy to a larger audience aurally in the Civil Rights era, even though they never spoke to the astronomical numbers the Invisible Empire did. The 1960s and 1970s were the breeding grounds of what would become known as right-wing rock, a genre of white power music, with a little known “Kajun” rock star called Johnny Rebel becoming the face of this underground movement of “Ku Klux Kulture” churning our

96 Though started in 1956 to illegally spy on the Communist Party in the United States, the Klan was swept up in the FBI’s COINTELPRO—short for Counterintelligence Program—in the 1960s until the program was officially ended, according to the agency, in 1971. Ernie Lazar’s FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) Collection: Extreme Right Groups contains files on the KKK used by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). FOIA: National Knights KKK-31 is one document from the collection that mentions Robert Shelton and David Duke specifically.
segregationist anthems in the late 1960s. In the opening segments of the documentary *The New Klan: Heritage of Hate* filmed in the following decade, Johnny’s Rebels hit underground single “N**ger, N**ger” (1968) is overlapped with a San Diego Klansmen riding his motorcycle, tying right-wing rock to the Klan for dramatic effect.

Another interesting individual in the long history of the Klan’s flirtation with mass media, and a connection to the second KKK is Wally Butterworth, who was a radio host in the early twentieth century who held many of the beliefs of Klansmen and admired the group deeply. Alarmed by the growing tide of anti-segregation in the South, and a believer in Imperial Wizard Shelton’s vision of a “Universal Klan” that would spread in the North now primed for them again, “...Butterworth would visit the North, speak to sympathetic audiences, and organize local Klaverns. After paying a one-time registration fee of ten dollars, dues would be one dollar a month, which entitled members to a free subscription to the weekly Klan newspaper, *The Fiery Cross.*” Both *The Fiery Cross* formerly published by Grand Dragon D.C. Stephenson in Indiana, and the Kleage system developed by the Southern Publicity Association were artifacts of the Invisible Empire. The Kleage system tweaked by Butterworth helped to nationalize the Klan during the Great Depression by giving them the cash reserves needed to print papers, record music, and dabble in a number of other ventures.

99 Some of Wally Butterworth’s radio and phonographic recordings can be found at the Internet Archive. One relevant recording is entitled, “Join the Ku Klux Klan Recruitment LP – BW KKK.” Recordings like these are rare because they were often live broadcasts, and hate speech is restricted by the Federal Communications Commission (FFC) in the United States.
of mass and radical mediums. So, it makes sense he would deploy it in a bid to rebuild the KKK’s “Invisible Empire.” Ultimately, however, the Civil Rights era Klan could not shake their “hick” image, as evidenced by an anti-communist rally held in October 1961 at the Dixie Speedway in Woodstock, Georgia. Less than 500 people came to the event at the birthplace of the second KKK, in which Butterworth and other pro-Klan speakers engaged the audience present using inflammatory language about the perils of integration and the threat of white revolt.101 The third wave of the KKK’s membership and mainstream media grip paled in comparison to the era of the Invisible Empire, and all iterations of the Klan since the Great Depression have never reached the Invisible Empire’s stunning mainstream success.

Despite their limited success in penetrating mainstream America, the “Klansmen USA” model found some remarkable success in a new technology that democratized the airwaves, to an extent, for American citizens that was unheard of until the 1960s and 1970s. Art M. Blake, a twentieth-century cultural and urban historian with an emphasis in sound studies, reveals how, “[t]he rapid, and early, privatization of the public airwaves in the United States,” meant that the airwaves was a mass communication network, “...unavailable to citizens as a tool...” but, “...the establishment of the “citizens band” radio service soon after the end of World War II created a small, public non-commercial space in the otherwise almost entirely privatized public space of broadcast spectrum in the United States.”102 The aural public sphere had been opened up overnight for those who could afford a license. As

noted above, Butterworth and hosts like him were often kicked off the airwaves by the FCC for using unacceptable speech on regulated soundwaves. So, while radio was and is an extremely important mass media technology, it is often left out in discussions of radical right-wing media because a lot of their opinions just couldn’t be aired. However, Blake’s analysis shows how CB radio became a way for which many Americans got around this barrier. “The timing of the availability of citizens’ band radio forms a crucial part of the story of its politicization and racialization...available for mass use in 1958, just as the mainstream civil rights regularly captured headlines across the United States...” with direct action like sit-ins by the youth wing of the Civil Rights Movement.103 This racialization and politicization was especially evident during the heydays of CB radio in the “...1970s…replete with populist claims to “freedom” and “free expression...” usually restricted to white men.104 Most troubling about CB radio as a radical media outlet is its use and abuse by the KKK.

According to an article in the Washington Post, the Ku Klux Klan began using CB radio in 1961. Klansmen used their radios to better organize their racial terror activities by reporting to each other on the whereabouts of law enforcement or of their latest targets. This report initiated a series of articles in the Washington Post in 1965 and 1966 revealing the extensive use of CB by the Ku Klux Klan and the FCC’s efforts to prevent such usage. In May 1965, as the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) prepared to begin hearings on Klan activities, the Washington Post ran a lengthy article on the modern “third” Klan, detailing the Klan’s long history and how it had recently become more active in the face of increased black efforts for civil rights.105 Black people did not sit on the sidelines as the Klan infiltrated this new medium, utilizing, “...CB radios to ensure a rapid response to any apparent or real threat,” combating white racism in an aural war. But this project focuses on radical right media, so CB radio is more important for this thesis to illustrate how the Klan gravitated between mainstream and radical

103 Art M. Blake, “Mobilizing Black Technoculture,” 51.
104 Ibid, 53.
105 Ibid, 51.
media. Like the record and sheet music publisher The American in the Klan stronghold of Indiana during the Depression-era Klan, the New Klan of the 1960s and 1970s made use of contemporary technology that allowed for semi-private circulation of more hardcore content.

In the documentary mentioned previously that buttresses this paper as a whole, David Duke announced a “Southern-border patrol” in 1977 where Klansmen would reportedly seal the U.S.-Mexican border from the flood of “illegal immigration.” The whole event was a publicity stunt, Duke and company numbering less than a dozen as he spoke to at least one hundred reporters, one of his tested and true strategies to make his Louisiana-based Klan appear bigger than it really was. But what is very interesting is the fact that in two separate sequences, Klansmen mention their use of CB radio: while cleaning guns and preparing for the event one Klansmen warns to be careful because law enforcement is hounding them, and when they pull their CB radios out to keep tabs on one another as they “patrol the border.”

While this happened a decade after the major print media scoops about the Klan’s use of CB radio, it’s important to show the continuity between its introduction and heyday in the 1970s, with a HUAC investigation not deterring them from making use of the medium.

With all that said, instead of one long continuous movement, or even the wave framing used in this paper, it may be better to think of the Klan as hyper-local white supremacists’ cells which operate independently of one another. They share a common revisionist history and peculiar Southern-born identity beginning in Pulaski, Tennessee with six ex-Confederates as their founders, truly coming of age within Dixon and Griffith’s fictional imagination. While they borrowed ceremonial robes and bureaucratic leadership

106 *The New Klan: Heritage of Hate*, DVD-R.
107 Ibid.
models from the first, the “Invisible Empire” was in many ways its own unique entity. Since
the classical Civil Rights Movement, the KKK has resurfaced in fits and starts, always in
reaction to liberalizing political movements and changing demographics. And while
factionalism remains how the Klan operates into the present, by the 1970s they had learned to
cooperate with other like-minded hate groups like Neo-Nazis. More importantly, while they
would never regain their astronomical membership numbers, by the 1970s the Klan had once
again learned how to wield radical media and mainstream media outlets at the same time,
making themselves bigger than they really were like the first Ku-Klux Klan, while engaging
openly in the hyper-violent actions of the second and third wave. It all hinged on their ability
to appeal to white America once again, trading ceremonial robes for button down suits,
preaching economic populism while participating in crimes against those they deemed non-
Americans. Over the years, the media built up the Klan in popular imagination, often
obscuring the viler parts of their movement for sensationalism. Once it got too bad, they
attempted to reel them in. By the 1970s, the media would repeat the parasitic cycle of
elevating the Klan with the rise of David Duke who preached populism and solidarity among
the white working class, or, “White Power” in an era where a bad economy and oppositional
political currents exploded, which we see echoes of in Charlottesville and more
contemporary white nationalist events.
CHAPTER TWO:
ONE NATION UNDER MAMMON

“Neither Communism, Capitalism, nor any other materialistic doctrine can save our race; our only racial salvation lies in a White racial alliance uniting our people with the common cause of racial idealism.”

— David Duke

Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015. Lee Park in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017. L’Simcha Congregation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 2018. All of these locations and many more made national headlines as the United States closed out the 2010s, a string of far-right white supremacist violence including shootings, fist fights, and vehicular homicide. The term “alt-right” entered common parlance, and the nation has not been the same ever since. The Ku Klux Klan is but one small facet of a much larger movement of white supremacy. However, their staying power and name recognition make them the go-to hate group when violence erupts in our nation. The Reconstruction-era Ku-Klux was been established as a social club for former Confederates determined to “right” the behavior of freed people of color, and not as a domestic terrorist organization as they are increasingly called today. However, the founders of the KKK would inspire and spawn a century of white supremacist violence, a far-right “movement of movements” in a way.

In 1977, the National Socialist Party of America—a splinter group formed in 1970 by a former member of the American Nazi Party Frank Collin—attempted to march in the village of Skokie just outside their home base in Chicago, Illinois. An estimated seven thousand survivors of the Holocaust lived there at the time, according to the Illinois Holocaust Museum. While the march was never to be, locked in legal battles over the limits of free speech, it was a chilling foreshadowing of what was to come. National Socialist Party of America v. Village of Skokie, 432 U.S. 43 (1977) would set a precedent that the display of swastikas did not constitute “fighting words,” the legal basis of what is considered hate speech. In other words, a citizen’s feelings could not be considered valid reasons for prohibiting speech, even if they survived the Holocaust and knew what Nazism really entailed. On November 3, 1979, members of the Communist Workers Party held a news conference which reporters described as a “Death to the Klan” rally in Greensboro, North Carolina, an area they had been organizing in for a while, clashing with the Klan on occasion as they tried to capture the working class for the Left. American Nazis and Klansmen arrived, and after gunfire rang out and the dust settled, five anti-Klan demonstrators between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-six were dead and ten more were injured, television

110 Ibid.
cameras capturing the violence in real time. What is now called the Greensboro Massacre by those on the Left and their sympathizers is a tragedy not only because of the lives lost and people injured, but the “...absence of a dissuasive police presence,” according to the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the absence of justice before the law as those accused have either been acquitted or never brought to trial. The unfolding drama between the National Socialist Party of America v. Village of Skokie, as well as the Greensboro Massacre are harrowing tragedies. They were also part of a disturbing trend of a “long white backlash.” Furthermore, it’s one of the first inklings of inter-hate group cooperation.

The way the media covered the radical right violence was part of the problem, and, in the 1970s, one man stood out who, synthesizing Nazi ideology and Klan tradition into one marketable package, a baby-faced Klansman and former Neo-Nazi out of New Orleans, Louisiana named David Duke. He is credited with single-handedly reinvigorating the KKK through a media blitz where he seized on the populist axiom that corrupt elites were fleecing the disempowered white working class. A “dying fringe movement,” the KKK took up the banner of white power after thorough Nazification—more fully incorporating anti-Semitism into their ideology under Duke’s leadership—and became a media darling. The mass media, in turn, broadcast their militantly racist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Semitic message across the world. Scholars of the Klan have debated if there is such a thing as a fourth wave of the KKK, if we are currently in what could be called the fifth, or if we are still living under the dwindling shadow of “Klansman USA” which reached its zenith during the classical Civil

113 Hayley Fowler, “Nazis, Klansmen killed 5 people in NC 40 years ago during the Greensboro Massacre,” *The Charlotte Observer.*
114 Ibid.
Rights Movement alongside segregationist politicians. David Duke, the preeminent Klansman of the era was himself an “outlaw Klansmen,” one of many splinter groups that came about after the fall of the “Invisible Empire.” Nevertheless, be they a mere extension or their own unique whitelash, the New Klan owes its continued survival to Duke and his media strategies. Likewise, figures like Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr. are the bridge that unite current anti-racist movements with movements of the past who would debate Duke in this era.

So why did the 1970s set the stage for these men turned populist champions and career politicians to become titans in their movements? What is it about the 1970s that gave us goose-stepping Neo-Nazis and cross burning Klansmen masquerading as right-wing politicians in one turbulent decade? What were the material conditions like that opened up citizens of all creeds and colors to extremism and populism? Most importantly, why was there such an asymmetrical response in mass media, as well as government officials, to the militant right who represented a tiny fraction of the overall population but received outsized coverage like David Duke? This paper contends that the news media, especially the optics of being on primetime television, empowered the New Klan under Duke who could adopt a stance of fighting for disenfranchised working-class whites with little to no push back initially because he was seen as a novelty. Duke, in turn, co-opted the language of the New Right which rose in response to the economic conditions of the day to hide in plain sight.

Historian Thomas Borstelmann argues that, “[o]ne of the most lasting impacts of the 1970s was the withering away of federal power as a result of deregulation, and…[w]hat had long been considered essential elements of public life, such matters as taxation, military service, welfare provision, and economic regulation, began to shift out of the realm of
government responsibility and into the private sphere where markets ruled.”

This is because of a number of concurrent forces: communism, corruption, and radical right populism. “Conservatives and nationalists regretted what they called “Vietnam Syndrome” in which uncertainty and self-doubt prevented the nation from acting effectively abroad, particularly in military fashion,” as the United States, a temporarily defeated imperial power, reeled from losing to a formerly colonized, newly Communist nation and feared encroachment of the Communist block around the world. At the same time, Watergate was breaking, and the FBI, CIA, and White House were embroiled in historic misconduct investigations. A number of scandals erupted during this time period alongside Watergate across several presidential administrations, including but not limited to the release of the Pentagon Papers detailing the shadow expansion of the Vietnam War into neighboring nations such as Cambodia, the shooting of unarmed students protesting the Vietnam War at Kent State in the early 1970s, and the hostile takeover of the American embassy in Tehran, Iran in 1979 as a result of the Iranian Revolution. These events and the insistent coverage in print media and on TV reverberated throughout every facet of the nation, and popular culture reflected anti-communist sentiment as well as reflected the widespread belief that Washington, D.C. was beyond salvation.

However, even though the decade began with the Old Right being hit with scandal after scandal at home and military defeat abroad, it was the Democratic party’s tenuous grasp on power that slipped away over the course of the decade. “...Democrats were divided, their

116 Ibid, 27.
117 Ibid, 42-43.
118 Ibid.
old coalition fraying as much of the white working class distrusted the party's ongoing shift from economic liberalism to cultural liberalism…” with the white South and much of white America fully delivered to the Republican Party by the end of the decade. What made them transition so rapidly? The term Conservative comes from the Latin root “conserve,” meaning, “...to keep intact or unchanged,” and “...since the noted English philosopher Edmund Burke opposed the French Revolution in the 1790s, conservatism had stood for defending existing institutions—political, religious, and otherwise.” Liberalism was shaped around the same time, dialectically opposed to Conservatism in theory if not always in practice. Similarly, the Republican party used to stand for “big government” while Democrats were for “states’ rights,” a euphemism for the right to own slaves. After the American Civil War, and as the nation was beset by the unprecedented economic downturn that was the Great Depression, these hard party lines and ideologies began to blur. By the 1970s, former President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s promise of a “New Deal” and former President Lyndon B. Johnson’s call for a “Great Society” no longer sufficed. “After forty years of political dominance by the New Deal version of the Democratic Party, preserving the existing system was the exact opposite of what these new conservatives sought. They wanted to overthrow it.”

“With economic challenges all around them in the stagflationary 1970s,” a neologism combining a stagnant economy with high rates of inflation, “many white working-class and middle-class Americans looked for explanations and were amenable to scapegoating.” Segregationist governors like George Wallace and moderate Republicans like Richard Nixon

119 Thomas Borstelmann, The 1970s, 45-46.
120 Ibid, 47.
121 Ibid, 49.
blamed Black people, blamed immigrants, and blamed any outside force they could to rally their new converts to their new cause. However, despite a common anti-establishment message, the New Right was fragmented between three groups: social conservatives rallying against liberal programs such as gay rights, feminism, and non-Christian religious expression becoming more accepted within society, anticommunists or Neoconservatives who were formerly Democrats drifting right as they saw Democrats as insufficiently anticommunist in their core beliefs, and a more vaguely Libertarian caucus concerned with economic policy and less so with social issues and communism more broadly. Of all these forces, the most relevant to this thesis is the social conservative. “Jesse Helms emerged as the most influential new leader in the 1970s of the forces of racially tinged southern social conservatism...positioning himself as the most principled, uncompromising...” leader of the New Right. As an elected Senator “...in an era of civil rights at home and decolonization abroad,” he calculated that he could not be overtly racist as much as he was openly homophobic, but Helms knew how to borrow, “...rhetoric of anticolonialism and self-determination to defend white neighborhood schools from “cultural imperialism” and “contempt for the ordinary parent” by...federal courts,” as the nation was swept into antibusing and fair housing battles not dissimilar to the classical Civil Rights era. If Jesse Helms is the prototypical firebrand Conservative of the era, able to whistle Dixie while claiming moral superiority over the rest of America, David Duke is his radical right counterpart and the most visible leader of the radical right of the 1970s.

123 Ibid, 50.
124 Ibid, 50-51.
Referencing John Egerton’s 1974 book entitled *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America*, Borstelmann maintains that Republicans, after taking over the white voting bloc, exported traditionally southern culture as the south was simultaneously drawn into America, reemerging for a brief time as the New South. However, the social conservative did not only see themselves as anticommunist Neoconservatives or capitalist vanguards as the Libertarians, if at all. They were waging a holy war against the liberalization of the United States’ social mores. And if one concedes that race is fundamental to America’s identity, it follows that the blurring of racial lines was anathema to certain Republicans. They would use busing, or housing, or in Helms case, the removal of WASP culture from its lauded place in American society as dog whistles to point to the breaking down of the white power structure. Likewise, David Duke learned how to don the disguise of a social conservative while harboring a much more insidious worldview. The economic conditions of the 1970s set the stage for populism to ascend. Popular culture and mass media were primed for anti-establishment politics. Figures like Duke latched onto the new acceptability of hate, presenting to the media one version of populism while advocating for another. Civil Rights leaders like Jesse Jackson attempted to push back not only at the rightward shift in America, but the steady creep of racist right-wing politics. But the question remained, would it be Duke’s far-right dream or Jackson’s more pluralistic future that would win the messaging war on the newest mass medium of TV?

CHAPTER THREE:
THE WIZARD, THE REVEREND, AND THE REPORTERS

“Blacks are not afraid of the Klan anymore… They can wear hoods or wear suits; they can burn crosses… Neither race has a monopoly on human virtue.”126

— Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr.

Stagflation and New Right-wing politics on the local and national level primed the public in the 1970s for a populist demagogue to emerge. Thus, the 1970s can be seen as the training grounds for radical forces to promote radical ideas through radical mediums. But a radical messenger, first and foremost, must devise a way to get their message out there. In the late 1970s, Bruce Skinner, a filmmaker who worked on the documentary *The New Klan: Heritage of Hate* and led the 2017 the restoration, recounts that the original catalyst for the film was actually the 1960s. The team recognized that although a lot of progress had been made on paper, the revolutions of the 1960s had failed to change the hearts and minds of much of white America.127 *The New Klan* is concerned with the history of the Klan as an educational tool, but it was made to expose why the Klan was a clear and present threat in the present, even though they had been relegated to a footnote in history, not unlike the long history of exposé style anti-Klan reporting in print media and film, now migrating to the new mass medium of television. More of a warning disguised as a public service announcement,

126 *The New Klan: Heritage of Hate*, DVD-R.
the film chronicles Duke’s first run for elected office, bisected by race-based violence, gimmicks like the “border patrol” to attract national headlines, and the New Klan’s dabbling with radical media like zine culture by distributing a black and white self-published anti-Semitic and racist comic book entitled “White Power Comes to Midvale” by Dennis Nix to kids in California after school.128 Before a stunning debate between Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr. aired on national television captured in the documentary, David Duke states quite plainly that, “I use the media, the best that I can, to promote my ideas and values.”129 Not only was he using the media—mainstream and otherwise—, the media was using Duke to drive up ratings and increase sales. One of the most stunning moments of the documentary is a snippet of archival footage of the live debate filmed by Chicago’s Channel 7 news featuring David Duke and Jesse Jackson in which Duke defends the Klan as an all-American institution while claiming high Black unemployment is the fault of Black Americans, and Jackson expertly pointing out that no matter how much Duke twists the narrative, the history of the Klan is in fact a history of brutality and racism.130 But, before unpacking why the full debate reveals the ways in which mainstream media normalized Duke and his message, and why Jackson acts as an avatar of the long Civil Rights movement trying to contain the long backlash represented by Duke, one needs to understand who Duke and Jackson are and how they were radicalized.


128 The New Klan: Heritage of Hate, DVD-R.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
when he attended a Citizens’ Council meeting in 1964. Founded in 1954, “...The Council advocated the use of education and legal methods to resist integration,” and the New Orleans chapter was no different, arguably one of the strongest in the nation which provided him literature that claimed white people were the superior race.\textsuperscript{132} The Citizen Councils of America (CCA) were the de facto anti-integration training grounds for the whitelash against the Civil Rights Movement for more “respectable” citizens that did not want to be associated with the Klan. Nevertheless, their message was just as far-right if not as openly violent and racist. Duke credits the CCA for “opening his eyes” to the issue of race. His local Citizens Council would nurture the seeds of his white supremacist ideology, but they would not blossom until he reached high school and was initiated into the Ku Klux Klan.

Duke attended John F. Kennedy High School and witnessed first-hand what integration would look like, becoming a Klansmen at the impressionable age of seventeen.\textsuperscript{133} By then, the third KKK had thoroughly re-entrenched itself in the South to “defend” white southerners against the wave of desegregation litigation coming their way. After graduation, “[i]n the fall of 1968, David Duke enrolled at Louisiana State University (LSU) in Baton Rouge.”\textsuperscript{134} Crowned the “The Nazi of LSU,” Duke “...transformed...from an ordinary southern racist...” becoming a hardened anti-Semite under the tutelage of Father Lawrence J. Tours, a Catholic priest who preached hate.\textsuperscript{135} Duke’s spiritual mentor evoked the legacy of Father Coughlin, a 1930s radio priest with a following numbering in the tens of millions who hated the Jewish people and made it clear on his show. Unlike Butterworth, it took a long

\textsuperscript{132} Douglas Rose, ed., \textit{The Emergence of David Duke and the Politics of Race}, 42.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid, 42-43.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid, 43.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.
time for Coughlin to be brought down. Duke became a member of the National Socialist Liberation Front (NSLF), the youth wing of the National Socialist White People’s Party (NSWPP) itself organized by the American Nazi Party. Oddly enough, Duke saw no tension in being a Klansmen and a Neo-Nazi being guided by a Catholic priest, a religion that was targeted by both movements in the past.

Another key aspect of Duke is that he always tried to present himself as a moderate, and “every man” of the white South. However, deep down, he was anything but. Duke would go on to be a model protégé of both Nazism and Klanism as an undergraduate at LSU. When William M. Kunstler, a radical lawyer and Civil Rights activist came to speak at the nearby Tulane University, Duke picketed the event carrying signs that read “Gas the Chicago 7”—left-wing radicals charged with federal conspiracy in relation to protests at the 1968 Democratic National Convention—and “Kunstler Is a Communist Jew” with Nazi regalia on full display. These actions would evoke a strong rebuke by Duke’s father, and while he tossed his Nazi armband, and claims that the event was a youthful discretion, he has never truly distance himself from the beliefs instilled in him by Father Lawrence J. Tours and his ilk. Even though first amendment rights allowed Duke to freely express his hatred on campus, he could not tolerate other voices doing the same. This is evident in the fact that he protested other events, such as a speech by Black activist Dick Gregory in November 1970 and an anti-war rally on March 5, 1971. But, while some of his classmates may have been “ordinary Southern racist” that agreed with many of his views, a majority would not openly endorse his antics seen as uncouth, much like white members of Citizen Councils did not

137 Ibid, 45.
138 Ibid, 46.
want to be associated with the “backwards” Klan. Despite his growing isolation, Duke persisted, disseminating alternative hate media meant to draw out supporters like the New Orleans’s Council did for him, “ultra-Right radical media” using Downing’s terminology.

Duke would go on to establish a White Youth Alliance (WYA) at LSU, not substantially different in tone, aims, or membership from his Neo-Nazi roots. Under the WYA banner, Duke wrote a pamphlet called “The White Power Program” which laid out his personal beliefs for the public for the first time, and even created a student newspaper called *The Racialist*. Even in college, Duke was trying to understand how to shape his message for the public, experimenting with interpersonal forms of communication to test his theories, staying firmly in the realm of radical media for first half of the 1970s. Moreover, “racialism,” the belief that human beings are naturally divided into races with distinct biological differences based on race, as well as populism, would become defining traits of his public image. After graduation, curiously Duke worked as an English teacher for Laotian military officials at the American Language School in Vientiane, Laos, a job he landed through his father’s connections with the government, and a job that must not have done any background check on his activities on campus. After returning to civilian life, David Duke’s big break on the political scene came when in September of 1972 he quickly climbed the ranks of the Klan in the Baton Rouge and New Orleans area, becoming, “…Louisiana’s grand dragon (state leader) and national information director…” in charge of editing the Klan publication *The Crusader*.

140 Ibid, 45-46.
141 Ibid, 46.
142 Ibid, 47.
Not only did Duke nazify the Louisiana chapter of the Ku Klux Klan by making anti-Semitism a more salient core belief due to his background in Nazism, he began to radically expand its geographical reach by focusing on high schools and college campuses to revitalize the Klan’s youth movement, welcoming white women as equals where they had once been segregated into the WKKK, as well as inviting Catholics into the Klan’s ranks when historically they had been shunned and met with violence, even penetrating military bases all throughout the 1970s. Duke would finally step onto the national arena in 1975 founding and becoming Grand Wizard of the, “…Louisiana Knights of the Ku Klux Klan…[appearing] on a variety of local and national TV talk shows—including “Today,” “Tomorrow,” and “A.M. America”—and became a regular on the college lecture circuit.” Duke spoke to those people whose cultural mores felt attacked by the liberalization of society, and were open to scapegoating newly enfranchised minorities, a hallmark of the Klan’s media strategy and staying power. Skilled in double speak about minorities and job loss and standing up for the “common man,” masking a more unhinged racism based in Nazi and Klan doctrine, David Duke spent his formative years immersed in far-right culture, dabbling in ultra-Right radical media before transitioning to more mainstream networks of mass communication. On the other hand, Jesse Louis Jackson was informed by those who would thrust Jim Crow into legal oblivion.

According to journalist Marshall Frady, by this time he made his historic runs for president in the 1980s, Jesse Jackson was, “…a kind of populist John the Baptist storming

143 Douglas Rose, ed., The Emergence of David Duke and the Politics of Race, 47.
144 Ibid, 48-49.
across the wide expanses of the Republic.”145 But before he entered politics, he endured the real life consequences of Plessy v. Ferguson that made the doctrine of “separate but equal” the law of the land. Born on October 8, 1941 in Greenville, South Carolina, Jackson began his life as a child brimming with potential despite his circumstances.146 Scouted in high school, Jackson attended the University of Illinois in 1959 on a football scholarship, a star player at a Big Ten sports school in the North.147 It was a remarkable accomplishment, but Jackson and other Black students on campus did not escape Jim Crow even though they had gone North to escape its shadow. So, after his freshman year, he transferred to “…North Carolina Agricultural & Technical College, a mostly black institution in Greensboro.”148

Now situated at the epicenter of the unfolding national drama that was the Civil Rights Movement, at A&T “…Jackson was also being closely tutored in the elements of Kings’ vision by several A&T professors, especially Samuel Proctor, who had been a fellow student of King’s at Boston University and remained a counselor to him.”149 On March 7, 1965, Jackson and his family entered Selma to march along Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., another one of his mentors, in what would become a historic demonstration, seeing, “…a multitude resembling a mural by some radical matter like some early premonitory manifestation of Jackson’s later vision of a Rainbow Coalition.” Like Duke, Jackson was receiving a radical education during a time of radical societal change, but unlike Duke he was being educated to see a more inclusive future for America, an embodiment of the “long Civil Rights

146 Ibid, 75.
147 Ibid, 137.
148 Ibid, 141.
149 Ibid, 175.
Movement’s” as the Black freedom struggle evolved in the 1970s and beyond. By the time they faced off in the late 1970s, Duke was media-savvy, but a virtual unknown in the political sphere leading a fragmented movement on the virtue of his relentless campaign to be the face of the New Klan. Jackson, on the other hand, was firmly a titan in the Civil Rights Movement. He does his best to pick apart Duke’s populism as a sham, but the very act of elevating Duke as his equal in a debate had the unfortunate effect of normalizing him much like newspaper coverage aided the Reconstruction-era and Depression-era Klans.

Captured in full from archival footage, the debate between David Duke and Jesse Jackson aired live on *Friday Night With Steve Edwards* in 1977, opening with the host giving a brief history of the KKK before presenting David Duke, then twenty-seven, as the “articulate” Grand Wizard and National Director of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (KKKK) and Rev. Jesse Jackson as an “outspoken” Black leader and disciple of MLK, Jr., as well as the president of PUSH (People United to Save Humanity).150 David Duke makes a point in the debate to state that even if other Klan leaders such as UKA’s Imperial Wizard Shelton would disagree, the fact that he speaks, “...at a number of colleges and television talk shows...” means he has been accepted as the leader of the New Klan by the general public.151 He was the new face of the New Klan, a Klan that was not a “hick, hillbilly” movement, and a Klan that did not hate Black people; Duke’s Klan was only advocating for the white race and white America as a whole when no one else was, according to David Duke.152 The problem with Duke, Jackson asserts, is that he’s not only a liar, he’s a revisionist liar because

151 Ibid.
152 Ibid.
“America” was not founded by whites for whites alone, and much of what is considered “American culture” stems from a variety of non-White and non-European societies like Christianity that began in the Middle East. What is so troubling about this debate is that, even if Duke is saying all the wrong things, he was given a legitimate platform to say them. Jackson is a skilled debater, picking apart Duke’s arguments one by one, but he is but one man, respected as he was, and is. Furthermore, though the show frames Duke as carrying a legacy of hate with a montage of the KKK over the years up to that point, and the host asks him from time to time if he feels superior to Jackson because he is Black, even giving Duke the chance to defend himself further legitimized his views. He was able to posture as an economic populist, and a white viewer could tune in and see themselves in him, a college-educated white Southern claiming to be fighting for people like them. As Duke asserted in his own words, he became the de facto leader of the Klan because the press kept calling him to speak on its behalf.

Neo-Nazi Klansmen like David Duke and Black Power preachers like the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr. have described themselves as, and been referred to, as populist. Furthermore, David Duke has leaned on media strategies geared towards taking what would be alternative messaging and presenting it to a large, mainstream audience under the guise of economic concerns for the white working class. But what does the term “populism” really mean in practice, and why is it so significant Duke was able to mainstream his version of economic radical-right populism in the Republican Party—for a time. What is populism? Why is populism at the root of the juggernaut political career of David Duke, and what’s its relationship to mass media? The problem with naming any movement, let alone any moment

153 *Friday Night With Steve Edwards: Jesse Jackson and David Duke*, DVD-R.
in history, as “populist” is because the term itself is amorphous, deployed across the political spectrum under very different circumstances. Even for scholars who study populism, it is often the case they run into similar hurdles, such as the fact that populism, “...lumps together disparate political projects with disparate social bases and modes of action...people, loaded with negative connotations of demagogic, anti-democratic forces overtaking rational liberal democracy.154 Populism is an elusive framework because, if populism is truly everywhere, “...it risks disappearing as a distinctive phenomenon,” and a useful category of analysis.155 While it is hard to define, one must try if they want to understand why Duke’s strategy would win the day, adopted from the New Right’s playbook. Populism, much like the Klan or any social movement, seeks to revolutionize the way society is structured around who they define as the “the people.” For the New Right those people were often of the WASP-variety, however, “...[t]he populist radical right is not a new phenomenon, and its rise in some respects reflects a wider fragmentation of mainstream electoral politics, particularly in...” what Kiely refers to as the “developed world.”156 The New Right preached with a persecution complex, that they were by every verifiable measure the mainstream and the majority in America and have been for a long time, even if the New Deal version of the Democratic Party controlled the levers of federal power for a time. Populism, for the New Right, meant “restoring” the white working class in America, which was an easy message for a figure like Duke to co-opt.

155 Ibid.
Drawing on outside scholarship, Political Scientist Ray Kiely contends that “...there are three key features of the contemporary radical right...nativism, authoritarianism and populism,” and that, “[n]ativism manifests itself above all through anti-immigration and anti-minority rhetoric, while authoritarianism expresses itself through a strong emphasis on law and order.” At its core, populism is the political expression of the alienated, who rally around a leader promising to end “elite corruption” that works against the so-called “common man.” “Crucially, conservative populism is combined with nativism (or in some cases, scapegoating of indigenous people) so that the construction of the people is not simply based on including all people outside of the corrupt elite, but only the ‘true’ people.”

Paradoxically, no matter what end of the political spectrum it arises from, populism is both an extremely exclusionary and mass political expression. In an era where the prevailing sentiment was the jobs were being shipped overseas, and the government had gone too far in their quest to right historical ills borne of American kyriarchy—a term coined by feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza to address the intersections of racism, sexism, and various other -isms—right-wing populism had massive appeal. Populism, as a concept, is important in order to understand how Duke mainstreamed the modern Klan for a time because by adopting an anti-establishment, nativist, “every white man” persona, he could pass himself off as a run of the mill Republican. Since the Republican Party was within the realm of acceptability, even the central political movement of the 1970s, Duke could ride the populist wave and create a pipeline to extremism. This begs the question, why was Duke able to court mainstream media attention despite being so open about his beliefs?

158 Ibid.
“...[O]ne key to Duke’s political success is his skill in handling the news media,” along with the media’s willingness to give him free coverage that he utilized towards his self-proclaimed “racialist” and populist platform for the white working class.\textsuperscript{159} He tapped into the mutually reinforcing messages of victimhood and white power by playing to the white working class’s biases, glossing over the fact that he still held very violent and very racist views towards the minorities he was railing against.\textsuperscript{160} Duke was inundated with “free media”—news time to air a candidate’s message—something news producers normally don’t do outside of cutting away from regularly scheduled programming to hear a presidential address.\textsuperscript{161} Duke’s version of the KKK was written off as a joke, that would pad the airways with something shocking to drive up ratings. But some that were tuning in were agreeing with Duke not laughing at him for holding absurd beliefs. Radical media is where David Duke came of age, but his fusion of outward banality while holding up white power struck a chord. He kept his core support while expanding his hold on the electorate by projecting an amiable, reformist image on national television.\textsuperscript{162}

Just as Northern presses created the KKK as a movement larger than life, and the print media failed to quell a resurgent KKK in the 1920s because their sensationalist coverage was more aimed at selling papers than pushing the Klan outside the bounds of acceptability, television fostered an image of David Duke that established him as a relatively household name. One can argue that using television as a communications channel for news is fatally flawed to explain how Duke and reporters formed a parasitic relationship.

\textsuperscript{159} Douglas Rose, ed., \textit{The Emergence of David Duke and the Politics of Race}, 137.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid, 138.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid, 140.
Television, in many ways, has no concept of memory or continuity the way reporting does in newspapers, for example, because news anchors and producers, “…rarely, if ever, review past coverage when preparing a deadline story…” and there are less on-air retractions compared to print media.\textsuperscript{163} Likewise, not all television news reporters are experts in the fields they report on like investigative reporters and journalism are, regular reporters akin to gig workers jumping from assignment to assignment, sometimes unable to drill into Duke with hard-hitting questions.\textsuperscript{164} This inability to synthesize accurate reporting with robust research causes a time crunch. Duke, in turn, exploited this when he would state outlandish lies that went unchallenged on air that appeared to be fawning coverage of his values to the audience.\textsuperscript{165} So, in the end, “[t]elevision’s amnesia [was] shared by its [largely casual viewing] audience...” who were presented revisionism as the truth, likely building on their own popular memory of events like the Civil Rights Movement and the American Civil War.\textsuperscript{166} On its face, this is a very compelling argument. Deadlines must be met, and no one wants to miss out on a big scoop. However, it places too much blame on one medium, and does not address the ways in which our culture is already attuned to many of the things Duke believes in, if not as extreme in nature. For example, during his successful run for the Louisiana House of Representatives in 1989, the \textit{Times-Picayune} newspaper in New Orleans supposedly failed to properly vet Duke.\textsuperscript{167} However, what this does is pass the buck and place responsibility for his political success solely on the so-called “Fourth Estate.” While it is the job of reporters across all facets of mass media to be truthful and accurate in their

\textsuperscript{163} Douglas Rose, ed., \textit{The Emergence of David Duke and the Politics of Race}, 140-141.  
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid, 141.  
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid, 143.  
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid, 141.  
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid, 142.
reporting, they are not the sole arbiters of truth. Moreover, this line of argument presupposed that Duke’s Klan and Neo-Nazi ties were something to be uncovered. He was unabashedly running as a Klansmen and still won, no matter how slim the margin was. At some point, one has to accept that Duke is not an aberration, an affront to American’s core egalitarian beliefs. He is a man that grew up in a racist culture who went on to be a racist, even if he held a particularly unorthodox level of racist views. He was successful because he ran as a populist demagogue who championed a group of people who felt victimized. And, even though it is true economic conditions in the 1970s worsened the plight of the working class of all creeds and colors, Duke tapped into the New Right that scapegoated rather than addressed the larger structural issues and the common enemy of neoliberal policies.
CONCLUSION:
A LEGACY OF TERROR

“If we are serious about the challenge of the unfinished business of racism, we must start by realizing that this is not a task we must complete. It is one we must begin.”

— Anne Braden

History is not a predictive discipline, and it operates with a necessarily limited understanding of the past. “For a historian, working on the recent past has peculiar challenges. Our perspective is still necessarily limited. If journalism is the first draft of history, contemporary history is merely the second.” Nevertheless, it would be misguided to say that history cannot unearth trends. Even as a slew of new right-wing hate groups have come to dominate popular discourse, the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan remains a potent reminder of what the real stakes are. To write about the Klan, one would be remiss to dismiss them as a fringe movement. Far from it, the KKK has seen itself as a bastion of all-American values, and in particular, the voice of the white race under siege from a variety of foreign and domestic subversive influences. While their ideology’s popularity has ebbed and flowed over time, at its height, Klansmen held some of the highest positions of political power in our nation, and on the cultural front, where portrayed as literal crusaders protecting “real”

169 Thomas Borstelmann, The 1970s, xiii.
Americans under slogans like “100% American.” That said, the KKK is best understood as the coalescence of a particular expression of reactionary white power ideology wrapped in ceremonial flourish, that has undergone rapid changes in their organizational structure, overall membership totals, and primary targets for hate crimes for almost as long as the United States of America has existed.

Considered a joke of a hate group made up of a few thousand “hillbillies” from a bygone era of racial, religious, and ethnic terror, the New Klan of the 1970s was not seen as a threat. However, by 2017, the crew behind the film felt compelled to restore and re-release a documentary that had been lost to time. *The New Klan: A Heritage of Hate* was restored at the onset of the Trump Administration, as the filmmakers realized many of the same conditions that were present in the 1970s was, unfortunately, relevant again. Trump alone is not to blame for the recent spate of white supremacist violence, but when the most powerful man in our country says things like the people who feel very “…strongly about the monument to Robert E. Lee, a great general…” are the same as the people injured and killed for demonstrating against them, and his statements go unchallenged in the news media, we begin to understand why the KKK and their legacy of terror remains relevant today. The events in Charlottesville, Virginia were an ugly reminder that the Klan was not gone, nor was the radical right. We have not even begun to deal with the remnants of oppression underpinning our society, so it is little wonder why lynching was once a public leisure activity, and Neo-Nazi Klansmen like David Duke could win elected office. While it is easy

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170 Bruce Skinner, April 2, 2020.
to blame “the media,” if one accepts that the media is directly influenced by one’s culture, 
the blame begins with us. Duke is an indictment on our willingness to accept racism, anti-
Semitism, and any number of “-isms” in service of the idea that white people are being 
trampled on by faceless and nameless “elites” out of touch with the “common man.”

On October 14, 1990, in the wake of Duke’s entrance into public office, journalists 
began to scramble to figure out how he won, and his old nemesis Jesse Jackson wrote that, 
“David Duke—former Ku Klux Klan leader, anti-Semite, smut peddler, fabulist—does 
cosmetic surgery on his face and his past and gets 60% of the white vote in a U.S. Senate 
race. Louisiana is sending a message, but you have to listen hard to get it right.”172 He goes 
on to add that citizens should not, “…confuse the message with the messenger. Racial scars 
still run deep in this society. Racial fears are easy to fan when times are hard, and people are 
scared. Yet surely many voted for Duke to send a message, not to embrace the messenger.”173

This project pushes back against that statement. We cannot simply tune out and hope racism 
disappears or hold the misguided belief that those who embrace xenophobia, nativism, 
racism, and any number of “-isms” by a politician so open about his beliefs like David Duke 
is just a cry for help by the exploited. People who voted for Duke not only sought in him a 
leader; they sought out a man who wanted to exert power over those they deemed “un-
American.” Voters saw in Duke’s policies they agreed with and had the privilege to look past 
his Nazi and Klan roots. His election highlights how Americans have become desensitized by 
speech, actions, and beliefs that should be beyond the pale.

172 Jesse Jackson, “COLUMN LEFT: Don’t Confuse Message With the Messenger: The big 
turnout for David Duke was a vote of frustration by embattled working people.,” Los Angeles 
story.html.
Later on, in his column, Jackson warns, “...that to treat Duke as an exception is a deception. The national Republican Party has renounced him. But what distinguishes Duke from the mainstream Republican Party is his baggage, not his beliefs.”

In this statement is a more accurate kernel of truth. The long backlash against the expansion of civil rights in this country is a project of those to the right of the political spectrum as a whole. It is not a coincidence figures like Duke just need to tweak their message a bit to fit into what is considered “mainstream.” This project is an attempt to synthesize Klan strategies over one-hundred years in the making, and the media’s role in their successes and failures, Duke being a prime example and former leader of a recognized, prevalent hate group. However, in the end, without a cultural shift, the Klan and its ideology will never be dormant in the United States, and all it takes is a charismatic leader, a willing audience, and the right optics for hate to win the day. If all press is good press, the question remains, how can the news media effectively cover white supremacist violence without providing them a vehicle to nationalize and normalize their message?

Throughout this thesis, that question has remained unanswered and will remain unanswered, because more scholarship is needed to grasp the full complexities of balancing coverage of white supremacy without legitimizing its proponents. But this project has, hopefully, shed some light on what not to do when confronting a man like David Duke and a group like the Ku Klux Klan. Beginning with the newspaper and the radio, and extending to the Age of Television, with a string of radical media in between, the Klan has consciously sought out new ways to shape public discourse around race and nation. Three of the main ways mass media helped to mainstream them were overestimating their power,

underestimating the influence of their ideology on society, and believing they were a passing fad. The first point is most relevant to the Reconstruction-era Klan, Civil Rights era Klans, and the current New Klans. These Klans did not, and do not, have many active members, and making the KKK a boogeyman does not adequately address why they are a problem even when their members number in the low thousands. The second point covers the Klan’s history as a whole, because it is often the case with anti-Klan coverage that reporters overestimate how much white America finds them abhorrent because of their racist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic views. More often than not, some citizens agree with them, they just do not want to march around in white pointed hoods, which is why the Klan has found recent success with ditching the hood and blending in with other white supremacists. The final point is the most important. The Klan is not a fad, a novelty, a product of a bygone era. Just as racism has never truly gone away in this country, until America is ready to confront it, they “why” of how the Klan keeps resurging will remain an open secret. The KKK will continue to exploit more mainstream communication networks to bring in new members. As Civil Right activist Anne Braden once wrote, “[t]he first European settlers who landed on [the shores that would become the United States] saw themselves as creating a great experiment in democratic government. Yet they were enslaving a whole population of human beings, Africans, and committing genocide against the Indigenous peoples of North America. As a nation, we have never really dealt with this contradiction.”175 The KKK claims to be “100% American” because it often is what America practices rather than preachers. The media influences, by it is also influenced by culture and capital. To relegate the KKK to the dustbins of history, we must first re-exam what it means to be “American.”

175 Anne Braden, “Finding the Other America,” 99.
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