

PREFACE:  
MEDIA HYPE AND POOR-BOY POLITICS

Although it is in Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America that terrorist groups count as a political force today, the United States is the home of one of the world's oldest such organizations, the Invisible Empires of the hooded Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan is seldom out of American newspaper headlines. Klan leaders are guests on talk shows and are interviewed on network TV by Barbara Walters and Tom Snyder, featured on the evening news and various newsmagazine shows, reported on regularly by journalists who are syndicated by the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* services, and profiled in *Penthouse*, *Oui*, *Esquire*, by Harry Crews in *Playboy*, and in an hour-long PBS special. A black sociologist interviewed Georgia and California Klansmen in connection with a baseball story in the twenty-fifth anniversary issue of *Sports Illustrated*. At a recent Klan rally in Florida, the igniting of the flaming cross was delayed twenty minutes at the request of a TV news crew so that the ritual could be shown live on the eleven o'clock news. When Klansman and talk show celebrity David Duke announced that his California realm would patrol the Mexican border against illegal aliens, only eight Klansmen, but more than a score of news and TV cameramen, showed up.

As the Klan becomes more active, so does its media coverage. A hooded Klansman, a flaming cross, a pretty blond child in miniature Klan robes are of surefire public interest. The picture goes into the news section of the daily paper, and there is a Klan story in the Sunday supplement. For the reader, there is a touch of mystery, a thrill of danger—and excitement. Guided by the Klan-watching authorities of the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Regional Council, the press has learned to be cautious about the Klan's own membership estimates, which often run from the tens

to hundreds of thousands. For the unwary, the turnout of spectators at a Klan parade or rally can be similarly misleading. Does it represent support or approval, or curiosity? Wouldn't any of us go if there were to be a cross-burning just down the road or outside of the town in which we lived?

Like others who have written on the Klan, I get calls from editors, journalists, wire services, researchers for "The McNeil-Lehrer Report," students, and network TV for comment on "the Klan revival." I used to reply to members of the media that *they* were the Klan "revival." This would be followed by a startled pause and a good two-way discussion of the distinctions between news reporting and publicity.

Over time, I have come to believe that I was being somewhat unfair to the media. The Klan does receive disproportionate attention, but that exposure is not an important factor in current Klan revivals. For the most part, the Klansman is not a devoted follower of the local press or the evening news. He is likely to have copies of Robert Shelton's *Fiery Cross*, David Duke's *Crusader*, Bill Wilkinson's *Klansman*, or the National States Rights Party's *Thunderbolt* on his living room table, rather than *Time* or *Newsweek*.

The Klansman is distrustful of the leadership of his community and country and is no more trusting of the media, which he believes is run from New York, controlled by the Jews, and part of the conspiracy against him and his kind. While the media may overplay the Klan, it is a distrust of those very media that helps to produce Klansmen. In the growing economic uncertainty and social confusion of the 1980s, at least a stratum of the small-town, working-class South has reacted by linking racial integration, communism, crime in the streets, the inflationary squeeze, and job uncertainty into an emotional package, summed up at all Klan rallies in the threatening words: AFFIRMATIVE ACTION.

In at least portions of the American South, where the Ku Klux Klan is still part of a great tradition, confrontation with black "justice and job" marchers in the streets has produced soldiers for the Klan ranks. In the cycle of Klan growth and decline, a sort of revival is under way, nurtured by social uncertainty, racial change, confrontation, and poor-boy politics.