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THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

date May 18, 1979
to Seymour Samet
from Milton Ellerin *ME*
subject THE KU KLUX KLAN -- An Update

A heightening of racial tensions, plus the advent of warm weather, has resulted in an upsurge in Klan activities, primarily in the old South. Current indications are that the tempo of Klan recruiting, rallies and violence in Alabama and Mississippi, and possibly in Georgia, Tennessee and Kentucky will continue on the up-beat as they have been for the past year. Weekend Klan rallies are now commonplace in the rural communities of northern Alabama.

First, a brief look at today's Klan movement. As is true with the Nazis, today's Klan is fragmented and beset by intense rivalry between competing Imperial Wizards. While there are a score or so "local" or unaffiliated Klans, the major Klan groups -- those with some claim to a national constituency -- are: The United Klans of America, headquartered in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and led by Robert Shelton; the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, based in Denham Springs, La. and led by Bill Wilkinson; Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Metairie, La., led by David Duke; James Venable's National Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in Atlanta, Ga.; and the Federation of Indiana Klans. Allegiance to any particular Klan is ephemeral. There is considerable lateral movement, with whole units transferring en mass from one Klan to another.

Within the past twelve months, some Klan activity has been observed in 21 states. In addition to the Klan presence in those states listed above, the Klan has surfaced sporadically in California, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas. The southern states excepted, the Klan manifestation was in a single area, and rarely sustained.

Realistically, the notion of a "resurgent Klan" is nurtured by the national media exposure afforded David Duke, featured on several national television programs and perhaps dozens of local programs, plus the widely-reported, Klan-inspired violence in Alabama and Mississippi. Indisputably, increased racial tensions in these two states has increased local Klan membership, now estimated to be 8,000-9,000 nationally. It must be stressed however, that the increase in membership is confined primarily to these two states, and, to a lesser degree, in the other southern states where the Klan has been demonstrating. If previous experience is any indication of things to come,

most of the newly-recruited Klansmen will allow their memberships to lapse, once present tensions subside.

Despite the sporadic and ephemeral nature of today's Klan, one aspect of the current revival is disturbing. After several years of stressing the effort to mold a new Klan "image" - that of respectability and lawfulness - the southern Klans are reverting to violence as a tactic. In addition to the standard "rallies" and "cross burnings," Klansmen in Alabama and Mississippi have been involved in shotgun blasts into the homes of black leaders, threatening interracial couples, beating up of whites who are alleged to have consorted with blacks and numerous beatings and assaults and, in one instance, murder. In April of this year, 20 Alabama Klansmen have been arrested by the FBI pursuant to Federal warrants for such activity. (State and local law enforcement officials still appear to be reluctant to proceed against the Klan. In fact, there is reliable information to the effect that many local police department officials in Alabama are Klansmen or sympathizers.)

The most militant and violence-prone is Wilkinson's Invisible Empire. Almost without exception, he now appears at public rallies flanked by bodyguards openly brandishing machine guns. Wilkinson contemptuously threatens to "take up arms" if his "lawful" activities are restrained by State or Federal authorities, and vaguely drops hints of an impending "revolution" in this country.

The upsurge in Klan activity in the South is primarily a result of a sharp increase in racial tensions. In the summer of 1978, there were angry black boycotts of white merchants in Tupelo and other Mississippi towns, for failure to employ blacks and as a means of protesting police brutality. Black picket lines induced confrontations, counterdemonstrations and the whole panoply of Klan lawlessness.

The arrest and subsequent recent conviction of Tommy Lee Hines, a mentally retarded black youth, for the alleged rape of a white woman, led to frequent, massive protest demonstrations by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and other clergy in Decatur, Alabama, and a violent response by the Klan. At least one Klan demonstration in the vicinity of Decatur drew more than 5,000 people, the largest Klan-inspired Alabama rally in more than a decade. Moreover, emotions charged by the Hines case spilled over to neighboring states.

Other factors which spurred Klan growth and militancy are: a growing sense of frustration by lower middle class southern whites that "moderate" approaches have been ineffective in halting what is perceived as black gains at their expense; the reality that positive attitudes by Southern whites towards blacks have been confined to the larger cities and correspondingly, the continuation of decades-old hostility of rural whites to blacks as a class.

The Klan continues to be openly anti-Semitic, although their primary targets are blacks. It should be noted, however, that

there have been Klan-inspired incidents against synagogues in Mississippi and Maryland. Publicly, the Klan still maintains that black militancy is instigated by Jews and communists or "the Zionist Communist conspiracy."

To a lesser degree, the southern Klan has opposed the influx of Vietnamese refugees and undocumented Mexican aliens.

There are several mitigating factors relating to the recent Klan upsurge. The Klan today, even in the south, is politically impotent. Given the power of the black vote, no politician can successfully run for office in that area on an anti-black platform. The responsible press uniformly and with regularity editorially condemns the Klan, as does the responsible clergy. If local state law enforcement officials are unwilling or unable to crack down on the Klan, the recent Federal indictments of 20 Klansmen and their arrest by the FBI suggests that the government has no such reluctance.

Given the above factors, there is no real fear that the Klan upsurge is likely to endure, much less develop into a potent political force. What is of concern however, is the Klan commitment to violence which is likely to increase in the coming months. Although blacks are the primary targets, Jews and Jewish institutions in the south are by no means immune.

ME:en
cc: Bertram H. Gold

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