

# White Supremacist Groups, African Americans, and the Creation of Images

Our concepts of the world and of ourselves and others in it are shaped by our perceptions. What we perceive in our transactions with others and in mass media or other vehicles of popular culture are perhaps the most dominating forces shaping our images of the people around us. When the Nazi party in Germany rose to power in the 1930s, it found key tools in print and broadcast media, manipulating the words and images being seen by the populace in order to support their ideologies. While no Nazi party has that much power in this country, at least at this writing in 1993, white supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the White Aryan Resistance do have a following in many parts of the country. They, too, find shaping images of their scapegoats for as much of the populace as they can reach to be a powerful tool in garnering support for their politicians, in raising money, and in bringing new members into their flocks. Examining the images these groups create can be frightening not only in their extremism, but also in their similarities to images created in the mainstream popular culture. Mostly, however, it makes for an interesting exercise in looking at how an extremist subculture can create its own kind of popular culture, whose language is spoken by all of its members. Jews and African Americans are the primary targets for most of these groups; here the focus shall be on the latter.

In his 1990 book *Blood in the Face: The Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, Nazi Skinheads, and the Rise of the New White Culture*, James Ridgeway opens with a description of the prominent role race played in the 1988 presidential campaign. As Jesse Jackson's political strength increases daily, the Democratic Party was faced in 1988, as it was in 1992, with possibly being the first major political party in the United States to put forth a candidate of color; apparently some members of that party were less comfortable with that idea than others. Also in 1988, though, there was the infamous William Horton incident, in which, Ridgeway says, "in the Republican Party deft professionals employed racial stereotypes and fears as a major device for attracting young, white male voters."<sup>1</sup> Race is a national obsession; the importance of race relations (and how poor we Americans are at them) permeates every aspect of public life and government, and, for most people, every aspect of private life as well.

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<sup>1</sup> James Ridgeway, *Blood in the Face: The Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations, Nazi Skinheads, and the Rise of a New White Culture* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1990), 16. The author does not mention Horton by name.

The white supremacist movement is one manifestation of how race can become a central issue in a very negative way. Often people make the crusade for rights of oppressed races a central point in their lives, but the white supremacist movement has made the preservation of oppressing others' rights its pivotal point. The most effective way that its organizers found to do this has been to turn the situation around and make its potential members believe that their rights and freedoms are being threatened and to put them on the defensive; much more mainstream support--or at least non-resistance—can be elicited from a defensive point of view than from an offensive point of view. By making whites believe that other races were not really oppressed but that instead their *own* race was in danger of extermination and/or subjugation (the likes of which they had in fact perpetrated on others), they were able to drum up much more support than they would have been able to as the offensive attackers. White supremacist groups have therefore generally cultivated a reputation for defending the honor of white women and protecting the threatened jobs of white men.

Instrumental in the propagation of the white supremacist movement in the United States has been the theory of Christian Identity, which Ridgeway defines as purporting “that the Anglo-Saxons were the Lost Tribe of Israel and that Jews, blacks, and other people of color were inferiors sent to earth as a scourge of God. At the coming of the apocalypse, Identity followers believe, the earth will be rid of these ‘mud people,’ and reserved for the only true Israelite people: white Aryans, whose sign of racial purity is their ability to blush, to have ‘blood in the face.’”<sup>2</sup> A weak economy adds to the mainstreaming of such an idea; with such a large number of people in the United States unemployed, many look for a scapegoat at whom to direct their anger, on whom they can blame the fact that they have no jobs. This usually targets first immigrants, but also Americans of color, especially with the raging controversies in the political climate over affirmative action.

The oldest and most widely known white supremacist group in the United States is the Ku Klux Klan, founded in 1866. After the war, some Tennessee soldiers with apparently nothing better to do began an all-in-fun kind of group they called the Ku Klux Klan (the name being derived from a Greek word for “circle”). While Ridgeway says they originally had no political motives one way or another, newly freed and basically unprotected African Americans were an easy target for practical jokes. Former Confederate soldiers and slave traders became increasingly involved in the group, which undoubtedly led to its eventually organized racist activities. With the rise of Nathan Bedford Forrest, who fell into both of the above categories, to the leadership of the Klan in 1868, “it began to purposefully intimidate blacks...in nighttime raids.... In anticipation of the year’s election they began to terrorize blacks, whipping them and breaking up voting efforts.”<sup>3</sup> In 1915, the Klan saw itself and its history glorified and romanticized in a major film, *Birth of a Nation*, directed by D. W. Griffith. In the 1960s, as the civil rights movement progressed, so did white supremacism. Many European Americans, feeling threatened by the potentially explosive anger of people they had oppressed for so long, sought security and strength in numbers. The John Birch Society and the Minutemen also grew out of this need.

The Liberty Lobby was the racist brainchild of Willis Carto. True to its name, it was active in mainstream politics. One representative, according to Ridgeway, “testified at a 1967 hearing

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<sup>2</sup> Ridgeway, 17.

<sup>3</sup> Ridgeway, 33-34.

on the omnibus civil rights bill, arguing the line of 'Negro immaturity'-claiming that blacks were a 'younger' race than whites with lighter brains and less developed frontal lobes."<sup>4</sup> A 1965 Liberty Lobby publication predicted that the Republican Party would become the white party while the Democratic Party would become the black party. They heralded Marcus Garvey's "support" for their position of separatism.

But throughout the starts and stops of the various supremacist groups in United States history, the Ku Klux Klan remains the most infamous. Klan members have carried out horrific, unspeakable crimes against people of color. A famous act in which Klan members were responsible was the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, in which four children of color were killed. Charles Conley Lynch, a Klan leader in St. Augustine, Florida, "demanded to know why people should feel sorry for the black girls killed in the Birmingham church. 'They weren't children,' he said. 'Children are little people, little human beings, and that means white people... There's little dogs and cats and apes and baboons and skunks and there's also little niggers. But they ain't children. They're just little niggers.' When the Kluxers spied four black men watching the rally, Lynch pulled a pistol, and the crowd descended on the blacks beating them with fists and gun butts. By the time the police arrived the mob was getting ready to burn the black men alive."<sup>5</sup> This dehumanized view of other races justified for white supremacists their superior position in society: if whites were the only true humans, or even just the "best" humans, then who cares what happens to the rest of them?

One very thorough argument put forth by a Klan member in favor of this belief in African Americans as worthless subhumans can be found in the July, 1940, issue of one of their monthly periodicals, *The Fiery Cross*. The author ("An Oklahoma Klansman") submits that since all African Americans originated in Africa, and Africans had long been "rubbing elbows" with Asians who were sophisticated in their trade, mining, and other marks of "civilization," and the Africans had not adopted the Asian ways of life, then they must be incapable of progressing as a culture.

*If this lack of intellectual power, natural capacity and creative ability in the Negro race is not a "mark of God," then we defy anyone to otherwise explain it. His history proves that while the white races have risen through all kinds of vicissitudes to the highest type of civilization, the Negro—after 4,000 years of direct contact with those civilizations—has never given to the world an invention, a piece of literature, a work of art or a law.... Instead of being impelled by that divine urge toward higher things that has characterized the intellectual advance of the white man, the Negro is still using a hollow log for a boat, still grinding corn between two rocks, still drivelling[sic] in filth, wretchedness and ignorance. With his naked body smeared with greasy clay; with rings in his nose and ears and bedecked with amulets and charms of snake skins and crocodile teeth; he is still making the nights hideous with the throb of his tom toms as he stamps out his voodoo dances on the banks of the Congo or the Zambesi.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Ridgeway, 64.

<sup>5</sup> Ridgeway, 70.

<sup>6</sup> An Oklahoma Klansman. "Answer to Race Equality is Supremacy: Mongrelization is Inevitable Result, Proven by Past History." In *The Fiery Cross: Official Publication of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan*, vol. 1, no. 13, July, 1940.

Based on this warped logic so deeply entrenched in the assumptions of white supremacy, the author concludes that to grant racial equality would ensure intermarriage of the races, which would result in contamination of the white race, and to its ultimate downfall. The answer he sets forth, and that which is set forth in much Klan literature, is that the only answer is for the evidently superior race to rule the other--hence, white supremacy. Historian William Peirce Randel explains that because African Americans had been (are) denied equal access to educational opportunities (then because of slavery), they appeared to whites as being more ignorant than whites; because of this "evidence," they were assumed in turn to be *incapable* of anything but ignorance. White supremacists used this line of reasoning frequently for supporting rule of their own race over others.

Another major tool in the fight for white supremacy was the notion that African Americans were out for a bloody takeover of the United States government, and that when they gained control, they would squash their former oppressors. This argument comes up so frequently in Klan correspondence and newsletters that it is impossible to include sufficient examples here; suffice it to say that virtually every issue of every Klan newsletter included the importance of keeping nonwhites disenfranchised to every extent possible because of the threat of being overruled by "the enemy."

The unifying theme in every white supremacist propaganda piece against African Americans is blaming them for all of the nation's woes, including those plaguing the African Americans themselves. The *Inter-klan Newsletter and Survival Alert* beat the drum to summon its people to war:

*We strike in surrogate for all the children bused to black ghettos and brutalized, for all the little girls dragged from the parks and raped, for all the families murdered while they slept, for all the young men sent to die in no-win wars in forgotten lands for unknown causes and for all the unspeakable heinous crimes unleashed upon civilized society.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> Ridgeway, 88.

Every crime committed was made to be the fault of any other race but the white one. Nonwhites brought on every economic trouble seen by the country. Every lack of educational and professional advancement of whites was because there were too many African Americans (or immigrants or Jews or pick-your-favorite-scapegoat) were in the job market; every lack of educational and professional advancement of nonwhites was due to a government conspiracy or a Communist plot (or both).

Certainly the best known image played up in the white supremacist popular culture of the African American male was that of the nonstop sexual machine. The unbelievable fear that white men had (have?) of African American men marrying their white daughters and sisters and then committing the unspeakable with them (resulting in mixed-race = contaminated children) overwhelms white supremacist literature. A 1981 Aryan Nations flyer has a picture on it of a white woman embracing an African American man, obviously a very happy couple, and under it reads the caption: "The Ultimate Abomination." The pseudo-chivalrous, paternalistic attitude white supremacy brought upon its own male-female relationships is worthy of an entire research project unto itself, but it seems to be rooted in this fanatical need to "protect" the purity of white women by keeping them away from African American men.

One caricature, drawn by A. Wyatt Mann and distributed by the White Aryan Resistance, that has come in many books on the subject of white supremacists to illustrate perfectly the stereotype against which African Americans are having to fight today is published in Ridgeway's book. The illustration, accompanied by a rhyme, is of an African American man (drawn, of course, with a stereotypical big-lipped, cross-eyed, idiotic grin), fist in the air, flask in back pocket, wearing a shirt reading "Rap On, Mutha Fucka." None of these are physical characteristics ever missed by evening newscasters in their quest for a juicy story--people always want to believe that criminals all look like this and that all people who look like this are criminals. The rhyme that accompanies this begins:

■ *Coon, coon, black baboon, brutal, worthless, thieving goon<sup>8</sup>*

The news media in particular is good at selecting African American players for their clips who steal.

■ *Often high, thrives in jail, his welfare check is in the mail*

Drugs and crime are portrayed by the news media and tabloid television shows as almost exclusively the problem of African Americans. The welfare system is assumed by many whites to be only for African Americans; whites are surprised to see other whites living in government-subsidized housing or on the streets.

■ *Some 40 offspring have been had, not one will ever call him dad*

Large families are seen by many to be the exclusive domain of African American women living on welfare whose children's fathers have left them never to be seen again. The problem of African American males leaving their households is one much harped upon by the popular press today, especially with the Bush administration's emphasis on so-called "family

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<sup>8</sup> While this cartoon can be found in several excellent publications on the subject, all references here are to the drawing as published in Ridgeway, 149.

values." This line also hearkens back to the fear of the African American male libido--unstoppable and roving.

*And yet he hollers day and night, "I blames de white man fo my plight, it's him spreads trash all round my shack it's him what makes me smoke dis crack he push my kind to burn and loot, an sends de po-lice dat we shoot, but inch by inch we takin hold, like when de white bread starts to mold, we'll overrun yo homes and soon dey be only fit fo de blackassed coon.*

This quintessentially irresponsible attitude, blaming all of one's troubles on others, is not only inaccurate and unconscionable, but it is also precisely what the white supremacist tactic is in this cartoon and in much of their image production. Playing on this fear of African Americans as the mortal enemy of whites in society, and as completely worthless if not evil beings, has been key to the strength of the white supremacist movement.

While it is interesting in its own right to examine the images created by an extreme sector of the population to portray a different sector, it is also noteworthy that these images, and these extremists, did not exist in a vacuum. They coexisted with the so-called "mainstream" of society, and by not acting against the behavior and ideas perpetuated by this group, the mainstream of society condoned them. Furthermore, by participating in racist attitudes and activities, such as interning all Japanese Americans in the 1940s because of their race or condoning a justice system which hands down much harsher sentences to people of color than to whites for comparable crimes, hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan were virtually given license to carry on as they pleased. The caricatures drawn for Ku Klux Klan and White Aryan Resistance newsletters and recruitment advertisements are so recognizable to anyone from the mainstream as being similar to images they have seen on television or in movies that it can be no accident that enrollment and activity in white supremacist groups increase dramatically at times of turmoil over race in general in the society, and that the political leadership and climate of the times determines the permissiveness with which those groups can work, and the openness available to them.

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