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## Stetson Kennedy Exposes the Klu Klux Klan: A Civil Right Primer

Joe Novotny

In the current fight for the establishment of gay and lesbian rights in the United States, both heroes and enemies face off for the cause. It is not a homosexual struggle, but rather one fight in the larger struggle for liberty and freedom. Heterosexuals should be encouraged to lend their support to the gay and lesbian civil rights movement as part of this larger struggle. The American Civil Rights Movement provides a powerful example of the important role that people not targeted by oppressors can play in raising consciousness and combating evil. Many African-American leaders and heroes who fought in that struggle for equality have been deservedly recognized for their contributions. White civil rights activists, however, are often still absent from the historical record despite their role in the establishment of an equal United States. Writer and activist Stetson Kennedy risked his life for beleaguered and victimized African-Americans in the 1940s when he covertly infiltrated Georgia's Klu Klux Klan, the secret society of white supremacists, and exposed it to all Americans through various mass mediums including radio and literature.

Insightful works on Kennedy's actions against the Klan include *The Fiery Cross* by Wyn Craig Wade (1987), which examines Kennedy's infiltration within the context of the Klan's entire history. Margaret Anne Bulger's dissertation "Stetson Kennedy: Applied Folklore and Cultural Advocacy" attributes the success of Kennedy's anti-Klan activities to his skills as a

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folklorist. This paper will focus on Kennedy's skillful use of radio broadcasting, his personal collaboration with state officials, and his distribution of anti-Klan literature, all which helped expose the massive amounts of information he collected undercover as a member of the Klu Klux Klan. It will also examine the effects of this exposure on the hate group's activities and participation.

Kennedy's grandfather was a lieutenant for the Confederate Army and his uncle, Brady Perkins, was a high ranking official in the KKK during the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> Although his pedigree made him a likely Klan member, many factors positioned Kennedy to infiltrate the Klan. Kennedy witnessed many Klan activities while growing up in Florida that disgusted him and made him hate the organization. A watershed event in Kennedy's childhood was when his family's African-American maid, who nursed Kennedy from birth to adulthood, was beaten and raped by KKK members for allegedly disrespecting white people.<sup>2</sup> In college, Kennedy was drawn to political activism, helping create the Florida Inter-Collegiate Peace Council in 1937, the first integrated university-student group in the South.<sup>3</sup> After graduating, he worked for the Works Progress Administration's Writers Project, collecting folklore and oral histories throughout the South. Eventually, his dedication to activism led him to work for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the Anti-Defama-

<sup>1</sup> Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 280.

<sup>2</sup> Stetson Kennedy, *The Klan Unmasked* (Boca Raton, LA: Florida Atlantic University Press: 1991), 18-9.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Anne Bulger, "Stetson Kennedy: Applied Folklore and Cultural Advocacy" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1992), 57; ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.



tion League (ADL). In his work with these groups, he discovered the resilient power and position of the Klu Klux Klan, still a prominent force in the South.<sup>4</sup> As Kennedy observed in *Southern Exposure* (1946), "The Klan's repressive influence is omnipresent throughout the South, not so much by virtue of its seen handiwork as by the terror engendered by the knowledge that the Klan's unseen lynch law lurks around every corner."<sup>5</sup>

Kennedy realized that as a member of the oppressive majority, he was in a unique position to hurt the Klan because he could become a member and gather evidence against the group and its illegal activities. Kennedy noted that at the time, the news media had many "writers [who] were against the Klan, all right, but they had precious few inside facts about it."<sup>6</sup> Kennedy soon adopted the alias John S. Perkins and gained a job in Atlanta as a circulation manager for the racist hate-sheet, *The Southern Outlook*.<sup>7</sup> This position would help him to not only join the Klan, but also to conduct in-depth interviews with Klan leaders. Living in Atlanta, Kennedy sought out Klan hangouts until he was eventually invited to become a member in 1944.

Kennedy successfully sought and received a recommendation to join the KKK by Klan-supporter and Georgia governor candidate Eugene Talmadge. Kennedy officially joined Nathan Bedford Forrest Klavern Number One, one of the most dangerous and strongest Klaverns in the South.<sup>8</sup> Kennedy entered the Klan without the support or security of any legal authorities

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<sup>4</sup> Wade, *The Fiery Cross*, 281.

<sup>5</sup> Stetson Kennedy, *Southern Exposure* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1946), 162.

<sup>6</sup> Kennedy, *The Klan Unmasked*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Anne Bulger, "Stetson Kennedy," 188.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

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and lived off a stipend received in exchange for the information he provided to the Anti-Defamation League.<sup>9</sup> He was in a constant state of fear of being discovered as the well-known Anti-Klan writer Stetson Kennedy. However, once initiated into the Klan, he used his membership to collect any and all information he could and deliver it to all interested sources.

Kennedy's next step was to campaign to become a Knight of the Klavaliars, known as the military wing of the Klu Klux Klan.<sup>10</sup> The most criminal and secretive activities were carried about by the exclusive Klavaliars and it was where Kennedy could do the most damage, exposing the violent activities of the KKK. Eventually, Kennedy became a Klavaliar and experienced the most gruesome and villainous parts of the Klan, including observing the murder of an African-American man.<sup>11</sup>

As Kennedy was slowly initiated into the rituals of the Klan, he took notes on all the secrets of the group, from their handshake, to their symbolic ceremonies, to the location and details of their meeting places.<sup>12</sup> Kennedy had to be very careful. He once recorded Dr. Samuel Green, Grand Dragon of the Georgia realm of Klans, boasting that "every member on Atlanta's police commission is a Klansman."<sup>13</sup> Klan members existed in all ranks of law enforcement, including the judiciary and the legislature. If Kennedy unwittingly revealed Klan secrets to another member of the Klan, he would

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Kennedy, *The Klan Unmasked*, 100.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>12</sup> Bulger, "Stetson Kennedy," 197.

<sup>13</sup> Stetson Kennedy, "Green of the White Sheet," *Reader's Scope* (November 1946), (Box 1, File 12), Stetson Kennedy Collection (SKC), Cecil H. Green Library (CHGL), Stanford University: Stanford, CA.



be rendering his own guilt as a traitor to the Klan, an act punishable by death.

Through a friend within the CIO, Kennedy was able to meet with Dan Duke, assistant attorney general of Georgia and known anti-Klan prosecutor.<sup>14</sup> When Duke found out that Kennedy had infiltrated the Klan, he put him on the payroll as a secret agent for the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. Kennedy was supplied with a pistol's license that certified him to carry a weapon and was also given a direct phone line to Duke that could be utilized at any hour of the day.<sup>15</sup> Kennedy provided weekly reports to Duke on Klan activities. Duke, in the meantime, prepared different cases to be brought against the Associated Klans of Georgia, supplemented by Kennedy's evidence. In all, Kennedy was paid \$300 by Duke for his services.<sup>16</sup> Kennedy also advised Duke and other legal authorities to investigate and prosecute "specific violations of specific civil liberties of specific persons by specific Klansmen."<sup>17</sup> Kennedy's evidence and testimony became very useful in the ongoing trials of accused Klansmen.<sup>18</sup>

Kennedy's reports were extremely thorough and informative. His career as a folklore collector and journalist aided him in the accurate recording of specific quotes from Klan meetings. His reports were also supplemented by information provided by another undercover infiltrator, John Brown, who had joined Georgia Klavern No. 297.<sup>19</sup> Kennedy's reports to Dan

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<sup>14</sup> Kennedy, *The Klan Unmasked*, 78.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-1.

<sup>16</sup> Bulger, "Stetson Kennedy," 203.

<sup>17</sup> Wade, *The Fiery Cross*, 280.

<sup>18</sup> Bulger, "Stetson Kennedy," 204.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

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Duke included the number of people who were in attendance at Klan meetings, the specific names of prominent social figures and speakers, the meeting's agenda, and any illegal activities planned or discussed. For example, in an official report by Kennedy from 25 February 1946, he describes how Dr. Samuel Green spoke about the need for the KKK to create a campaign against an anti-Klan politician who was currently running for office. In the same report, Kennedy revealed how City Councilman [first name unknown] Cawthon, a member of Klan No. 1, spoke at the meeting about the danger of the "Negro strength in voting."<sup>20</sup> On 5 March 1947, Kennedy reported that 300 attended the meeting at which six new members were initiated. Part of the discussion during this Klan meeting was the type of punishments and torture that Klansmen would like to administer to Stetson Kennedy, who had been identified as a Klan spy exposing many Klan activities via the media. John Perkins, however, remained safe.<sup>21</sup>

Kennedy was not risking his life to acquire information about the KKK simply to hand it over to the proper authorities. He made an effort to get certain things accomplished using whatever means possible, including legal technicalities. One of his goals was the revocation of the Klan's state charter. In 1944, the Internal Revenue Service and U.S. Treasury required the Knights of the Klu Klux Klan Inc. to pay \$645,000 to the federal government for taxes dating back to the 1920s. James A. Colescott, at the time the Imperial Wizard (executive leader) of the Klan, suspended all

<sup>20</sup> Stetson Kennedy, Report, 25 Feb. 1946, (1-3), SKC, CHGL.

<sup>21</sup> Stetson Kennedy, "Cut or Burn," 5 May 1947, (1-5), SKC, CHGL.



official Klan activities so the KKK would not be required to pay. However, Dr. Samuel Green soon revived the Klan in Georgia, pretending that the two corporations were not the same.<sup>22</sup> Kennedy informed Dan Duke that Green's Klan was using the "copyrighted name and rituals, its patented insignias, and everything else [of the Knights of the Klu Klux Klan Inc.]."<sup>23</sup>

To assure that the Klan's state charter would be revoked, Kennedy wrote a letter to Georgia's governor, Ellis Arnall, that laid out the different grounds for which the charter could be revoked: 1) The Klan's charter claimed it was a non-profit organization while the current Klan was operating for a profit, 2) The Klan violated its non-political charter by extreme involvement in political activities, 3) The Klan was involved in activities that prevented and denied others of their civil rights.<sup>24</sup> On 13 June 1947, acknowledging Kennedy's contributions, the Georgia Charter for the KKK was revoked by the Fulton County Superior Court in Georgia.<sup>25</sup> The loss of the charter meant that Grand Dragon Green could not claim that he was the ruler of the Klu Klux Klan. This loss of authority caused divisions in the Associated Klans of Georgia, culminating in the creation of a separate organization: the Original Southern Klans.<sup>26</sup> Later that year, Kennedy tried to acquire a charter for his own "mock" Klu Klux

<sup>22</sup> Stetson Kennedy, "Green of the White Sheet," (1-12).

<sup>23</sup> Kennedy, *The Klan Unmasked*, 83.

<sup>24</sup> Stetson Kennedy to Ellis Arnall, 21 May 1946, (1-6), SKC, CHGL.

<sup>25</sup> Bulger, "Stetson Kennedy", 204.

<sup>26</sup> Stetson Kennedy, "Divisible Invisible Empire," *Newsweek*, 19 July 1948, Reel 25, Orradre Library, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA.



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Klan in Illinois that would promote equal rights and more importantly, not allow the real KKK to operate under that name, perform any patented rituals, or use any copyrighted symbols.<sup>27</sup> Although his application was rejected, Kennedy continued to explore every possible avenue that would hurt the Klan and draw attention to the civil rights movement.

Some of the other avenues Kennedy explored involved Congress and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Kennedy offered to visit the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) and hand over what he called "trunkloads of documentary evidence of the Klan's un-American activities."<sup>28</sup> In 1946, Kennedy would not be deterred by the committee chairman's refusal of his offer. To make visible the very real presence of the KKK, Kennedy arrived at the House Office in Klan garb; he was immediately detained by police and removed. The next day, however, he was offered a meeting with the committee's chief investigator—who also refused Kennedy's briefcase filled with "documentation of Klan violence." The committee's focus was flushing out communism, not attacking obvious racist acts that hindered civil rights.<sup>29</sup> Kennedy was extremely frustrated with the lack of concern by Congress for the bigotry and violence that was being perpetrated by the KKK.

Undaunted, Kennedy tried to turn evidence and his personal testimonies over to the FBI offices in Atlanta. When reporting illegal Klan activities, Kennedy recalled, "I always had a feeling that I was speaking to a

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<sup>27</sup> "Illinois Bars Mock Klan," *The New York Times*, 16 Aug. 1947, 6; ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>28</sup> Wade, *The Fiery Cross*, 287.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

machine that could not respond.”<sup>30</sup> Kennedy felt neglected by the FBI, a perception later confirmed by testimony from FBI agents who observed that FBI director J. Edgar Hoover often ignored civil rights cases and regarded them as “burdensome.”<sup>31</sup>

Kennedy, with little help from the government or law enforcement authorities, needed to find a way to hurt the Klan even without formal sanctions. Based on his own experiences, Kennedy concluded that their “total reliance upon an invented, magical world made the Klu Klux Klan ultimately vulnerable to ridicule.”<sup>32</sup> He knew that by exposing the secret names, symbols and rituals of the Klan, he “would steal the symbolic heart from the organization” and “sap their strength by turning their own rituals against them.”<sup>33</sup> The Klan exerted a power over its members by creating a tight-knit community, but that power could be broken if the community was no longer exclusive and the public was fully aware of its activities.

To expose the Klan’s secrets and beliefs on a mass scale, Kennedy turned to radio. Broadcasting offered immediate, vast audiences. Because radio listening was an important social event, the secrets of the Klan could be delivered to audiences coast to coast. Kennedy solicited the aid of Drew Pearson, a syndicated journalist and progressive radio commentator. Kennedy provided the minutes of each week’s Klan meeting to Pearson, who from 1946-47 broadcast them on his Sunday night show. Kennedy gave the names of Klansmen and detailed the group’s plans. These

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<sup>30</sup> Kennedy, *The Klan Unmasked*, 86.

<sup>31</sup> Wade, *The Fiery Cross*, 288.

<sup>32</sup> Bulger, “Stetson Kennedy,” 195.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.



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broadcasts had an incredible effect on the state of the Klan. After Pearson broadcast nationally the names of Klansmen who were prominent politicians and businessman in Atlanta, these individuals soon stopped attending meetings.<sup>34</sup> When Pearson named Cliff Vittur as the leader of the malicious Klavaler military group, trucks at Vittur's trucking firm were set aflame.<sup>35</sup> Kennedy was creating personal problems for Klan members by revealing their identities and the viciousness of their group. In a standard Klavern report, Kennedy recorded, "Grand Dragon Green was extremely upset about the exposure of Klan activities by Drew Pearson in his broadcast the previous night, and blamed it on Stetson Kennedy."<sup>36</sup>

Kennedy's collaboration with Pearson led to another idea for exposing the Klan via the radio. Kennedy's observation of young boys playing with secret passwords inspired him to create a children's entertainment program to release Klan passwords. Instead of creating a new program, Kennedy thought to tap the power of the *Adventures of Superman*, an already existing and enormously popular children's radio program.<sup>37</sup> In 1946, Kennedy called on Robert Maxwell, *Superman's* radio producer, to create a new series: "Superman Battles the Grand Dragon."<sup>38</sup> Kennedy was named a consultant, editing the show's scripts, assuring authenticity, and updating the show with newly changed passwords.<sup>39</sup> Superman defeated legions of Klansmen on the radio, as children listened

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>35</sup> Wade, *The Fiery Cross*, 284.

<sup>36</sup> Kennedy, "Cut or Burn," (1-5), SKC, CHGL.

<sup>37</sup> Kennedy, *The Klan Unmasked*, 92.

<sup>38</sup> Bulger, "Stetson Kennedy," 206.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 208.

and acted out the show's plot. At subsequent Klan meetings, Kennedy reported that many members were distraught. One Klansman stated, "When I came home from work the other night, there was my kid and a bunch of others, some with towels tied around their necks like capes and some with pillow cases over their heads...When I asked them what they were doing, they said they was playing a new kind of Cops and Robbers called 'Superman against the Klan.'" <sup>40</sup> As Margaret Anne Bulger writes, "Kennedy's mission was to deflate that [Klan's psychological] power by reporting on the Klan with ridicule, holding up their ritual as childish, and revealing the priesthood's secrets to break their spirits."<sup>41</sup> Kennedy certainly was successful in his mission: at subsequent meetings he observed attendance at "rock bottom" with no new applicants for membership.<sup>42</sup>

Kennedy knew the strength of the media in swaying public opinion. He realized that Americans had a "common need of 'belonging'" which he wanted to manipulate to make tolerance and civil liberty *in-style* rather than racism and hatred.<sup>43</sup> Radio was just one of the media realms that he utilized to change the attitudes of the American audience. Another realm was literature, also highly effective in exposing the Klu Klux Klan. Kennedy's book *Southern Exposure* was published in 1946, followed by *I Rode with the Klan* in 1954 (later re-titled *The Klan Unmasked*): two first person narratives revealing the state of the South,

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<sup>40</sup> Kennedy, *The Klan Unmasked*, 92-3.

<sup>41</sup> Bulger, "Stetson Kennedy," 201.

<sup>42</sup> Kennedy, *The Klan Unmasked*, 94.

<sup>43</sup> Bulger, "Stetson Kennedy," 189.



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viewpoints on civil rights, and Kennedy's own personal interaction with hate groups including the KKK.

Kennedy believed the press was a valuable media source to expose the Klan. He noted that if the press were to "rip the mask from them [Klan members] and turn on the spotlight...they'll crawl back into their cracks and stay there."<sup>44</sup> Kennedy used his journalistic skills to effectively expose the Klu Klux Klan on a national level. While undercover, he did freelance work for *The Nation*, *Newsweek*, *PM*, *Common Ground*, and consulted with writers for the Anti-Defamation League on anti-Klan literature.<sup>45</sup> He noticed that when the Klan was exposed in respected publications, victims subsequently approached Dan Duke with their personal stories about assaults, torture, and arson that they experienced at the hands of the Klan.<sup>46</sup>

Kennedy was undercover in different hate groups and terrorist organizations in the South from September 1944 to December 1948.<sup>47</sup> In all, he would join over twenty Southern organizations, all of whom threatened the establishment of civil rights in America.<sup>48</sup> He risked his life, spending considerable time among violent hate mongers to collect information in order to educate Americans on the current state of civil liberties, or lack thereof, in the United States. Kennedy weakened the Klan by helping revoke its state charter in Georgia and by providing evidence and testimony against Klan members tried for assault and other criminal charges. His creative use of radio to "demythify" the Klan set a precedent for the use of popular

<sup>44</sup> Kennedy, *The Klan Unmasked*, 116.

<sup>45</sup> Wade, *The Fiery Cross*, 282.

<sup>46</sup> Kennedy, *The Klan Unmasked*, 117.

<sup>47</sup> Bulger, "Stetson Kennedy," 192.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

mass media programming as a tool to greatly affect social situations.<sup>49</sup> His heroic actions as a white person who rejected racism and complacency and fought for others' civil rights in the segregated South pioneered white people's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Overall, his perseverance and determination to single-handedly decrease the participation and strength of the Klan through his creative tactics were commendable and an achievement that should be carefully studied by others dedicated to social justice.

Stetson Kennedy knew that the information he had could be used against the Klu Klux Klan in a manner that would "de-mystify" the secret society and expose it as a group that promoted alienation and used violence as its means.<sup>50</sup> In the racially divided United States of the 1940s, few lawmakers were willing to take on the Klan and many law enforcement agencies were filled with Klan members. Kennedy skillfully forged his own route and used media to expose the hate-group on a mass scale. Kennedy's exposure of the Klan caused a decrease in participation in KKK meetings and activities. He set an example as a white activist for civil rights in the segregated South, well before the Civil Rights Movement was recognized. Kennedy is the model of a single person who accepted personal responsibility in the fight against discrimination. Even though that discrimination was not directed at him, he used the means available to him to expose inhumane attitudes and actions and preach the idea of true equal rights to the American people. His example as a member of the privileged majority who fought for the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.



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discriminated minority is applicable today in a variety of movements, including the present struggle for gay and lesbian rights because his story inspires even those not personally subject to discrimination to courageously work for liberty for all.