

---

# The Klan, The Cop And the FBI

*Book from World 2/21/93*

---

## TERROR IN THE NIGHT

### The Klan's Campaign Against the Jews

By Jack Nelson

Simon & Schuster. 287 pp. \$22

---

By L.J. Davis

---

**I**N A WAY, it was entirely fitting that echoes of the Sixties should have come back to haunt us, however briefly and to such conspicuously little effect, in the presidential election year of 1992. Although Americans will never be accused of possessing a national tidiness of mind, we tend to view our history as a series of decade-long compartments, almost as though they were a series of towns through which we have drifted like so many wandering cowboys forever stumbling into love or trouble. The habit is often little more than a lazy exercise in glibness and nostalgia, but occasionally it reflects an eerie kind of truth; some decades, such as the Sixties, seem to be with us always. Among many other things, it was a time when good people committed horrible deeds for the loftiest of motives; as Jack Nelson, the Washington bureau chief of the Los Angeles Times reminds us in his new book, *Terror in the Night*, it was a time when destruction seemed to be the only way to save the village. And the country has never been the same.

---

*L.J. Davis is a contributing editor of Harper's magazine.*

---

In revisiting an old story with new information and the wisdom of hindsight, Nelson tells what happened when the Ku Klux Klan attacked the Mississippi Jewish community in the crucial years of 1967 and 1968. It is a tale that does not lack for drama, moral complexity, or colorful characters. Confronted with the greatest civil rights struggle since Reconstruction, the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover, his curious obsessions on prominent display, had poured in men and resources with an unstinting hand. If the hand had been forced by the 1964 murder of three civil rights workers—two of them white, Northern and Jewish—near the grotesquely misnamed town of Philadelphia, so be it. Hoover was both an odd duck and a clear and present danger to the Republic, but revisionist commentators often forget that he was occasionally a very good cop indeed. In 1960s Mississippi, the FBI was just about the only powerful friend the black community had. *But not until the 60s.*

As head of the field office in Jackson, Hoover chose Special Agent Roy Moore, who had demonstrated un-Bureaulike ingenuity a few years previously when he reconstructed an entire downed airliner in Denver, solving a mass murder. And in Mississippi, Moore discovered an unlikely ally: when racial violence veered toward the old rail hub of Meridian, it ran directly into the city's chief of police, Roy Gunn, a violent, volatile ignoramus who had undergone a profound religious experience while sitting in church. The religious experience, simply put, had told Gunn to enforce the law of the land, equally and without favor.

The common enemy, the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, was a virulent offshoot of an organization that, as they say, is a little hard to like; in one of the book's few omissions, Nelson fails to note that the Knights were deeply infected with a hydrophobic form of neo-Nazism that was excessive even by the Klan's spacious standards. And as the Knights' chosen instruments for the attack

---



on the Jews, the leadership chose a hit team that seemed to have walked out of a Kurt Vonnegut novel: Thomas Tarrants III, a young, disturbed (to say the least) son of an Alabama used-car salesman, and Kathy Ainsworth, a sweet-natured, rabidly racist grammar-school teacher who dressed for assassination in a low-cut top and short shorts. Ainsworth's father had been a circus juggler. Like her companion, she was a homicidal maniac.

If there is an element of surrealism here, there is also much tragic irony. Although more than 40 black churches had been bombed or burned, it did not seem to occur to the state's officialdom that houses of worship were under attack until Tarrants blew up the Jackson synagogue and its rabbi's house and then dynamited the synagogue in Meridian. Even then, the reaction of most locally elected representatives can best be described as one of tepid outrage. Though the small Jewish community was well-established, prosperous and shared the questionable values of the larger white com-

munity, most of the Christian leadership seemed to regard them as pets rather than full-fledged people. The FBI and Gunn, however, responded to the bombings with a full-court press.

While the Bureau intensified its attack on the Klan by using the notorious, sometimes illegal tactics of disruption it had long deployed against Hoover's favorite whipping boy, the comically inept Communist Party USA, their version of equal justice meant that the born-again, well-meaning Gunn now treated the Klansmen with the same barbarity he had previously inflicted on African-Americans. At one point, he actually considered hiring the Chicago mob to perform a rub-out; it might have been better if he had done so. Instead, with money from the Jewish community, the help of trusted members of his force, and—as Nelson persuasively demonstrates—the advice and complicity of the FBI, Gunn learned Tarrants's latest plans and laid a nocturnal ambush from which no perpetrator was supposed to escape with his life. In a brief spasm of South-

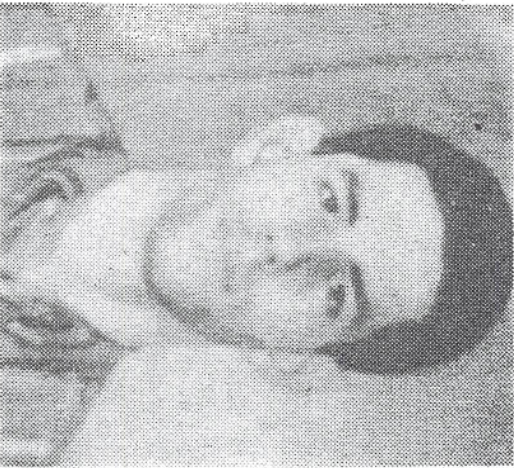
ern chivalry, when it was learned that Tarrants's companion was a woman, an urgent order was given to spare her. In the hall of police gunfire, the order could not be obeyed. Tarrants, horribly wounded, survived.

**T**HE APPARENT ending was a happy one. After the pointed object lesson of the ambush, White Knight violence effectively ended in Mississippi and has not resumed to this day. In prison, Tarrants also underwent a religious conversion, was released with the help of the very people who had put him there, subsequently appeared with yet another born-again wrongdoer, former Nixon adviser Chuck Colson, and now lives quietly in the Washington vicinity. But the FBI did not merely turn against its old friend, reporter Jack Nelson, for having spread the true story of the Meridian outrage through the news wires and the front page of his newspaper; using the lawless tactics perfected in Mississippi—with the possible exception of official murder—Hoover's Bureau did its best to disrupt both the anti-war movement and, in a supreme irony, the activities of the Rev. Martin Luther King. The FBI and its parent, the Justice Department, have still not quite shaken the notion that they march to a different drummer.

The Bureau was not alone in the tattering of American democracy, of course—to a greater or lesser degree, American democracy is always tattered. Nor was it the first (or the last) to declare that the law is an ass, especially when confronted with a Higher Good. But after the horrors of Mississippi, the FBI became part of something very dark in this country, and we dwell in its shadow still. For those too young to remember how we got to where we are, *Terror in the Night* is an invaluable primer. For those of us who lived through it, the book is a reminder of what we tried to do and what went so horribly wrong. It takes the measure of our failure. ■



*From 'Terror in the Night'*  
The White Knights hit team, Kathy Ainsworth and Thomas Albert Tarrants



*FROM 'TERROR IN THE NIGHT'*  
The White Knights hit team, Kathy Ainsworth and Thomas Albert Tarrants