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Salim Muwakkil

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Burning Hate: The Torching of Black Churches

by Salim Muwakkil

Nearly 100 predominantly Black churches have been torched since 1990, their congregations forced to watch in horror as the very centers of their communities were consumed by the flames of racial hatred. Americans of all races have recoiled in shock—and often with genuine shame—as the attacks have escalated in past months. But despite President Clinton’s call for interracial solidarity and the belated appeals of white evangelical Christian leaders for racial reconciliation, many African Americans are left wondering whether white America grasps the meaning and significance of this reign of terror.

So far, police have arrested 34 suspects in connection with the arson attacks. All but two of the suspects are white, according to figures compiled by the Center for Democratic Renewal (CDR), an Atlanta-based hate crimes watchdog group. Investigators suspect that most of the attacks have been random acts of vandalism and not part of a conspiracy. But there’s little solace in that distinction.

“The conspiracy is racism itself,” says Noah Chandler, a CDR research associate. The Reverend Jesse Jackson of the National Rainbow Coalition/Operation PUSH attributes the burnings to a “cultural conspiracy” that reinforces long-held racial biases, inspired at least in part by the racebaiting rhetoric of the political right. Jackson has urged Clinton to convene a White House conference on racial justice. “We can’t just focus on the fire and not the fuel,” he says.

“This is the most serious thing that I think has happened in the South in years—far more serious than the dollar value of a church building that is burned,” says Morris Dees, co-founder of the Alabama-based Southern Poverty Law Center, another group that monitors racist groups. “Symbolically, the burning of Black churches is more important than the World Trade Center bombing.” Unlike the other investigators, Dees maintains that many of the church burnings are part of an explicit conspiracy.

Last June [1995], two Black churches in rural Greeleyville, S.C., were destroyed by fire, and two white men are now jailed on arson charges. Dees’ center has filed a civil lawsuit on behalf of one of the churches, alleging that the men acted under the direction of the Christian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, a Klan splinter group. The suit seeks compensatory damages for the destruction of church property and punitive damages to “punish the defendants for their intentional and malicious acts and to deter others from engaging in such acts.”

Dees’ group has been successful in the civil prosecution of the Klan and other hate groups. In 1987, the center won a \$7 million verdict against another KKK splinter group, the United Klans of America, for lynching a black man in Alabama, and in 1990 the group won a \$12 million ruling against the White Aryan Resistance in connection with the murder of a black man in Oregon. In both cases, the punitive damages effectively put the groups out of business. If any of the 30 other white suspects held in connection with recent church burnings are linked to racist organizations, those groups, too, will be vulnerable to civil action.

The cloud of this tragedy may have a few other silver linings as well. Expressions of support in words and dollars have poured into aid organizations from a wide variety of sources: The National Council of Churches, which has led the effort to focus national attention on the church burnings, has established a fund and mobilized support to help the victimized congregations rebuild their churches. As news of the burnings has spread, groups spanning the religious spectrum have offered their support and assistance, some establishing funds of their own. So moved was Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition, that he offered “repentance” for the past racial sins of white evangelical Christians and called for a day of national racial reconciliation. Reed pledged to raise at least \$1 million to help rebuild African-American churches that have been burned. “It is a painful truth that the white evangelical church was not only on the sidelines but in many cases on the wrong side of the most central struggle for social justice in this century,” he said during a June meeting with black ministers and representatives of the NAACP, the Anti-Defamation League and other groups called to marshal support for the destroyed churches. “We come today bearing the burden of that past, with broken hearts, a repentant spirit and ready hands to fight this senseless violence,” Reed said. The coalition dubbed July 14, 1996 “Racial Reconciliation Sunday” for the 100,000 churches on the group’s mailing list, and he urged members to donate generously to the rebuilding fund.

But the involvement of the Christian Coalition, perhaps the most powerful political force on the religious right, has been greeted with skepticism by others involved in the rebuilding effort. “Reconciliation requires something much stronger than charity,” said the Reverend Joseph Lowery, director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. “Charity can be motivated by pity, but love embraces justice.” Lowery said the root of the problem is racism, not the burning of churches, “and the Christian Coalition’s right-wing agenda has contributed to the very climate of negativism.” With his gift for metaphor, Jesse Jackson nicely summed up many activists’ view of the Christian Coalition’s role. “We shouldn’t get tripped up by people like Ralph Reed, who seed the clouds of racism to make intolerance rain and then offer us an umbrella.”

This article appears courtesy of In These Times. It originally appeared in the July 8–21, 1996 edition titled, “Burning Hate: The Recent Spate of Black Church Burnings Confronts America with Racist Past and Present.” Since the writing of this article, the number of Black churches set on fire or bombed has increased to more than 200 churches.

Despite the outpouring of support for the rebuilding effort, few organizations seem willing to trace the problem of church burnings to the racist roots of American culture. In a sense, the absence of any organized conspiracy to burn churches is more disturbing than an organized conspiracy would be; it means we live in an era when individuals, unconnected to one another or with organized white supremacist groups, consider burning Black churches an act worthy of emulation.

Indeed, the burning of Black churches has historically been a common mode of white supremacist violence. “There have been attacks on Black churches ever since there have been Black churches in this country,” notes C. Eric Lincoln, professor emeritus of religion at Duke University and author of the 1996 book, *Coming Through The Fire: Surviving Race and Place in America*. Since African Americans were allowed few opportunities to exercise autonomy and to affirm their culture, Black churches became centers for activities that were both sacred and secular. Because of their mobilizing and ennobling functions, these churches antagonized many whites.

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The first recorded torching of a Black church occurred in South Carolina in 1822, Lincoln writes. In 1829, white mobs torched churches in Cincinnati’s African-American ward, and Philadelphia’s churches became constant targets of disgruntled whites during the mid-1800s. In their campaign to terrorize blacks into submission to white rule after the Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan habitually targeted Black churches. Only during the civil rights era, when the nation recoiled at the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, that killed four young girls, did most of white America learn of this ugly legacy. The motivations for that attack were the same as they have always been: By attacking Black churches, white supremacists were striking at the very heart of the movement for racial equality.

The burning of a Black church has always been much more than a question of destroying its property value; only at the level of symbol can we understand its significance. “This is about more than just bricks and mortar,” explains Ron Daniels, executive director of the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights, an organization enlisted by the National Council of Churches to serve as part of its Emergency Response Team. The council called this group of organizers together to help mobilize support for the affected congregations, to monitor official investigations of the fires and to help catch the culprits. “We are vigorously pushing the issue of prosecution,” says Daniels. “The issue is not just

rebuilding the churches but also social justice, and we intend to ensure that justice prevails.” Daniels says his group is considering adopting Dees’ civil litigation strategy in cases in several Southern states.

Daniels echoes others who blame a social climate rife with race-baiting for the upsurge in racist terrorism. “The black community—through the myths of welfare, affirmative action and crime—has become the scapegoat for the pressures and dislocations that are being felt in the larger United States economy. We have a bunch of angry white males who are being told to look for answers in white supremacy and domestic terrorism. We must confront that.”

President Bill Clinton has forcefully denounced the church burnings and created a special task force to investigate them, but he has not labeled the fires “domestic terrorism,” which would mobilize the additional resources that critics argue are necessary to mount an effective probe. “In New York City, when the World Trade Center was bombed, a piece of scrap metal was enough to indict 10 men—that’s how vigorous that investigation was,” says Daniels. Similarly, the investigation of the bombing in Oklahoma City yielded two suspects within weeks. “Why haven’t we seen those kind of investigations with the church bombings?” Daniels asks.

Federal authorities ought to classify the church burnings as suspected domestic terrorist incidents, argues Tyrone Powers, a former FBI agent who has followed the church burnings closely. “The attorney general’s guidelines for terrorism are ‘the unlawful use of force or violence, committed by a group or groups of two or more individuals, against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof in furtherance of political or social objectives.’”

But Powers, the author of *Eyes to My Soul: The Rise or Decline of a Black FBI Agent*, a memoir of his nine years in an agency he characterizes as pervasively racist, detects familiar political motives in this foot-dragging. If word got around during the 1996 Summer Olympics that the same kind of racist terrorism that characterized the Old South was still at large, he maintains, Atlanta’s international reputation as the center of the “New South” would be seriously tarnished. Clinton has been talking tough about “hunting terrorism down wherever it is,” Powers says, but now that the world is coming to Atlanta “he’s been hoisted on his own petard.”

When Clinton flew to South Carolina in early June [1995] to visit the ruins of the Mount Zion AME church in Greeleyville, S.C., Republican National Committee chairman Haley Barbour called the visit “shameless, transparent politics.” House Majority Leader Dick Armey joined in the criticism, and even Republican presidential contender Bob Dole accused Clinton of politicizing the burnings. The Congressional Black Caucus has mildly praised Clinton’s efforts to address the burnings—but only by way of countering Republican charges that the president has exploited his visits to torched churches for

political mileage. “We think the president was right to take the bully pulpit, to take the high ground on this issue,” said Rep. Ron Dellums (D-CA). Polls also indicated that Clinton’s action was politically popular.

By contrast, the Republican Party’s reticent reaction to the burnings apparently has hurt its image. Speaking at an Iowa campaign fundraiser, former Housing Secretary Jack Kemp warned GOP leaders that their harsh criticism of the president made them look to the public like “a bunch of grumpy old men,” adding cryptically, “I want the Republican Party to come across more like Ronald Reagan than Pat Buchanan.” In other words, Kemp urges the GOP to disguise its racist impulses in the puerile evocations of a mythic America that kept Reagan popular. He’s not calling for a public repudiation of the race-baiting tactics that promote racial attacks because the GOP owes its present prominence in the South to those very tactics. It’s unlikely the party would surrender its tactical advantage just for the sake of smoother race relations. In fact, racial tensions are good for the GOP.

Now that these burnings have awakened even the long slumbering conscience of the white Christian right, a slender opportunity may be opening for more serious attempts at racial reconciliation. Of course, Ralph Reed’s

expression of contrition might simply be an immediate reaction to the sacrilege of flaming churches. But Reed’s strong condemnation of racial animosity may be helpful in tempering the GOPs divisive racial rhetoric and discrediting social policies that are much more destructive to the African-American community than the fires.

Dees doesn’t think the fires will stop until large enough rewards are offered to persuade people with information to contact authorities. Thus, as a practical matter, he recently urged the governors of nine Southern states to establish substantial reward funds—a minimum of \$100,000 in each church arson. And although such practical solutions do little to attack the underlying problem of racism, they’ll have to do until the nation is ready to confront the demon at its core.

Salim Muwakkil is a senior editor of the magazine, *In These Times* and a contributing columnist with the *Chicago Sun*. He is on the board of directors of the Madison-based Progressive Media Project, the Oakland-based Applied Research Center and the Community Media Workshop in Chicago.