

## Reflections on a Klan Rally



Recently, a Klan rally was held in a small town not far from where I live. I was at first reminded of the Klan rallies that took place during my youth. Regular rallies were held on the top of Stone Mountain in Georgia, east of Atlanta. I recall sitting in my car at a highway intersection waiting to exit onto the highway while a seemingly endless stream of Klan "kars" passed by in route to the mountain and the inevitable cross burning.

As I considered the current event, which was much smaller than those earlier events, an observation made by a psychologist, Charles Carver, came to mind. Carver's observation was that if you want to understand a behavior, you must first understand the goal to which it is directed. This thought led to questions about the goal of the Klan and of the protesters present at the rally.

I don't seriously believe that the Klan thought they were going to persuade anyone to adopt their position on any issue, so what did this small band of men belonging to a marginalized and socially impotent group hope to accomplish? Further, what was the goal of the protesters at the Klan rally? I very much doubt that the protestors thought they were going to persuade the Klansmen to throw off their robes and become advocates for freedom and liberty for all.

If this little "dance" on the Ellijay town square wasn't about one group trying to change the mind of another group, what then was it about? I think that for the Klan, a true home grown terrorist organization that is now marginalized and socially unacceptable, the rally was primarily about validation. They sought and obtained public attention, which affirmed that they weren't forgotten relics and could still command an audience by their public presence. The Klan reminds me of youths I've observed who know just the right buttons to push to aggravate some adult in their lives (teachers and parents seem to be favorite targets) and take considerable pleasure and satisfaction from having so manipulated an antagonist.

In addition to the self-affirmation obtained from public attention, the rally seemed to me to possibly serve a second purpose -- communication. How does a small, isolated group recruit new members and give support to other scattered and isolated groups and individuals of a similar mind? One answer I think is through publicity. The news coverage generated by the event turned protestors and the media into the unwitting accomplice of the Klan in disseminating its message to its kin, "we're here and we still matter." In support of this analysis consider this from Scott Atran an anthropologist and expert on terrorism, "**Media and publicity are the oxygen of terrorism. Without them it would die.**"

Even in this day of digital communication, the context of a public event has significant messaging potential, as all of the "terrorist" groups in the world know so well. A public event, whether a rally or a car bomb, is both a cheap and effective way to obtain an outcome not otherwise possible for such a group. Thus, contributing to a publicity event conducted by the Klan, whether by showing up to protest or showing up to cover the "event" for the media, is to assist the Klan in meeting its goals. Empowering the Klan in stressful and contentious times is especially hazardous because it remains a spark with the potential to become a fire.

What led the protestors to become dance partners with the Klan? Clearly, there was a bit of self-affirmation going on here as well. What better way than a public dance of defiance with a defanged cobra to demonstrate one's righteousness and moral superiority. The Klansmen in their white robes provided a stimulus to elicit the moral outrage of the most sensitive members of the community -- the Klan's dependable foils. The protestors came out because of the Klan but they demonstrated to affirm their own beliefs and to signify publicly to one another and the community that we are truly good and caring people. The rally also provided the protestors an occasion to identify kindred spirits in the community, form new associations and weave a new thread into one's personal narrative.

In the end, the Klan cared only that the protestors showed up and the more the better for their purposes. The dance goes on.

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