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AFTERWORD *“Passing the Torch”*:
The Klan’s Brand in America

Something that is beyond man is happening. America today begins to turn back to God. For too long, this country has wandered in darkness.

—GLENN BECK (2010)

We are going to take on the barbarism of war, the decadence of racism, and the scourge of poverty, that the Ku Klux—I meant to say the Tea Party. . . . You all forgive me, but I—you have to use them interchangeably.

—REV. WALTER FAUNTROY (2010)

So in America, now, let us—Christian, Jew, Muslim, agnostic, atheist, wiccan, whatever—fight nativism with the same strength and conviction that we fight terrorism. . . . The America that was attacked out of a bright blue sky nine Septembers ago was its best self—and we now are our best selves—not when we rage against differences but when we honor them.

—JON MEACHAM (2010)

In 2008 *Mother Jones* published online Anthony Karen’s photo-documentary of “Ms. Ruth,” a contemporary seamstress and manufacturer of Ku Klux Klan robes and other miscellaneous hate regalia. Karen’s photo essay for the leftist magazine documented Ms. Ruth’s operation and her day-to-day routines: taking orders, sewing and constructing each and every robe by hand from her home, and frequently checking in on her bedridden daughter. Ms. Ruth cut, sewed, and blessed each robe for the newer generation of Klansmen and Klanswomen. *Mother Jones* aptly titled her an “Aryan outfitter,” a play on the store Urban Outfitters that sells popular trends in clothing and home furnishings. The photo essay captures the mundane parts of Ms. Ruth’s far-from-ordinary business, from her regular cigarette breaks to the image of Nathan Bedford Forrest, an officer in both the Reconstruction and the 1920s Klan, which graces her wall. Karen juxtaposes Ms. Ruth’s ordinariness and kindness with her manufacturing of “hate couture.” The audio clips of Karen and Ms. Ruth paired with the essay enhance the images, and readers/listeners learn that she is a fifth-generation Klan member and a long-standing supplier of white supremacist merchan-

dise. She has cardboard patterns for each Klan hood and apron, and she sews not only the ordinary and iconic white Klan robes and an assortment of colored robes for a variety of Klan organizations, but also the more elaborate robes for contemporary Klan officers. This seamstress of "hate couture" produces one robe a day to pay for her infirm daughter's care while training her teenage granddaughter to take over "the tradition" of robe making.¹ In addition to the robes, Ms. Ruth markets flags, patches, and altar covers. Her husband sells her products at local flea markets alongside other white supremacist merchandise.

From the audio clips, it appears that Karen is a bit stumped by Ms. Ruth. While the Aryan outfitter might produce hate accoutrement, she fosters good relationships with her customers, whom she describes as "good people" and "Christian." She takes care of her daughter all day and all night, and, for Karen, she was a nice lady who welcomed him into her home. In between sewing and her daughter's care, Ms. Ruth explained to Karen the importance of the Klan historically as well as in the twenty-first century as a force of good and benevolence that protected, and still protects, the rights of white citizens. Her creation of white supremacist gear and her gracious invite to Karen seem at odds. Her customers pray for her daughter, and Ms. Ruth prays for them. Karen argued that in many ways Ms. Ruth is one of a kind. Her custom-made robes have a reputation above all others because each is hand sewn. In several of Karen's photos, Ms. Ruth blesses each robe by holding it close to her heart, closing her eyes, and praying for the person who purchased it. She wraps her thin arms tightly around the garment and recites, "God bless the person who wears this robe."² Yet Karen also notes the interesting ethical dilemmas of this assignment and affirms that he was not photographing Ms. Ruth to judge her but only to document her small business of crafting hate. Ms. Ruth signaled to readers of *Mother Jones* that hate was still present in our culture in merchandise, robes, and people long affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan. Ms. Ruth showcased that the Klan was still a part of America, even if the readers of the magazine no longer wanted it to be.

Nevertheless, the modern Ku Klux Klans, unlike their nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century predecessors, are no longer one large, centralized organization but rather many smaller, fragmented organizations.³ Some have local and regional chapters, websites, and

newsletters, but there are not necessarily any connections between the two disparate groups besides the popular use of the Klan moniker. Even so, the newer Klans still embrace the “look” of the previous Klans with robes, the cross, and the flag, and the main organizational goals still revolve around the protection and defense of white supremacy. Ms. Ruth demonstrates how artifacts are still essential to the Klan more than a century and a half after the Reconstruction Klan was founded. No longer does a special plant staffed with Klansmen and Klanswomen provide the regalia; instead, a single Klan member/supporter and her small staff produce robes and other products. The average robe is still white with a cross insignia, but the newer variations have color and flair that the older stark white robes lack. Ms. Ruth’s ritual blessing highlights the important role that Christianity still has in the many manifestations of the Klan. By seeing and listening to Ms. Ruth, it becomes apparent that the Klan, albeit in a different form, still exists and consumes merchandise, regalia, and other miscellaneous objects while practicing some generalized form of Protestant Christianity. By engaging the ritual and product of Ms. Ruth, it becomes clear that Christianity remains an important component of contemporary Klan culture. The Klan movement might be much smaller and less accepted in the mainstream than its forebearer in the 1920s, but the Klan is still a part of American culture in the twenty-first century.

Examining modern and historical incarnations of the Klan indicates the long-standing presence and prevalence of Christian nationalism within the order and in the larger nation to promote exclusion as a valid expression of nationalism. For the 1920s Klan, Catholics, Jews, and African Americans were all lesser citizens than their white Protestant neighbors; today, Muslim Americans face a similar challenge to their status by contemporary neighbors locally and nationally. Through creation and maintenance of artifacts and print, the second Klan in the 1920s (and Ms. Ruth today) created a religious landscape in which white Christians needed to fight to save their nation from the imminent threat of immigrants. The order’s vision of a religious and righteous nation became visible in hooded faces, robed bodies, burning crosses, and the American flag. Familiar symbols of patriotism and faith might seem somewhat unfamiliar in the Klan’s use, but the Ku Klux Klan sought to dress members in religious virtue, patriotism, and

tolerance, even if Klansmen and Klanswomen used these terms differently from the mainstream. Aryan outfitters of past and present continue to communicate a darker vision of nation, nationalism, and Protestant Christianity. The robes, the Klan's most identifiable object, still illustrate a feverish desire to return to America's fabled white Protestant origins, and this vision remains tinged with the Klan's hope of white Protestant redemption and recovery, as well as the echoing concern that the larger nation contests the Klan's version of America. In multicultural and pluralist visions of America, the 1920s order's vision is sidelined and downgraded in hopes of presenting a multitude of American experiences.

Ms. Ruth's artifacts and religious vision illuminate the Klan's persistence and tenacity to remain a part of the American nation, and the permutations of the Ku Klux Klan fall, rise, and reemerge again and again like the mythical hydra sprouting new heads as soon as one is removed. The Klan, it appears, is always with us, and the order's newest incarnations represent not only the legacy of the Klan but also the new imaginings of the Klan's purpose and function in the twenty-first century. The orders may no longer be unified, but their continued presence suggests the longevity of the Klan's "brand"—religious nationalism and political rhetoric formed by intolerance and white supremacy—still applies.

Ms. Ruth demonstrates the order's unique ability to reincarnate and reemerge in a variety of times and places in American history, as well as the audacity and permanence of the Klan's vision of white Protestant America. Klansmen are still Knights dressed in white robes, and the robes, the iconic image of Klan, have a continued presence and purpose. The robes still contain theological content and also showcase a certain theatricality that remains acceptable and expected for Klansmen and Klanswomen. The robe becomes a material connection to the order's sordid past. Moreover, the robe becomes the symbol for fear and terror in the American imagination. The haunting presence of white-robed Klansmen illustrates the order's long history of racism, anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, and intolerance. White-robed Klansmen still elicit much fear and disdain, despite comedian Dave Chapelle's best efforts to lampoon the order in his sketches about black white supremacists.

All the same, I often wonder about how the contemporary manifestations of the Ku Klux Klan compare to my study of the 1920s order. What binds them together? Is it only a shared name and visual identity? Are the goals of the 1920s order congruent with the newer incarnation of the Klan's brand? Is the legacy of the 1920s Klan a Klan seamstress like Ms. Ruth, a modern Klan website, or a sometime politician like David Duke? Or are we missing something important when we simply tie the 1920s order to the newer movements with the same moniker?

I posit that we need to expand our vision of the Klan as a brand or style of religious nationalism that appears not just in groups that label themselves "Klan" but also in other political actions and movements. The Klan's white Protestant America emerges in other places than Ms. Ruth's home, rallies, cross burnings, and David Duke speeches. The intolerance and exclusion of the 1920s order still haunts the American landscape, but it is not limited to those who wear robes and hoods.

We now are our best selves—not when we rage against differences but when we honor them.

Tolerance is held up as an American virtue, but our ideals often fall short of the historical reality. Much like the hooded order and robes, intolerance and exclusion remain with us. As I write this afterword, the ninth anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks has come and gone with much controversy, politicking, and intolerance. Florida pastor Terry Jones catapulted to national and global infamy by threatening to burn Qur'ans as a memorial to those (Christian) Americans who died in the September 11 attacks. In response to Jones and the media attention surrounding him, Jon Meacham of *Newsweek* and others called for Americans to discard our intolerance and become better, more tolerant people. For Meacham, Americans were better as a whole than those who would destroy any sacred scripture. He wrote: "So in America, now, let us—Christian, Jew, Muslim, agnostic, atheist, wiccan, whatever—fight nativism with the same strength and conviction that we fight terrorism. . . . the America that was attacked out of a bright blue sky nine Septembers ago was its best self—and we

now are our best selves—not when we rage against differences but when we honor them."⁴

An editorial in the *New York Times*, reflecting not on the September 11 attacks but on the larger history of American "fear" of Others, documented many egregious cases of intolerance against Catholics, Jews, and Chinese and Japanese immigrants and citizens. The *Times* columnist concluded that Americans react badly to "new arrivals." The piece continued: "But we have a more glorious tradition intertwined in American history as well, one of tolerance, amity and religious freedom. Each time, this has ultimately prevailed over the Know Nothing impulse."⁵

For both authors, what was obscured in discussions of intolerance and violence was the triumph of American tolerance and religious freedom. The lasting legacy of America, then, is our ability to move past our prejudice and adapt to Others. For some, the election of our first African American president, Barack Hussein Obama, two years earlier signaled the new tolerant, "post-racial" America.⁶ Yet in 2008, Ms. Ruth stitched Klan robes, and a Klan in Bogalusa, Louisiana, murdered a prospective member when she chose not to join their local chapter.⁷ Simultaneously, white supremacist movements, previously on decline in the late 1990s and early 2000s, began growing steadily, and the Southern Poverty Law Center reported earlier this year that the number of active hate groups in the United States has grown to "record levels," to near 1,000 active hate groups. In the spring of 2010, 61 percent of Americans believed that the nation was in decline, and analysts of the "American radical right" feared the level of rage rising against the government generally and social programs specifically.⁸

For *Mother Jones* magazine, Ms. Ruth, the designer and creator of hate couture, showed that the artifacts of hatred are still in demand. If one is to believe the pundits, the rhetoric of American politics has reached a fevered pitch on both left and right, and division among Americans appears in the pages of newspapers. The nation appears divided, still, waging the fabled "culture wars" between progressive and traditional worldviews, in which surely the nation's soul is imperiled by the successes and failures of either side. For some, America is at a pivotal moment where unease at what lies ahead clouds optimism on

both left and right, while pessimism and fear seem to run rampant for those on both sides of the political spectrum. Perhaps, we are not our “better selves.”

Personally, I find myself in interesting physical and ideological spaces. After living almost three years in the Southwest, my new home in Knoxville, Tennessee, means that I have returned to the South, the region of my birth and upbringing. My native-born Florida was home to one of the most violent incarnations of the Klan, and my hometown, Marianna, is tainted by the legacy of the lynching of Claude Neal in 1934. Now I live in the state (in)famous for the birth of the Ku Klux Klan in Pulaski, the Scopes “Monkey” Trial of Dayton, a recent mosque controversy and subsequent arson in Murfreesboro, the arson of a local lesbian couple’s home in nearby Vonore, and the defacement of a Qur’an at the doorsteps of a Knoxville mosque.⁹

While blogging on domestic terror at the Religion in American History blog, I received my first death threat for simply suggesting that Americans need to recognize the place of Christianity and religion more generally in domestic terrorism and the larger hate movement. This response to a mere blog post surprised me because I did not suggest anything particularly controversial or inflammatory. Instead, I posed a question as to why the media and other commentators were hesitant to examine the place of religiosity as motivation, or justification, of acts of domestic terror. My foray into contemporary events left me a bit stunned, and the stakes were certainly higher. Yet I still could not help but notice that the resonance of the 1920s Klan in today’s political and public culture went beyond Ms. Ruth’s robes and the rise of white supremacist movements.

Describing the 1920s Klan’s lasting impact on American culture in the twenty-first century appeared to be a Herculean task. One could, as many historians have, trace the legacy of the 1920s Klan through the manifestations of the order in the 1960s, 1980s, and today. But the mere presence of the Klan today does not prove the longevity of the 1920s Klan’s particular vision of white Protestant America. Would that vision be found in the newer, web-savvy versions of the order? Was this vision limited to the right-wing fringe monitored by the Southern Poverty Law Center? Or was this imagining of the American nation more diffuse and elusive? Where is the order’s rightful legacy?

Before this incident, my former editor, Kalyani Fernando, at the University Press of Kansas, suggested that I write a contemporary afterword for my book to show the relevance of my study of the 1920s Klan to our contemporary world. My historical study might have seemed pressing for this particular moment, but I was uncomfortable about making tenuous connections between the historical actors with whom I am familiar and my impressions of national politics, global affairs, or American culture. I feel qualified to judge the historical worlds of Klansmen and Klanswomen, but my neighbors and fellow citizens seem too close and too present for my own scholarly judgment. Or, as I often tell my students, I am much more comfortable studying the recent dead than the living and breathing. Reading and writing about pages upon pages of Klan newspapers informed my study of the men and women who took up robes and crosses, marched at home and in the nation's capital, hosted picnics, and perpetuated ugly stereotypes of Catholics, Jews, and African Americans as enemies of American culture. The *Night-Hawk* and the *Kourier* showcased the Klan's vision of white Protestant America and the centrality of intolerance and exclusion to the re-creation of this particular nostalgic vision of the nation. This religious history of the Klan allowed me to demonstrate the dominance of Protestant Christianity in the Klan's platform, political actions, and ritual to illuminate why millions of Americans became members and supporters of the hooded order.

The 1920s Klan has been a part of my scholarly life for several years as I have re-created its vision and its consequences. The white Protestant nationalism of the Klan, bolstered by exclusion and religious intolerance, is significant to the contemporary moment, but the question of how to transition my knowledge of the order into a coherent analysis of the contemporary moment with the same authority and precision is a good one. How do I comment not on the distant past but this very moment? This is a question that religious historians, particularly American religious historians, confront and wrangle when attempting to apply their knowledge of the stories of previous religious Americans to the present. Lived religious histories of the long departed bear their own complexity, but engaging my own vision of the American nation alongside the other competing visions that populate our media, television, film, and politics is difficult.

Applying ethnographic sensibilities to the Klan's textual community that oppose my own understanding of American history and American religious history allows a certain ease and distance. I could "read with" them somewhat comfortably. Reading with contemporary politicians, pundits, journalists, and even white supremacists is a trickier task. Yet, my editor was right. The 1920s Klan does showcase the complexity of the current moment and the place of the Klan's particular religious nationalism and political style. In many ways, the order's positions on race, gender, religion, and nation still resonate today. The Klan's vision of America still exists in our public and intellectual cultures, and this vision is still under assault from pluralism, diversity, and competing religious and ideological movements.

The decline of white (Protestant) America appears again in the early twenty-first century much like it did in the early twentieth century. There are still guardians of privilege, whiteness, and religious faith. Moreover, the contemporary "culture wars" might have emerged in the time of jazz, gin, and the second Ku Klux Klan.¹⁰ The Klan I studied found its values, virtues, race, and religion under assault by those who obviously did not have the nation's best interest at heart. At first glance, the study of the 1920s Klan might seem very applicable to the current political and ideological battles over values, virtues, histories, ideas, and nation. Yet, I would caution those who want to take this case study as a straightforward guide to the twenty-first century. The similarities might resonate, but it is naive to apply the case study of the Klan to the twenty-first century without acknowledging the key differences in time and place. The campaigns and enemies have changed. The 1920s Klan feared Catholics, Jews, and African Americans. The threat of Islam has much more cultural currency today. Some right-leaning Catholics and Jews have sided with conservative Protestants on politics, values, and national culture rather than with their own religious brethren. Yet the 1920s Klan might apply as an object lesson in the American political and cultural battles of 2010.

From the beginning of this project, I have often wondered what the Klansmen and Klanswomen I study would think of the twenty-first century. Would they find this America to be substantially different from their own? How would they react to the new forms of media, multiculturalism, and our current president? Would their laments

about the decline of America seem fulfilled? Is there any part of our contemporary moment that they would recognize? When I imagine what the world would look like to these historical actors, I can't help but wonder if maybe the differences would not be as jarring as the similar themes of declension, secular and religious enemies, and codified patriotism. For some Klan historians, the connections are obvious. For instance, Wyn Craig Wade explicitly links the 1920s Klan to religious fundamentalism to argue that the Christian Right has continued the Klan's legacy of hatred and intolerance through today.¹¹ He argues that the Klan, "in its corruption of American ideals, . . . has capitalized on some of the best-loved aspects of the American tradition."¹² The key to this analysis for Wade is the assumption that the Klan was somehow a "corruption" of valued American traditions like democracy, tolerance, and equality. Perhaps the better understanding is that the Klan is not just the seamier opposite of American virtues like freedom, liberty, and equality, but instead a reconfiguring of these terms. The order was not following a tainted vision of these ideals, but rather Klansmen and Klanswomen followed their own version of these values to support their vision of white Protestant nation. Tolerance, equality, and freedom only applied to certain American citizens, and this shallow application has a long historical legacy in the United States. For Wade, the Klan's corruption showcases the corruption of the Christian Right in their attempts to bring the nation back to a so-called moral foundation.

While I do not agree entirely with Wade's assessment, I do think we should examine how the Klan's brand of religious nationalism and rhetoric appears repeatedly by being bound to so-called American virtues. Understanding the 1920s Klan as indicative of the mainstream, conservative, and traditional values illuminates how the language of tolerance, freedom, and equality lacks common meaning. The Klan's attempts to describe and redescribe the American nation emphasize what is at stake in who claims dominance in narratives of American religious life and showcases how battles over the vision of nation are still ongoing. The Klan is part and parcel of the nation, and perhaps if we can appreciate the order's influence, then we can see how the Klan's legacy impacts our constructions of American culture and narrativity.

"Passing the Torch."

On September 19, 2010, the *Knoxville News Sentinel* ran a political cartoon entitled "Passing the Torch." The Rev. Terry Jones, pastor of the Dove World Outreach Program, stands in the visual foreground. His white hair and mustache blend in with his white long-sleeved T-shirt, which bears the slogan "Burn a Koran Day." He looks over his shoulder as he reaches to the figure behind him. Standing at the edge of the cartoon is a white-robed Klansman holding a burning torch toward Jones. The torch smolders as the Klansman looks on. The cartoon Klansman is in full regalia (robe, hood, and mask), and his eyes appear slightly dazed behind the hood of his robe. Is it possible that Terry Jones confuses the Klansman? Or is it just hard to represent facial expressions behind the order's infamous white hood? The cartoonist's agenda to bind Jones to the lasting legacy of the Klan and religious hatred becomes clear. Burning Korans equates to burning crosses. Jones, a pastor of a small congregation in Gainesville, Florida, became an international figure when he started a (now defunct) group on Facebook wed to his website, titled "Islam Is the Devil," and started using Twitter to promote his ideas and plans.¹³ Through online social media, he claimed that he would burn 200 Korans on the ninth anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks. He had already written a book with the same title as the website. Yet Jones did not gain much attention, media or otherwise, until he requested that his Facebook fans and followers send in their own photos and ideas of how to destroy the sacred text of Islam.¹⁴

Jones quickly transitioned from an obscure pastor of a small congregation to an international representative of the supposed American hatred of Muslims. The association in the political cartoon, then, should be obvious: those like Jones who would burn the Koran are the same as the members of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan represents a certain brand of intolerance and hatred, and Koran-burners obviously fall into the same lineage. In the cartoon, Jones's clothing, his outreached arm, and his T-shirt slogan all showcase his attachment to the Klan's long history of terror and racism. The white-T-shirt-wearing pastor does not wear robes; his face is not hidden. But his white clothing illustrates his sympathy and similarity to the hooded figure. The visual

message of the cartoon is that Jones is fringe, much like the Klan, and he bears the order's legacy, which means he is representative of a small subset of Americans.

Yet the visual analogy does not hold up under much scrutiny. The Klan, at least the 1920s Klan, burned crosses not to protest Christianity or individual Christians but to show the light of Jesus in the flames of each fiery cross (and to terrorize those who found lit crosses on their lawns). Klansmen were not attacking larger Christian tradition. Instead, they employed the fiery cross to warn the enemies of white Protestant America and the Klan more generally. Moreover, the order imagined that each lit cross memorialized the importance of Jesus' sacrifice for humanity. On the other hand, Jones clearly wanted to destroy the artifact, the sacred text, of Islam. The potential destruction of the Koran was an attack on Islam that he associated with terrorism and the September 11 attacks. In his conflation of Islam and terror, Jones's symbolic protest denied that the majority of Muslims worldwide are not terrorists and sought to terrify and harm. The current of terror in the immolation of both cross and Koran cannot be denied. But the contexts of both fiery ends are significantly different. The 1920s Klan's fiery cross indicated the common prejudice of the Klan. Media, pundits, and politicians represented the Koran burning as an anomaly, a presentation of Jones's unique and uncommon hatred.

While Jones's anti-Muslim bigotry might have been more theatrical than other forms of intolerance directed at Muslims, this did not mean that Jones and his congregation were the only Americans who had animus toward Muslims. As William Saletan notes at *Slate*, Americans were resentful that Jones became indicative of our nation and our people. Yet Americans by and large make the same judgment about all Muslims based on the actions of the terrorists involved in the September 11 attacks. Saletan writes:

This is how it feels to be judged by the sins of others who destroy in the name of your faith. You're no more responsible for 30 Christian extremists in Florida than Muslims are for the 19 hijackers of 9/11. Yet most of us, when polled, say that no Muslim house of worship should be built near the site of the 9/11 attacks. In saying this, we implicitly hold all Muslims

accountable for the crime of those 19 people. Now you know how it feels to be judged that way. It's inaccurate, and it's wrong.¹⁵

For Saletan, Jones and his congregation were not representative of all Americans, but their prejudice against Muslims was not unique to them. Many Americans equated Muslims and terrorism, even if they did not threaten to burn Korans. According to an *ABC News/Washington Post* poll, only 37 percent of Americans view Islam favorably, which is significantly less than the poll conducted in October of 2001 after the terrorist attacks. Moreover, 49 percent of Americans view Islam unfavorably, which demonstrates that Jones's intolerance might be more common than we might like to admit.¹⁶ While Meacham can claim a larger trend of tolerance, Jones and public opinion about Muslims suggest otherwise.

A dark vision of American life.

Yet Jones was not the only figure branded with the iconic image of intolerance, bigotry, and racism. A constellation of new political movements, organized under the moniker of Tea Party and claiming the revolutionary spirit of the original Boston Tea Party, stirs populist fervor, mobilizes voters, and seeks governmental reform. The Tea Party movements trace their origins back to CNBC pundit Rick Santelli's comments about the mortgage crisis and bailout. On February 19, 2009, Santelli called for voters to revolt against the plan while standing on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. His rant, called the "Shout Heard Round the World," was a heated affair. The outburst was a couple minutes in length, and Santelli claimed what America needed was a new Tea Party, a revolution to give power back to voters. Voters, who like Santelli felt that the bailouts and stimulus packages were wrong, organized their own Tea Party events. The first Tea Party rally was held in Washington, D.C., on February 27, and the movement was born.¹⁷ Santelli has become one face of the Tea Party, and Glenn Beck, a *Fox News* commentator, author, and radio host, has become another prominent persona of this burgeoning political movement, despite his attempts to suggest otherwise. Writing for the *Weekly Standard*, Matthew Continetti argues that Santelli and Beck

represent two poles of the Tea Party movement. Both feel the country is "wildly off course," that the government "subsidizes bad behavior," and that by returning to the founders of the nation we can steer the country to the right course.¹⁸ While Continetti is comfortable with Santelli's style and rhetoric, Beck makes him a bit nervous. He writes that Beck "provides his audiences with a dark vision of American life" in which "rich, highly educated, radical elites are using instruments of power to control the common man and indoctrinate his children." These "elitists" battle with "patriots by calling them racists and extremists." For Continetti, the danger is that Beck, unlike Santelli, finds the American nation utterly broken. The country made great by the founders' vision is crumbling, and Beck calls on his radio and television audiences to turn back the tides of dangerous "progressivism" and declare themselves the true patriots defending a declining nation.¹⁹

In his writing and in his television and radio shows, Beck urges Americans to take back their nation and bring the government back under the control of the people. His 9/12 Project urges voters to take back their country, their values, and their government. Beck is an amateur historian who looks to the Founding Fathers and particular conservative historians, including W. Cleon Skousen, not to "assault contemporary liberalism," but to deconstruct "the very foundations of the New Deal and the Progressive Era."²⁰ Beck's rendering of American history informs the audiences at his shows, his speeches, and his public events about what exactly the nation once was, the trouble that the nation now faces, and his belief about the rapid declension of America. Beck suggests that America was once unified and good, and he encourages his audiences to redeem their nation.

On August 28, 2010, Beck hosted a "Restoring Honor" rally to "celebrate America." The date coincided with the forty-seventh anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, which occurred on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. According to Beck, he did not realize the anniversary. He originally hoped the rally would be held on September 12 to echo his 9/12 Project, but the date was on Sunday, the Sabbath, which was not acceptable to Beck because of his religious faith. Later, Beck claimed that it must have been "divine providence" for the date to work out as such.²¹ At the rally, Beck

spoke fervently about the need to restore America to its previous greatness and to reinstate the role of the divine in this redemption. Beck stated, "Something that is beyond man is happening. America today begins to turn back to God. For too long, this country has wandered in darkness."²² The rally was attended by at least 80,000 people, Tea Party supporters and otherwise, illustrating Beck's popularity and the desire of many citizens that America return to some fabled past.²³

The rally proved to be highly controversial and generated much print, blog, and radio commentary. Civil rights activist Rev. Walter Fauntroy declared that the Tea Party movement was synonymous with the Ku Klux Klan. At a news conference of the National Press Club, two days before the rally, Fauntroy told reporters: "We are going to take on the barbarism of war, the decadence of racism, and the scourge of poverty, that the Ku Klux—I meant to say the Tea Party. . . . You all forgive me, but I—you have to use them interchangeably."²⁴ Fauntroy continued that he did not want to be painted as angry or reactionary, but "when this right-wing conservative exclusionary group comes to highjack our movement, we have got to respond."²⁵ Fauntroy equated Beck and his rally attendees to the same folks who tried to cut the cables of the sound system during King's famous speech. Stephen Colbert, the satirical host of Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report*, even noted wryly: "Finally someone is bringing Martin Luther King's movement back to its conservative white roots."²⁶ Colbert and Fauntroy pointed out one of the most common criticisms of the Tea Party movement: that it is a movement of white people attempting to restore white dominance in America. For some news outlets, *Salon* and *Newsweek*, to name just two, the umbrella term "Tea Party" pretty much describes movements of white people claiming victimized status and disenfranchisement in American culture.²⁷ *Newsweek* asks, "Are Tea Partiers Racist?" and their answer is a bit more complicated. Relying on a University of Washington Institute for the Study of Ethnicity survey, supporters of the Tea Party movement had "a higher probability [around 25 percent] . . . of being racially resentful than those who are not Tea Party supporters."²⁸ This preponderance for racial resentment quickly became a venue for Tea Party detractors to label the larger movement as racist. The NAACP even called for Tea Party organizations to dispel racists from their ranks.²⁹

For *Salon's* Christopher Hitchens, Beck's rally showcased the burgeoning white concern that "white America is within thinkable distance of a moment when it will no longer be the majority." Those attending Beck's Restoring Honor rally wanted to return to "the roots," or origins, of the nation with Pilgrims, Puritans, and founders.³⁰ What Hitchens argues is that the return to the roots and origins is loose code for the return to dominant whiteness. Using Beck's retelling of history, rally attendees and Beck's fans can imagine a nation in which American history starts with white colonists, continues to the founders, ignores slavery's role in the Civil War, and sees a dire threat in anything labeled progressive. The Tea Party, then, is a desperate move to restore something that white Christian Americans feel is almost lost. Beck is a lightning rod for both liberal and conservative criticism, and some Tea Party members disavow him because of his controversial style. The Tea Party emerged in the American news media as a movement with plenty of populist fervor but no substance.

Yet this rendering of Beck and the Tea Party is mostly unsatisfying. The goal, it seems, of much of the news coverage is to paint the movement as dangerous fringe—but fringe nonetheless. The desire to separate Tea Party supporters from mainstream politics and culture is an attempt to place their ideology and vision of history at the fringes of American life. To marginalize Tea Partiers is to marginalize the influence of their ideas on our larger nation as a whole. Fringe ideas equal fringe status. Yet the people who attended Beck's rally do not seem that different from other Americans. Alex McNeill attended the rally and wrote:

Those with whom I spoke wanted to be sure that I understood the Tea Party is distinct from Glenn Beck or Sarah Palin, and that it is more than the sum of its spokespersons. Most wanted me to see that they were ordinary, hardworking, Christian Americans who were fed up, frustrated with a system that failed them again, angry over the country's direction, and interested in a return to (as the Restoring Honor website put it) "the values that founded this great nation."³¹

For McNeil, the people of the Tea Party found hope in Beck's rally and in the political movements, and their frustration was palpable. He continued, "Individually, most Tea Partiers are nice people, trying to

do what's right, motivated by good intentions."³² They seemed normal and caring, unlike their caricatures in other news stories and press. While McNeil generously assesses the motives of rally attendees, the lingering association of the Tea Party with extremism remained strong and unforgiving. Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, a Democrat from Texas, disagreed. In a workshop for the NAACP, Lee made a comparison similar to Fauntroy's, but a month earlier, saying:

All those who wore sheets a long time ago have now lifted them off and started wearing . . . clothing . . . with a name . . . tea party. Don't you be fooled. Those who used to wear sheets are now being able to walk down the aisle and speak as a patriot because you will not speak loudly about the lack of integrity of this movement.³³

While the members of the Tea Party might be ordinary and sincere, Lee was convinced that they were just a newer incarnation of the Ku Klux Klan.

Who represents the Klan's legacy?

Jones, Beck, and the Tea Party movement generate significant ire and journalistic ink, which cannot possibly be covered here. Yet the more important issue for me is the attempt to associate the Gainesville pastor and the larger Tea Party movement with the Klan. This is a bold and criticized move that demonstrates the legacy of the Ku Klux Klan in the American imagination. What is at stake in labeling both Jones and the Tea Party as inheritors of the Klan's legacy? Why brand Koran burning and a rally on Washington as indicative of the Klan? Who stands to gain with such representations? As a historian of religious intolerance and the Klan, I was waiting for the Klan to emerge in these public debates as the method to label persons and movements as nefarious and harmful as the white-robed vigilantes. The Klan's legacy, after all, revolves around violence, racism, misogyny, privilege, and white Protestantism. The men and women who burned crosses and donned robes become shorthand in our culture for anything nefarious, dangerous, or explicitly racist. The iconic Klansman carries both visual and ideological weight. Just the mention of the Klan in association with Jones or the Tea Party spurs media attention. Importantly,

the image of the Ku Klux Klan, the white-robed Knights lighting crosses on fire, is a constant in the American imaginary. From John Grisham novels to television shows and film to music videos, the image of the Klan appears again and again in American popular culture to represent the seedy, backward, and dangerous. The long history of the order and its many manifestations is boiled down into the image of a Klan in regalia, an image of terror and intimidation. Binding people and movements to the Klan is an effective tool to showcase nefarious intentions and legacies.

White-robed Klansmen and the mention of the Ku Klux Klan appear as useful metaphors for intolerance, hatred, and violence. Images of Klansmen and Klanswomen still haunt our public spoken, written, and visual culture. This means that identifying a movement or person as being like the Klan carries heavy symbolic and ideological weight. To be labeled as a part of the lineage of the Klan signals one's participation in the corruption, prejudice, or outright hatred. This supposedly showcases a "corruption" of American ideals, a blatant acceptance of hatred and a danger to American society as a whole. To be labeled as "Klan" signifies detriment and destruction. The question that remains, then, is how this association bears fruit in our public discourse. Or to explain this more simply: what does one gain by labeling an adversary or competing movement as Klan? By describing the Tea Party or Jones as the same as the hooded order shows us that these political movements and this pastor are not a part of the American mainstream. Their ideas, then, do not hold cultural value, and other Americans are their opposites: tolerant, pluralist, and accepting. Yet I wonder who is the true inheritor of the Klan's legacy: the Klan seamstress, an inflammatory minister, or a broader populist movement? Who represents the vision of white Protestant America that the 1920s Klan fought hard to protect and redeem? In distinctly different ways, all three examples represent the Klan's brand of religious nationalism and vision of what America should be.

For Ms. Ruth, the legacy is the most identifiable because she manufactures Klan robes and artifacts. She most obviously claims the mantle of the Ku Klux Klan and inherits her membership from previous generations of her family. Her blessing ritual illuminates her Christian faith and the continued attachment between faith and intolerance. No

one would deny that Ms. Ruth inherited the Klan's brand of Christian nationalism and white supremacy.

For Pastor Terry Jones, the legacy is not the burning of objects but his use of modern technology, intimidation, and exclusion to fight a so-called enemy of the American nation, Islam. In threatening Muslims and attempting to destroy sacred objects, he created a one-dimensional enemy of a white Christian nation that must be battled at all costs. The "torch" was not passed to him directly, but through a style of politics that highlights the dangers of pluralism and multiculturalism to the nation's fate. For Jones, the terrorist attacks made his views tangible and real. His threat to burn the Koran did not bind him to the Klan as much as his ideas about enemies and national safety. Moreover, Jones is representative of anti-Muslim fervor in the United States. While many Americans will not burn Korans, they will contest the ability of Muslims to build mosques and practice their religion freely.

Finally, the Tea Party's vision of American history and the destiny of the nation represents a crucial legacy of the Klan: the battle for who controls our national narratives. Long before Glenn Beck and his chalkboard, amateur Klan historians whitewashed national history to place white Protestants at the center of American life. Klansmen and Klanswomen feared the decline of white Protestant America, and they fought rhetorical battles to preserve their rightful place in nation. They were guardians of a certain vision of nation, much like the Tea Party hopes to be today. Of course, the preservation of nation benefits certain people at the cost of others. The Klan's brand is still present today. Yet the order's legacy is not merely contained by white-robed members of the modern Klan but also appears in the long-lasting legacy of America's religious intolerance and the fervent desire for the nation to return to its origins, but only if those origins are white and Protestant.