

'President Carter Saw Red...And Then He Called Me a Coward'

By JERRY THOMPSON

Jimmy Carter's famous grin disappeared as he looked across the Labor Day crowd at Tusculumbia, Ala., and saw that my Ku Klux Klan buddies were unfurling a Confederate battle flag.

Suddenly, this Southern-born president, whose administration stood for equal rights for black Americans, recognized our white robes and hoods — and he saw red.

"THERE ARE some who practice cowardice and preach fear and hatred," said President Carter departing from the text of his prepared speech and "It makes me angry when I see them with a Confederate battle flag."

I had anticipated many eventualities when I had signed up as an undercover member of the Ku Klux Klan. But I had not expected to be called a coward by the president of the United States.

Nor had I anticipated that the presence of the Ku Klux Klan at his opening campaign speech would become the trigger that would fire the opening shots in the presidential campaign between Carter and Ronald Reagan.

Almost at the moment Carter was criticizing the KKK, Reagan was in Pennsylvania criticizing Carter for opening the Democratic campaign in Tusculumbia — which Reagan mistakenly declared was "the birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan."

THE ACTUAL birthplace of the Klan is Pulaski, Tenn.

When the president attacks the Klan it is big news. And when a presidential candidate makes a blunder it also is big news. So Carter's blast and Reagan's

bloopers gave our KKK group substantial publicity.

For a couple of days after the Carter speech, the two presidential candidates and their staffs were hurling Klan-related barbs at each other. Still more news involving the KKK.

Inside the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan Don Black, the Imperial Wizard — the man who had "recruited" me into the Klan almost a year earlier — was delighted that his picketing of the president had made such a media stir.

"When both candidates recognize us it makes us healthy," Black told me in a later conversation. No matter that the coverage was largely pejorative. Any Klan news was good news to Black.

BLACK'S BRANCH of the Klan had been losing considerable momentum for months to the rival organization, the Invisible Empire of the KKK, headed by his arch-foe, Bill Wilkinson.

Now this protest against Carter, the response from the president and the crack by Reagan gave Black what he thought he needed: national recognition. He was elated.

**My Life
with the
KLAN**



"It's got to help us," he told me. His only disappointment was that Reagan, who had gotten what I am certain was an unwanted KKK endorsement, had made demeaning statements about the Klan in the exchanges with Carter.

But it was a minor disappointment.

Even before Black's idea about picketing and heckling the president occurred to him, I had already decided that the time had come for me to move to another area and join the rival Invisible Empire of the KKK.

As an investigative reporter for *The Tennessean*, working to penetrate the Klan movement, I felt I had benefited all I could from an association with Black's organization.

I HAD BECOME convinced that Black's KKK "Knights" were disorganized and losing members to Bill Wilkinson's Invisible Empire. Don Black seemed more theoretical than activist.

In July, after nearly eight months of association with Black, I talked with my publisher, John Seigenthaler, about the prospect of moving my "place of residence" to Cullman, joining Wilkinson's group but remaining a part of Black's organization.

We had doubts that it was safe to try to belong to both Klan empires at the same time. But I had gained considerable confidence as the months had passed.

I had discovered that Klan "security precautions" were mostly a myth. I now felt that I could pull it off, or, if discovered by one group, I could simply stay with the rival Klan organization — or quit and come home.

The publisher finally agreed. My move already was under way at the time of Carter's Labor Day speech.

In earlier articles, I already have pointed out how quick Klan leaders

are to seize upon any incident or racial tragedy to try to gain notoriety for themselves. This was the case when the White House announced late in August that the president would open his campaign in North Alabama.

I FIRST HEARD of Don Black's plan to picket the president from Ben Walker, a member of Black's security forces who heads the small Fulltondale, Ala., den of the Knights.

"We are going to march against the president," Walker told me by telephone. "Get yourself ready. Don is already up in North Alabama demanding a parade permit from the Tusculumbia officials."

I asked Walker whether Black could get a parade permit.

"They don't want to give us the permit," he said. "But if they don't I'm willing to march anyway and let them arrest us."

Seigenthaler and I had talked in the past about the prospect of a demonstration resulting in my arrest. It could mean publicity and could damage my new relationship with Bill Wilkinson's Klan faction, the Invisible Empire, if my picture should be published being jailed with Don Black.

I ASKED Walker how strong Black was about marching if the permit were denied.

"I know him pretty well," he said. "I fear that he might back down on it without permission from the officials for us to march." That bore out my belief that Black was less an activist than an anti-semitic, racist theorist.

It was somewhat surprising to me to hear Walker, one of Black's key backers, tell me that he thought his leader might "back down." It validated my belief that Black's support was paper thin, even among his cadre of security guards.



—Staff photo by Jimmy Ellis

TUSCUMBIA, Ala.—Tennessean reporter Jerry Thompson, wearing his Ku Klux Klan robe and a cowboy hat, carries a sign with a misspelled slogan in a Klan march, Labor Day, when President Carter opened his re-election campaign.

In late July, Black had moved up from Grand Dragon of the Alabama Klan to the ultimate position, Imperial Wizard, an office he took over from his friend, David Duke of Metairie, La.

Duke had failed in discussions with his rival, Wilkinson, to "merge" the Knights into the "Invisible Empire." Duke had wanted \$35,000 to merge his organization under Wilkinson's leadership.

AFTER THAT, Duke gave up his Wizard's job to Black who was struggling to keep it going.

The breakdown of negotiations between the Knights and the Invisible Empire in July left the bitterness between the two groups more intense than ever.

Black's group, as it planned the march on President Carter, was gloating that Black had come up with the idea. There was concern that Wilkinson might try to move in on their action against the president, but that failed to materialize.

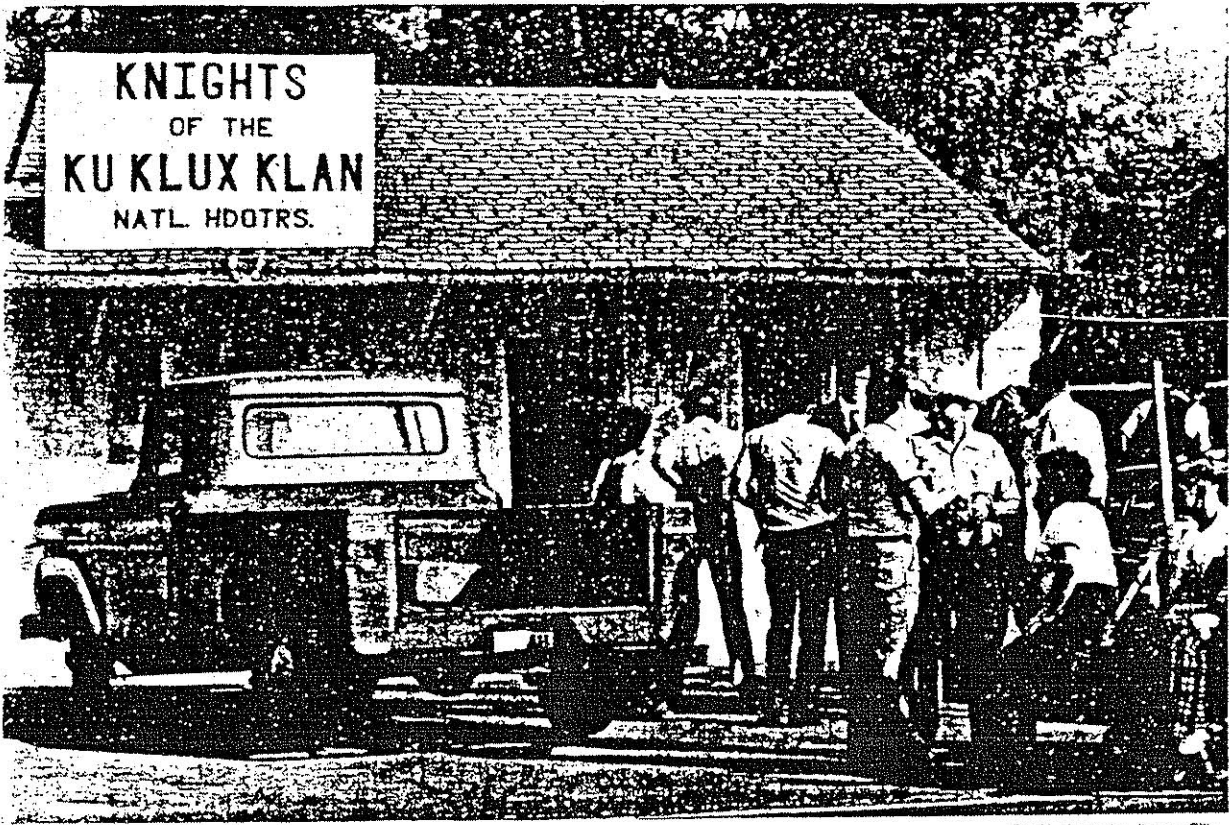
When Don Black returned to Birmingham from Tusculumbia, he told me of his conversations with the Tusculumbia officials — who, obviously, were discussing the president's visit with the White House and the Secret Service.

"They won't give us a permit, but they can't stop us from being there and demonstrating," said Black. He was not going to back down.

SINCE TAKING over the Knights he had moved the "national headquarters" to Tusculumbia because there were more members of his group in northern Alabama than in Birmingham.

"What I plan," Black told me, "is a rally the night before Carter gets to Tusculumbia. We'll meet at the national headquarters building, and we'll have a cross lighting."

"Next day we'll hit the streets and stage our protest against



—Staff photo by Jimmy Ellis

Planning Picketing of a President

Imperial Wizard Don Black, wearing a dark suit, meets with members of his Knights of the Ku Klux Klan outside its national headquarters at Tuscumbia, Ala. Among the gathering last Labor Day when Presi-

dent Carter appeared in the North Alabama city to open his re-election campaign is Tennesseean reporter Jerry Thompson, sporting a cowboy hat.

Carter. After he gets through talking we'll march through the street again in a group," he said. Obviously he was seeking to maximize the KKK's visibility.

It was typical Klan leadership thinking, Black later scheduled his Klan's national convention and a rally and march — for Birmingham on the November weekend of the Alabama-Auburn football game. Again, he was seeking to have his group seen by as many people as possible.

Wilkinson, like Black, seeks to exploit any possible event to Klan advantage. He will travel hundreds of miles to try to focus attention on a racial tragedy or flareup in a community.

HIS SECURITY guards usually go armed. But he laid the law down for the presidential confrontation: "no guns."

During the year I spent around Don Black's operation, I had participated in many events. I had attended public rallies, cross burnings, marches, den meetings, and had picketed a television station protesting the showing of a Klan documentary.

In terms of "status" Black obviously hadn't planned anything to match his march against the president.

We gathered in Tuscumbia the night before Labor Day — Aug. 31 — at the modest block building that serves as the "National Headquarters." The name on the front of the building is far more imposing than the structure itself.

Our plans had been announced in the national news media.

Only about 60 of us were Klan members. But a huge crowd

showed up for our rally and cross-burning ceremony.

MANY OF THEM were curiosity seekers. Many of them were reporters from far-flung places.

But too many of the more than 1,000 people who showed up that night obviously were sympathetic to the anti-black and anti-Semitic sentiments Don Black articulates.

Earlier in this series, I have cited examples of shocking, covert support the Klan has among "respectable" people who don't sign up as Klan members. This turnout of people on the eve of Carter's visit to the area was another example of that frightening, subtle sympathy for the KKK.

Black's speech to that crowd was once again typical: He preaches that black Americans are threatening the well being of whites and that the Jews are conspiring to wreck the country. He is not as impressive a speaker as his predecessor wizard David Duke.

But, like Duke, a college graduate, Black is well spoken and outspoken.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "just look around you. Just notice all these people in white robes."

"These people have made the most important decision in their lives. They have dedicated their lives to making this a better country, returning it to the greatness it was when our forefathers shed their blood to make it free."

"AS I'VE SAID, many of us have made our decisions, won't you make yours to join us so we can work together for such a worthy purpose."

He sounded like a fundamental-

ist preacher, and there was almost no applause.

There was some applause after he launched into an attack on President Carter, the federal government, blacks and Jews. He lambasted Carter for his support of affirmative action programs which he said was eliminating jobs that could be held by white Americans.

"Jobs are going to all the many thousands of Cuban refugees that Carter has welcomed with open arms," he said. "He has opened the border between the United States and Mexico by placing the son of an illegal Mexican immigrant in charge of the Border Patrol."

WHEN THE speaking and cross burning ceremony ended, about 60 of us — Klan members — gathered in the small headquarters as Black outlined the plans for the next day.

"We don't have a permit, but we are going to do it anyway," he said — suggesting that he was defying the local authorities. "We've got as much right to be on the sidewalks as anybody else who is here."

Already the local newspapers were reporting that Black had been told that while he could not have a permit to conduct a formal march the authorities said they could not stop him if he brought a group of Klan members to the speech by Carter.

Black outlined how we were to perform, and since the details were being carried by the local media it was obvious that some sort of prior agreement had been reached between the authorities and Black.

"We will remain on the sidewalks and march two by two, four feet apart," he said.

Our march was to begin about

three hours before Carter's arrival. We would walk through the downtown area, and afterward we would attend the president's speech.

BLACK TOLD US he was elated over the crowd turnout during the rally and cross burning. It was a surprise to me. I had been used to having Black indicate to me that there would be massive turnouts, only to be disappointed by a showing of half-a-dozen Klan members. I was shocked by the huge crowd that night. Actually, Jimmy Carter raised Black's crowd.

"Tomorrow," Black warned us after the rally, "there is going to be the closest scrutiny we have ever been under. We will be dealing with the Secret Service as well as the police."

"They will be checking us for weapons, and I want it clear that there won't be any guns. I am urging you not to bring any weapons."

His plan was for himself, Gene Russell, the commander of the Tuscumbia den and Stanley McCollom, a Tuscumbia "Giant," which is a regional officer, to walk in the front of the parade.

"If anybody is to be arrested it will be us. You all just do as you are told," Black said. After the march we would go in a group to hear Carter and wave the Confederate flag at him.

ON THE WAY to my motel that night, I heard on the radio that the details Black had outlined had been tentatively approved by the authorities.

I felt better about the coming day, but I was worried that somebody in the Wilkinson branch of

the Klan might be monitoring our march and recognize me. As it turned out, that was not the case. I spent three months more as a member of the rival empire before leaving after a den meeting last Saturday night.

On Labor Day, right on time, about 50 of us in robes arrived at the headquarters building for the short trip to town. I rode from the national headquarters in the back of the pickup truck of Ben Walker, Black's security guard. He was unarmed. In the truck with me were some of the placards we would carry during our picketing of Carter.

Downtown we assembled in the courthouse parking lot, donned our robes and joined a number — perhaps 80 — Klan sympathizers in civilian clothes. The borrowed hood I had worn at previous functions had been returned to its owner. My own hood was being made for me. I was wearing a cowboy hat with my white robe.

WHEN BLACK first saw me that morning, his mercurial personality described earlier in this series, threw me off guard. Noting my hat and sunglasses, he said to me without smiling: "J.W., you are traveling incognito today." I explained that his hood-maker had not provided me with a "helmet" of my own.

I had no idea what he meant — or if he meant anything. He walked away, talking to my fellow Klan members. Had my hat and glasses prompted some suspicion on his part? I worried about it throughout the day. As it turned out, my paranoia about being discovered was working overtime. Within a week, a hood was delivered to my house, for which I paid \$5 by check.

The morning sun was already hot — it would get into the 90s that day, but that wasn't the reason I began sweating profusely again. I was nervous once more. Did Black suspect me?

I also feared some of my friends from the news media would recognize me that day. That was why I wore sunglasses.

Despite what I thought was Black's caustic comment about my traveling "incognito," I joined the march and we trekked about six city blocks, winding up back at the parking lot where we disrobed for our return to Klan headquarters. No one paid much attention to me — except for the prisoners who heckled us when we passed by the city jail. "Hey, you crazy mothers," they shouted, "what the hell do you think you're doing?" As always, when I marched in Klan regalia, I felt silly.

THERE WERE a lot of people in town that day, most backing Jimmy Carter. Their response was lukewarm.

The picket signs we carried that day protested everything negative you could think of about the Carter administration: busing, the admission of Cubans and Asians to the country, "Jew Control" of his gov-

ernment, the failure to free the hostages in Iran, the downturn in the national economy.

I carried a sign that said, "End Welfare (sic) Giveaways!" I thought some Tennessean reporter might accuse me of writing that sign myself.

I had been told by Klan leaders months earlier that if we ever were attacked during a march our picket sticks could be used as clubs to defend ourselves. It wouldn't be necessary this day. Most people just ignored us. And the picket sticks were pretty flimsy, anyway.

Following the march, we gathered briefly in the courthouse parking lot, then drove back to the national headquarters. Some of our members disrobed and disbanded.

"I wouldn't listen to Jimmy Carter for 15 seconds," one of them said. But about a dozen of us went to the speaking, clad in our robes as a further form of protest.

WHEN WE arrived at the park where the annual Quad Cities Labor Day Picnic was being held, the crowd was already gathering to hear Carter.

We drew stares and glares as we made our way through the audience to a little mound in front of the president, and to his left, about a hundred yards from his bank of microphones.

While our morning march had been less than eventful, conducted under the watchful eyes of the Tusculum police who kept their distance, my Klan associates were feeling that the crowd they had drawn the night before provided them with the "exposure" they were seeking.

And so, there we were, a band of a dozen KKK members in a crowd of 30,000 who had come to hear the president.

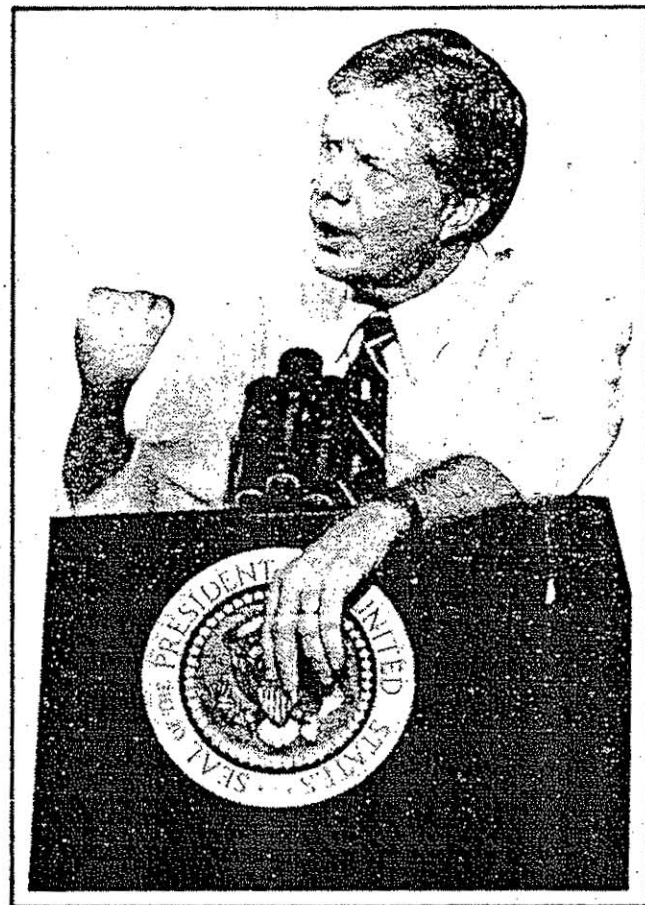
And except for us, most of the audience was overwhelmingly supportive of the president. He had begun his speech and was a few minutes into it when three members of our group unfurled the Confederate flag. As the Star and Bars suddenly billowed, it caught the president's eye and he gazed out at us, as if seeing our white robes for the first time.

"I say these people who wear white sheets do not understand what our country stands for," said the president.

AND HE WENT on to say to the crowd that the Klan represents "cowardice," "fear" and "hatred."

There was a brief moment while Carter was speaking during that day when one of our group exchanged words with a black youth when sheriff's deputies rushed in. It was one of those insignificant events that suddenly develops, threatens to create violence, then dissipates.

A group of black youths were talking with a young white teenager who was in the company of a white girl. One of my group of Klan members feared that the blacks were "surrounding" the



—AP Lasephoto

President Carter Faced Klan as Campaign Opened

"It makes me angry when I see them with a Confederate flag."

whites. We rushed over. They obviously had engaged in some hot words. The girl was wiping tears from her eyes.

"Get back," one of the Klansmen ordered the black youths.

"I don't have to back up for you," the black youngster retorted.

The Klansman, who was a stranger to me — and whom I have never seen again since that day — retorted: "Boy, you haven't been smacked until you get smacked by a Klansman."

BY THIS TIME sheriff's deputies rushed in, ordered us back to our place on the hill, told the group of youths to disperse — and the tense moment passed.

The president finished his talk, and we wandered off. It had been an eventful day for Don Black, and when I next talked to him by phone he was elated. He had elicited from Carter a blistering attack from the president's bully pulpit. "We got his attention," Black told me.

Black gloried over the headlines that kept his ego soaring for several days when Carter and Reagan kept the Klan alive as an issue.

Finally, Reagan felt obliged to issue an apology to Alabama and to

make a formal statement, saying he was sorry anything he said might have been interpreted as "reflecting adversely on Alabama or the city of Tusculum." Black told me he was surprised that Reagan made such a "dumb" mistake. Still, he was determined to endorse Reagan for president, "because he is our only choice." I'm sure that was about as welcome to the former California governor as a case of the mumps.

NEVER IN ALL the time that I knew Don Black — and there were times when I shared such intimacies as his wife's cat giving birth to kittens — did he seem so elated about the future success of the Klan.

But as events of the next few weeks would demonstrate, the presidential campaign controversy was not enough to bolster the Klan leader's organization.

Increasingly, it became apparent to me that Black and his group would soon be down the drain.

As a reporter, I was fortunate to have already made my move on to the more successful — and more violent-prone — Bill Wilkinson Klan group.