

Excuse me, America, your house is on fire: Lessons from Charlottesville on the KKK and “Alt-Right”

By Jalane Schmidt

On this 50th anniversary of the hippies’ “Summer of Love,” Charlottesville, Virginia, will be weathering a long, hot, right-wing extremist “[Summer of Hate](#).” The July 8, 2017, [Ku Klux Klan rally planned for Charlottesville](#) is not the group’s first appearance in our “[beautiful, ugly city](#),” as one local African-American pastor recently characterized this ostensibly liberal (Hillary Clinton received [80% of the local 2016 presidential election vote](#)) but [racially-riven](#) university town. One month after the KKK rally comes a larger, more ominous event: the Klan’s 21st century counterparts’ August 12, 2017, “Unite the Right: March on Charlottesville.” We are bracing ourselves.

Charlottesville’s local chapter of the KKK can hardly be described as having humble beginnings.

From the files of *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up*: the Klan’s 1921 cross-burning inauguration ceremony, reportedly attended by “hundreds of Charlottesville’s leading business and professional men,” was held at our area’s best-known attraction, the Monticello tomb of renowned local slaveholder [Thomas Jefferson](#). At the organization’s subsequent events, credentialed visiting national

Klan figures were introduced by ministers for [well-received speeches at the Courthouse](#) (an appropriate venue, given the [injustices systematically](#) imposed on African Americans there), and the KKK grew in prestige as it [attracted members among respectable elements](#) of the community. Which is to say: some of Charlottesville's current parks, streets, stores, buildings, and notable institutions likely bear the names of the town's "[influential citizens](#)" who were 1920s Klan associates. And today, we should bare the names of those whose identities were often [hidden under robes](#) and masks: the [county sheriff](#) was a [KKK member](#), phalanxes of 200 robed Klansmen were welcomed to reserved seats at [church revivals](#), the [University of Virginia](#) (a "public Ivy" founded by Thomas Jefferson) had its [own Klan chapter](#). As they rush to [denounce the impending July 8 visit of the KKK](#), these and [other local institutions need to come clean](#) about the history of their own past associations with this white supremacist organization which [terrorized blacks](#). The Virginia Realm of the Knights of the KKK [generously pledged \\$1,000 to the UVA gymnasium fund in 1921](#) for the University's 100th anniversary endowment drive. UVA President Edwin Alderman responded cordially, and expressed his "[hearty thanks](#)." Calculating the S&P 500 average and compound investment over 96 years — assuming the honorable gentlemen of the Virginia Realm honored their promised centennial Kapital Kampaign Kontribution — the sum could be worth a tidy \$16,000,000 today.

(Someone please alert the UVA Foundation and Alumni Association about this overlooked naming rights opportunity for a Hoos KKK scholarship.)

As the "Invisible Empire" expanded [locally](#), state-wide — with a [rash of lynchings](#), and [nationally](#) in the 1920s, the suit-and-tie branch of this lynch mob achieved substantial political reach. After splintering into factions, the misnamed United Klans of America operated as [assassination squads](#) during the Civil Rights

Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. These vigilantes often acted with the tacit (and [not-so-tacit](#)) support of local Southern law enforcement officials.

Remnants of this Reconstruction-era white supremacist terrorist group have [crawled out](#) from under their rock to demonstrate against [Charlottesville's effort to remove its Jim Crow-era Confederate monument](#) to General Lee. Historical preservationist organizations which support maintaining such Lost Cause relics have scrambled to voice their [disavowals](#). One local white nationalist organizer has sputtered a feverish [conspiracy theory](#): leftist activists must have put the Klan up to holding this July 8 event, a month prior to his own planned August 12 “alt-right” gathering at the General Lee statue, in order to tar his “legitimate conservatives” and Confederate devotees with the [same ugly KKK brush](#). He doth protest too much: the image from his own [promotional poster](#) for the August 12 “Unite the Right: March on Charlottesville” event — which features [Richard Spencer](#) as its headliner — clearly connects the dots between three white supremacist movements past and present, with sly nods to Third Reich graphic design style, and “alt-right” [Pepe the Frog icons](#) wearing Confederate military uniforms, marching in formation between Confederate monuments and Confederate flags. Churlish trolling, to be sure. But chilling. As [one Civil War historian has pointed out](#), white supremacists who congregate at Confederate monuments are right where they belong.

And so the [North Carolina-based Loyal White Knights of the KKK](#) will visit Charlottesville on July 8, 2017, for a one-hour gathering around the Stonewall Jackson statue next to the Courthouse in which their 1920s Klan forebears spoke, in now-named Justice Park. Not to worry: the group has assured Charlottesville's Chief of Police, Al Thomas, Jr. — the first African-American to hold this post — of their chivalrous intention to “take the high road.” Stay classy, KKK. Fortunately, the organization (to

use that term loosely) has been [in decline](#) for decades, and [Klan marches](#) draw few participants today.

The bigger threat is posed by the daily presence of the Klan's 21st-century "alt-right" successors.

Contemporary white nationalists have made [political in-roads](#), garnering [delegate status at the 2016 Republican National Convention](#), and now are ensconced as "journalists" with [White House Press Briefing credentials](#), and in positions as [Oval Office advisers](#). With robust [online recruitment](#) and new energy injected by the election of their xenophobic champion, President Trump (who owns a [winery](#) just outside of Charlottesville), these organizations' ranks continue to swell.

The white nationalist groups which held Charlottesville's [infamous May 13, 2017, Klan-like nighttime torch-lit rally](#) in then-named Lee Park are returning August 12, 2017, for an event in [now-renamed Emancipation Park](#). Leading white nationalists [Richard Spencer](#), [Derrick Davis](#), and [Jared Taylor](#) are all Virginians who come to Charlottesville to mobilize [local white supremacists](#). The "[Proud Boys](#)" are now organizing [in the area](#). They and their visiting [national associates](#), such as [Nathan Damigo](#) and [Matthew Heimbach](#) (a [neo-Nazi](#) who [assaulted](#) African-Americans at a Trump rally), are the veritable Imperial Wizards of today's Klan incarnations. Instead of robes and masks, [Taylor was reportedly spotted, disguised in a wig and sunglasses](#), during a recent dinner meeting with local acolytes at a restaurant on the downtown pedestrian mall—the [gentrifying](#) city's central gathering place.

During their 2017 stopovers in Charlottesville, right-wing extremists drove through black neighborhoods shouting threats and racial epithets, scrawled Nazi-themed notes on dinner receipts, physically shoved and yelled racist and homophobic

taunts at restaurant staff, and assaulted other residents in public spaces. City council members received [death threats](#). A brave African American high school-aged anti-racism activist has been [doxxed](#). These groups [incite violence](#) and are a [threat to public safety](#). [Crime statistics for the past decade](#) show that acts of violence perpetrated by the “alt-right,” such as the recent murders of [a black ROTC student at the University of Maryland](#), and [two Good Samaritans in Portland](#), far [outnumber](#) U.S. attacks by ISIS sympathizers which receive more attention. In the tragic Baltimore and Portland cases, the alleged perpetrators were already well-known to local anti-racism activists as violent right-wing extremists, but the police paid no heed to this [civilian-gathered intelligence](#), and only played catch-up after the fact. Thus the sense of urgency which spurs anti-racism activists to sound the alarm: it’s too late to intervene after the house has already burned to the ground. And excuse me, America, but your house is on fire.

Located in the land of the Founding Fathers — Presidents Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe all hail from the area — residents of [genteel Charlottesville](#) pride ourselves for our civility. But perhaps lynchings might have been prevented if more Southern whites in the 1920s had violated the norms of polite comportment by interrupting klavern assemblies. Instead, most Southern whites minded their manners, and said or did very little. And, like a malignant tumor that was ignored, the Klan metastasized.

Today, however, some Charlottesville [anti-racism activists](#) have begun [disrupting white supremacists’ gatherings](#) at local establishments on the city’s downtown pedestrian mall. A growing number of restaurants and bars there [refuse to serve](#) these white supremacists, or have banned them following altercations with staff or activists. But a fair number of self-identified moderates and liberals in this upscale, small Southern town are more concerned to continue dining in peace on \$40 locally-sourced medium-rare steaks and \$15 glasses of Côtes-du-Rhône. They ask,

Why are all dinner patrons within hearing distance — themselves and the white supremacist organizers alike — being disturbed, when everyone should be enjoying a quiet evening out with friends? (Because public safety, particularly that of marginalized communities, is at risk.)

Aren't these noisy anti-racist activists simply fanning the flames? (No. The activists are performing a public service by pulling the proverbial fire alarm on a fire already in progress that is proximate to marginalized communities, and which threatens to engulf everyone. The activists aren't being "divisive"; **rather they're exposing tensions which have existed for centuries** which are now being exploited in increasingly dangerous ways.) Isn't everyone, even "alt-right" organizers, entitled to freedom of speech and assembly? (Answer: this is not absolute, when they have announced on social media that they intend to incite violence.)

The First Amendment stops the *state* from curtailing *political* speech and *peaceful* public assembly, even those of insult-spewing, hateful bigots. But the First Amendment does not prohibit private citizens' countering of, and private businesses' right to refuse service to, those same bigots. Being an insult-spewing, hateful bigot has consequences: it may lead to **social rejection**, and it is not a protected category with respect to equal accommodations. The state will not prohibit white nationalists from organizing; concerned civilians face a different set of restrictions — and have different tools available. We can't falsely scream "fire" in a theater, but the theater owner may refuse to admit a patron who previously threatened to bring matches and lighter fluid.

Some fence-sitting moderates and liberals go on to complain that their polite sensibilities are offended by anti-racism activists' relentless verbal confrontations with groups of known "alt-right" organizers, at times amplified by bullhorns and punctuated with shouts of "Fuck white supremacy!" To this tone policing (amid the

literal [over-policing](#) of [left-wing activists](#) and their [protest plans](#)) one activist from the [local Black Lives Matter chapter](#) retorted: Why does the first word of that slogan offend you more than the last two? White supremacy is indeed pretty effing offensive. And its encroachment is dangerous and incendiary. There is no polite way to alert people when their house is on fire.

Reflecting the opinion of more provincial portions of their audience, local media too often focus on the blaring annoyance of the fire alarm, rather than the smoke and flames which occasion it. [Behind-the-curve journalists](#) bury the lede within a studiously neutral on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand “report the controversy” frame, neglecting to investigate the fuller scope of the problem, which is that the “alt-right” is surging locally and attracting an ever more [sinister cast of national characters](#). (After receiving a tip that white supremacists and anti-racism activists were arguing — again — on the downtown mall, one television reporter told me to update her if the public stand-off devolved into violence, so that she could alert her station to send a camera team. If it bleeds, it leads.) Other stories demonstrate that the interviewer lacks familiarity with the disturbing positions espoused by the “alt-right” interviewee and their fellow travelers. The result is a [kid-glove treatment](#) of white supremacists which normalizes them as simply a new, if quirky, offering within a mainstream range of political options. Although we are not in as dire circumstances, Charlottesville anti-racism activists feel a kinship with their besieged Civil Rights Movement-era predecessors in the 1960s South, who beseeched the national media (read: Northern outlets) to Please Send Help.

Hand-wringing [civil libertarians](#) tut-tut at some anti-racist activists’ [give-no-quarter](#), [allow-no-platform tactics](#) and admonish them to “grow up,” respect “free speech,” or urge us to pursue [dialogue](#) with those who consider us to be subhuman and

who [advocate for our removal](#) from their [hoped-for white homeland](#).

We are effectively being told to carry on as normal while today's Klan holds convivial organizational meetings at the next restaurant table. But in these circumstances, comity is no virtue. It is a failure of civic responsibility that could have blood on its hands. Many people mentally transport themselves back to critical moments of history—the Antebellum slavery regime, the rise of the Third Reich in Germany, or the Civil Rights Movement—and muse about what they might have done in those situations. They assure themselves of their moral superiority by imagining that they would have risked all to have been rabble-rousing abolitionists or a conductor on the Underground Railroad, have joined the French Resistance or hidden Jewish fugitives in their attics, or disrupted Klan meetings and marched with Martin Luther King across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Now is a historical moment to cast one's lot. Whatever you are doing (or not doing) today is what you would have been doing then.

Members of marginalized communities [implore our white fellow-citizens](#) to take clear, preemptive actions by leveraging the relative safety of their white privilege to publicly reject these “alt-right” groups and their message. Just as businesses affix rainbow stickers in their window to indicate their welcome of the LGBT community, so they should signal, in word and in deed, their solidarity with those of us being targeted by white supremacists.

But installing [yard signs](#) which affirm inclusivity, or displaying stickers, posters or tshirts with the “Klanbusters” meme above, or wearing [safety pins](#) are a minimal first step. Virtue signaling is [passive](#), and can only go so far. Additional action is needed to fight this fire. For the defense of the community and the collective good of the nation, inconvenience yourself and [get comfortable with making racists uncomfortable](#). Interrupt their dinners,

protest their rallies, and tell them: “Get your hate out of our community.” White supremacists are organizing here, having moved from Monticello to the Courthouse, to online, and on to downtown, under our very noses. We smell smoke. This is not a drill. The house is on fire. Don’t wait: join the brigade and douse the flames.