

American unmasked: the KKK



The journey of a photojournalist into the \"belly of the beast\", reveals a reality that many might associate with the past. The real story behind the photographs is the inexorable rise of extremist organisations in the U.S. and the spiraling number of hate-crime victims. As America's middle and working class gets thrown out of work, hate groups are flourishing. The revival of the KKK is but one example of this disquieting phenomenon.

A child has his outfit adjusted at a Labor Day rally in Arkansas.

The USA has a new president but an old problem - and nothing typifies it like today's Ku Klux Klan. The photographer Anthony Karen gained unprecedented access to the 'Invisible Empire'.

These images show members of the Ku Klux Klan as they want to be seen, scary and secretive and waiting in the wings for Barack and his colour-blind vision for America to fail. Anthony Karen, a former Marine and self-taught photojournalist was granted access to the innermost sanctum of the Klan. He doesn't tell us how he did it but he was considered trustworthy enough to be invited into their homes and allowed to photograph their most secretive ceremonies, such as the infamous cross burnings.

When he talks about the Klan members he has encountered he tends not to dwell on the fate of their victims. Karen's feat is that he takes us to places few photojournalists have been before, into the belly of the beast. The scenes he presents portray a kinder, gentler Klan. The mute photographs present an organisation that is far less threatening than the hate group of our popular imagination. Consciously or otherwise, his photographs hold our imagination in their grip while doing double duty as propaganda for the extremist right, much as Leni Riefenstahl's work did for the Nazis.

Today the Klan is a mere shadow of what it used to be and there are at least 34 differently named Klan groups. "They are a fairly low-rent bunch of people, many of whom use their local organisations as a way of raising money for themselves," says Mark Potok, director of the Intelligence Project at the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama.

Photographs of the Klan folk in their hooded regalia aren't all that rare. The archives of America's newspapers contain plenty of front-page photographs of lynchings throughout the past century. Three years ago, James Cameron, the last survivor of an attempted lynching died, thankfully of natural causes.

The older generation of Black Americans grew up hearing about Klan lynchings whispered over the dinner table but never mentioned outside the home. At the Klan's height, around the turn of the 20th century, some 30 to 40 lynchings a

year were being recorded. It is believed that there were in fact many more unrecorded deaths, especially in the cotton-growing south where the deaths of black field-hands were often not recorded.

Karen's photographs show an entirely different side of the far right. He presents a 58-year-old, fifth-generation seamstress he calls "Ms Ruth" and he has photographed her running up an outfit for the "Exalted Cyclops" or head of a local KKK chapter. She gets paid about \$140 for her trouble. Karen tells us that she uses the earnings to help care for her 40-year-old quadriplegic daughter, who was injured in a car accident 10 years ago.

Karen's images of the Klan and its supporters regularly appear on the recruiting websites of the far right. Out of context, the images of hooded Klansmen and their families tell us little of the real story – the inexorable rise in the number of extremist organisations in America.

The number of hate-crime victims in the US is also rising and as America's middle and working class gets thrown out of work, the hate groups behind the crimes are flourishing. As people lose their homes to foreclosure and, without the benefit of a safety net, find themselves slipping into poverty, there is already a search for scapegoats underway. Immigrants from central and South America have become particular targets as the grim economic times take hold.

Anyone who doubts the capacity of the modern KKK for violence need look no further than the recent case of 43-year-old Cynthia Lynch of Tulsa, Oklahoma. She had never been out of her home state before she travelled to Louisiana to be initiated into the Klan. She was met off the bus by two members of a group that calls itself the Sons of Dixie and taken to a campsite in the woods 60 miles north of New Orleans.

There, Lynch's head was shaven and after 24 hours of Klan boot camp, including chanting and running with torches, she had had enough and asked to be taken to town. After an argument, the group's "Grand Lordship", Chuck Foster, is alleged to have shot her to death. He was charged with second-degree murder and is awaiting trial. Just as shocking is that the event happened in Bogalusa, a backwoods Louisiana town that was once known as the Klan capital of the US.

In the 1960s the Klan operated with impunity in Bogalusa and once held a public meeting to decide which black church to burn down next. Local Klan members were suspected of ambushing two black policemen in 1965, killing one and wounding the other. No one was ever tried for the crimes.

Despite all its notoriety the Klan has been a spent force for decades with nothing like the clout it once wielded. At its peak the KKK boasted four million members and controlled the governor's mansions and legislatures of several states. Since the 1930s the KKK has been in a state of disorganisation and today it probably has 6,000 members. But the economic crisis is swelling their ranks and already, a month after the inauguration of the first black president, the tidal wave of interracial harmony that greeted Obama's election is starting to recede.

"Things are certain to get worse," says Potok. "The ingredients are all there: a dire economy that is certain to get worse; high levels of immigration; the white majority that is soon to turn into a minority and a black man in the White House."

More than 400 hate-related incidents, from cross-burnings to effigies of President Obama hanging from nooses have been reported, according to law-enforcement authorities and Potok's organisation, which files lawsuits against hate groups aimed at making them bankrupt.

Late last year, two suspected skinheads who had links to a violent Klan chapter in Kentucky were charged with plotting to kill 88 black students. They were then going to assassinate President Obama by blasting him from a speeding car while wearing white tuxedos and top hats. They were never going to succeed, given the huge security net around Obama, but the fact that they had planned such an outlandish attack may be a harbinger of things to come.

"There is a tremendous backlash to Obama's election," says Richard Barrett, the leader of the Nationalist Movement, another white supremacist group. "Many people look at the flag of the Republic of New Africa that was hoisted over the White House as an act of war."

Sources

- www.voltairenet.org

