

# The ADL makes strange bedfellows in the South

by Jeffrey Steinberg

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## Terror in the Night: The Klan's Campaign Against the Jews

by Jack Nelson

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Until November 1968, Jack Nelson was a fairly typical liberal reporter covering the civil rights movement in the South. As the Atlanta bureau chief of the *Los Angeles Times*, Nelson had cultivated good ties with both the Federal Bureau of Investigations and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (ADL). Many of his stories about the trials and tribulations of the civil rights movement, including his coverage of the racial violence meted out by the Ku Klux Klan, the White Citizens Councils, and other virulently segregationist groups, were based on information provided by the FBI and the ADL.

All that changed when Nelson received a late-night, frantic phone call from Ken Dean, a Baptist minister and civil rights activist who was the head of the Mississippi Council on Human Relations. Nelson had known Dean since 1965, and considered Dean to be one of his best sources, and also a man of great integrity. Ever since June 30, 1968, when local police in Meridian, Mississippi had gotten into a shootout with two Ku Klux Klan terrorists who were caught trying to plant a bomb at the home of a local Jewish community leader, Meyer Davidson, Dean had been regularly contacting Nelson in a hitherto fruitless effort to get the *Times* reporter to look deeper into the incident. One of the two would-be KKK bombers, a local schoolteacher named Cathy Ainsworth, had been killed in the incident, and a second terrorist, Thomas Albert Tarrants III, had barely survived the ambush. He was shot 70 times.

Nelson agreed to pursue the story, which Dean said would implicate the ADL, the FBI, and the Meridian police in a pre-meditated execution of the Klansmen. Nelson's first step was to contact Adolph "Bee" Botnick, the ADL's southern regional director in New Orleans. Nelson's notes of Bot-

nick's comments from that initial phone conversation read in part: "It was logical someone had paid to set up the Klan members . . . he had helped raise funds for the purpose . . . wouldn't say how much was paid . . . wouldn't want to see the ADL involved in a story about the Meridian incident . . . four guys know I was in on the original planning . . . it was a trap—you know that."

Although Botnick acknowledged the incident in that initial conversation with Nelson (he would later deny that he had admitted anything to either Nelson or Dean), he smugly reminded the reporter that the latter lacked sufficient details or corroboration to go to print with the story. Botnick exuded confidence that Nelson would never get to the bottom of the Meridian incident.

Following that initial confirming discussion with Botnick, Nelson received a very detailed, 11-page, memo from Dean, which spelled out a horrifying tale of ADL-FBI-police collusion in buying the services of one group of Klan killers to set up another Klan hit team for a police kill. Ever present in the scheme was the ADL, ostensibly a private, tax-exempt public interest group devoted to combatting anti-Semitism through public education.

Still lacking "smoking gun" proof, Nelson, using his best Mississippi "good ol' boy" persona (he was born and raised in the Deep South), won the confidence of the key Meridian police officials involved in the murder plot. They turned over hundreds of pages of police reports, including payment vouchers, that told exactly what had happened. Nelson made sure that he had obtained the evidence aboveboard, and arranged for another *Times* reporter to sit in on several long sessions with Meridian police officer Luke Scarborough to authenticate the taped discussion and the receipt of the police files.

## Organized crime and political terror

Nelson's book not only provides comprehensive detail of the events leading up to the June 30, 1968 shootout. He also provides some extremely insightful background on the state of affairs in the Jewish community in the Deep South during the height of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. Most of all, with a journalist's cautious sense of understatement, he provides a damning indictment of the ADL as a private police force, judge and jury run amok.

In reading Nelson's book, I found myself trying to step into the shoes of the average American; trying to gauge how he or she might respond to the events and personalities portrayed. In an ironic sense, I was operating at a disadvantage, because I have been figuratively engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the ADL for more than a decade. After participating in the research and writing of the book *Dope, Inc.*—an exposé of the international narcotics cartel—I found myself and my closest associates targeted by the ADL, publicly branded as an anti-Semite (I was raised in a religious Jewish home), and eventually set up for federal prosecution.

The more I probed over the years, the more I learned that the ADL was anything but a Jewish civil rights group. It was more precisely a front for organized crime, with deep ties as well into the FBI. Recent revelations about the late FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's ties to gangster Meyer Lansky provide essential insight into how the ADL came in recent decades to enjoy such clout. Top ADL officials like Sterling National Bank president Theodore Silbert personified the cozy back-room relationship between the top dons of organized crime and the FBI chief.

I had first learned of Nelson's exposé of the Meridian events years ago, and still retain a weather-worn copy of his original 1970 *Los Angeles Times* story on the Ainsworth-Tarrants shootout in my files. For me, the Meridian incident was one of a score of such tales of ADL collusion with the KKK. In the mid-1970s, an ADL operative named Jimmy Rosenberg had infiltrated the Trenton, New Jersey chapter of the KKK and solicited a bomb attack against the local headquarters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). A decade later, Rosenberg, using his *nom de guerre* "Jimmy Anderson," was still operating inside the racist right as a Queens, New York chapter leader of the Christian Defense League. In 1979, Jewish Defense League member Mordechai Levy, operating under ADL instruction, attempted to organize a KKK-Nazi Party rally at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, and simultaneously tried to organize a potentially violent counter-demonstration involving Jewish and leftist groups.

More recently, in the course of my research for *The Ugly Truth about the ADL* (Washington, D.C.: Executive Intelligence Review, 1992), I learned that the ADL and its "mother lodge" B'nai B'rith had been part of the very same Confederate espionage apparatus that had spawned the Klan in the post-Civil War era. Simon Wolf, then international president of B'nai B'rith, had been a guest of honor at the 1901 Washington, D.C. unveiling of the statue of Klan founder Gen. Albert Pike. In April 1865, Wolf had been one of the last people to meet with John Wilkes Booth on the day of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. He had been briefly jailed in 1862 as the suspected ringleader of a Confederate spy organization in the nation's capital.

## Support for segregation

Nelson is aware of this strange legacy of the Jewish community in the Deep South, and his book includes a historical description in the opening chapters of the Mississippi Jewish community's support for segregation: "Jews had lived in Mississippi since before it joined the Union in 1817. They had fought on its side when it tried to leave the Union in 1860; many were proud that a Jew, Judah Benjamin, had been an important figure in Jefferson Davis' Confederate government. Along with other whites, they had supported and prospered from 'the peculiar institution' of slavery in its pure form before Emancipation and in its covert form

afterwards."

Many Jewish leaders in Jackson and Meridian were still dyed-in-the-wool segregationists even as the civil rights struggles of the 1960s gained steam and Mississippi was flooded with Freedom Riders from the North, many of whom were Jews. When the Klan turned its attention from black churches and civil rights activists and began bombing synagogues in southern cities, ostensibly in response to the flood of northern Jewish civil rights activists, the South's Jewish community, which had by and large been disinterested in the plight of the blacks, suddenly was up in arms. To be sure, there were courageous southern Jews who joined enthusiastically in the civil rights battles from early on. Rabbi Nussbaum, whose synagogue and home in Jackson were bombed by the Klan, was one such figure. Ironically, according to Nelson, one of the initial suspects in the bombings (they were actually carried out by Tarrants) was a member of Nussbaum's congregation who made no bones about the fact that he detested the rabbi's civil rights activism. Another member of that congregation, attorney Al Binder, who would play a pivotal role in funding the Meridian shootout, had actually toured the country as a speaker for the state's official segregationist lobby.

While ostensibly on the side of the civil rights fighters, the ADL, according to Nelson, was consumed with its own "paranoid" crusade against communism. By Nelson's descriptions, ADL regional boss Botnick was a self-styled Roy Cohn or J. Edgar Hoover, who at one point tried to have Ken Dean purged from the leadership of the Mississippi civil rights movement because he once showed a film favorably describing the Student Non-Violence Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Spy files on Dean were funnelled from Botnick into the ADL's central files in New York City.

Most importantly Nelson's book, in recounting a typical instance of ADL subversion, forces the reader to take up some rather thorny issues of morality and law. Is vigilante justice acceptable? Can a private agency commit murder—even if its accomplices are licensed federal and local police?

In the Meridian case, the ADL funnelled a total of \$69,000 to Raymond and Alton Wayne Roberts, two brothers who were notorious as Klan murderers of blacks and civil rights workers. Alton Wayne Roberts, at the time of the Meridian events, was already convicted of the murders of Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner in Philadelphia, Miss. in 1964. As the result of the ADL-FBI collusion, Alton Wayne Roberts served less than three years for the Philadelphia killings, despite the fact that evidence emerged that he was the trigger man.

It is an ugly story. By focusing exclusively on Meridian, Nelson provides a richness of detail, but at the same time, leaves the reader potentially open to the false impression that the Meridian case was somehow an aberration. The best way to do justice to the Nelson book, is to read it, and follow up by reading *The Ugly Truth About the ADL*.