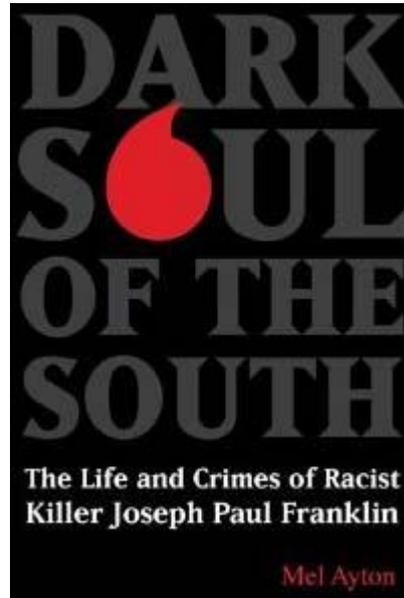


Pulling the Trigger – How Hate Groups Influence Racist Killer Joseph Paul Franklin

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An excerpt from Mel Ayton recently published book [Dark Soul of the South – The Life and Crimes of Racist Killer Joseph Paul Franklin](#)

by **Mel Ayton**

In 2010 the U.S. Supreme Court cleared the way for executions to start again in Missouri when it refused to hear the Missouri lethal injection case, *Clemons v. Crawford*. In response, Missouri's attorney general stated executions would recommence. He also said he wanted Potosi Prison Death Row inmate and racist killer, Joseph Paul Franklin, to be the first to die.

In 1977 Franklin, a self-proclaimed racist and anti-Semite, began his murder spree after concluding the organizations he had joined – the American Nazi Party, the States Rights Party and the Ku Klux Klan – were not serious enough in putting their extremist and violent beliefs into practice. Between 1977 and 1980 Franklin acted as a “Lone Wolf” assassin, roaming the length and breadth of the United States in pursuit of Jews, African-Americans and especially interracial couples whom he believed were “beasts ready for the slaughter.” In a three-year period he bombed the home of a Jewish lobbyist in a Washington D.C. suburb and a synagogue in Chattanooga, Tennessee; used a sniper rifle to kill a congregant outside a St Louis synagogue; shot and wounded Civil Rights leader Vernon Jordan; shot and paralyzed magazine publisher Larry Flynt; killed two African-American joggers in a sniper shooting in Salt Lake City; shot and killed two young African-American boys in Cincinnati, Ohio; successfully targeted with his sniper rifle interracial couples in Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, Georgia and Wisconsin; and shot and

killed African- American men in Doraville, Georgia, Falls Church, Virginia and Indianapolis, Indiana. He also murdered four young women who had confessed to him they had had sexual relationships with black men. Eventually, he was sentenced to numerous life sentences but received the death penalty only once for the 1977 murder of Gerald Gordon in Richmond Heights, St Louis.

Despite the evil nature of his acts, Franklin became the poster boy for extremist groups around the world. His crimes were also immortalized by right wing *Christian Identity* fanatic William Pierce in his book *Hunter*, the fictional story of a "lone wolf" violent racist who targeted racially mixed couples. Internet sites proclaiming Franklin as a hero for the "cause" proliferated throughout the 1990s and beyond, promoting a message of violence and hatred towards Jews and African-Americans. It is a message which, to this day, is polluting the minds of vulnerable American youth.

The impending execution of Franklin occurs at a time when Americans are becoming especially fearful that with the election of an African-American president the country's extreme right wing will begin a new campaign of violence and hatred and spur yet another young misfit into believing he is doing God's work through murder, assassination and other violent acts. In April 2009 the Department of Homeland Security issued a new alert warning of the dangers posed by approximately 926 hate groups documented by Morris Dees' *Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC)*. The alert stated that "white supremacist lone wolves" and "small terrorist cells embracing violent right-wing extremist ideology" are currently the most significant domestic terrorism threat. The 2009 shooting of a security guard by an 88-year-old neo-Nazi Holocaust denier at the Washington D.C. Holocaust Museum persuaded some experts that it heralded a possible surge in hate crimes.

Franklin grew up in Mobile, Alabama, as James Clayton Vaughn Jr., the son of an alcoholic father who was absent from the home for long periods, sometimes years at a time, and a stern disciplinarian mother. As a teenager he became a fan of Adolf Hitler and later became convinced Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Paul Goebbels was one of the great men in history. At the age of 26 he changed his name to Joseph Paul Franklin. He did this for three reasons. He hated his father whose name he inherited. He wanted to become a mercenary in Africa and feared his criminal record (he had maced an interracial couple in Maryland in 1972) would cause problems in obtaining a passport. Additionally, he wanted to honour his hero Goebbels and also American revolutionary hero Benjamin Franklin.

James Clayton Vaughn Sr. was physically abusive to his children, especially towards James Jr. There are, of course, some children who do not go on to commit criminal acts because they are fatherless or have an abusive background. In many of these cases a safety net system existed. Local social services or schools intervened or a strong wider family network helped to alleviate some of the more egregious conditions. Unfortunately, however, in Franklin's case, the problems of his childhood and the abuse he suffered from his parents were exacerbated by neglect in school, indifference from the

neighbourhood and an ineffective social services system. And his educational achievements only fit him for dead-end jobs.

Although Franklin's murderous acts can undoubtedly be traced to years of abuse by his parents they were also the result of his indoctrination by extremist groups he joined – the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), the American Nazi Party and the National States Rights Party (NSRP). He killed again and again, remorseless and full of conviction he was saving America and doing God's work.

Franklin's experiences growing up in a poor dysfunctional family in the South is a stark reminder of how hate groups can provoke young men and women into violent acts in the name of a "higher ideal." In order to compensate for his shortcomings, Franklin identified with powerful yet dangerous elements in society that reflected the bigoted views he was tutored in by his parents. The American Nazi Party, the NSRP and the KKK were, in effect, facilitators and came to represent the family he never really had. Through the organizations he joined he achieved what was missing at home – a sense of belonging and a vague feeling of his own importance.

As Raphael Ezekiel noted, in his study of neo-Nazi youths, *The Racist Mind*, there is a common experience extremist organization members have which makes them particularly susceptible to indoctrination. The men are usually in their teens when they are recruited and they come under the influence of older leaders of the movement. Almost every member he studied was fatherless at a young age, most from divorce and only a few from the death of the father. Ezekiel said that a sense of abandonment and uncertainty followed the loss of the father if some support system was not present. As they grew up they became exceptionally vulnerable and the white supremacist movement was a way to deal with this sense of "orphan hood." Its young members have "...a need to feel strong, masculine...tough guys." The attraction to racism was about a "mood" and a "lonely resentment....and several ideas – white specialness, the biological significance of 'race', and the primacy of power in human relations...people will find some way to make their lives meaningful, and if nothing richer is at hand, racism (or religious fanaticism or nationalism or gang membership) will do."

Uneducated young men like Franklin were targeted by the KKK, the American Nazi Party and the NSRP in their membership drives. Writer Ralph McGill described the Southern racist as "uniformed (and) illiterate" and who had been, "...deceived and satisfied with this sort of narcotic (hate literature)" which the racist groups like the Klan were disseminating throughout the South. "They live on hate as a drug addict lives on his needle of heroin and morphine", he wrote, "Each pamphlet is a shot in the arm for the hate fringe. Some are so crazed thereby as to dynamite churches and schools." And, as Southern author Melissa Fay Greene observed, "These were crackpots; these were madmen. The extremity of their language was in inverse proportion to their numbers, in inverse proportion to the likelihood of their realizing their goal of purging America of all non-whites and non-Christians. But in many locales, the crackpots did the dirty work of the power structure. And the crackpots had access to dynamite."

However, there were other influences in his life that moulded Franklin's character. During his childhood unspoken rules of the Jim Crow system existed in his hometown of Mobile, Alabama. In this cultural milieu there was no need for signs. African-Americans had to ride at the back of the bus and give up their seats for whites if the bus was full. African-Americans had to enter hotels, theatres, train stations and movie theatres by the back door. If they wanted to try a hat on in a store they would first have to put a handkerchief on their heads. If an African-American blocked the way of a white person on the sidewalk they were expected to stand aside. Black doctors could not treat white patients. Above all, African-Americans must not be "uppity" nor should the sexes of different races mix. Interracial marriages between black and white were illegal in many states until the 1960s and any person misrepresenting his or her race was guilty of a felony.

During Franklin's adolescence, many whites were persuaded to channel their bitterness about the race issue into supporting extremist groups like the KKK and in committing acts of violence in furtherance of the white supremacist cause. And in many ways they were allowed to get away with it. State governments in the South turned a blind eye to brutalities against African-Americans and thus perpetuated a racial culture whereby white violent racists felt they could act with impunity. Franklin was only too aware that whites who committed hate crimes did not suffer the harsher sentencing that ordinary criminals were given – often they were acquitted. This idea was central to James Earl Ray's beliefs about wanting to kill Martin Luther King Jr. in a Southern state. Ray believed that if he was caught he would suffer the same fate as other racist killers of the era. Ray knew that the murderers of the Civil Rights workers in Philadelphia, Mississippi in 1964 and the murderers of Medgar Evers and Viola Liuzzo had escaped justice. Juries in Civil Rights cases would either acquit or judges would administer lenient sentences.

However, by the 1970s, as Franklin embarked on his "mission," the South had essentially morphed into the "New South." Progressive state governors like Georgia's Jimmy Carter had been elected and the majority of the population, while exhibiting a conservative philosophy through their voting choices, were abandoning their support for leaders who were overtly segregationist and discriminatory towards African-Americans. The majority of voters rejected the politics of hate but they also legitimately embraced social and political issues that they feared were being hijacked by right-wing organizations including preventing uncontrolled immigration, a ban on bussing, a ban on gay marriage and a ban on educational and work-related quota systems which, they said, were taking equal rights a step too far. Southern voters also gave their support to politicians who correctly identified Hollywood, the television media and the music industry as purveyors of pornography and violence and of how these cultural institutions were a danger to American and Christian family values and morality.

Franklin's first targets in his "Lone Wolf" mission were Jews. As a young man Franklin was taken with the idea of a "Jewish conspiracy" which had been promoted by right-wing groups. The literature he read alleged the American government was controlled by a secret cabal of Jews who were bent on taking control of the world. Although there was no evidence to support these allegations, extremist groups used bogus statistics and

false historical information like the Russian forgery, "*The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*," to promote their bigoted philosophy. Like many young Americans today who use the Internet as the sole repose of acquired knowledge and are thus susceptible to outrageous conspiracy mongering, Franklin's only world view was through extremist literature. Through the World Wide Web, talk shows, books and videos, conspiracists and extremists spread their fear, hatred and political paranoia – the forces of evil stalk the land led by the Jews, the Illuminati (a purported conspiratorial organization which acts as a shadowy "power behind the throne," allegedly controlling world affairs through present day governments and corporations) and the U.S. Government which is purportedly controlled by Jews and communists. The Nazi ideology Franklin learned combined the delusions of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy with that of a notion that the Jews were a satanic people. And, if Franklin believed that Jews and African-Americans were subhuman, he would feel no guilt in exterminating them. The dehumanization of the Jews justified his acts of violence against them and that such acts could be committed without violating Biblical injunctions.

After bombing the home of a Jewish lobbyist in a quiet Washington suburb, dynamiting a Chattanooga synagogue and killing a Jewish congregant in St Louis, Franklin changed tack and sought out African-Americans as targets, especially African-American men who were associating with white women. Franklin's targeting of mixed race couples originated in the long-held idea that interracial couples were "Godless."

After the Civil War miscegenation and 'black rape' were so ingrained in the minds of Southerners some Southern states passed laws outlawing marriage between the races. In 1907 United States Senator Benjamin Ryan Tillman of South Carolina told the Senate that white women in the rural South were being attacked and raped by roaming "Negro beasts," "...their breasts pulsating with the desire to sate their passions upon white maidens and wives" and that every Southerner was fearful of returning home to the sight of his wife or daughter "ravished." By 1910 the governor of South Carolina, Cole Blease, was telling voters that, "Whenever the Constitution of my state steps between me and the defence of the virtue of the white woman then I say to hell with the Constitution."

In 1941 Wilbur J. Cash had written about the fear Southerners had of racial mixing and the fear that free black men would "violate" their white women. Cash said that white women in the South had been exalted to an unusual degree and their susceptibility to the black man's attention had always been monitored by the white male Southerner.

Poor rural whites like Franklin were especially prone to the fear of racial mixing. As writer Joel Williamson explained it, "If white men could not provide for their women materially...they could certainly protect them from a much more awful threat – the outrage of their purity...by black men...bread for their women was important, but it was nothing alongside their purity."

Many newspapers in the South during Franklin's boyhood promoted the idea that the stereotypical white Southern belle was in danger if African-Americans attained equal rights. Georgia State Attorney General Eugene Cook told reporters after the U.S.

Supreme Court handed down its 1954 *Brown v Board Of Education* ruling which outlawed segregation in the classroom, "As I view it the scope of (the Supreme Court decision) goes directly to our miscegenation laws...Once (our laws) are struck down, I foresee a (racial) amalgamation stampede."

When Joseph Paul Franklin joined the KKK in Atlanta in the early 1970s his belief that the mixing of the races was an "abomination" was reinforced by the extremist organization. One of the Klan's beliefs was the idea that if the black man was given equal rights with whites the white male population would suffer along with their wives and girlfriends who would become targets for sexually aggressive black men. The Klan also promoted the idea that racial mixing would forever be a stain on the honour of the Southern white population.

Franklin's choice of "heroes" also informs us of how charismatic individuals who hold extremist views can influence young people. Franklin's heroes were Joseph Paul Goebbels, Nazi propaganda minister, George Lincoln Rockwell, founder of the American Nazi Party and J. B. Stoner, leader of the National States Rights Party. He was also heavily influenced by Klan leaders like Robert Shelton and David Duke. And the paranoid leaders Franklin hero-worshipped appealed to his discontented soul: "It is not you who are the problem. It is they."

The leader persuades that the present society is corrupt and worthless and he imbues in his members the idea they will be rewarded in the future. It is a powerful motivating force for misfits like Franklin. The leaders of the groups Franklin joined persuaded him that society was out to get him and counterattacks were justified for "self-protection." The fantasy of a war between "us and them" became a reality for Franklin when he embarked on his "mission" to rid the world of Jews and African-Americans.

In the late 1960s the American Nazi Party was the first extremist organization Franklin joined. Its leader, George Lincoln Rockwell, founded the hate organization in 1958 and adopted as its emblem the swastika. Rockwell published the party's manifesto, titled *White Power*, which included deporting all African-Americans to Africa, liquidating the Jews and hanging everyone Rockwell considered to be traitors including President Eisenhower, President Truman and Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren. At public rallies he wore a brown uniform and boots, with a swastika arm band, greeting his followers with the Roman salute surrounded by "storm troopers" and American and Nazi flags. In his speeches Rockwell would rail against the promotion of racial integration and interbreeding with blacks. He called for resettling American blacks in Africa in a new African state. In response to the Civil Rights Freedom Rides of the early 1960s, Rockwell had his own "hate bus" which he and some of his members drove through the South. In the late 1950s and early 1960s much of Rockwell's efforts were in organizing controversial demonstrations in Washington D.C. and other areas. His powerful sense of hatred and resentment coupled with his devotion to Nazi ideology and white supremacy made for a highly charged political personality. "I'm going to completely separate the black and white races and preserve white Christian domination of this country and I'm going to have the Jew communists and any other traitors gassed for treason," he told his

followers and anyone else who would listen. Without any hint of irony he also said, "That's one great trouble with our movement. Ninety percent of the people in the movement are lunatics."

Rockwell's danger lay in the fact he was far from being a confused, poorly educated and illiterate thug like most of his supporters. His attractiveness to new recruits centered on his intelligence and charisma and the devotion his supporters gave to him. In time, Rockwell's charisma, in conjunction with his followers' fanaticism, became a lethal cocktail. The American Nazi Party taught against inter-racial mixing and the lesson was simple: unless white people prevented black men from marrying and dating white women there was going to be a downfall of the white race in the form of "mongrelization."

Disillusioned with the American Nazi Party because its membership was more interested in talking about revolution than fomenting it, Franklin moved to Atlanta and joined the National States Rights Party, led by J.B. Stoner. Around this time he also joined a Georgia branch of the KKK. Through Stoner, Franklin met James Earl Ray's brother Jerry who had been hired by the NSRP leader after the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. *The New York Times* described the organization as, "...the ideal merger of Klan and Nazi philosophies". Stoner's NSRP became central to the white supremacist movement because it placed hatred of Jews as the force behind the integration of African-Americans and it was crucial in bringing together previously unknown fringe groups into a larger organization. Throughout the 1960s the group played a major role in racial strife throughout the South.

Stoner was born in 1924 and grew up on a Walker County, Georgia farm. Stoner remembered how he learned his racism on the knee of his grandfather who "...showed me the evils of racial mongrelization and he taught me how whites should fight it." He was orphaned by the time he was 16 and he suffered from polio which exempted him from military service. He walked with a limp. He was described by many who knew him as a "creepy" sort of man "nervous and leering." Like Franklin, he also suffered uncontrollable rages especially where race was concerned. When it was pointed out to him that a Jew, Jonas Salk, had invented the polio vaccine he became livid.

At age 18, anti-Semitism became the center of Stoner's life. He advocated killing Jews and said his neo-Nazi party would eliminate them with gas chambers, electric chairs and firing squads. "The only thing I find wrong with Hitler," Stoner told his followers, "(is) that he didn't exterminate all those six million Jews he's credited with." He also said that America had fought on the wrong side in the Second World War. In fact, the Chattanooga Klan found Stoner's brand of anti-Semitism so extreme they cancelled his membership.

Stoner also had a history of violence against Jews. According to a police informant, a former KKK leader, Stoner would, "... do anything against the Jews and the Negroes, and especially against the Jews. He hates the Jews." In fact, like Franklin, Stoner acted on his beliefs in a violent way. In 1958 he participated in the bombing of Birmingham's

Bethel Baptist Church. In 1983 he was tried for the crime, found guilty, and sentenced to 10 years. He spent three and a half years in prison before he was released on parole.

Prior to his three-year murder spree, Franklin had been well primed. Wishing to belong, he never questioned the group's beliefs and once a paranoid belief system is established in a group, ergo the German people in the 1930s, it is nearly impossible to dislodge. Furthermore, immersing himself in these hate groups made it much more likely he would commit murder even if he was not predisposed to it. Franklin's sense of mission, which he repeated to anyone who would listen in the early days of his murder spree, was constantly reinforced by his fellow Klansmen and Nazis and there was no one he came into contact with who could tell him his ideas were lunacy.

Following Franklin's arrest in 1980, America witnessed an unprecedented level of racial hatred by white supremacists. In the 1980s the Posse Comitatus, National Alliance, Christian Identity, and the World Church of the Creator organizations became successful in promoting their white supremacist cause and recruited thousands of members to their ranks. Their recruitment drives were successful because hate substitutes for money and power and is a central emotion. And emotion is a very strong driving force especially to those who have never discovered the world through a decent education or been given a strong sense of morality passed on by caring parents or a religion that eschews violence.

Franklin was primed by the hate groups and told everything he thought and did was right and the government was wrong and that it was legitimate to use violence for a just cause and his tutors, the Nazis and the Klansmen, did it under the cloak of the First Amendment. Franklin responded to the call to arms by embracing violence as a form of "propaganda of the deed" and showed a real preference for spectacular and decisive action over the hard work of ideological contemplation. He could not assimilate with the groups he longed to be part of. But his desire to participate in their efforts remained with him. He still had his ideology which kept him going; it made him matter. He could now focus his whole personality around his own interpretations of "God's mission."

As Morris Dees of the Southern Poverty Law Centre astutely observed, the Ku Klux Klan and American neo-Nazis undoubtedly share "moral responsibility" for Franklin's killings.

Mel Ayton is the author of numerous books and articles including *A Racial Crime (2003)*, the story of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassin and *The Forgotten Terrorist: Sirhan Sirhan and the Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy (2008)*. Ayton has a master's degree in history from Durham University, is a former Fulbright teacher, deputy headmaster and college lecturer, and lives in County Durham, England. Ayton has appeared in documentaries produced by the National Geographic Channel (*CIA Secret Experiments, 2008*), the Discovery Channel (*CIA - Mind Control, 2006*, *Conspiracy Test: The Robert Kennedy Assassination, 2008*) and Fox News (*How Did Marilyn Monroe Really Die?, 2009*) and has worked as an historical consultant for the BBC. His latest book,

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