



## **THE USE OF POPULAR CULTURE AND NORMS BY EXTREMISTS**

**Date:** November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020

*Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.*

### **KEY EVENTS**

On November 27, 2020, Dr. Elaine Frantz presented *The Use of Popular Culture and Norms by Extremists* at the 2020 CASIS West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a panel discussion for questions and answers, and a breakout room for further discussion before closing off the day. The key topic of Dr. Frantz's presentation included the development and spread of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) through the media in the 1860s and 1870s.

### **NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

#### **Presentation**

Dr. Frantz explained the spread of the KKK through media and popular culture throughout the years. The role of newspapers was likely paramount in pushing their message in the U.S. South during the 1860s.

#### **Question Period**

During the question period, Dr. Frantz addressed the threat of parodies and satire appearing as propaganda in mainstream media, and their influence on radicalization.

### **BACKGROUND**

#### **Presentation**

Popular culture and norms have been used to spread extremist messages across populations. In the 1860s, the advancing of messages was not as simple as today with social media. The KKK emerged during a period where news was shared

primarily through newspapers. The KKK founders were involved and interested in popular culture. They began by playing musical instruments and singing to connect themselves to popular culture and media as a way to expand their beliefs and ideas.

The KKK was formed like any other formal organization with shared costumes and secret handshakes among members. Yet, there is no one person that is at the top leadership role for the KKK. They are a decentralized group with members that encompass different roles.

Initially, the KKK was not involved in violence, but surely consisted of white supremacists that believed in carrying out hate towards people of color which later did progress to violence. The KKK began receiving attention in the late 1860s, and the Northern newspaper picked it up and began reporting on them. The newspaper began to report on the costumes that the KKK wore and how they resembled the popular culture at that time. The newspaper was a likely contributor to the expansion and rise of the KKK in the South as people became interested in Southern white power groups. The KKK was very successful in the South and gained thousands of supporters and members which resulted in further violence against people of color.

The rise of the KKK illustrates the control and power that the media has to further expand beliefs and ideas across nations, and possibly globally. Even though the KKK itself did not expect their messaging and group to be spread widely throughout the South, the Northern newspapers that covered the KKK in the 1860s were essential in establishing it in the South where the KKK witnessed their rise. Further, realizing the power of the media, KKK members used newspapers to advance their messaging by writing letters about their violent doings and taking credit for their actions.

### **Question Period/Breakout Room**

Dr. Frantz discussed how the KKK was glorified in newspapers in the 1860s and 1870s, and how there was also a pushback with the military against the KKK. This resulted in the military receiving more attention than the KKK. In addition, popular culture especially newspapers likely assisted the radicalization of the KKK.

### **KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION**

- Initially, the KKK was created to sing and play musical instruments to align with popular culture.

- The Northern newspapers led to the expansion of the KKK in the South.
- In the South, the KKK began to commit violent actions towards people of color.
- The KKK wrote letters to newspapers about taking responsibility for their violent actions against people of color, furthering their beliefs and ideas.



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