11 of 366 DOCUMENTS

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Hoodwinked?

BYLINE: By Stephen J. Dubner and Steven D. Levitt.

Stephen J. Dubner and Steven D. Levitt are the authors of "Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything." Some of the documentary evidence discussed in this column is at www.freakonomics.com

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Information Asymmetries

Our book "Freakonomics" includes a chapter titled "How Is the Ku Klux Klan Like a Group of Real-Estate Agents?" This chapter was our effort to bring to life the economic concept known as information asymmetry, a state wherein one party to a transaction has better information than another party. It is probably obvious that real-estate agents typically have better information than their clients. The Klan story was perhaps less obvious. We argued that the Klan's secrecy -- its rituals, made-up language, passwords and so on -- formed an information asymmetry that furthered its aim of terrorizing blacks and others.

But the Klan was not the hero of our story. The hero was a man named Stetson Kennedy, a white Floridian from an old-line family who from an early age sought to assail racial and social injustices. Out of all of his crusades -- for unionism, voting rights and numberless other causes -- Kennedy is best known for taking on the Klan in the 1940's. In his book "The Klan Unmasked" (originally published in 1954 as "I Rode With the Ku Klux Klan"), Kennedy describes how he adopted a false identity to infiltrate the Klan's main chapter in Atlanta, was chosen to serve as a "klavalier" (a Klan strong-arm man) and repeatedly found himself at the center of astonishing events, all the while courting great personal risk.

What did Kennedy do with all the secret Klan information he gathered? He disseminated it like mad: to state prosecutors, to human rights groups and even to broadcasters like Drew Pearson and the producers of the "Superman" radio show, who publicly aired the Klan's heretofore hidden workings. Kennedy took an information asymmetry and dumped it on its head. And in doing so, we wrote, he played a significant role in quashing the renaissance of the Klan in postwar America.

Kennedy has been duly celebrated for his activism: his friend Woody Guthrie once wrote a song about him, and a Stetson Kennedy Day was recently declared in St. John's County, Fla., where Kennedy, 89, still lives. That is where we interviewed him nearly two years ago; our account of his amazing true story was based on those interviews, "The Klan Unmasked" and a small mountain of history books and newspaper articles.

But is Kennedy's story as true as it is amazing?

That was the disturbing question that began to haunt another Florida author, Ben Green, who in 1992 began writing a book about Harry T. Moore, a black civil rights advocate who was murdered in 1951. For a time, Stetson Kennedy was a collaborator on the book. Although Green was only tangentially interested in Kennedy's Klan infiltration -- it wasn't central to the Moore story -- he eventually checked out Kennedy's voluminous archives, held in libraries in New York and Atlanta.

These papers charted the extraordinarily colorful life of a man who had been, among other things, a poet, a folklorist, a muckraking journalist and a union activist. But Green was dismayed to find that the story told in Kennedy's own papers seemed to be quite different from what Kennedy wrote in "The Klan Unmasked."

In "The Klan Unmasked," Kennedy posed as an encyclopedia salesman named John S. Perkins who, in one of his first undercover maneuvers, visits the former governor of Georgia -- a reputed Klan sympathizer -- and ingratiates himself by offering to distribute some hate literature. A document in Kennedy's archives, however, suggests that Kennedy had indeed met the ex-governor, but not in any undercover capacity. Rather, he had interviewed him for a book he was writing -- nor did this document mention any hate literature.

A close examination of Kennedy's archives seems to reveal a recurrent theme: legitimate interviews that he conducted with Klan leaders and sympathizers would reappear in "The Klan Unmasked" in different contexts and with different facts. In a similar vein, the archives offer evidence that Kennedy covered public Klan events as a reporter but then recast them in his book as undercover exploits. Kennedy had also amassed a great deal of literature about the Klan and other hate groups that he joined, but his own archives suggest that he joined most of these groups by mail.

So did Kennedy personally infiltrate the Klan in Atlanta, as portrayed in "The Klan Unmasked"?

In his archives are a series of memos that were submitted to the Anti-Defamation League, one of several civil rights groups to which Kennedy reported. Some of the memos were written by him; others were written by a man identified as John Brown, a union worker and former Klan official who had changed his ways and offered to infiltrate the Klan. "This worker is joining the Klan for me," Kennedy wrote in one memo in early 1946. "I am certain that he can be relied on."

In Kennedy's subsequent memos -- indeed, in hundreds of pages of Kennedy's various correspondence from the era -- he matter-of-factly attributed some of his most powerful Klan information to John Brown: one of the memos he declared "a report from my informant inside the Klan on the meeting of Atlanta Klan No. 1 on August 12 and Atlanta Klan No. 297 on August 15." As John Brown fed inside information to Kennedy, Kennedy would then relay it to groups like the A.D.L., as well as to prosecutors and journalists. It wasn't until he wrote "The Klan Unmasked," several years later, that Kennedy placed himself, Zelig-like, at the center of all the action.

Ben Green, despite months spent immersed in Kennedy's archives, could not identify the man once known as John Brown. Green did manage to interview Dan Duke, a former state prosecutor who, as rendered in "The Klan Unmasked," worked closely with Kennedy. Duke agreed that Kennedy "got inside of some [Klan] meetings" but openly disputed Kennedy's dramatized account of their relationship. "None of that happened," he told Green. In 1999, when Green finally published his Harry T. Moore book, "Before His Time," it contained a footnote labeling "The Klan Unmasked" "a novelization."

Green is not the only person to have concluded that Kennedy has bent the truth. Jim Clark, who teaches history at the University of Central Florida, says that Kennedy "built a national reputation on many things that didn't happen." Meredith Babb, director of the University Press of Florida, which has published four of Kennedy's books, now calls Kennedy "an entrepreneurial folklorist." But except for Green's footnote, they all kept quiet until the retelling of Kennedy's exploits in "Freakonomics" produced a new round of attention. Why? "It would be like killing Santa Claus," Green says. "To me, the saddest part of this story is that what he actually did wasn't enough for him, and he has felt compelled to make up, embellish or take credit for things he didn't do."

When presented with documents from his own archives and asked outright, several weeks ago over lunch near his Florida home, if "The Klan Unmasked" was "somewhat conflated or fictionalized," Kennedy said no. "There may have been a bit of dialogue that was not as I remembered it," he answered. "But beyond that, no." When pressed, Kennedy did concede that "in some cases I tookthe reports and actions of this other guy and incorporated them into one narrative." As it turns out, Kennedy has made such an admission at least once before. Peggy Bulger, director of the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress, wrote a 1992 dissertation called "Stetson Kennedy: Applied Folklore and Cultural Advocacy," based in part on extensive interviews with her subject. In an endnote, Bulger writes that "Kennedy combined his personal experiences undercover with the narratives provided by John Brown in writing 'I Rode With the Ku Klux Klan' in 1954."

We weren't very happy, of course, to learn that a story we included in "Freakonomics" was built on such shaky foundations -- especially since the book is devoted to upending conventional wisdoms rather than reinforcing them, and concerning Stetson Kennedy, the most conventional wisdom of all is his reputation as a Klan infiltrator.

There is also the fact that in our work we make a point of depending less on anecdote in favor of data, the idea being that numbers tend to lie less baldly than people do. But the story of Stetson Kennedy was one long series of anecdotes -- which, no matter how many times they were cited over the decades, were nearly all generated by the same self-interested source.

Perhaps Kennedy's long life of fighting the good fight are all that matter. Perhaps, to borrow Peggy Bulger's phrase-ology, a goal of "cultural advocacy" calls for the use of "applied folklore" rather than the sort of forthrightness that should be more typical of history or journalism. One thing that does remain true is that Kennedy was certainly a master of information asymmetry. Until, that is, the data caught up with him.

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