

Second night, same group was there. I felt a little more easy because I got some things off my chest. The third night they wanted to elect a chairman. Howard Clements stood up and said: "I suggest we elect two cochairpersons." Joe Beckton, executive director of the Human Relations Commission, just as black as he can be — he nominated me. There was a reaction among some blacks. Nooo. And then, of all things, they nominated Ann Atwater, that big old fat gal, as cochairman. I thought to myself: "Hey, ain't no way I can work with that gal." Finally, I agreed to accept it, 'cause at this point I was tired of fighting.

A Klansman and a militant black woman, cochairmen of the school committee. How could I work with her? But after about two or three days, it was in our hands. We had to make it a success. This gave me another sense of belonging, a sense of pride. It helped this inferiority feeling I had. Here's a chance for a low-income white man to be something. I accepted the job. Her and I began to reluctantly work together. She had as many problems working with me as I had working with her.

One night I called her: "Ann, you and I should have a lot of differences and we got them now. But there's something laid out here before us, and if it's gonna be a success, you and I are gonna have to make it one. Can we lay aside some of these feelings?" She said: "I'm willing, if you are."

My old friends would call me at night: "C.P., what the hell is wrong with you? You're selling out the white race." This began to make me have guilt feelings. Am I doing right? Am I doing wrong? Here I am all of a sudden making an about-face and trying to deal with my feelings, my heart. My mind was beginning to open up. I was beginning to see what was right and what was wrong.

We were gonna go talking together for ten nights. By this time I had gone to work at Duke University in maintenance. Making very little money. Terry Sanford gave me this ten days off with pay. He was president of Duke at the time. He knew I was a Klansman and realized the importance of blacks and whites getting along.

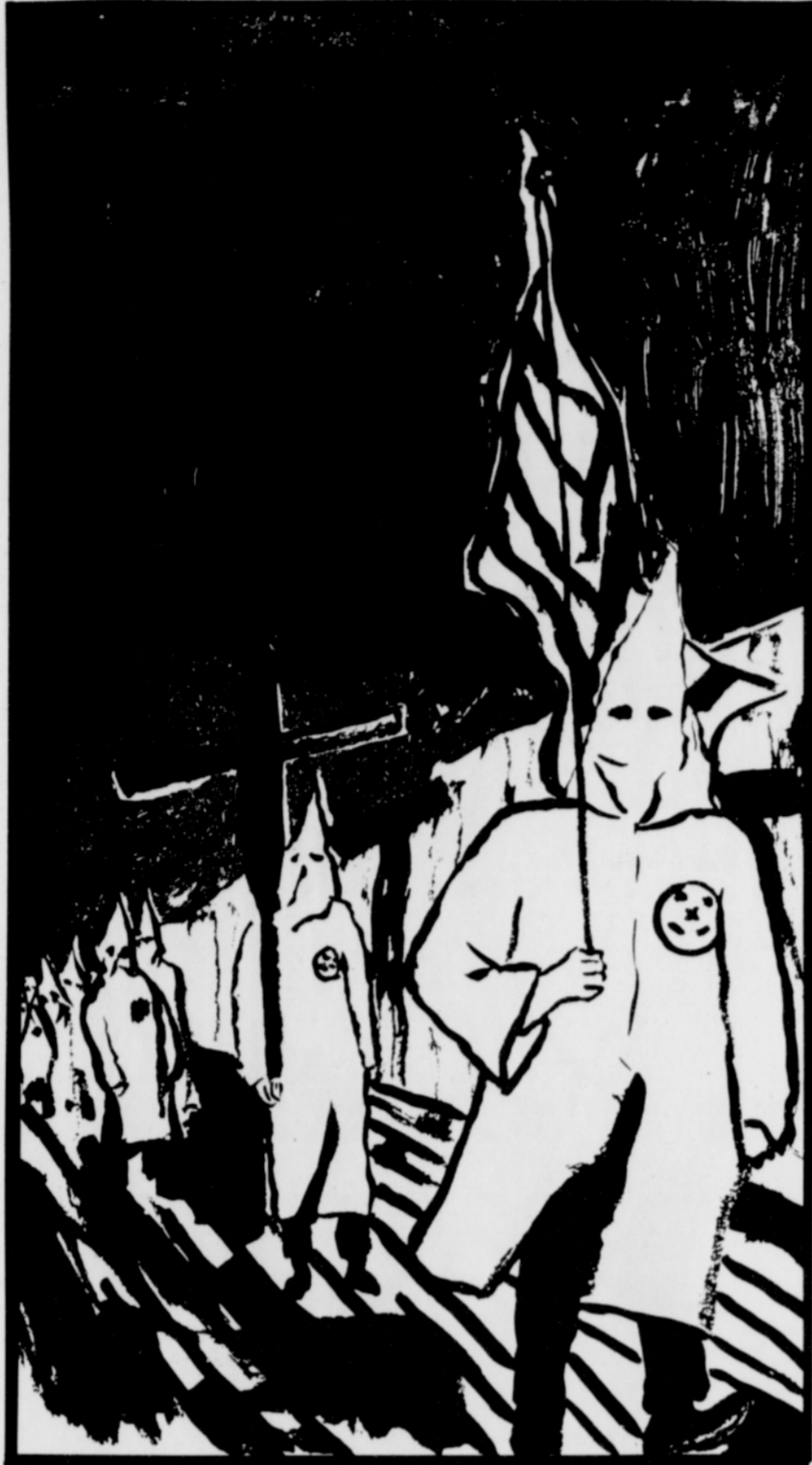
I said: "If we're gonna make this work, I've got to get my kind of people." The low-income whites. We walked the streets of Durham, and we knocked on doors and invited people. Ann was going into the black community. They just wasn't responding to us when we made those house calls. Some of them were cussing us out. "You're selling us out, Ellis, get out of my door." Ann was getting the same response from blacks.

One day, Ann and I went back to the school and we sat down. We began to talk and just reflect. Ann said: "My daughter came home crying every day. She said her teacher was making fun of me in front of the other kids." I said: "Boy, the same thing happened to my kid. White liberal teacher was making fun of Tim Ellis' father, the Klansman. He came home crying." At this point I began to see, here we are, two people from the far ends of the fence, having identical problems, except her being black and me being white. From that moment on, I tell you, that gal and I worked together good. I began to love the girl, really.

We worked with the people who came to the meetings. They talked about racism, sex education, about teachers not being qualified. After seven, eight nights of real intense discussion, these people who'd never talked to each other before, all of a sudden came up with resolutions. It was really something, you had to be there to get the tone and feeling of it.

At this point I didn't like integration, but the law says you do this, and I've got to do what the law says, okay? We said: "Let's take these resolutions to the school board." The most disheartening thing I've faced was the school system refusing to implement any one of them. These were recommendations from the people who pay taxes and pay their salaries. So when the school board refused, I decided I'd just run for the school board.

I spent \$85 on the campaign. The guy running against me spent several thousand. I really had nobody on my side. The Klan turned against me. The low-income whites turned against me. The liberals didn't particularly like me. The blacks were suspicious of a Klansman. But I made up my mind that what I was doing was right, and I was gonna do it regardless of what anybody said.



It bothered me when people would call and worry my wife. She's always supported me in anything I wanted to do. She was changing, and my boys were too. I got some of my youth corps kids involved. They still followed me.

I was invited to the Democratic Women's Social Hour as a candidate. Didn't have but one suit to my name. Had it six, seven, eight years. I had it cleaned, put on the best shirt I had, and a tie. Here was all these high-class wealthy candidates shaking hands. I walked up to the Mayor and stuck out my hand. He said: "C.P., I'm glad to see you." But I could tell by that rag-type handshake he was lying to me. I know they were saying: "What's this little old dude running for school board?" Yet they had to smile and make like they're glad to see me. I began to spot some black people in that room. I automatically went to them and that was a firm handshake. They said: "I'm glad to see you, C.P." I knew they meant it.

Every place I appeared, I said: "I will listen to the voice of the people. I won't make a major decision until I first contact all the organizations in the city." I got 4,640 votes. The guy beat me by 2,000. Not bad for 85 bucks and no constituency.

The whole world was opening up, and I was learning new truths that I had never learned before. I was beginning to

look at a black person, shake hands with him, and see him as a human being. It was almost like being born again. I didn't have these sleepless nights I used to have when I was active in the Klan and slipping around at night. I could sleep at night and feel good about it. I'd rather live now than at any other time in history. It's a challenge.

Back at Duke, doing maintenance, I'd pick up my tools, fix the commode, unstop the drains. But this got in my blood. Things weren't right in this country, and what we did in Durham needs to be told. I was so miserable at Duke, I could hardly stand it. I'd get up and go to work every morning just hating to go.

My whole life had changed. I got an 8th grade education, and I wanted to complete high school. I went to high school in the afternoons on a program called PEP — Past Employment Progress. I was about the only white in class, and the oldest. I began to read about biology. I'd take my books home at night because I was determined to get through. Sure enough, I graduated. I got the diploma at home. And I got another job.

I came to work one morning and some guy says: "We need a union." At this time I wasn't pro-union. My daddy was anti-labor too. "We're not getting paid much, we're having to work seven days in a row. We're all starving to death." The next day I meet with the international representative of the Operating Engineers. He gave me authorization cards. "Get these cards out and we'll have an election." There were 88 for the union and 17 noes. I was elected chief steward for the local.

Shortly after, a union man came down from Charlotte and says we need a fulltime rep. We've got only 200 people at the two plants here. There's just barely enough money coming in to pay your salary. You'll have to get and organize unions. But I know how to stir people up. That's how I got to be business agent for the local.

When I began to organize, I began to see far deeper. I began to see people again being used. Blacks against whites. Management is vicious. There's two things they want to keep: all the money and all the say-so. They don't want these poor working folks to have none of that. Hire anti-union law firms, bad-mouth unions. The people were making \$1.95 an hour, barely able to get through weekends. I worked as a business rep for five years and was seeing all this.

I ran for business manager of our local. He's elected by the workers. The guy that ran against me was black, and our membership is 75% black. I thought: Claiborne, there's no way you can beat the black guy. But I beat him, 4 to 1.

The company used my past against me. They put out letters with a picture of a robe and a cap: "Would you vote for a Klansman?" They wouldn't deal with the issues. I immediately called for a mass meeting. I said: "Okay, this is Claiborne Ellis. This is where I come from. I want you to know, you black ladies here, I was at one time a member of the Klan. I want you to know because they'll tell you about it."

I invited some of my old black friends. I said: "Brother Joe, Brother Howard, be honest now and tell these people how you feel about me." Howard Clements kidded me a little bit. He said: "I don't know what I'm doing here, supporting an ex-Klansman." Then he said: "I know what C.P. Ellis come from. I knew him when he was. I knew him as he grew and grew with him. I'm telling you now, follow this ex-Klansman." I won, 134 to 41.

It makes you feel good to go into a plant and butt heads with professional union busters. You see blacks and whites join hands to defeat the racist issues they use against people. Can you imagine a guy who's got an adult high school diploma running into professional college graduates who are union busters? I gotta compete with them. I work seven days a week, nights and on Saturday and Sunday. The salary's not that great, and if I didn't care, I'd quit. But I care and I can't quit. I got a taste of it.

I tell people there's a tremendous possibility in this country to stop the wars, the struggles, the fights between people. People say: "That's an impossible dream. You sound like Martin Luther King." An ex-Klansman who sounds like Martin Luther King! I don't think it's an impossible dream. It's happened in my life. It's happened in other people's lives in America.

I don't know what's ahead of me. I have no desire to be a big union official. I want to be right out there in the field with the workers. I want to walk through their factory and shake hands with that man whose hands are dirty. I'm gonna do all that one little old man can do...and I ain't got that many years left, but I want to make the best of them.

Back in 1968, when the news came over the radio that Martin Luther King was assassinated, I got on the telephone and began to call other Klansmen. We just had a real party at the service station. Really rejoicing because that troublemaker was dead. Our troubles were over. They say the older you get, the harder it is for you to change. That's not necessarily true. Since I've changed, I've sat down and listened to tapes of Martin Luther King. I listen to it and tears come to my eyes because I know what he's saying now. I know what's happening.

Studs Terkel is the author of *American Dreams: Lost & Found*, from which this interview is reprinted. (The book also includes an interview with the late Bob 'Kewpie' Ziak, the world famous environmentalist logger from Brownsmead, who died in 1990: *NCTE*, Summer/Fall 2000). His other highly acclaimed oral histories include *Working*, *Division Street: America*, *Hard Times*, *The Good War*, and his most recent *Hope Dies Last*.

IN BED WITH BUSH

Upton Sinclair self-published a book called *The Brass Check* in 1919, thirteen years after *The Jungle*. The brass check was the coin used in whorehouses. The customer went up to see the madam and he would pay his two bucks — this was long before inflation — and receive a brass check, which he would give to the girl.

And at the end of the day the girl would cash in all her brass checks and get half a buck apiece. So Upton Sinclair took the brass check, and made it a reference to the press in those days. The journalists were pretty much brass check artists, they were like the girls in the brothel. And how much has changed in the past century?

Think about the coverage of George Bush, especially after 9/11, when David Broder, a solid, centrist journalist, compared Bush to Abraham Lincoln. That gives you an idea of the nonsense we have to deal with these days. We're not talking now about the right-wing pundits, of whom nothing much need be said. We're talking about journalists like Broder who are considered part of the "liberal media," which is of course an obscene phrase because of the burlesque nature of it.

Another horrendous example of the media and its cravenness was the lack of attention paid to Senator Robert Byrd (Democrat of West Virginia) in September 2002. Here we have a conservative Democratic senator making one of the most eloquent addresses attacking the USA Patriot Act and the Bush administration for endangering our civil liberties, and for violating the Constitution. It was a fantastic speech. You would have thought it would make headlines. Here was the dean of the Senate speaking about dangers to our fundamental rights. And the fact it got so little reportage says more than you want to know about the media.

At the same time I am not going to be overwhelmingly pessimistic. There is reason for optimism. *Hope Dies Last* (the name of my new book) is a phrase used by Jesse de la Cruz, who worked very closely with Cesar Chavez organizing farmworkers. She said that whenever times were bleak, they had a phrase, "la esperanza muere ultima — hope dies last." Because what is the alternative? Despair. And with despair, all that is left is the head in the oven, or about twenty sleeping pills and a couple of martinis — or in my case a dozen martinis.

Hope has always been the hallmark of dissenters. We know something happened on September 11, 2001, but there is another day — February 15, 2003 — I call it "Almost Liberation Day" when 10 million people across the world acting for peace attended protests against Bush's preemptive strike at Iraq. That hope continues as an undercurrent in the many, many community groups. The issue could be the environment as well as peace, or civil liberties under John Ashcroft. The question is: Can it be made active?

One of the things that keeps people from doing what they know they should do for their own good is the national Alzheimer's disease. There is no memory of the past. There is no yesterday. There was no Depression. There was no New Deal. There is no memory that when the free market, which is our religion, fell on its fanny, the free-marketers — I call them free-buccaneers — pleaded with the government, "Please help us out. Please save us." And of course the New Deal and regulation did. Now the sons, grandsons, daughters and granddaughters of those whose asses were saved by the New Deal, by big government, are the ones who most condemn big government today. And they are getting away with it because of the media.

The key is not simply to dissent, but to turn the country around. What's to be done is to act. To act is to do, to do is cast your ballot, and to do is also to ask: Who is representing what?

Fortunately, we have an alternative press. The effect of the alternative press is seemingly minor, but it has a ripple-in-the-water effect. You can tell that by reading the letters to the editor in the *Chicago Tribune* — my barometer of what the public is thinking. But aside from alternative journals like *In These Times* and Bill Moyers and humorist Jon Stewart on Television, Upton Sinclair's brass checks are alive and well today.

Now is the time to act, and thus become what we were born to be — thinking, active citizens of a democratic society.

—STUDS TERKEL

This is an excerpt of an article Studs Terkel wrote for a special *In These Times* issue on the media.

