

## BOOKS

"A Southern Tragedy, in Crimson and Yellow." H5

# Ideas

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## Testimony in search of TRUTH

Excerpts from testimony before the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission

In the fall of 1979, members of the Workers Viewpoint Organization (which later became the Communist Workers Party) were planning a march against the Ku Klux Klan. Fliers advertising the event used provocative rhetoric to taunt the Klan. On Nov. 3, marchers were gathering in an east Greensboro neighborhood when a Nazi-Klan convoy drove up. A fight broke out and the Klan-Nazi contingent fatally shot five demonstrators. The shooters claimed self-defense and were acquitted in criminal trials. In a federal civil lawsuit later, a jury found two police officers, a police informant and five members of the Klan-Nazi contingent liable in the death of one victim.

In June 2004, in an attempt to seek truth and healing for the community, the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission was sworn in. Earlier this year, it began holding hearings and taking testimony from dozens of people about the shooting. Below and on page H4 are excerpts from that testimony.



**Claude Barnes, N.C. A&T political science faculty member:**

It is amazing to me how people don't want to talk about this history, but if you don't talk about this history, how can you have a future? How can you really talk about improving a situation if people don't have a collective memory and some kind of collective agreement about why some individuals are aggrieved and still feel aggrieved and other people feel that everything is hunky-dory?



**Lewis Brandon, longtime Greensboro grass-roots activist:**

I don't know of any social change that occurred in this community without a struggle. I've been here since 1957, and this is a city that does not do things because it is the right thing to do. It does things because it's forced to change. ... Like in '57, rather than desegregate the swimming pools, it sold the swimming pools and got out of the swimming pool business. In '58, when the school system was ordered to take two students in at Caldwell School, they moved all of the white students out, the white teachers out, and Caldwell School ... became an all-black school. This is how this city operates. ... That's the Greensboro I know.



**Signe Waller, widow of Jim Waller, one of those killed on Nov. 3:**

The City of Greensboro has tried to pretend that the killings happened in the city but were not of the city. The City of Greensboro portrayed itself as merely a victim of a most unfortunate happenstance.

Yet how can it be that the city was not directly and intimately involved when the Klansman who was a main organizer of the Klan and Nazi groups in the deadly caravan and the man who actually led the caravan to its target was simultaneously a paid informant for the Greensboro Police Department? This man was Eddie Dawson. He was engaged by the GPD in October '79.



**Yvonne Johnson, Greensboro mayor pro tem:**

The City of Greensboro has to show real leadership in bringing people together where there are very uncomfortable, very diverse views. ... Maybe this process will allow our whole city to be transformed based on hope, our collective wisdom, and a spirit of cooperation, trust and based on love.



**Paul Bermanzohn, march organizer, critically wounded on Nov. 3:**

Was it a mere coincidence that out of 50 to 100 people gathered that day, the five killed were all leaders of union community organizing efforts? I was shot in the head and Nelson Johnson was stabbed in a knife attack. And what was Virgil Griffin doing driving through Greensboro, the morning before the attack, before the sun came up, with police agent and FBI informant Eddie Dawson, with a copy of our parade permit in their lap? What exactly were they doing? ...

The FBI acknowledged it had done an investigation of the WVO [Workers Viewpoint Organization], as we were then called, that ended on Nov. 2, 1979, the day before the murders. To me, at least, this looks like the pattern we see leading up to the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. In both those political assassinations, there was a period of FBI surveillance and harassment followed by the murders in circumstances of great conflict and confusion. It is not too much to think that those who would want revolutionary leaders out of the way would resort to violence to clear them out of the way — to clear us out of the way. Don't forget the scores of Black Panthers and leaders of the American Indian Movement who were



PHOTOS BY KIM WALKER/News & Record  
The five people who were killed in the 1979 shootings are remembered with a photograph and a white rose during a Truth and Reconciliation hearing at N.C. A&T University in August.



**Capt. Rick Ball of the Greensboro Police Department speaks about the police response to the shootings. He was an officer called to duty that day.**



**Virgil Griffin of Mount Holly, imperial wizard of the Cleveland Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, voices his dislike of communism. Griffin was a leader of the caravan of Klansmen and Nazis when the shootings took place.**

killed by the FBI in similar ways. They had a whole program called Counter Intelligence Program or COINTELPRO dedicated to this thing.



**Virgil Griffin, Ku Klux Klan leader who was part of the Klan-Nazi Nov. 3 caravan:**

I don't think this commission's going to solve anything. I think it's a total waste of time. And uh, this thing would have been forgotten 20 years ago if it hadn't been people like this commission and the news keep bringing it up in the paper. ... If you're interested in the citizens of Greensboro, and all the textile jobs, the jobs that's been lost around here, you'd be tryin' to think of something positive, something good about Greensboro, to draw some interest in here to get these people back to work. If you've got the interest of Greensboro and the city and the citizens of Greensboro, I think you'd shut this thing down right now and tell the media to get out of here and never bring it up again.



**Sgt. Ramon Bell, a retired Greensboro police officer who was at the scene after the shootings:**

At that time, the District 2 captain was Captain Trevor Hampton. ... It was pretty much the district captain's duty when some events like this came up to write or construct what was known as an administrative operational plan. ... There was an administrative plan. I read it, and I saw it. I have no idea what happened to it or where it went after Nov. 3. But there was an administrative plan. It was written by, I suppose, Captain Hampton and approved by the administrative. ... Hampton ... had some personal philosophies that a lot of us didn't agree with. ... He

believed that the more numbers of uniformed officers there were, the more potential it was to incite the community. So, we stayed away. I believe myself that this same philosophy of his was written into this operation plan.

Because it was written with a theme that he called "low profile." That was the theme for this plan. "Low profile" in this instance meant that ... police officers would not be visible at the gathering points for the most part, at least not in numbers. ... I read that operational plan twice because I couldn't believe it. A lot of us read the operational plans and just shook our heads. ... You don't let two groups with extreme political views from each other come together without a buffer; and the buffer would have been the police.

In my opinion, yes, we should have been there. It wasn't my decision at the time. I was a patrolman. Uh, I think everybody learned from it. Mistakes were made. That was a big mistake in my opinion. Uh, conspiracy? No.



**Sally Bermanzohn, a march organizer:**

[A]t 11 a.m., [the time] which we had publicized for a month that we would begin to assemble. ... Three actions were happening under the direction of the command of the Greensboro Police Department:

1. [Officer] Cooper and police detectives continued to monitor the formation of an armed caravan and continued to report that to the office.

2. Tactical squads, responsible for protecting demonstrators, were sent to lunch, pulling them from any kind of protection.

3. Officers on other duties in Morningside, near where the marchers assembled, were pulled out of the neighborhood, as they watched an armed caravan assembling.

My most profound conclusion is that the Greensboro massacre happened because of po-

### DISCUSS THE ISSUES OF NOV. 3

**What:** Full day of small-group discussions on community issues connected with Nov. 3, 1979, that still linger today. Sponsored by the Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

**When:** 9 a.m. Saturday.

**Where:** Mount Zion Baptist Church, 1301 Alamance Church Road.

**To register:** Send e-mail to phyllis@greensborotrc.org or call 275-6462. Registration limited to 200 people. Breakfast and lunch provided.

lice behavior. There are lots of unanswered questions about other government agencies and officials, on the federal, state and local level. And I do not frankly think the police could have acted in isolation of other government officials. But regardless of whether these questions will ever be answered, there is no doubt [about] the police of Greensboro, their outrageous behavior — the illegal, criminal acts of the police commanders in making these decisions which allowed, enabled this massacre to happen. ... I think commanding officers owe it to Greensboro to come here, owe it to this commission to share what they know about it.



**Candy Clapp, former Morningside Homes resident:**

Nobody seemed to care how we [the children of Morningside] were affected. We had to go to school the following Monday. We were expected to function and be focused. And some of us couldn't. ... After November the third my family wanted out of the hell on Earth, and we got out. Some stayed until it was being torn down. You all can put new buildings on old soil, but the dirt will never change. The soil is still the same: bloody. Until some justice is done about all this, there will always be a dark cloud over Greensboro.



**Rev. Carlton Eversley, vice chairman of the Darryl Hunt Project for Freedom and Justice:**

I've been, of course, disappointed with your own city government, trying to either ignore/hide/forget about events that were and are wrenching. Anyone who's counseled with someone whose loved ones have been murdered knows that you don't just get over it. The grief process has to be addressed. In your case, it's a citywide process — as it was in our case. Ninety percent of black people always believed that Darryl [Hunt] was innocent. Seventy percent of white people thought he was guilty. This tore our city [Winston-Salem] up.



**Rev. Nelson Johnson, a lead organizer of the march:**

I rose from Jim Waller's dead body and began to speak with all the force my emotional state could muster. I charged that this could not have happened without the involvement of the police. I denounced Mayor Jim Melvin as a "dog" and a representative of the capitalist class.

Let me take this occasion to publicly apologize to Mayor Melvin for referring to him by a demeaning name. I recognize that calling Mayor Melvin a "dog" was wrong. While it reflected my state of mind at the time, it was no less wrong and should not have been done. I am sorry that I used such language. Under any circumstances, it demeaned his humanity and thereby reduced my own stature as a moral being.

Having said that, I want to publicly renew the call I made to Mayor Melvin in a private letter on April 12, 2004. In that letter ... I stated that:

*A Guilford College student interning with the Beloved Community Center shared that you might be open to having a conversation with me regarding the events of November 3, 1979. I would be honored to have such a conversation. ... I know that we have historically represented different points of view on the tragedy of November Third as well as other matters. I believe however, given the particular way we were involved — you as sitting mayor and me as chief organizer of the event — that we have something helpful to offer to our city and maybe the nation. In fact, it seems that there is an opportunity for us to model for ourselves and the whole city how to move beyond the cultural tendency to focus on perceptions of the worst in each other even when there are significant differences on issues of substance. ... I am a granddad now, and there is nothing I would like to do more than to help foster better race and human relations consistent with truth and social justice in the city where I raised my family and lived my adult life.*

While Mayor Melvin and I did talk briefly by phone in response to that letter, we had no discussion of substance about the truth process or about the events related to November Third. Also, we were not able to reach any agreement on a follow-up discussion or his participation in this process. I am still hopeful that Mayor Melvin will not only participate fully in this process but also use his considerable influence to urge others, especially current and former city officials and police officers, to do so as well.

More excerpts from the hearings on H4.