

PRESS & MEDIA

The Fires This Time

"Who Was Burning the Black Churches?" by Joe Holley, in *Columbia Journalism Review* (Sept.–Oct. 1996), 101 Journalism Bldg., 2950 Broadway, Columbia Univ., New York, N.Y. 10027;
"Politics and Church Burnings" by Michael Fumento, in *Commentary* (Oct. 1996),
165 E. 56th St., New York, N.Y. 10022; "Playing with Fire" by Michael Kelly, in
The New Yorker (July 15, 1996), 20 W. 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

The story raged out of control in the nation's news media last year. Black churches in the South were burning in an epidemic of racist-inspired arson. "Flames of Hate: Racism Blamed in Shock Wave of Church Burnings," screamed a *New York Daily News* headline. Many accounts hinted that a conspiracy might be at work. President Bill Clinton and other politicians expressed alarm at this supposed resurgence of American racism. And then the story largely turned to dust. How did the news media get taken for this wild ride?

Fumento, a columnist for *Reason* magazine, charges that the Atlanta-based Center for Democratic Renewal (CDR), a left-wing group that tracks right-wing extremism, perpetrated "a deliberate hoax." In conjunction with the National Council of Churches, he says, the CDR early last year fed the media "a steady diet of 'news' about black-church burnings in the South." Whatever the organizations "had in mind when they started their mendacious campaign," it filled their coffers with millions of dollars in contributions from appalled Americans. In June, after a black church in Charlotte, North Carolina, burned to the ground (in a fire that, it later turned out, had been set by a disturbed 13-year-old), the CDR claimed that

since 1990 "there had been 90 arson attacks against black churches in nine Southern states; the number had been rising every year; and each and every culprit 'arrested and/or detained' was white," Fumento writes. This gave a false picture of the situation, he says. The CDR blamed arson for fires that authorities attributed to other causes, for example. And fires at churches in the nation had actually *decreased* since 1980, and an upsurge in attacks on black churches in 1995 and the first half of '96 "could be largely ascribed to a combination of more reliable statistics and copycat behavior," Fumento says.

Holley, a free-lance writer based in Austin, Texas, does not pin all the blame on the CDR. Reporters made faulty interpretations of what was happening. "The black-church-burning story," he writes, "is a textbook example of what can happen, both good and bad, when journalists are tempted to connect the dots. It's an example of how the media can be distracted, even misled for a while, but, given time, are able to right themselves, regain their balance, and tease out the complex truth."

Surprisingly, *USA Today*, though not noted for investigative reporting, led the way in getting at the truth of the matter. (Close

The Helpful War Correspondent

"Once upon a time, war correspondents were accorded some support and privileges by the armies they covered," writes veteran CNN correspondent Peter Arnett in *Media Studies Journal* (Fall 1996). "Now it's the other way around." Arnett covered the war in Chechnya last summer.

Forget much of what you learned about journalistic impartiality when you enter the blackened debris of [the Chechen capital of] Grozny: You play by local rules. That means lending your satellite phones to the vodka-swiggling Russian soldiers at the checkpoints so they can call their wives or their distant headquarters. So far, no journalist with a satellite phone has been shot in the back after being waved through the checkpoint—more than can be said for some local reporters. And you give lifts to the armed Chechen rebels materializing from the underbrush along country roads. No point in trying to outrun a B-40 rocket, even in an armored car.

behind were the Associated Press's Fred Bayles and the *New Yorker's* Kelly.) *USA Today* reporter Gary Fields and a dozen colleagues, notes Holley, "conducted more than 500 interviews, examined fire records in every southern state, and visited the sites of 45 church arsons." They found that while there had been a "surge" of arsons during 1995 and '96 at black churches in two areas in the South, there was no "epidemic of racially-driven arsons" sweeping the region. Of the 64 fires at black churches the *USA Today* team examined, only four could be conclusively shown to be racially motivated.

The nation (and the news media), Fields and a fellow reporter observed, had stumbled upon an old phenomenon and mistaken it



The burning last June of Pleasant Ridge United Church of Christ, in North Carolina, fed the media's "fire."

for something new. "The phenomenon: churches of every color are a traditional favorite of arsonists. Although the pace has been declining in recent years, arsonists still torch an average of 520 churches and church-owned buildings a year."

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

America's Foolish Romance with God

"The Last Taboo" by Wendy Kaminer, in *The New Republic* (Oct. 14, 1996), 1220 19th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Many sermons are preached these days about America's moral decline and loss of religious faith. Nearly everybody seems to agree that the spirit of secularism has seized the nation. Kaminer, a Public Policy Fellow at Radcliffe College, begs to differ. Americans, she says, give too much respect to religion—and too little to the rational alternative: atheism.

"If I were to mock religious belief as childish, if I were to suggest that worshiping a supernatural deity, convinced that it cares about your welfare, is like worrying about monsters in the closet who find you tasty enough to eat, if I were to describe God as our creation. . . . I'd violate the norms of civility and religious correctness, I'd be excoriated as an example of the cynical, liberal elite responsible for America's moral decline. I'd be pitied for my spiritual blindness; some people would try to enlighten and convert me. I'd receive hate mail. Atheists generate about as much sympathy as pedophiles. But,

while pedophilia may at least be characterized as a disease, atheism is a choice, a willful rejection of beliefs to which vast majorities of people cling."

She cites a 1994 survey showing that 95 percent of Americans believe in God or some other universal spirit, and that 76 percent "imagine God as a heavenly father who actually pays attention to their prayers." Many also entertain more exotic beliefs. According to a 1991 survey, 53 percent of Catholics and 40 percent of Protestants believe in UFOs (unidentified flying objects). Nearly one-third of the nation's teenagers believe in reincarnation.

"In this climate—with belief in guardian angels and creationism becoming commonplace—making fun of religion is as risky as burning a flag in an American Legion hall," Kaminer asserts. "But, by admitting that they're fighting a winning battle, advocates of renewed religiosity would lose the benefits of appearing besieged. Like liberal rights orga-