

to think I climbed under the bed in the middle of the night, faced the monsters and dragged them into the light so that we might all better understand the hatefulness that grows in the shadows we choose to ignore.

When I was a freshman at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago I set out to expose these darker places. Little did I suspect that the images I captured would one day attract international attention and the FBI, subpoena in hand, would come looking for the monsters I uncovered.

November 1974

It was one of *those* November days in Chicago. The savage wind and rain – whipped into a predatory frenzy by the whitecaps on Lake Michigan – stalked victims up and down Michigan Avenue. It was a dismal, atheist rain, just one degree short of converting to sleet.

It was a perfect day for hunting Nazis.

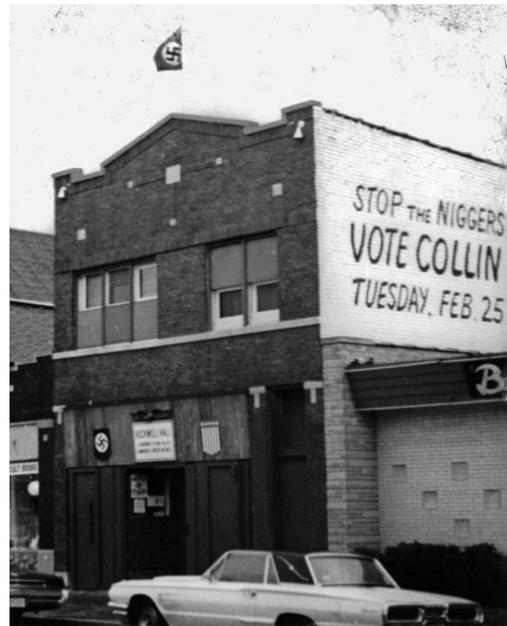
I turned my back against the rain and prayed my knit cap and raised collar would help sell my disguise. The term *skinhead* hadn't yet come into vogue but I was fairly certain a *longhair* would not be welcome inside Nazi Party headquarters. I was trying to look like a rough and tumble longshoreman but suspected I looked more like Mike Nesmith of the Monkees.

The target of my photo-documentary was an organization calling itself the National Socialist Party of America (NSPA), which rumor held was headquartered in the Marquette Park neighborhood on the city's far south side. Frank Collin formed the NSPA in 1966 after being dismissed from the National Socialist White People's Party (NSWPP) which had evolved from the original American Nazi Party founded by George Lincoln Rockwell. Not long after this

assignment Collin would become the subject of extensive media coverage when it was announced the NSPA, dressed in full Nazi Stormtrooper regalia, intended to march through Skokie Illinois, home to a vast enclave of Holocaust survivors.

The streets of Marquette Park were deserted when I arrived. Its shoe cobblers, TV repairmen and fortunetellers had closed their doors against the oppugnant weather and its residents had taken refuge behind thick, faded curtains. The aging, old-world population of Marquette Park seemed reluctant to give up its secret but when I found myself staring gape-mouthed at George Lincoln Rockwell Hall I realized the NSPA was not the clandestine operation I had expected.

Rockwell Hall had the unmistakable look of a Nazi Party headquarters. The two-story brick fortress was built with steel reinforced doors, barricaded windows, and a swastika banner flying high above the pediment. But the real giveaway, the images that jolted me like a jackboot to the solar plexus, were the brazen racist messages broadcast across the second story walls.



I stood frozen before the reinforced door, my inertia broken only when a group of goose-stepping Nazis marched up the street and a fresh regiment of goose pimples marched down my spine. The placards they carried spewed loathsome messages and their shirts bore the stark, unmistakable likeness of a swastika encircled by the words "WHITE POWER".

There's a scene in The Wizard of Oz in which the Scarecrow, Tin Man and Cowardly Lion slip into the Wicked Witch's castle by following the Winkie Guards through an imposing gate. As

they fall in line behind the last guard the Cowardly Lion tries futilely to conceal his tail inside his coat. Like some absurd Winkie parody the Nazis marched past me and entered single file into their fortress. I confirmed that my own tail (that is to say my ponytail) was safely hidden inside my coat and then I fell in line behind the last Nazi and slipped into the claustrophobic confines of Rockwell Hall.

When the disconcerting thud of a dead bolt sounded behind me the stale air seemed to compress like the thick, muffled atmosphere of a decompressing airplane. With my head down to avoid eye contact I ricocheted off brusque neo-Nazis who seemed oblivious to my presence. It hadn't occurred to me that they might think of me as just another bored, hate-mongering teenager and for the time being my mission remained hidden.

The room was dark and the musky air felt tainted with radioactive levels of testosterone. I wandered past drab walls punctuated with racist posters and feigned interest in dilapidated racks spilling over with xenophobic propaganda. On the farthest wall there hung an illuminated Nazi Party flag. In the monochromatic gloom its brilliant red and white hues shown like the glowing embers from a thousand burning books.

NSPA leader Frank Collin was middle-aged, diminutive and balding. He could have been the neighborhood butcher or insurance agent if not for the swastika on his arm and the pistol on his hip. Collin was rallying his troops for a propaganda blitzkrieg on the neighborhood when I approached and revealed the camera hidden beneath my coat. He slowly sized me up as the voices in the room took on the guttural resonance of a pride of mountain lions eying their prey and doing the math. In Collin's unreadable eyes I felt the monster's invisible arms slither around my chest and send my lungs chasing air.

Frank Collin was many things including a candidate for the local alderman's seat. His unambiguous campaign slogan – WHITE MAN FIGHT – was plastered on the side of Rockwell Hall four decades before populist politicians would develop coded language to relay the same message. To sway the impasse I recovered my breath and reminded Collin of a politician's need for exposure (my stomach lurched as the stark propaganda films of Leni Riefenstahl sprang to mind). He broke from his deliberation and summoned his men to pose before the flag for a quick group shot – just like one big happy Aryan family.



After Collin's troops dispersed I took a seat next to a quiet man wearing a brown shirt and a black gun. The young Nazi had the abbreviated syntax of a man uncomfortable talking to others but when I asked about his pistol he brightened and unholstered the weapon. He emptied the bullets from their chambers and lined them up on the desk before me. "See how the tips are hollowed out?" he asked. "They're called 'dum-dum bullets'. They expand on impact to inflict maximum damage."

The term was new to me. In a few years dum-dum bullets would enter the national vocabulary (and the national debate on gun control) when a gunman would fire a similar bullet into the President of the United States.

I guiltily continued my charade as an enthusiastic pupil and gradually pried open the door into the young man's guarded isolation. As he coddled the powerful weapon in his hands a subdued self-satisfaction began to lubricate his speech.

“Dum-dum bullets make a small hole when they go in, but a BIG hole when they come out.”

His disarming demeanor was the antithesis of his unsettling words. Here sat a soft-spoken young man marginally older than me, a man who came of age during the summer of love, flower power and the peace movement, and yet some unknown circumstance had led him down this dark, hateful path. He calmly spoke about killing with the emotional velocity typically reserved for ordering lunch. I imagined this carnal exchange, warm flesh on cold steel, would somehow deliver the psychological carbohydrates needed to feed his inner demons and sustain him through another day.

Today

My mind has replayed this conversation many times over and while the words have faded from exact recall, I still remember the hollow feeling of remorse that followed me home that day. It wasn't Frank Collin or the young neo-Nazi with the bullet fetish that upset me. It was my own clandestine façade, my own revolver of guilt that fired the hollow-tipped bullets of shame into my psyche.

I let a group of white supremacists believe that I was one of them because the urge to do otherwise was suppressed by a well-developed survival instinct. George Orwell once cautioned, “He wears a mask and his face grows to fit it”. I didn't think I was in danger of succumbing to an

outbreak of racism or catching some neo-fascist infection. All of my liberal inoculations were up to date. No, the sepsis crawling beneath my skin was more like the associative guilt that Michael Herr described in his Vietnam memoir *Dispatches*; “I went there behind the crude but serious belief that you had to be able to look at anything, serious because I acted on it and went, crude because I didn’t know, it took the war to teach it, that you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did.”

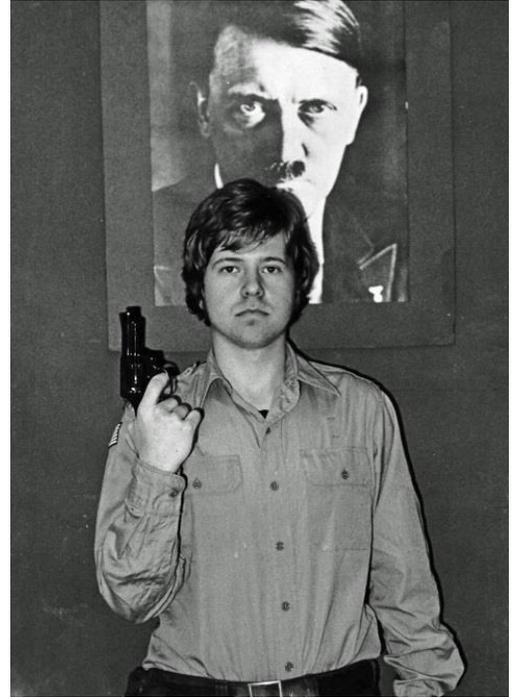
Time spent in the company of white supremacists infects the soul with white guilt; a cultural remorse derived from membership in a race that has for centuries, slaughtered, enslaved and banned people of color. In my case the guilt that gnawed at my consciousness was the memory of how I so eagerly and easily sold my disguise. It was the liability of this deception that quietly chafed at my moral sensibilities for years and it was the unresolved culpability of omission that eventually metastasized into a malignant lump of regret.

November 1974

I was just about out of film but I hadn't produced "the shot" – the one powerful image that captured the essence of all I'd experienced. In other words, I had yet to drag the monster out from under the bed and into the light.

My subject had relaxed in his role as weapons expert so I positioned him before a portrait of Adolf Hitler. In the moment he raised his gun I came face to face with the lethal hollow tips nestled inside each chamber.

Click.



The monster was captured on a 35-millimeter prison of film.

I didn't know then how far my photos would travel but in hindsight there was a great deal I didn't know that day. I didn't know that Frank Collin would win a frightening 16% of the vote in his bid for public office or that these same Chicago Nazis would gain international notoriety when the Supreme Court would allow them to demonstrate in Skokie Illinois. I didn't know that Collin would eventually be ousted from power when he was exposed as the son of Jewish immigrants or that he would go to prison for molesting young boys inside Nazi Party headquarters.

And I most certainly didn't know that the FBI, armed with a subpoena, would visit my office in search of the monsters I held captive on a tiny strip of film. It wasn't Frank Collin they were seeking. They were looking for the quiet young Nazi with an unhealthy infatuation with guns; a

man who possessed an even stronger infatuation with a young actress named Jodie Foster. The FBI was chasing the murky past of John W. Hinckley Jr., the disturbed gunman who shot down President Ronald Reagan and three others on a Washington DC sidewalk.

May 1981

The phone rang at dawn and as I pulled the receiver close a metallic shout from the other end jolted me upright and awake.

“FEDS SEIZE NAZI PIX!”

“Wha ...?”

“The New York Post. Front page. FEDS ... SEIZE ... NAZI ... PIX!”

Five minutes later I stood sockless at the corner newsstand, scrutinizing the front page of the New York Post. Two familiar Nazis stared back. Adolf Hitler’s portrait hung in the background, his stare intense and chilling. A young neo-Nazi with a raised pistol in hand stood in the foreground – his expression unreadable and lifeless – but no less chilling. My eyes went to the photo credit beneath the picture where I found my name.



I was no journalist. When I took the picture I'd been a teenaged art student shooting an exposé of Nazi activity for a college photography assignment. If I'd been a journalist I would have written down the names of my subjects. Instead I'd spent the past two months struggling to learn the true identity of the man now staring back at me from the newsstand.

I secured the resources of the *New York Post* to help

uncover the truth but when the District Attorney in Washington D.C. got wind of my “bombshell” photo-documentary the truth proved irrelevant. No longer interested in the young Nazi’s true identity, *The Post* ran the story on page one because, “Yesterday, in a surprise move, two [FBI] agents quietly returned to the Manhattan office of photographer Don Carter with a subpoena for the negatives.”¹

Today the word truth is conveniently presented between a pair of bobbing fingers. Tabloid television, fake news, and alternative facts contribute to a systemic American malady symptomized by “quotation truth”. Much like “Newspeak”, the language George Orwell created in his novel *1984*, the corrosive de-evolution of truth radiating from Washington and perpetuated by mercenary media outlets is designed to create an alternate reality – a reality that rewrites history and contradicts all that we know to be true. Orwell forewarned, “The very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world. Lies will pass into history.”

Do we give up all hope of objective truth the moment we let others manipulate our perception of reality? Once we take that leap of faith – whether with a parent, teacher, political party or the

press – do we become nothing more than the manipulated sycophants of a thousand well-orchestrated lies?

In 1981 it hadn't occurred to me that truth could be subjective, opinion, or mutable and my single-minded mission had been to discover the truth (sans-quotation marks) about the pictures that would soon make their way into magazines around the world. The September 1981 issue of *American Photographer* magazine reported,

While agencies like Sygma and Gamma/Liaison were turning over their files for pictures of young blond Nazis, Carter was painstakingly trying to identify the young man who had posed for him before a picture of Adolf Hitler. Eager to obtain a positive i.d., Carter, now a videotape editor in New York City, called the Post and offered exclusive first rights if the paper would do the legwork.²

At a midnight meeting in lower Manhattan with New York Post columnist Steve Dunleavy (the tabloid TV reporter better known for his work on *A Current Affair*) the newspaper agreed to turn the images over to their contacts at the Secret Service. The subsequent article revealed that, “Two days later a Secret Service Agent told The Post he was “90% sure” of the man’s identity.

After two months of fruitless research, the FBI subpoena had come as a welcome development, a signal that perhaps the truth would finally be revealed. Could the young neo-Nazi be, as the Justice Department suspected, the same man who had recently attempted to assassinate President Ronald Reagan? Was it possible I'd spent an afternoon discussing hollow-tipped bullets with the insane gunman John Hinckley Jr.?

March 1981

It was a bright cold day in April when I heard the news that Hinckley had gunned down President Reagan, Secret Service agent Tim McCarthy, police officer Thomas Delahanty and White House Press Secretary James Brady, who succumbed to his wounds decades later. In the days following the shooting, sketchy details of Hinckley's involvement in the American Nazi Party surfaced. Like a ghost rattling its chains outside memory's doorway, something in these reports was haunting me. For days I consciously ignored what my subconscious would not and when the weekend arrived I succumbed to an irrepressible urge to catch up on events with the *Sunday New York Times*.

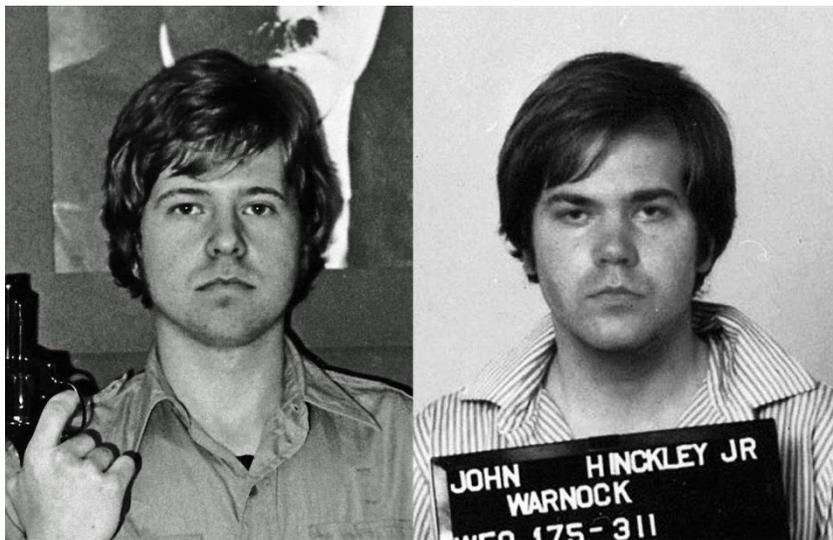
25-year-old John Hinckley is charged with attempting to assassinate President Reagan, and his apparent fascination with the National Socialist Party and his brief reported association with the neo-Nazi group remain an important focus of the Federal Government's investigation.³

In the years between shooting my photo documentary and the shooting of the president, Frank Collin had lost control of the National Socialist Party of America and a new generation of leaders had emerged. *The Times* article went on to report,

Two successive leaders of the American Nazi group, Mr. Allen and Harold Covington, have said that Mr. Hinckley was a member ... Mr. Allen, the party leader, said that "character assessment" reports from Mr. Breda to Mr. Collin, the party leader at the time of the Skokie march, suggested that "basically, he was uncontrollable" and openly preached violence.³

The National Socialist Party? Mr. Collin? The Skokie march? It took about a thousand gigawatts of clues but the cerebral light bulb finally switched on and for the first time since the shooting I took a good look at the images of John Hinckley Jr. in the newspaper and thought, “We’ve met before.”

I bolted the attic steps two at a time and located the box where the residue of my college years had settled in sedimentary layers. Like an archeologist on a bone I located the photographs and spread them across the floor.



The similarities were unmistakable despite a six-year lapse between photographs. The downturned corners of his mouth, the cupid’s bow of his upper lip, the narrow bridge, ball and nostril flare of his nose, the

bend of his eyebrows, the curl of his sideburns around the base of his ears, even the blemishes on his neck and cheeks, all mirrored the images of Hinckley assembled by *The Times*. When combined with the article linking Hinckley to Frank Collin and the Chicago NSPA, I was convinced I had hit the photojournalism jackpot.

I glanced up to find my fiancé Caroline looking over my shoulder and realized that in the countless hours we’d spent getting to know each other I had neglected to mention my infiltration of the American Nazi Party. The iconic Nazi imagery spread across the attic floor combined with

the *New York Times* headlines about the Reagan shooting had her wondering who the hell she was about to marry. Clearly Caroline did not share my enthusiastic response to learning I was somehow connected to the attempted assassination of the President of the United States.

Hours after my epiphany in the attic I met with editors at the *New York Daily News*, *United Press*, and *TIME Magazine*, before eventually striking the midnight deal with the *New York Post*. I later signed with Outline, a photo agency anxious to represent my images in Europe and negotiations in Paris, Munich, Milan, London and half a dozen other European markets followed.

The struggle to uncover the truth became paramount after false Hinckley images surfaced, making media outlets reluctant to publish unsubstantiated photographs. *American Photographer* magazine wrote,

Following the attempted assassination of President Reagan, and the ensuing scramble for Hinckley photos, many magazines and newspapers ran pictures that turned out to be frauds.

Outline, the photo agency representing Carter ... made "an unusual deal" in selling the photos to Time, Paris Match, Bunte, Gente, and the London Daily Mirror, even though their editors are not able to publish them unless it is proven that their subject is truly Hinckley.²

Over the next two months a series of exchanges took place with the FBI and the prosecuting District Attorney. More than once I felt the tap of paranoia on my shoulder. After all, I was raised on a steady diet of conspiracy theories surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy, which coincidentally occurred on my birthday. Government lies and CIA manipulation of the press had been well documented through disclosures about the Pentagon Papers and Operation

Mockingbird. As I looked into the faces of the Nazis inhabiting my photo essay I couldn't help but wonder if there might be a real-life Manchurian Candidate staring back.

Ronald Reagan recovered from the assassination attempt and went on to complete two full terms as President. James Brady struggled with his injury for the remainder of his life and died in 2014. His death was ruled a homicide as a result of the wounds he sustained during the assassination attempt but prosecutors elected not to press murder charges against Hinckley. In 1982 John W. Hinckley Jr. was found innocent by reason of insanity and spent 35 years in a psychiatric hospital.

I still don't know if the man I met in the Chicago Nazi Party headquarters was the man responsible for the murder of James Brady and the attempted assassination of President Reagan, but a document I recently obtained through the Freedom of Information Act has confirmed that in April 1981 the Director of the FBI received a request to "perform a full photographic comparison of these photos with photos of subject John Warnock Hinckley, Jr.". To this day the agency has remained silent on the results of their investigation and the man's true identity remains publicly unknown.

Today

The recent rise of the "alt-right" movement and the violence that erupted in Charlottesville, Virginia has rekindled interest in my decades-old encounter with the American Nazi Party and the fruitless search for truth that followed.

What is more dangerous, the racial contempt displayed by a small group of white supremacists in Chicago or Charlottesville, or the implicit encouragement of an administration that emboldens people of hate to act against people of color? I have stood toe to toe with the pistol-toting, swastika-wearing variety of racism and from my perspective the inflammatory rhetoric of those in power, cloaked in Orwellian doublespeak and designed to fuel the cultural resentments buried in our national psyche, is far more dangerous. Racism, which was once secretly concealed beneath America's thin white skin, is now blatantly displayed on our inflamed red necks.

When "alt-right" ideology becomes mainstream and "alternative truth" competes with "objective truth" for the attention of our nation, it's time to look back and examine the road that got us here, a road that passed through Selma in the sixties, Chicago in the seventies, and now passes through Washington D.C. When America comes to the next fork in that road the direction we choose depends on the strength of our people to see through the artifice, obfuscation and misdirection of those trying to alter what is real.

Pulitzer Prize winning author Thomas E. Ricks wrote, "The struggle to see things as they are is perhaps the fundamental driver of Western civilization ... It is the agreement that objective reality exists, that people of goodwill can perceive it, and that other people will change their views when presented with the facts of the matter."⁴

Meanwhile, Big Brother is watching.

¹ FEDS SEIZE NAZI PIX (May 29, 1981) New York Post, 1

² IN CAMERA (Sept. 1981) American Photographer, 10

³ King, W. (April 13, 1981) Hinckley Inquiry Studies Alleged Nazi 'Flirtation', The New York Times, 20

⁴ Ricks, T. E. (2017) Churchill & Orwell The Fight For Freedom, 270