

HATE CRIME INCIDENTS: FROM ELECTION DAY TO INAUGURATION DAY

Saturday February 7, 2009

We've never before known hate crimes to be lubricated by our nation's presidential choice. Being the first elected African-American identified president, however, Barack Obama's success aroused the hateful passions of more than a few Americans. His run for the White House sparked hate incidents¹⁻⁴. In addition, his election provoked some to contemplate acts of hate^{5,6}, and others to actually commit criminal acts of hate. In addition, Barack Obama's inauguration provoked others. Going beyond the headlines, we examine here in detail those hate crime incidents that have come to our attention that were fueled by Obama's election victory and by his assuming the office of the president. After reading this, you'll learn that there was no randomness to these crimes; rather, similar forces were operating in places with similar histories regardless of where, what, when and why they occurred.

In the 78 days from November 4, 2008 through January 20, 2009, we've tallied 15 hate crime incidents that were significantly provoked by the election or inauguration of President Obama. On average, that's about one hate crime every five days, although the crimes did not occur at regular intervals. Ten of the 15 crimes occurred within 48 hours of GOP presidential candidate John McCain conceding defeat. One incident happened on the weekend following the election (November 8-9). Another Obama-related hate crime occurred on November 14, 2008, and the remaining three occurred four days before, two days before, and on inauguration day. For all we know, there may have been more Obama-related hate crimes, but they did not come to our attention. In these 15 incidents, there were 17 persons arrested; 13 of those arrested were white males, two were white females, one was an African-American male (said to have posed as a white male on the Internet), and one was a Latino male who worked in concert with three white males. In five of the 15 incidents the perpetrators are unknown with this exception. On election night on the **North Carolina State University** campus in Raleigh, four *N.C. State* students spray-painted violent, racist messages about Barack Obama, including two assassination remarks that read, "Let's shoot that N----r in the head" and, "Hang Obama by a noose." Instead of having the students arrested as they should have—calling for a head of state's head is an act of domestic terrorism—the mostly white school's administration instead protected the students. By refusing to take any legal action against them, the school protected the identity of the students, and it refused to discipline them or to expel them from school (although the **NAACP** demanded expulsion). *N.C. State's* administration thus sent a chilling message to its current and future black students. Bizarrely, the four cowardly students issued a written, anonymous apology, which of course is meaningless since no one but the *N.C. State* administration knows who they are. In other words, they said in essence: *you don't know who we are, we aren't going to tell you who we are, we're not withdrawing from N.C. State, but now that we've been caught we want to say we are sorry we said we wanted Barack Obama murdered, now shut up*

and let our college educations be unmarred by our threats of domestic terrorism so that we can use our college privilege to eventually gain well-paying jobs. N.C. State administrators are "studying" the issue of on-campus hate speech, and we can expect their white-washed report out in March.

Turning to the election-to-inauguration hate crime incidents where something *is* known about those arrested and what they are accused of doing, we've found that in addition to 88% being male, 88% being white, and 78% being white males, the vast majority (82%) were young. The average age of the 17 arrestees is 25 years; their ages ranged from 18-47 at the time of their arrests, with five being in their late teens (18-19 years), nine being in their early twenties (21-24 years), and three being in their forties (42-47 years). Additionally, only four of the 15 hate crime incidents occurred in former slave states (two in Mississippi and one each in Georgia and North Carolina). The other Obama-related hate crime incidents occurred in New York (where there were four), New Jersey (where there were two), California (where there were two), Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Utah. **In other words, those arrested don't fit the stereotype of old, white Southerners clinging to hopes of a resurrected Confederacy.** But, of course, American racism was never regional as James W. Loewen [has taught us](#).

Of those arrested little is known about any possible prior criminal history; that is, in only two hate crime incidents where arrests were made was something reported by the media about past criminal activity. In the case of **Steven Joseph Christopher**, 42—a white man who was arrested in Brookhaven, Mississippi after allegedly planning to travel to Washington, DC, to assassinate President Obama during the inauguration ceremony on January 20th—we know that while living in his native Wisconsin, Christopher was charged with knowingly violating a domestic abuse restraining order in February, 2008 out of Walworth County, Wisconsin—a county whose population is 94.5% white, and one of only 13 counties of Wisconsin's 78 counties to give John McCain the nod over Barack Obama. Forty-eight percent of Walworth County voters picked Obama in a state where he garnered 56% of the vote. According to the laudable research of James W. Loewen, Walworth County, Wisconsin is no stranger to racism; it has one probable and four possible *sundown towns*—entire communities that have a history of banishing blacks from living there or even being present after dark (hence the term *sundown town*). It's places like Walworth County—historically racist, currently and historically disproportionately white, and largely Republican—where you would expect hateful seeds to germinate into a plot to assassinate Barack Obama.

In the other hate crime case where something is known about the criminal records of those arrested, in Hemet, California, **Justin Tyme Hayes**, 21, **Crystal Lee McCann**, 22, **Derek Shane O'Brien**, 22, and **Darrin Peter Thibault**, 24—who were all arrested for allegedly being involved in the brutal race-based beating of a 19-year-old Latino man causing him permanent and severe brain damage ten days after the presidential election—are said to be members of a white supremacist hate group, the “COORS Skins”. In addition, Hayes has been charged with drug dealing. What makes the Hemet hate crime connected to the election is the fact that the COORS Skins had a website which included angry messages railing against the election of Barack Obama. Clearly, Obama's race and

his victory on November 4th appeared to further enrage the gang. Thankfully, the website was shut down after the November 14th attack on the Latino victim whose name has not been released to the public. Not so coincidentally, Hemet, California—a city in Riverside County with an African-American population totaling just about 2.6% and with a white population of about 80.5%—also has a history of racism: it is a probable *sundown town* according to James Loewen's research. Hemet's white population far exceeds that of Riverside County (65.5%), and its black population is about two-and-half times *lower* than Riverside County (6.24%) which is itself about *half* the national average. Also not coincidentally, the voters of Riverside County were much less likely to have voted for the winning presidential candidate in 2008 (Barack Obama got 51% of the vote in Riverside) when compared with the entire state of California (61%).

In the 15 hate crime incidents we tallied that were sparked by President Obama's election and inauguration, what exactly is said to have occurred? As we've mentioned, in one case a young Latino man with his future ahead of him now will spend the rest of his life severely brain-damaged and the ward of the state of California; and, as we've said, four college students spray-painted a threat and a directive to kill our president at *North Carolina State University* on election night with no consequences to them, and one white man, who had also allegedly verbalized threats to assassinate President Obama, was apparently making plans to go to Washington, D.C., to carry out his act at the inauguration. In the other twelve hate crime incidents either someone was assaulted (or otherwise intimidated face-to-face) or a fire was set—with the exception of these two cases. First, in south Torrance, California—a former *sundown town* in Los Angeles County that currently has twice as many white residents as the rest of L.A. County—race-based and neo-Nazi symbols were found painted and left on homes with signs supporting Barack Obama. The vandals spray-painted cars, walls, trees and Obama campaign signs with swastikas and racist slurs and phrases, including “Go back to Africa,” “nigger”, “Hitler”, and “Nazi”. Second, in the case of the only black person arrested, **Dyron Hart**, 19—a former **Nicholls State University** student and 6-foot-3-inch, 350-pound *Nicholls State* football player wannabe—allegedly sent to black students at four schools a message via *Facebook* stating he planned to kill 3,000 people, including them, the day after the November 4th election. Hart stands accused of sending the electronic threats to students at his old school in Thibodaux, Louisiana, as well as to students at **Louisiana State University**, the **University of Mississippi**, and the **University of Alabama**. Hart, of Poplarville, Mississippi, allegedly was posing as a white man when he is said to have sent the emails. He was arrested by the **FBI** on November 12, 2008, and if convicted, could receive up to five years in prison, a \$250,000 fine, and three years of supervised release. Not unlike Walworth County, Wisconsin, and Riverside County, California, the voters in Pearl County, Mississippi, where Poplarville is located, were significantly less apt to vote for Barack Obama (19%) than the rest of the state (Obama won 43% of the vote in Mississippi).

THE ARSONS

Six of the 15 election-to-inauguration hate crime incidents we've tallied involved purposefully setting a fire. In some instances, the physical damage was minor. For

example, in South Ogden, Utah—a place where whites make up 91.5% of the population, where African-Americans constitute only 0.74% of the population, and a place that in 2002 had an active Neo-Nazi hate group according to the **Southern Poverty Law Center**—the American flag flying at the home of a black family who had just returned home from volunteering at their local polling station on November 4th was torched. The family was publicly known as being supporters of Barack Obama, and the incident was investigated as a hate crime (no arrest was made).

Similarly, in Hardwick Township, New Jersey, on November 6, 2008, while taking his eight-year-old daughter to school, an African-American man, **Gary Grewal**, 51, discovered that someone had burned a six-foot tall cross on his yard near his political banner that declared Barack Obama president. The banner was torched also. Although no one was arrested in that hate crime incident, nine days after the fire, townspeople marched in unity against hate crimes. Like some of the other places where there were Obama-related hate crimes, Hardwick Township is almost exclusively white (97%) with a very small, relative African-American population (0.6%). And like nearly all of the other places where these community-destroying crimes took place, fewer people in Warren County, New Jersey (of which Hardwick Township is a part) voted for Obama (42%) than the state where it is located (57% of Garden State voters chose Obama).

Then there was the cross-burning on the lawn of the only black man in Apolacon Township, Pennsylvania, the night after the election. In that small town in Susquehanna County, **Archie Johnson**, 71—a retired architect—and his partner, **Ruth Cohen**, 63, who is a Jewish retired school principal, discovered the cross-burning on their property, and one week later police arrested two white men, **Stephen James Barrett**, 22, and **Forrest Michael Ashcraft**, 19, both of Friendsville, Pennsylvania. The two were charged with criminal conspiracy to commit ethnic intimidation (a third-degree misdemeanor), ethnic intimidation (a third-degree misdemeanor), and trespassing out of the *Montrose District Court*. Unlike Harwick Township, New Jersey, there was no anti-hate crime rally in Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania, where just 0.3 % of its residents are African-American and 98.5% are white, and where on election day, its voters—unlike Pennsylvania—gave the nod to John McCain (55% of voters in Pennsylvania chose Obama, but in Susquehanna County, he received only 44%).

On inauguration day in Jersey City, New Jersey, someone burned the front door of a woman's apartment after first taping Barack Obama newspaper articles on it. Thankfully, the woman who had apparently taken the day off of work to watch Barack Obama's inauguration on television smelled smoke at her front door and discovered it was on fire before major damage or injury occurred. No arrests were made to our knowledge in this case which took place in the only location—of all the Obama-related hate crime communities—where the president fared well in the election. Hudson County, New Jersey, where Jersey City is located, overwhelmingly supported Obama (73%) as compared to the rest of New Jersey (57%).

Two of the election-related hate arsons, however, were devastating. First there was the Springfield, Massachusetts church fire. Just hours after the nation elected its first non-

white president, the Macedonia Church of God in Christ, a predominately black church, burned to the ground, and authorities launched an investigation as to whether the Tinkham Road church fire was a hate-related arson set in retaliation for the election of President Barack Obama. They concluded it was, and on January 16, 2009, [authorities arrested](#) Benjamin F. Haskell, 22, Michael F. Jacques, 24, and Thomas A. Gleason Jr., 21, all of Springfield, Massachusetts. Haskell is said to have bragged to an uncover police officer that he set fire to the church and was responsible for five other arsons. On January 27, 2009, [the three white men were indicted](#) on federal civil rights charges. Each faces up to ten years in prison and three years of supervised release, if convicted as charged.

Then near Lake Lanier in Cumming, Georgia (Forsyth County) two days before Barack Obama was sworn in as our first African-American identified president, the home of **Pamela Graf**, 47, was destroyed by a deliberately set fire. Graf said she was in Washington, DC, to attend his inauguration at the time her 2,800-square-foot home went up in flames. She also said the root cause of the arson was her public support of the president. Referring to president Obama, someone had spray-painted a racial slur and the phrase "your black boy will die" on a fence along her Lanier Drive property. Prior to the suspicious fire, Ms. Graf said she took down an "Obama for President" yard sign after she received a threatening letter. The **Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives** was called to aid in the investigation. At the time of the suspicious fire, Cumming, Georgia was overwhelmingly white (89% versus 67% for the state of Georgia), and Forsyth County had significantly fewer votes cast for Barack Obama (20.4%) than Georgia (47%) or nationally (53%). A known *sundown community*, [Forsyth County is well-known for its racism](#), including incidents as recently as the 1990's. However, the legal investigation of the Cumming, Georgia arson differs dramatically from the Springfield, Massachusetts church fire. On February 6, 2009, authorities arrested Pamela Graf and her boyfriend, **Steve Strobel**, 46, of Winder, Georgia, in Barrow County for intentionally setting Ms. Graf's house on fire allegedly to collect insurance money. Both were charged with first-degree arson.

THE ASSAULTS

As of this date, four of the 15 arrested have pleaded guilty; the remaining have not had their criminal cases adjudicated. The three white men and the one Latino man who pleaded guilty went on a race-based terror-spree on Staten Island immediately following—and because of—the election of Barack Obama. In all, four men were assaulted. Ironically, the victim most seriously injured was white. From our *This Date in Hate* calendar at our website, here is the account of those assaults:

“In the early morning hours on Staten Island, New York, just hours after the 2008 presidential election outcome was known, four men were attacked in separate race-based hate crime incidents by four Staten Island men—three white and one Latino. First, a black Muslim teenager who emigrated to the United States in 2000 from Liberia, **Alie Kamara**, 17, was attacked with a pipe and police baton by four men who shouted "Obama" in the *Park Hill* section of Staten Island. Bloodied by the attack,

Mr. Kamara was able to escape from his attackers and he made his way home where he then called for help. The four perpetrators also assaulted a black man in the *Port Richmond* section of Staten Island by pushing him to the ground, and then accosted a Latino man and demanded who he voted for, for president. After those three attacks, a white man, **Ronald Forte**, 38—who was mistaken to be African-American by his perpetrators—was run over and then left for dead on *Blackford Avenue* in the *Port Richmond* section as he was walking home at night from his job as a *Shop Rite* manager. Mr. Forte, a father of five, who had items stolen from his body allegedly by the perpetrators as he lay clinging to life, was in a coma for days following the attack. He suffered significant brain injury, is no longer able to work, and is being cared for by his mother. Two white Staten Island men, **Ralph Nicoletti**, 18, and **Bryan Garaventa**, 18, were arrested for attacking Mr. Kamara, and on November 16, 2008, they pleaded Not Guilty to state charges of assault as a hate crime and weapons possession charges in a Staten Island court. Two other suspects—**Michael "Dominican Mike" Contreras**, 18, and **Brian Carranza**, 21—were arrested on January 6, 2009, and [were arraigned](#) the following day on federal civil rights charges along with Nicoletti and Garaventa in *Brooklyn Federal Court* for their roles in the election night hate crime attacks. Police discovered Nicoletti, Garaventa, Contreras and Carranza were involved in the attack on Mr. Kamara, and in the hit-and-run attack/robbery of Mr. Forte, because police found items belonging to Mr. Forte in the possession of Nicoletti and Garaventa during their investigation of the two. All four pleaded guilty to federal civil rights violations (federal hate crimes) for their roles in the post-election attacks which they admitted were prompted by their race-based anger about the election victory of Barack Obama. Garaventa pleaded guilty on January 6, 2009, [Carranza pleaded guilty](#) on January 26, 2009, Contreras pleaded guilty (also in January, 2009), and [Nicoletti pleaded guilty](#) on February 2, 2009. Nicoletti, who was the ringleader and who was the driver who hit Mr. Forte, could get up to 12 years in federal prison plus fines of up to \$250,000; the other three could receive up to 10 years in federal prison each and fines of up to \$250,000 each.”

Never a *sundown town* and racially diverse with 15% of its population Latino and another 15% black, Staten Island nonetheless has in common with nearly all of the other sites of Obama-related hate crime incidents election results out of sync with its surroundings. While 62% of New York voters chose Barack Obama for president, less than half (47%) the residents of Staten Island (Richmond County) voted for him. Additionally, two presidential election cycles ago, in 2000, Staten Island had two active white racist hate groups (a neo-Confederate group and a white nationalist group). In fact, 8 of the 12 locations where the hate crime incidents we examined have occurred have had an active hate group or currently do have an active hate group, according to data from the *Southern Poverty Law Center*. An additional community has a history of overt racism aimed

directly at African Americans (Forsyth County, Georgia) in the form of being a *sundown community*, as previously mentioned.

CRIME SITE-SPECIFIC ELECTION RESULTS

Although Barack Obama won the popular vote in six of the nine states where there occurred an Obama-related hate crime, the communities in which those hate crimes happened were very often *not* hotbeds of Obama support as we've shown throughout this report. In only three of twelve hate crime communities (25%) did Barack Obama garner significantly more votes than in the state in which those crimes occurred (*viz.*, Hudson County, New Jersey, Los Angeles County, California, and Wake County, North Carolina). When examining the president's election results by state-versus-community percentage differences, we discovered that the hate crime communities (HCC) were very often places significantly *opposed* to Barack Obama (TABLE ONE). As listed below, seven of the twelve communities were places where Obama had relatively weak support (highlighted in red). For example, in Richmond County, New York (Staten Island), Barack Obama had 15 percentage points *fewer* votes than in the state of New York as a whole. Additionally, in only 4 of the 12 communities (33%) where an Obama-related hate crime occurred did he have significantly more of the vote than his opponent, John McCain (highlighted in blue).

It is noteworthy that the one incident police believe very strongly was not a hate crime incident, but rather an arson-for-money scheme, was in a county that showed little support for Obama on election day (Forsyth County, Georgia). In fact, of all the counties where Obama-related crimes occurred, Forsyth County was the least to support Barack Obama.

TABLE ONE

Hate Crime Community (HCC), State	% of HCC Vote for Obama	% of State Vote for Obama	HCC vs. State Voting % Differences
Forsyth County, GA	20	47	-27
Pearl River County, MS	19	43	-24
Richmond County, NY	47	62	-15
Warren County, NJ	42	57	-15
Susquehanna County, PA	44	55	-11
Riverside County, CA	51	61	-10
Lincoln County, MS	34	43	-9
Hampden County, MA	62	62	0
Weber County, UT	35	34	+1
Wake County, NC	57	50	+7
Los Angeles County, CA	69	61	+8
Hudson County, NJ	73	57	+16

It is also noteworthy that the only black-on-black hate crime incident—the email incident allegedly involving Dyron Hart—is also said to have occurred in a location where Obama fared poorly on election day (Pearl River County, Mississippi).

In summary, just examining the period of time from the presidential election (November 4, 2008) to the day of Barack Obama’s inauguration (January 20, 2009), we have found fifteen (15) Obama-related hate crime incidents most all of which occurred in clusters around the time of Barack Obama's election victory (11) and around the time of his inauguration (3). In five of the fifteen cases (33%), the identities of the perpetrators are not known to the public. In the ten hate crime incidents where the identities of the actual or alleged perpetrators are known, most were men (88%), white (88%), or both (78%); and, the vast majority (82%) were young with 14 of the 17 persons arrested being between the ages of 18 and 24 years. These fifteen hate crime incidents occurred in nine states, but the places where the crimes occurred and those arrested for them do not fit stereotypes of old, white Southerners clinging to hopes of a resurrected Confederacy. That less than 30% of the hate crime incidents occurred in former slave states, and that nearly 20% of all states had an Obama-related hate crime incident (and these occurred coast to coast) tells us that the transmission of attitudinal white supremacy from generation to generation is a national problem. Two of the fifteen Obama-related incidents are significantly atypical; one appears to be a faked hate-crime arson-for-money incident, and the other a black-on-black hate crime. Both of these incidents are said to have occurred in very politically conservative (and historically racist) locales; the support on election day for Barack Obama in those two counties was low even compared with the counties where the typical hate crime incidents we’ve described in this report occurred. The communities where Obama-related hate crime-related incidents occurred—typical and atypical—generally were places of relative weak support for the president. Finally, in general these communities were historically racist places to live; and, generally speaking, they were and are today disproportionately white communities.



Footnotes:

¹See the blogs at Trends In Hate’s blogsite dated November 8, 2008, and November 15, 2008, at <http://trendsinhate.blogspot.com/>.

²Jim David Adkisson, 58, a white man who wrote a manifesto stating he hated “liberals”, “gays”, “Democrats” and “Barack Obama”, murdered two and wounded six at a Unitarian church in Knoxville, Tennessee, on July 27, 2008, because of his hatred.

³It was discovered in late October, 2008, by the *Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives* in Nashville, Tennessee, that two white supremacists, Daniel Cowart, 20, of Bells, Tennessee, and Paul Schlesselman 18, of West Helena, Arkansas, allegedly had plans to assassinate Barack Obama and to murder 102 black people after robbing a gun store in Nashville.

⁴Three white men—Tharin Gartrell, 28, Nathan Johnson, 32, and Shawn Adolf, 33—were arrested in August, 2008, in Aurora, Colorado, for gun and drug possession charges, and it was thought that they were planning to assassinate Barack Obama at the Democratic National Convention in Denver. United States Attorney Troy Eid said at an August 26, 2008, press conference that the men were not serious about carrying out their death threats (Adolf is said to have told one *Secret Service* agent that he wanted to kill Obama on the day of his inauguration, and Johnson is said to have told the *Secret Service* agent that he wanted Barack Obama murdered “because Obama is black.”).

⁵A white U.S. Marine stationed at *Camp Lejeune*, North Carolina, Kody Brittingham, 20, became the focus of a *Secret Service* investigation in December, 2008, when it was discovered that Brittingham’s journal apparently contained plans on how to kill Barack Obama as well as white supremacist material.

⁶A white man from Fort Bragg, California, living in Belfast, Maine, James G. Cummings II, became the focus of an *FBI* investigation after his murder on December 9, 2008, at the hands of his wife who tired of his sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. Amber Cummings told authorities that her husband became very angry when Barack Obama was elected president, that he spoke to white supremacy groups, and that he spoke about “dirty bombs”. A *Secret Service* investigation revealed that James G. Cummings II had just completed an application to become a member of a large neo-Nazi hate group, and that he had at his home on High Street in Belfast radioactive materials and instructions on how to make a so-called dirty bomb.

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