

**USA Today won plaudits when it revealed that reports of black church burnings were overblown. Unfortunately, the nation's leading fast-food paper failed to acknowledge its own shameful role in fanning the flames of this faux epidemic in the first place. To add to the confusion, it's now standing by all its stories, however discredited, outrageous, and irresponsible they may have been.**

**BY MICHAEL FUMENTO**

**W**hen an outbreak of black-church burnings swept the South earlier this year, virtually every major news outlet in the country came to the same conclusion: the fires were being set by white racists. All calamities sell papers, but this was the kind of story an editor's dreams are made of—an ongoing series of unsolved crimes, enormous blazes that captured the public's imagination, and underneath it all the always explosive subject of race relations in America.

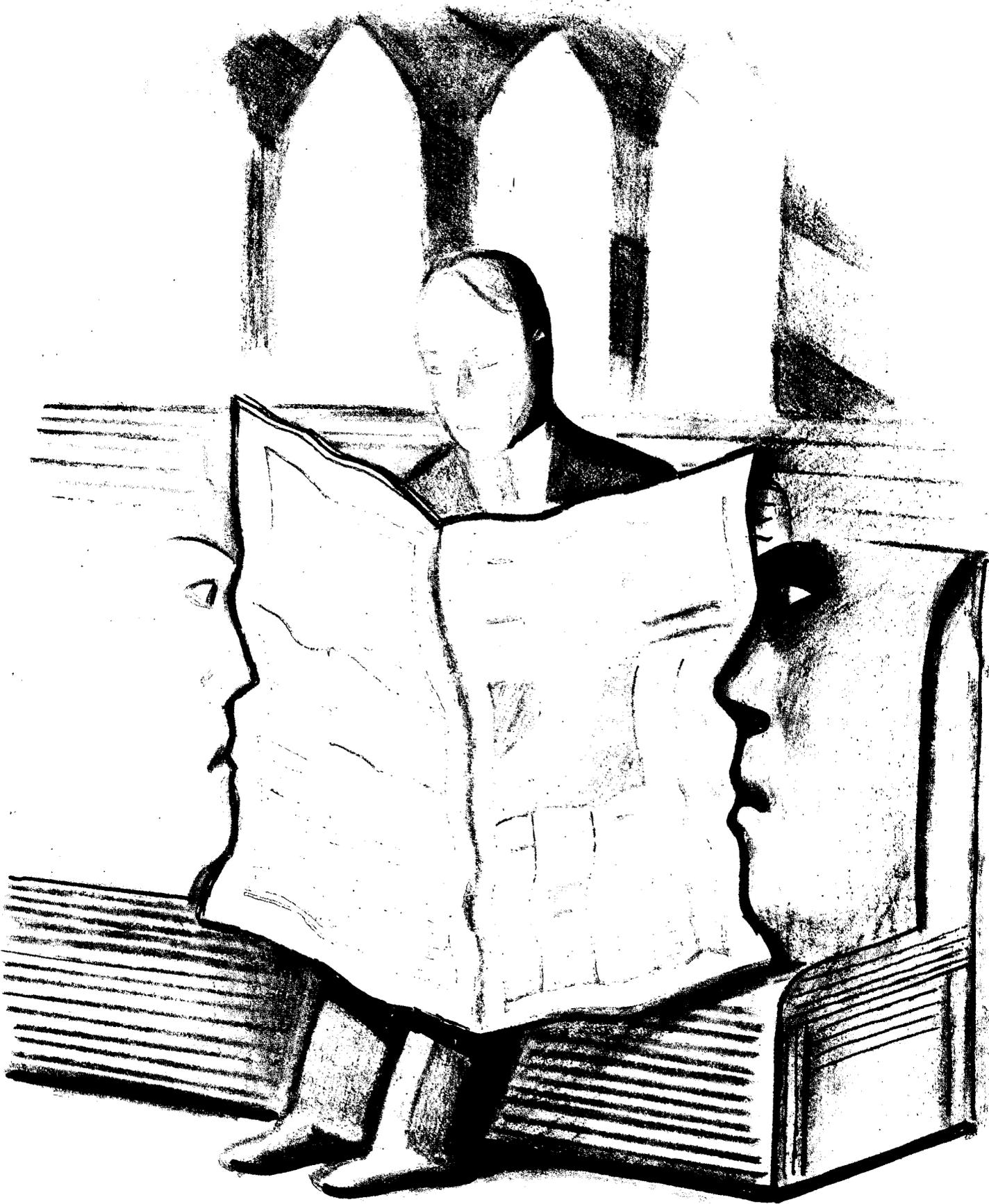
Then, in late June and early July—with the nation in the grip of a media blitz that was pushing public sentiment to the boiling point—*USA Today* pulled off the kind of once-in-a-lifetime journalistic coup that forges reputations and launches careers. Racism hadn't been a major factor in the burnings after all, the paper reported. Many more white churches were being torched, and the number of black churches set ablaze wasn't significantly higher than it had been in the past.

The scoop brought overnight credibility to a newspaper long mocked by its rivals. *USA Today's* tiny stories and ample graphics had earned it a reputation for being unserious, as well as the derisive nickname "McPaper." It was not thought of as a place for "real"

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reporters. But the church-fire breakthrough made other papers change their tune. After fifteen years in existence, the *New York Times* clucked, *USA Today* was finally "a real newspaper." Even the *Columbia Journalism Review*, a kind of tribunal of peers, offered glowing praise for the paper's work.

There was a catch, though, one that nobody in the press troubled to notice: no newspaper in the country had done more to build the racism myth in the first



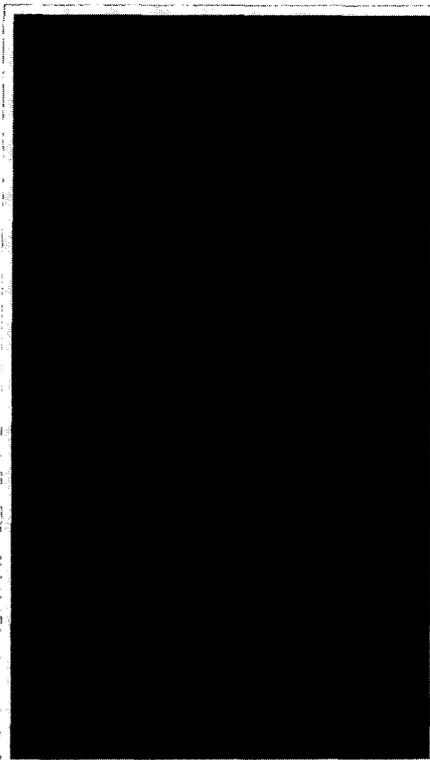
place. *USA Today* reporter Gary Fields had written over sixty articles on the burnings. And that early coverage—which promoted the racism hypothesis—had focused attention on the story nationwide. Columnist Clarence Page, who in mid-June had complained of a “conspiracy of silence” despite more than 1,400 press references to the burnings by then, praised Fields’s reporting. So did the Rev. Mac Charles Jones of the National Council of Churches (NCC), a group which itself played a major role in spreading the disinformation. Furthermore, it would seem that *USA Today*’s hype was at least in part responsible for bringing on a rash of copycat fires. The supposed hero of the story was also its goat.

**M**cPaper launched its first strike in January, with an article by Linda Kanamine entitled, “‘Unmistakable’ Terrorism in Arson at Tenn. Church.” A black church in Knoxville had been firebombed, and unidentified “racial slurs [were] found in the rubble.” Brian Levin, of the Southern Poverty Law Center, was quoted saying, “This is an unmistakable act of terrorism” because, “even if it was done without a racial motive, the fact of the matter is, it still sends shock waves throughout a community.” Seven months later—but not at this time—a *USA Today* article would detail how the Southern Poverty Law Center had become fabulously wealthy, in part by exaggerating the threat of racial terrorism.

• February 8: Gary Fields and Tom Watson became the first reporters to suggest that the isolated incidents might instead be part of a church-burning epidemic. “In scenes reminiscent of the 1960’s civil rights struggles,” they wrote, “black churches in the South are being set afire at an alarming rate.” Their article, “Arson at Black Churches Echoes Bigotry of Past,” was also the first to claim that black churches in particular were being singled out. “Somebody has a grudge in their heart about black churches,” said one victimized pastor. “Out of all the white churches around, nobody has done anything about them.”

• February 16: Fields and Watson took the story to the next level with this dramatic proclamation: “A *USA Today* investigation found that black church burnings have increased dramatically in recent years and are far more numerous than realized by the FBI and civil rights groups.” They added ominously, “All the church burnings have occurred in the South.”

In fact, the number had increased for a very simple reason: in the past the FBI hadn’t kept track of church arson. Any number was an increase over zero, a fact so plain that *USA Today*’s editorial page would admit it five months later. But



Fields and Watson said nothing about that; in fact, by the beginning of March, Watson was already pulling figures out of his hat to document the “rise” in “racist” church burnings. *USA Today*, he wrote, had “found that black church fires have risen dramatically in the past 13 months increasing from an average of one a year between 1987 and 1994 to more than one a month since January 12, 1995.”

• March 6: The next leap of logic was almost predictable. Fields quoted a U.S. Commission on Civil Rights official saying, “It is very clear, based on the information that we’ve received, that racial and ethnic tension is on the increase, and the fires you see are merely reflections of this increase.”

• March 15: Now it was time for the paper’s columnists to get into the act. Barbara Reynolds declared the “epidemic” of burnings was nothing less than “an attempt to murder the spirit of black America.” She went on: “Police have linked the Klan, skinheads or their sym-

pathizers to about a dozen fires,” yet cited evidence for just three. Then the *coup de grâce*: Reynolds blamed the burnings on white Christians. After allowing her thesis seemed “hard to swallow,” she helpfully reminded readers: “The KKK has historically claimed to be a ‘Christian’ organization.” She even quoted the international treasurer of the African Methodist Episcopal church, Dr. Joseph C. McKinney, who said, “It wouldn’t surprise me if white Christians were burning the churches.”

So far all the paper had was made-up statistics and pure conjecture. As evidence none of that would have passed muster in a third-rate local weekly; but by then the story had gathered its own momentum, as stories do. White racism had reared its ugly head again, and *USA Today* was on to something big.

• April 1: Fields tells readers about church rebuilding funds established by the NCC and the Center for Democratic Renewal (CDR), and prints telephone numbers for both. There is no indication that any of this money might be going for something other than actual church rebuilding. The paper reprints the number on June 17. It wasn’t until July 2 that the newspaper released this information: “The National Council of Churches will also use part of the money to carry out anti-racism programs.”

• May 22: Fields quotes the Rev. Mac Charles Jones, the NCC’s associate for racial justice and former president of the CDR: “We’re talking about a climate of racial hostility.” He also reports U.S. assistant attorney general for civil rights Deval Patrick calling the fires “an epidemic of terror.” Patrick also urges Congress to “speak up and speak out against hate, against bigotry, and against violence.”

• June 10: After church-burning number 31, in Charlotte,

North Carolina, Bob Twigg quotes national NAACP chairwoman Myrlie Evers-Williams: "If we don't work together, there is a very good chance we'll be destroyed." This church later turns out to have been burned by a mentally disturbed 13-year-old girl. In the same issue, Fields writes: "Today, the NCC will release a report suggesting the majority of the fires are linked to white supremacist groups." He does not suggest which groups might be responsible, nor inquire into the nature of the Council's evidence. The report turns out to be the product of the left-wing Center for Democratic Renewal. Throughout its reporting, *USA Today* will mention the NCC or CDR in almost twenty articles, without once referring to the groups' left-wing politics. In two of the four articles in which Fields mentions the Christian Coalition, they are labeled either "conservative" or "conservative right."

• June 12: Linda Kanamine and Bob Minzesheimer finally air the possibility that some of the fires may be the work of copycats. "Whenever you see a rash of fires like this," says one U.S. attorney, "the first word that jumps into your mind is 'copycat.'" But the very next day, Susan Page quotes CDR spokeswoman Mary Ann Mauney: "To say they're just copycats diminishes the seriousness of the situation."

• June 18: Five months into its coverage of the "epidemic," the newspaper finally gets around to looking at white churches. "A fire that heavily damaged Pine Lake Baptist Church in Georgia underscores a little-reported fact: Federal investigators are probing nearly as many arsons at predominantly white churches as they are at black churches," begins a piece by Fields and Lori Sharn. Unlike other articles in this series, which were placed on either page one or three, this story is back on page eight.

• June 25: An unsigned item paraphrases Coretta Scott King as having "denounced white church leaders who have been silent on the church burnings." Six days before, the paper reported that, in King's home town of Atlanta, Ralph Reed had pledged to raise \$1 million for rebuilding burned churches.

It wasn't until June 28 that *USA Today* started to reverse itself. In a three-day series comprising twelve articles by thirteen reporters, the newspaper analyzed the fires case-by-case and arrived at conclusions that contradicted what its reporters had been writing for months. Far from there having only been "an average of one [black church arson] a year between 1987 and 1994" in the South, as Fields reported on March 1, the newspaper now presented a chart showing thirteen such fires in 1990, sixteen in 1991, ten in 1992, eleven in 1993 and 1994. Fields had claimed "all the



church burnings" occurred in the South, but now the paper estimated there had been 780 church burnings in the United States since 1995. Only 144 of these took place in eleven Southern states.

More surprisingly, of these 144 fires, eighty were of white churches; sixty-four were black. Despite the repeated admonitions that the fires were primarily racially driven, the paper now retreated: "Analysis of the 64 [black church] fires since 1995 shows only four can be conclusively shown to be racially motivated." Of the thirty people arrested in connection with these fires, ten were black.

Despite these flip-flops, *USA Today* could not let go of the most basic element of the myth—that there clearly was a real increase in black church burnings. "The numbers confirm that a sharp rise in black church arsons started in 1994 and continues," it said in part one of the three-day series. Yet without a doubt, part of that increase was due to copycats. For example, one 17-year-old arsonist arrested

for burning the door of a North Carolina church in late May, according to the state's attorney general, "started the fire because he had seen them on television." In an Oklahoma case that got tremendous media attention, a detective declared the arsonist "told us that he wanted to be on TV." A monthly breakdown of Southern black church fires released by the Department of Justice shows that, other than a spike in December 1995 and January 1996 (during which several of the fires were apparently related), the only significant increase in church arson came between February and May—in other words, after media coverage became intense.

The rest of the increase resulted from what statisticians call a reporting error. Any time you compare one set of data to another, you need to be sure that they were collected in the same way and under similar conditions. Otherwise you have the proverbial "apples and oranges" problem. Apparently none of *USA Today's* reporters or editors realized that crimes are always underreported. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, "About 35 percent of all victimizations, 42 percent of violent victimizations, 27 percent of personal thefts, and 33 percent of all property crimes were reported to police." If the church is destroyed, it's highly likely to be reported; if just the door was burned, it's far less likely. If it's insured, it's certain to be reported; if uninsured, again it's less likely. If it looks like an arson, it's likely to be reported; if it looks accidental, it's less likely.

Complicating matters is that while federal data on murder, for example, is carefully broken down by the race of the victim and of the perpetrator, such was not the case with church arsons. A July 2 editorial in the paper even admitted that "Insurance industry experts say the reported arson rate [for

arsons in general] may understate the problem by 50 percent.”

But in 1996, as a result of all the media coverage, church burning became the most thoroughly reported crime in the country—black church-burning, at least. Stories that wouldn't have made the local newspapers in years past were now front-page and six-o'clock TV news. Among the “arsons” in *USA Today's* tally from June 28 were a \$90 trash can burned near a church, \$500 of damage done to a side door, \$300 damage to a pew, and a carpet burn.

Yet, in the June 28 listing of burned black churches, the paper tried valiantly to link as many of the fires to racism as possible. “KKK graffiti left year earlier,” it reported in the notes about one incident. “KKK graffiti left three miles away,” it said of another. Of two Tennessee fires set within 90 minutes of each other on January 13, 1995—a fire for which no arrests were made, nor racist graffiti found—*USA Today* suggested these were racially motivated, because they “came as the black community prepared for Martin Luther King day two days later.” Which is to say they simply happened within two days of that date. The words “prepare for” imply a connection that wasn't substantiated.

The paper also cited as evidence what it called “arson zones.” (The *Columbia Journalism Review*, in its laudatory article, specifically cited the paper's “discovery” of these zones.) “A two-month *USA Today* investigation finds no conspiracy to target black churches,” it allowed. “But serial arsonists in two parts of the South may be behind a recent surge of fires.”

It laid out a map of the locations of the black church arsons it had found since January 1995. Two sets of these fires, which it called “clusters,” were circled: one encompassing parts of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, and one comprising parts of Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi. “Fires that seem to be racially motivated are concentrated in the two zones shown here,” read the description. Probably at least 95 percent of the newspaper's graphics-oriented readers would interpret that to mean that all of the fires in those zones were racially suspect. But looked at individually, using the newspaper's own description in a chart in which fires are described one by one, a different picture emerges.

For example, of the nineteen fires in the North Carolina-South Carolina-Georgia “cluster,” only three, by the paper's own account, appeared to have racial motives. Two of these, in South Carolina, were burned by former KKK members in 1995. The third was the North Carolina church burned by the 13-year-old girl, who authorities said didn't even know the



church was black. Of the remaining sixteen fires in this alleged cluster, the newspaper doesn't even hint at racist motives. In many of the cases no arrests were made; in others, those arrested were black. Thus the newspaper's cluster of nineteen fires in three states should have been restricted to drawing a tight circle around two fires in South Carolina.

Perhaps most scandalously misleading of all, *USA Today* told its readers nothing about the false CDR report that Fields had alluded to on June 10. Starting in January, 1996, the CDR and the NCC began telling any reporter who would listen that there was a sudden surge in church fires. (Fields says he got the idea on his own.) In late March, the groups held a press conference at which they released a preliminary report claiming an increasing number of black church arsons.

While the report got a lot of media coverage, the real explosion came after the burning of the Charlotte, North Carolina church on June 6, later revealed to have been lit by the 13-year-old girl. President Clinton delivered a radio address two days later condemning the burnings and praising the work of the NCC. The groups then released an updated version of their study, claiming there had been ninety arsons against black churches in nine Southern states since 1990, with the number rising every year up to thirty-five in 1996 as of mid-June. Each and every culprit “arrested and/or detained,” the report stressed, was white. “This country will explode,” warned the Rev. Mac Charles Jones. “It is that serious.”

It was this CDR report which finally gave the media the “proof” of an arson epidemic they had so valiantly been seeking. But when I obtained the report, and then contacted the law enforcement officials of several states on the CDR list, a very different picture emerged. The CDR had systematically ignored fires set by blacks and those that occurred in the early part of the decade; it had also labeled some fires as arson that clearly were not—all in an apparent effort to make black church torchings appear to be an escalating phenomenon.

*USA Today* told its readers none of this, nor—after having repeatedly printed the phone number for the NCC's Burned Churches Fund—did it report that at least \$3.5 million of the money raised over the phone was being siphoned off for an array of social-agenda projects, though this too has become a matter of public record. Some of the money was earmarked for homosexual and feminist programs, yet the paper said only that the NCC had “set aside 15 percent of its money for programs to improve race relations.”

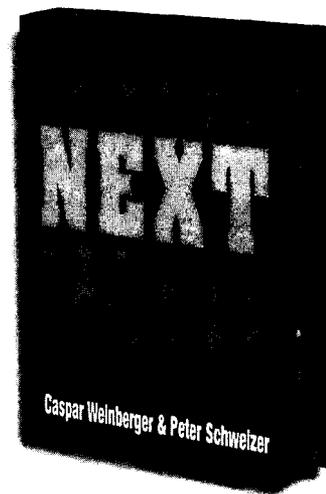
Gary Fields stuck by his story anyway. He "was justifiably proud of the enterprising reporting he did on the church-burning story," according to the *Columbia Journalism Review*. Asked by the *American Journalism Review* whether the media overplayed the story "in light of the lack of significant increase in the rate of burnings compared with previous years," Fields was unapologetic. "Who gets to decide what is a normal rate for churches to be burned?" he said. "The one conspiracy there has been is a conspiracy of indifference."

The CDR stuck to its guns, too. After I published a July 8 *Wall Street Journal* article outlining many of the errors and distortions of *USA Today's* coverage, CDR board President JoAnn Watson responded with a letter to the editor that didn't refute any of my points. Instead, she concluded, "We think that epidemic or not, even one church torched because of racial hatred is one too many." This was the same Watson who had told an AP reporter on March 28 that the church burnings were "domestic terrorism," adding: "It is not an isolated phenomenon. It's an epidemic. It's a pattern that's very clear."

In the mid-1980's, long before Gary Fields joined McPaper, America was gripped with hysteria over an alleged epidemic of missing children. A then-fledgling *USA Today* repeatedly editorialized about two million such lost souls, with one of their columnists claiming that 100,000 of these had been kidnapped. The paper ran frightening editorial cartoons, such as one showing children being sucked into a vortex and another of a huge dark-skinned hand seizing a little white girl. Later the newspaper was forced to admit that the two million figure was probably closer to 30,000, of which, according to the FBI, only sixty-seven were kidnapped. As it did in the church-fire scandal, the newspaper remained unrepentant about its errors. "Whether it is 5,000 or 500 or only 50 children who are kidnapped and living in terror," ran one editorial, "our concern is justified." Far better, it would seem, to have some concern for the truth. ❁

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PROGRESSIVE FORCES WOULD STOP AT NOTHING TO SEE THAT SINGLE-SEX EDUCATION—FOR MEN—CAME TO AN END AT THE VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE. OF COURSE WHAT THEY REALLY WANT IS TO DESTROY THE FABLED SCHOOL ALTOGETHER.

BY GEOFFREY NORMAN

**I**t rained in Lexington, Virginia on the morning of May 15, 1996, and right up until the last minute, there was talk of canceling the parade. But the clouds thinned just enough, and at 10:00 a.m., the drums began beating cadence and the cadets marched out through Jackson Arch in ranks and in step. They wore white pants, gray coatees with crossed dykes, and shakos. They marched in perfect alignment, looking like the nineteenth century on review.

When the battalions had come to a halt in line and at attention in front of the staff on the wet grass of the big field, the adjutant gave the command, "Guides post."

The guides took their posts.

The adjutant then called for the report.

From A company, a call went out, very clear on the morning air:

"Corporal Atwill."

And the response: "Corporal Atwill died on the field of honor, Sir."

Then to B company: "Private Haynes."

"Private Haynes died on the field of honor, Sir."

"Private Jefferson."

"Private Jefferson died on the field of honor, Sir."

There are ten names, in all, from A, B, C, and D companies. They are reported to the regimental commander as absent, having "died on the field of honor." The regimental commander acknowledges this report by saluting with his saber. He then marches forward to a large statue where he lays a wreath. The statue is called "Virginia Mourning Her Dead," and just behind it are plain stones marking the graves where six of the ten men whose names have just been

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called are buried. They are known as the New Market Cadets. This is New Market Day at Virginia Military Institute, the 132nd anniversary of the Battle of New Market which took place 90 miles north of here.

The Civil War had become a general conflict by then. The Shenandoah Valley was just one of many theaters and New Market one among many battles. It might have been an obscure skirmish, except for one detail. After being called out of their bunks in the middle of the night, the entire Corps of Cadets from VMI marched four days to serve as rear guard and reserve for the Confederate forces. They were boys, some barely in their teens, and General Breckenridge, the Southern commander, did not intend to put them in the line.

But the fight had its own momentum and logic, and Breckenridge soon had no choice. It was put in the cadets or lose the battle. So he gave the command, "Send in the boys and may God forgive me."

The cadets moved up to plug a gap in the Confederate line, taking fire. Some of the boys were hit, but the cadets were firm. They held their ground under heavy shelling and then charged a strong Union artillery position taking nearly 30 percent casualties—including the 10 dead—in a force of some 250.

The battle of New Market was a Confederate victory, and the charge of the VMI cadets had turned the tide. The action did not change history. Union troops, after all, came back up the Valley not long after the battle of New Market while, in other theaters, Sherman and Grant were squeezing the life from the Confederacy. The battle of New Market had virtually no influence on the outcome of the war, other than to add to its lamentable casualty rolls and its long list of legends.

The effect on the Virginia Military Institute, however, was incalculable. Nothing like that had ever occurred—schoolboys marching into

CRA



ROBERT GROSSMAN