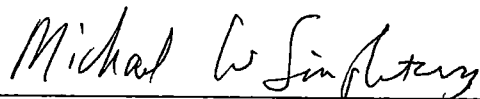


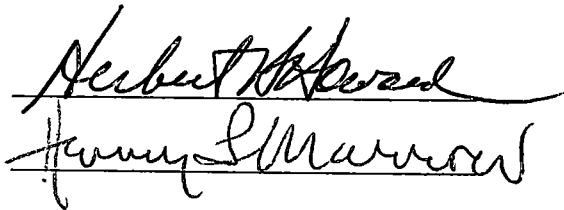
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Roger Norman Hammitt entitled "Throwing Fuel on the Fire: Reggie White's Role in the Media Coverage of a Tennessee Church Arson." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Communications.

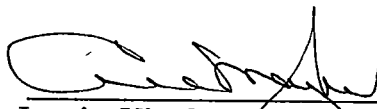


Michael W. Singletary, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:



Accepted for the Council:



Interim Vice Provost
and Dean of the Graduate School

THROWING FUEL ON THE FIRE:
Reggie White's Role in the Media Coverage
Of A Tennessee Church Arson

A Thesis

Presented for the Master of Science Degree

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Roger Norman Hammitt
December 2000

Copyright 2000 by Roger Norman Hammitt
All rights reserved

DEDICATION

TO LISA AND JEANETTA,

FOR THEIR PERSEVERANCE AND FAITH

AND TO MY SON, RYAN

WHO I HOPE WILL ALWAYS STRIVE TO LEARN

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author is indebted to Dr. Michael W. Singletary, thesis advisor, and to Dr. Herbert Howard and Dr. Jerry Morrow, members of the thesis committee, for their guidance and encouragement.

This thesis could not have been completed without the cooperation and assistance of many people who contributed immensely to its undertaking. Gratitude is extended to Bruce Cureton, Tom Chester, Darrell DeBusk, Gary Fields, Katherine Skiba and Hallerin Hilton Hill.

I am especially grateful to my wife, Lisa for her tenacity and encouragement and my son, Ryan for his patience and good humor. Special thanks go to my in-laws, Gaylore and Jeannetta Stearns for their faith and my mother, Vivian for her love and sacrifice.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research study was to examine the ability of a celebrity to influence how national and local media cover an event. It focused on the influence of football superstar Reggie White over the media coverage of an arson fire that destroyed the Inner City Church in Knoxville, Tennessee in January 1996, where White was an associate pastor. Also studied were the rise in church arsons as a result of the increased media coverage and the involvement of politicians, civil rights and religious organizations in the coverage.

This thesis was based on my personal experience as Public Information Officer for the Knoxville Fire Department, on personal interviews with emergency personnel and journalists who covered the event, on reports that appeared in The Knoxville News-Sentinel, The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal and other publications. The 1997 and 1998 National Church Arson Task Force Reports to the President and Reggie White's 1996 autobiography, In The Trenches were examined as well.

The research showed that prior to Reggie White's involvement in the issue, 27 Southern black church arsons in 1995 were barely given any media attention. Reggie White's outspokenness, charisma, athletic superstar standing and his presence before the cameras gave the media a reason to begin its coverage of the church arson story. The increased media attention and publicity soon led to "copycat" arson crimes that resulted in five times the number of black church arsons in 1996 than in the previous year. This

also led to political figures, civil rights activists and African American church groups seeking opportunities to weigh in on the issue.

It is clear that after Reggie White became vocal about the burning of his own church, media coverage of Southern church arsons increased dramatically. What was considered a local story was suddenly elevated to an issue of national prominence.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem	
Methodology	3
II. BACKGROUND	5
Reggie Lights the Fuse	6
More Arsons Follow	9
Raising Money for Reggie's Church	11
Domestic Terrorism?	14
Political Opportunities	17
An Investigative Partnership Forms	19
III. LITERATURE REVIEW	23
Celebrity Endorsers and Opinion Swayers	24
Jesse Jackson in Decatur	25
In The Trenches	27
Goeringer's Observations of Hysteria	28
Kelly's Criticisms	29
Knoxville Was The Catalyst	30
IV. FINDINGS	32
The Lack of Coverage	32
The Intensity of Coverage	33
The NCC & The CDR	36
Clinton, Congress and the National Church Arson Task Force	39
The National Church Arson Task Force Report	41
Jerry Upton, Drugs and Money	42
Summation	44
V. CONCLUSIONS	48
Reggie White Provides a Reason	48
The Volume is Increased	50
An Investigation Pressured, But Unhampered	51
The Impact on Racism in America	53
An Opportunity to Advance a Cause	55

REFERENCES	58
References Cited	59
VITA	63

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This paper will examine the influence of celebrity on media coverage of an event. It is a study of the influence National Football League superstar Reggie White had over the media coverage of an arson fire that destroyed the Inner City Church in Knoxville, Tennessee on January 8, 1996. The motivation for the research comes from the author's personal experience as a Public Information Officer for the Knoxville Fire Department during the period of time under examination. The study will examine White's involvement in convincing the media the issue was worthy of extensive coverage, when previously the subject of Southern church fires had received little attention. The study will also show how the increased attention from the media led to an escalation in arson fire activity across the South, jumping dramatically from 27 total fires in 1995 to 298 arsons in 1996. The fact that the frenzy of media attention led politicians, along with liberal and conservative organizations, to voice opinion and take action will also be examined.

Statement of the Problem

Prior to the January 1996 burning of the Inner City Church, none of the church fires which occurred previously in the United States was given much media attention. In

1995, there were a total of 27 black church arsons in 11 Southern states, the same number in 1994 and 19 black church arsons in 10 Southern states in 1993. Not until Reggie White used the forum of a national sports television broadcast to voice his tremendous disappointment and displeasure over what he expressed was a lack of progress and professionalism in the Inner City Church investigation, did the national media really begin to pay attention to the issue.

This is an examination of how a well-respected, idolized and charismatic individual can use celebrity status to convince the media that a personal issue is one that deserves attention. White's dissatisfaction with local and federal authorities investigating the fire and their methods of operation gave the national media a reason to mobilize resources in the coverage of this story. For the media, the story had grown exponentially from a routine story to a major national story supercharged with allegations of racism.

The contention of this thesis is that Reggie White was the catalyst for the firestorm of media coverage that followed his protestations. His participation also created opportunities for politicians and civil rights organizations to take advantage of a situation that would not have existed otherwise.

The academic literature reveals a lack of research on media coverage of the Southern black church arson fires of 1996, particularly the influence of celebrity on the issue. Consequently, a comprehensive study of Reggie White, the 1996 Inner City Church fire and its aftermath would add considerable knowledge to the issue of media coverage and the power of celebrity.

Therefore, the following research questions are posed:

1. Would the media have paid any attention to the issue of Southern black church arsons if an outspoken athletic superstar like Reggie White had not gotten involved?
2. Did White's involvement affect the volume of media reports on the issue?
3. Did White's activities and the subsequent media scrutiny hamper efforts to investigate the Southern church arson fires?
4. What impact did the media coverage of the Southern black church arsons have on the issue of racism in America?
5. Politicians, civil rights and religious organizations became key players in the continuing story of the Southern black church arson issue. Did the media coverage supply these groups with opportunities to advance their causes?

Methodology

Startt and Sloan (1989) say historical study is primarily a humanistic rather than a scientific study. It looks into the past and asks questions about what people have done and receives the answers based on evidence discovered. This method also relies heavily on primary and secondary library resources.

In this study, personal interviews and documents such as newspaper and magazine articles played a prominent role. Since the Inner City Church fire and subsequent church fires across the South were covered so extensively by local and national media, this material provided the main research tools.

Primary data was obtained by interviewing those individuals who were involved in the Inner City Church investigation and the media coverage of the arson fires. Personal interviews were conducted with Bruce Cureton, retired Fire Chief of the City of Knoxville Fire Department; Tom Chester, Deputy Managing Editor of the Knoxville

News-Sentinel; Darrell DeBusk, Assignment Manager of WBIR-TV, the NBC affiliate television station in Knoxville and Haller in Hilton Hill, talk show host with NewsTalk 99, WNOX Radio. Written questions were given to two national newspaper reporters who covered the church arson story extensively. Those reporters are Gary Fields, Investigative Reporter for USA Today and Katherine Skiba, National Affairs Reporter for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter I and the introduction recognizes the lack of research in this area, introduces the problem statement, poses questions for research and discusses the research methodology. Chapter II examines the background of the issue and how Reggie White's involvement began. Chapter III is a review of all relevant literature. Chapter IV focuses on the results of the analysis, the outcome of the Arson Task Force investigation, the impact of religious and political involvement and the potential for lessons learned. Chapter V summarizes conclusions and interprets findings.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND

For the African American, the church has always been the symbol of community. It is the refuge they seek against the societal ills of homelessness, hunger and hate. It is also the training ground for an education in not only religion, but politics, government and life. "It is the all-inclusive mechanism for training our people," said Reverend Willie Barrow, Chairman of the Board, Operation PUSH. "The Black Church has always been the hotbed for politicians, entertainers, lawyers, judges, preachers, etc.-for every rising star in the Black community. We do not have a Democratic Party, a Republican Party, an independent party or a press club -- we have the Black Church." (EBONY, September, 1996)

That sense of community was first attacked by arson in 1822. The African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina was destroyed by fire and became the first Black church arson on record.

"The centrality and determinative importance of the Black Church to the Survival, Development and Dignity (these words were upper-cased in the original article) of its people makes it the likely and prime target of the racist and repressive forces in our society," said Bishop John Hurst Adams, current Senior Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston. (EBONY, September 1996).

Those forces would make themselves known again, as more than a century later, other Southern black churches would burn during the tumultuous civil rights movement in this country. Using homemade bombs, dynamite and primitive timing devices, Ku Klux Klansmen destroyed Southern black churches, Jewish synagogues, the homes of ministers and integrated schools all for the purpose of ending integration in the 1950s and 60s. Black churches were the prime targets because they were becoming the center of the civil rights movement. Some were the “home” to leading black ministers like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph David Abernathy. And even in the most rural of countryside, small black churches were teaching their congregation to read and registering them to vote (Greene, June, 1996).

Twenty- seven bombings and attempted bombings struck Southern black churches during 1958. But a bombing in September 1963 still rings for black church and civil rights leaders today. Four young girls were crushed to death after a bomb exploded in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. More bombings followed, but more importantly, so did the protest marches and civil disobedience actions of the “Freedom Summer” of 1964.

Reggie Lights the Fuse

Thirty years later, Southern black churches fell victim, once again, to arson. Reports by USA Today showed that in 1993, 19 black churches were destroyed by fire in 10 Southern states. One year later that number rose to 27 arsons in 11 Southern states. In 1995, the statistics showed a repeat of the year before with 27 arsons in 11 Southern states. During that year, 17 people were charged with church arson (Fields, August 1996).

The New Year began with a new arson. On January 8, 1996, the Inner City Church in Knoxville, Tennessee was destroyed by fire. Local investigators determined it was arson after a multitude of Molotov cocktails, containers of gunpowder and kerosene were discovered inside the structure. No preceding church fire had occurred in this manner and had this remaining collection of evidence. The discovery brought the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) to the scene of the crime.

Three days later, while being interviewed about his preparation for his NFC championship contest with the Dallas Cowboys, Green Bay Packer defensive lineman Reggie White announced his unhappiness with the tone of the investigation in Knoxville. White was also an ordained minister and Associate Pastor of the Inner City Church. White's characterizations of local and federal investigators as "keystone cops" who "swept things under the rug" and "botched the investigation" sparked a frenzied media interest in what was transpiring. Suddenly, national broadcast and print news organizations focused their attention and resources on Knoxville.

"In retrospect, the Knoxville fire appears to have been the catalyst – the incendiary element, if you will – that transformed spot news in various papers across the South into big news across the nation" (Holley, October, 1996).

Because the national media placed so much effort in covering the story, it forced the local press to increase its efforts in handling the situation.

"There was an immediate change in the level of coverage on the very first day when you realize that Reggie White is an associate pastor of the church. So with that high level

of persona you ratchet up your coverage immediately ” (Chester, personal interview, March 2000).

“When word leaked out that they were sending in national investigators and that Reggie White was involved, it just changed instantly. Networks called, other stations called, Milwaukee called and even foreign news services called wanting video and wanting to know what was going on.” (DeBusk, personal interview, April 2000)

In subsequent media interviews, White began accusing federal authorities of focusing their investigative energies on his church members. In an interview with the Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune five days after the fire, White chastised the investigators as unprofessional. “I don’t think the police are taking this serious enough. The investigators have botched it.” (Scripps Howard, January 1996).

Reports soon emerged that investigators were paying particular attention to the church’s pastor, 54-year-old David Upton and his brother Jerry. In an interview with the Associated Press, White complained of the tactic. Upton told the news service he had been interviewed by federal authorities on several occasions totaling more than 10 hours.

“We’ve been asked question after question,” said Upton. “They have not come out and accused me, but some of the things they have said made us look like suspects, not victims.” (Associated Press, February 1996)

Grant McGarity, resident agent in charge of the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms in Knoxville defended the investigative actions as standard procedure. “We’re getting a lot of good cooperation from citizens. I’m not sure exactly what Mr White’s concerns are, other than we’re looking into every avenue – as we do with all arson cases” (Associated Press, February 1996).

More Arsons Follow

Three days after the Inner City Church fire in Knoxville, two Baptist churches in Green County, Alabama went up in smoke. The media latched onto the story and began paying more attention to the comments of Reggie White. The Alabama fires coupled with White's continued comments drew the attention of reporters such as those from the Los Angeles Times and the Washington Post who pointed out the Green County arsons occurred just 100 miles from the 16th Street church bombing in Birmingham in 1963 (Pressley, January 1996).

"Suddenly, black church arson was one of those stories that caused the back of a reporter's neck to prickle. It was an important story with national implications; it offered clear-cut issues of good and evil, heroes and villains, and the intriguing, unanswered questions of a criminal investigation; it resonated with the heroic tones of civil rights history, particularly when the dateline was Alabama " (Holley, September, 1996)

The media coverage of black church arson became so intense; it led to "copycat" incidents occurring throughout the South, contributing to the escalating number of fires. Prior to Reggie White's involvement there were only 27 cases of arson in black churches during 1995. The church arson totals dramatically increased after Reggie entered the picture and the media began paying extraordinary attention to the story, jumping to 298 total arsons for 1996 with 117 involving black churches. Arson investigators, insurance industry groups and newspaper reporters attributed some of that increase to copycat arsonists motivated by the media attention being given to the fires.

Fred Bayles of the Associated Press reported in the weeks following President Clinton's spotlighting the issue of black church fires, at least 18 fires destroyed black and white churches (Bayles, July 1996).

According to the 1997 National Church Arson Task Force Report to the President, throughout 1996, there were 298 incidents of church arsons in the South. One hundred and seventeen of those involved black churches and 181 were of other houses of worship. By June 1997, CNN reported that investigators had opened 82 investigations into arsons, bombings or attempted bombings (CNN, June 1997). In a July 1996 edition of its newsletter, the Emergency Response and Research Institute (ERRI) gave an opinion on the reason for the increased number of arson fires at Southern black churches. The ERRI is a Chicago, Illinois-based organization designed to provide research and communication services to the emergency response and government communities. In that July newsletter, ERRI criminalists theorized the main reason for the increase was the publicity generated by the news media and a resulting copycat effect. The newsletter quoted a member of the insurance industry trade group, Insurance Committee for Arson Control, who voiced the same conclusion. "There's a lot of feeling out there that there are copycat fires" (Macko, July 1996). Nineteen of those incidents involved predominately black churches and 63 involved other houses of worship (CNN, June 1997).

By June 1996, African American clergy were angry over the number of church arsons in the South and frustrated over what they considered a lack of progress by investigators to find the perpetrators. Ironically, by August of that year, investigators had made 39 arrests in 25 arson cases. Of those arrested, 26 were white and 13 were black. In its second and final report to the President, the National Church Arson Task Force reported

that of the fires involving black churches, 65.8% of the accused arsonists were white and 32.9% were African American. Those statistics suggested a high percentage of blacks were setting fire to black churches and tended to refute the charges of widespread racism (NATF Second Year Report, October 1998).

As White and his fellow African American church leaders continued to voice their frustrations, the media coverage of the Inner City Church arson and other church fires convinced Green Bay and Milwaukee fans of Reggie White to take action.

Raising Money for Reggie's Church

To the media, investigators and everyone else in Knoxville and around the world, the church that burned on that early January morning was known as the Inner City Church. But to the Wisconsin fans of Reggie White, it was simply called "Reggie's Church." When news of the Inner City Church arson reached the Milwaukee-Green Bay area, Packer fans of No. 92 began a fund-raising campaign. One child chipped in 92 pennies, while the Governor of Wisconsin, Tommy G. Thompson gave \$92 (Skiba, November 1998). Residents and businesses in Wisconsin raised more than \$250,000. The fund raising continued across the country with anonymous donations totaling more than \$120,000.

During a Wednesday night service, almost ten days after the fire, Pastor David Upton told the congregation of the generosity and promised a rebuilding. "The response has been just overwhelming," Upton said. "We're getting mail and donations from all over the country" (Copeland, January 1996).

After the fire, the church received an insurance settlement of \$505,000. In addition, the Department of Housing and Urban Development offered the church a guaranteed loan

of \$800,000 to rebuild. In his public comments, Upton said it would cost at least \$ 1 million to rebuild the Inner City church. The settlement, loan offer and donations brought the total to \$1.6 million.

In July 1996, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, at the request of Inner City Church Pastor David Upton, paid a visit to Knoxville and brought building materials in an effort to help Reggie White, Pastor Upton and the congregation of the Inner City Church rebuild. He also used the opportunity to tell the media in attendance that corporate greed and a racially biased judicial system were contributors to what Jackson termed racial hostility.

"It's the blue suits and the black robes that set the climate for economic conditions and social attitudes that have combined to ignite racial hatred in America" (Lackey, July 1996).

To the media gathered there, Jackson said he would return to dedicate the new church. One year later, the media discovered church leaders sold the materials to a local man for \$1,500. It was also reported that rebuilding plans drawn up by a Knoxville architectural firm had been put on hold.

In articles dated January 4, 1998, National Affairs Reporter Katherine Skiba of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and reporter Wesley Loy of the Knoxville News-Sentinel both wrote that two years after the Inner City Church fire, there was little progress made in two areas: capturing the perpetrators of the crime and re-building "Reggie's Church."

When asked by reporters, church leaders began turning down requests for interviews. Public Relations Director for the Green Bay Packers, Lee Remmel, told Skiba that Reggie White was "a little tired of talking about that subject" (Skiba, January 1998).

Loy reported that some church members were complaining privately of the lack of progress in building a new structure and some had confronted the Uptons to inquire about the donated funds (Loy, January 1998).

After meeting for two years in temporary settings like high school auditoriums and hotel ballrooms, the multi-denominational congregation of the Inner City Church began to dwindle in number, shrinking from a total of 600 to around 20.

As time progressed, those who gave in an effort to see the church built again began to worry about their contribution. After having raised \$8,000 from his fellow faculty members and students, 60-year-old Charles H. Reynolds, head of religious studies at the University of Tennessee felt angry and uncertain. "I feel ripped off," said Reynolds (Skiba, November 1998).

By late 1998, Reggie White had not preached to an Inner City Church congregation for two years. He had sold his home in Knoxville and moved permanently to Green Bay. He told reporters that erecting a new church would now cost \$2.5 million and the congregation didn't have that much money. After being told that some people in Knoxville were asking for a public accounting of the money donated, Reggie said: "Let me put it this way: Those folk in Knoxville didn't do what the folk up here (in Green Bay) did. So I'm not concerned what people down in Knoxville are saying" (Skiba, November 1998).

Reggie White may have had difficulty in rebuilding the Inner City Church, but his media exposure and the public reaction convinced one organization to mount its own, more successful fund-raising drive. The National Council of Churches (NCC), a 46-year-old ecumenical organization based in New York, used the celebrity of Reggie White, the

media frenzy over Southern church arsons and the rhetoric of racism to raise \$9 million to rebuild churches destroyed by fire. By November 1996, the organization had raised the funds needed to rebuild 33 Southern black churches. (Early, November 1996). In raising money for rebuilding, the NCC had also increased its media exposure by stepping to the forefront of the "racism as cause" debate that continued in the media and behind the pulpit. Even though the efforts by investigators showed the contrary, civil rights and religious organizations were steadfast in their belief of a "racist conspiracy."

Domestic Terrorism?

Days after the Inner City Church fire, Reggie White began to change the tone of his rhetoric. When interviewed by the media, White no longer focused all of his energy on protesting the performance of investigators in Knoxville. Instead, more effort was given to the argument of deep-seated racism as the cause for the Inner City Church fire and subsequent church arsons. White told reporters of racial slurs found on the church and letters written and bomb threats phoned in by skinhead groups. "This is part of a much deeper problem in this country and we have to stop sweeping these attitudes under the rug," said White. "Things like this will continue to happen—and people will die---until this country starts dealing with these groups" (Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune, January 1996).

By March 1996, civil rights and religious organizations took up the mantle and began their own informational campaign. One of the lesser-known organizations, the Atlanta-based Center for Democratic Renewal (CDR) held a news conference and released a preliminary report detailing the dramatic increase in black-church burnings over the last six years. CDR board member Reverend Mac Charles Jones told the Christian Science

Monitor, “You’re talking about a well-organized white-supremacist movement.” In an interview on CNN, he characterized the situation as “domestic terrorism” (Holley, September, 1996).

That same month, another religious organization took its own stand on the issue. Members of the National Council of Churches came to Knoxville and charged that acts of white supremacy and racial hatred were linked to the arson fires at predominantly black churches in the South (Ferris, Towns, March 1996).

As months passed and more church burnings occurred, the rhetoric of racism escalated. In its June 3rd issue, Newsweek ran a story quoting the Reverend Jesse Jackson who blamed a “cultural conspiracy”—a seeping intolerance fed by white politicians’ attacks on affirmative action and immigration.” In its July 1st issue, Time alluded to “the national epidemic of violence against black churches,” and quoted the National Urban League president, Hugh Price “The flames of bigotry and intolerance are soaring higher than they have in a generation” (Holley, September 1996).

Newspaper columnists and network television newscasts began to draw comparisons of the fires to the church bombings, which preceded the civil rights movement in the 50s and 60s. Stories on race relations then and now began to consume broadcasts and newspaper print. While the stories usually made the point that no evidence existed which suggested a conspiracy, almost every journalistic piece contained what Michael Kelly of the New Yorker called “clear, conspiratorial overtones”(Kelly, July, 1996).

In February 1996, Reggie White decided to discuss his concerns with a fellow Tennessean. White called Vice President Albert Gore, Jr. to talk about the Inner City Church investigation and his belief of a racist conspiracy sweeping the South.

“So you’re talking in a month to five weeks Reggie White was already cranking up the pressure. Nowhere did you see anywhere else across the country at any of the other fires do you see that kind of thing happen. Then the Vice President calls the Special Agent in Charge of the FBI here in Knoxville, which is pretty significant. Normally, they’ll go through the Justice Department or go through whoever is in charge. He actually picks up the phone and calls Knoxville wanting an update” (Chester, personal interview, March 2000).

By mid-1996, the rhetoric was at a boiling point. The church bombings were labeled “a wake-up call to deal with a much larger issue” and a “repugnant symptom of a malignant disease” (Gilliam, July 1996). A black history professor told a Mississippi Sun-Sentinel reporter that the people doing this know how to hit black people where they hurt.

Reggie White used this opportunity to make a symbolic trip to Washington. D.C. Along with 59 other Southern black clergy who had seen their churches destroyed by fire, White met with Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin, and Attorney General Janet Reno. Both assured White and the other clergy that increased efforts would be made to aggressively investigate the fires. At a news conference called shortly after those meetings, White and the other church leaders applauded the federal officials’ response, but cautioned there was a history of mistrust between the black community and the FBI and ATF. Reverend Mac Charles Jones of the National Council of Churches told Rubin that “pastors feel that instead of being questioned, they have been interrogated” (CNN Interactive, June 10, 1996).

Reverend Spiver Gordon of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference told the assembled news reporters that he was just as blunt in his discussions with Secretary Rubin. Gordon said he and the other church leaders “feel the federal investigation has not been intensive enough in light of a ‘conspiracy’ in the church burnings” (CNN Interactive, June 10, 1996).

The media coverage of White’s visit to Washington opened the doors of political opportunity - an opportunity with which both Capitol Hill and the White House wanted to capitalize.

Political Opportunities

On Saturday morning, June 8th, 1996, President Bill Clinton, in his radio address to the nation, spoke of the troubling arson fires, which had destroyed black churches in the South. He characterized the fires as a rash of crimes that hearkened back to a dark era in the nation’s history. He used a Charlotte, North Carolina church burning, which occurred three days previously, as an example before investigators even knew who set the fire or the perpetrators’ motive. Two days later, investigators discovered a 13-year-old emotionally troubled white girl without the slightest suggestion of a racial motivation had set the fire.

The President’s speech was symbolic of what was to come. More political rhetoric followed in what Michael Kelly of the New Yorker called an “overreaction to make up for a previous indifference”. Along with the religious groups, political interest groups and the national media, the leadership of both congressional parties and the Clinton Administration saw political opportunity in taking a stand against what the Assistant Attorney General for civil rights, Deval Patrick, called “an epidemic of terror.”

At the behest of Representative John Conyers of Michigan, an African-American liberal Democrat, Representative Henry Hyde, a white Conservative Republican called for congressional hearings on the matter. As Joe Holley, a free-lance writer said in his article for the Columbia Journalism Review, “an epidemic of church burnings is a compelling issue for politicians, particularly in an election year” (Holley, September 1996).

During the hearings, which began on May 21, 1996, lawmakers heard testimony from FBI and ATF officials, as well as representatives of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Christian Coalition, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The hearings gave Dr. Joseph Lowery, president of the SCLC, an opportunity to criticize the federal government for its slow attempt at solving the problem. “We’re not surprised by the feeble response to the church burnings. It just represents the fifty-first state in this nation: the state of denial” (Schmitt, May 22, 1996).

Meanwhile, both parties were using the political opportunity to its fullest. Conservative Republicans needed an issue to rectify the ill-will felt by African Americans toward the party’s “Contract with America”. The black community saw the contract as the end of affirmative action and welfare, programs from which many African Americans benefited. The author of the contract, House Speaker Newt Gingrich, told the African American community the full force of the federal government would be used to protect their places of worship. Senator Bob Dole, who was running for President that year, urged the Justice Department to “find and punish the cowards responsible for these vicious acts of hate” (Kelly, July 15, 1996).

For liberal Democrats, the issue offered an opportunity to counter-punch the conservative agenda. They suggested the attacks were the result of a racist climate created by attempts to end affirmative action, initiate hard-line policies on crime and radically reform the welfare system.

For President Bill Clinton, the church burning issue became the centerpiece of a re-election campaign to win the African American vote. In response to the church burnings and the protests of Southern church leaders, Clinton formed the National Church Arson Task Force and enacted tougher federal legislation. State fire marshals, fire departments and other law enforcement officials received more manpower and more money to investigate the arson crimes. As the Task Force gained momentum, the results of the investigations proved the antithesis of what Southern church leaders and civil rights organizations were telling the media and the public. The cries of “racial conspiracy” were drowned out by the sobering reality of hard facts.

An Investigative Partnership Forms

On June 19th, 1996, President Clinton announced the National Arson Prevention Initiative. The initiative created a partnership between the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the U.S. Department of Justice, the U.S. Department of the Treasury and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to investigate arson crimes and promote the need for arson prevention. The President also created the National Church Arson Task Force, which mobilized a large contingent of federal investigators on those areas, struck by arsonists.

One month later, the President and Congress decided to give the Task Force more muscle. On July 10th, in a ceremony staged for the White House press corps in the Rose

Garden, Clinton announced the enactment of the Church Arson Prevention Act. The Act gave the federal government more power to prosecute those arrested for arson or vandalism of church property, increased sentencing for those convicted and extended the statute of limitations on prosecuting these crimes from five to seven years. The Act also increased the number of federal investigators already assigned to church arsons and established a loan program for rebuilding damaged churches.

But months before this action took place, the FBI and the ATF were already deeply involved in a number of investigations in the South. Partnering with the local fire departments, fire marshals and law enforcement, the investigators were coming up with evidence that painted a somewhat different picture than was being described by Reggie White and the religious, civil rights and political organizations involved. While these groups continued to call for federal action against the “racist conspirators” responsible for the Southern church arsons, federal investigators were making arrests and finding evidence which didn’t support the purported theory.

Deval Patrick, a black lawyer with extensive civil rights experience and a Justice Department official was made co-chairman of the Arson Task Force. Despite his earlier characterizations of the church burnings as “an epidemic of terror”, Patrick told a reporter in November 1996 that racist motivation was suspected in some and clear in about half of the cases of black church arson investigated. Various other motives including congregational disputes, vandalism, teen-age drunkenness, and insurance fraud were also uncovered. (Early, November 1996).

Soon after the Inner City Church fire occurred, pressure began to mount on investigators to find the cause. In fact, White's accusations of unprofessionalism placed local investigative teams under microscopic scrutiny.

"I feel like he misdirected the investigation and misdirected the nature of the fire and, really, he made the investigative agencies in the city a scapegoat for what had happened," said Bruce Cureton, retired Fire Chief of the City of Knoxville Fire Department. "It was a big distraction being under pressure to solve the crime as soon as possible" (Cureton personal interview, March 2000).

By February 1996, Reggie White had used another television interview opportunity to complain about the course of the investigation. While in preparation for the Pro Bowl in Hawaii, White told reporters that his pastor, David Upton, and Upton's brother, Jerry, were being considered suspects by authorities. Asked to comment, Grant McGarity, resident agent in charge of the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms in Knoxville, said the questions were routine. "We're asking a lot of questions of a lot of people, which is a standard investigative technique in these types of cases" (Associated Press, February 1996). McGarity also said although racial epithets were left at the scene, the motive remained unclear and the Inner City Church fire could not be tied to any of the other subsequent fires which had occurred.

By the end of 1996, evidence discovered by federal, state and local investigative teams and reported in major newspapers across the country made it clear there was no white supremacist conspiracy or racist uprising responsible for the Southern church arsons. To come to this conclusion, the federal government sent nearly 300 agents to investigative locations and spent \$30 million. In its first official report to the President, the Arson

Task Force concluded in June 1997 that although racist activity could be cited as the cause for perhaps half of the arson crimes solved, there was no evidence of a racist conspiracy. The task force also discovered that in its review of 429 investigations of arsons, bombings and attempted bombings dating back to January 1, 1995, fewer than four in 10 of the attacks were on predominantly black churches (National Church Arson Task Force Report, June 1997).

CHAPTER III

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature focusing on the influence of a celebrity on the sustained media coverage of a news event was difficult to locate. A number of books, magazines and newspaper articles focused more on the power of celebrity over public opinion. Whether it's a celebrity endorsement of a product or a celebrity's involvement with a health or behavioral issue, there is substantial literature pointing to the powerful influence that exists to change consumer or public behavior. There is little, if any, literature available that tries to explain a celebrity's ability to influence how the media covers a news event.

For the purposes of the thesis, this literature review will highlight the information that is available in explaining celebrity endorsements and the effects of celebrity on consumer behavior and public opinion. There is an abundance of newspaper and magazine articles on the Southern church arson fires, the Inner City Church fire in Knoxville and Reggie White's involvement in the issue. These articles will serve as the secondary sources for the thesis.

Personal interviews with local and national journalists, as well as representatives from the investigative field will act as primary sources because of "hands-on" experience with the issue.

Celebrity Endorsers and Opinion Swayers

As early as the 1930s, when movie leading man Clark Gable was seen without an undershirt in “It Happened One Night” and undershirt sales fell dramatically, its been evident that celebrities can and do influence consumer and public behavior.

Most recently the power of celebrity endorsers became even more apparent when Pepsi spent \$5 million on pop superstar Michael Jackson for a 1983 advertising campaign. Within the next decade, Pepsi spent tens of millions of dollars on Jackson concert sponsorships and endorsement fees. This resulted in Pepsi picking up two market share points on rival Coke, each point worth an estimated \$500 million in annual sales (Horovitz, November, 1993).

In 1992, former Chicago Bulls superstar Michael Jordan earned \$3.9 million playing basketball. Endorsing Nike shoes and other products earned him an additional \$36 million.

A search by the New York Times Financial desk in 1994 found there were 207 celebrity contracts for endorsements from January 1980 through December 1992.

Whether it’s a music, motion picture or sports superstar, the general public is enthralled by celebrity and that infatuation translates into mega-dollars for advertisers. It also can translate into more effective awareness campaigns for health and other societal issues.

Former First Lady Nancy Reagan’s public decision to undergo a radical mastectomy in 1987 led to an increase in the number of women having breast removal surgery. A study conducted by Dr. Ann Butler Nattinger of the Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee examined the records of more than 162,000 women with breast cancer. The

study found there was a 25 percent decrease in the number of women choosing to save their breast rather than removing it in the six months following Reagan's surgery. This was compared to women facing a similar decision in the three months before Reagan's surgery. The study was published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (Medical Tribune News Service, March, 1998).

In 1991, basketball great Earvin "Magic" Johnson announced he had contracted the AIDS virus and would retire from basketball. Shortly afterward, three different studies were conducted to determine the importance of the celebrity identification process in effectively changing personal behaviors. The first study by Mays, Flora, Schooler and Cochran conducted in 1992 showed Johnson was perceived as credible among homeless people and college students. The second study by Kalishman and Hunter in 1992 showed Johnson's announcement resulted in a significant increase in an individual's concern about AIDS, interest in additional information and communication. The third study in 1994 by Basil and Brown showed that Johnson's celebrity played a large role in his effective advocacy of safe sex behavior. The fourth study conducted one year after Johnson's announcement attempted to replicate the Basil and Brown findings. The study used 147 University of Hawaii undergraduate students and found that those who identified more strongly with Johnson were more affected by his calls for concern about AIDS and behavioral changes (Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, Fall 1996).

Jesse Jackson in Decatur

One of the more recent examples of celebrity influence over media coverage concerns the Reverend Jesse Jackson and the expulsion of seven high school students last September in Decatur, Illinois. The incident began with a fight among the students of

two rival high school football teams. The fight escalated out of control and seven students from one of the high schools were expelled for starting the fracas. The students were expelled for two years under the Decatur school system's zero tolerance policy (CNN, November, 1999).

Arguing the two-year expulsions were unfair, Jackson went to Decatur to try and convince the school board to reverse the decision. The airing of the fight, which was caught on home video and aired on CNN, and the involvement of Jackson, brought the national media spotlight to the Illinois city. While in Decatur, Jackson organized protest marches that drew considerable national media attention. Using the Governor as a special mediator, Jackson activities and the national media spotlight convinced the school board to reduce the expulsion to one year. The school board also suggested an alternative school for the teens. By this time, six of the students had been officially charged with aggravated battery and mob action (PBS Online Newshour with Jim Lehrer, November 1999).

Nine days after his arrival in Decatur, Jackson was arrested in what one AP reporter called "a made-for-TV demonstration that evoked the style of the civil rights movement." Jackson and three other demonstrators were handcuffed before a throng of cameras, reporters and photographers. Reporter Dennis Conrad of the Associated Press said once Jackson arrived with other local ministers and protestors, he asked the media to move away so he could approach the police line and get arrested (Conrad, November 1999).

Throughout the incident, Jackson maintained the action wasn't about race, but fairness. He accused the school board of overstepping its authority. Jackson may not have publicly stated it was about race, but the other facts may show otherwise. All seven

students were black. The high school attended by the students is 40 percent black. Most of the school board and the school superintendent are white. The only school board member to vote against the expulsion was African American. “He contends that although the officials who kicked those kids out of school are overwhelmingly white, the issue is not about race. In almost the very next breath, he likens Decatur to Selma, Alabama. If race is not the issue in Decatur, why dredge up memories of a historic civil rights struggle where the only issue was race?” (White, TIME Magazine, November 22, 1999).

It is clear Jackson’s involvement brought a higher degree of media attention to the issue of the Decatur expulsions than existed otherwise.

In The Trenches

No literature review of this subject would be complete without the inclusion of an autobiography of Reggie White written in 1996. The book entitled, In the Trenches, is White’s examination of his life as a NFL superstar and devout Christian. Chapter 11 of the book called “Fighting Fire” focuses on the burning of the Inner City Church in January 1996 and White’s distrust of the investigators.

In a sub-section of the chapter, entitled “The Wrong Way Investigation,” White discussed the investigative tactics of local, state and federal authorities. He stated the investigators had subpoenaed financial records of congregational members, forced them to take lie detector tests and personally offended his family and friends.

The chapter also allows Reggie White an opportunity to debunk authorities’ theories about how his church was destroyed. Investigators have said that the substantial amount of material present in the structure, along with no signs of forced entry and gas lines found open, suggest a methodical plot was carried out over time. White argues that since

his church was interracial, a white stranger could have hidden inside the church after Sunday service and had free run of the entire building after the church was empty and locked (White, 1996).

The chapter concludes with Reggie White's discussion of the problem of racism in America and suggests five processes to "move our nation toward racial healing" (White, 1996).

The chapter is pertinent to this study because of its description of White's thoughts, motivations and reasoning at the time of the church fire in his own words. Therefore, it becomes a primary source of information for this research.

Goeringer's Observations of Hysteria

Conrad F. Goeringer, a writer for the publication The American Atheist, wrote in a 1997 issue of the magazine about, what he labeled, the national hysteria which surrounded the church arson fire media coverage. He suggested the so-called epidemic of conspiracy-laden church fires was actually fueled by the rhetoric of religious and political leaders and the news media.

Goeringer contended the church arson conspiracy was the result of societal stresses being played out at that time in our culture. The list of his cultural and societal "triggers" that may have contributed to the conspiracy theory include the racially-divisive outcome of the O.J. Simpson trial, the heated debate over partial-birth abortions, the beating of motorist Rodney King and Louis Farrakhan's million-man march on Washington, D.C. According to Goeringer, all of these events added to the debate over racism and equality in America and all were played out on news broadcasts and in newspapers across the country.

Goeringer also pointed out that more pertinent information about the church fires, such as findings by insurance and arson prevention groups showing there was really no significant statistical increase in the annual rate of fires involving churches, was being left off the front pages of the country's newspapers and out of the network news coverage in favor of the more compelling imagery of more and more fires. Despite evidence by investigators that there was no suspicious link to the fires, and an in-depth investigative series by USA Today, religious and political figures continued to espouse various forms of conspiracy theories and ignore the evidence to the contrary (Goeringer, Autumn 1997).

Kelly's Criticisms

At the mid-point of the summer of 1996, some journalists and analysts were reflective about the church arson media coverage and became critical in the aftermath. Michael Kelly of the New Yorker magazine wrote that a considerable amount of exploitation occurred, involving politicians, church and civil rights leaders and the national media.

Kelly characterized the series of church burnings as "a crisis that creates respectful attention from the press, opens the wallets of people on an organization's mailing lists and provides a golden opportunity for a group to advance its agenda" (Kelly, July 1996). All, of which, Kelly wrote, gave rise to a form of rhetoric that increases the sense of conspiracy rather than diminishing it.

Kelly also wrote of a near-hysteria among the general public caused by, what he says, was the media and politicians overreacting to the issue as a way of compensating for their former indifferences. He said the true picture of the black church fires was less apocalyptic than what the public had been led to believe by what he called the "hysteria-mongers."

Kelly examined the political opportunities created by the church arson media coverage and used to considerable effect by politicians. He said Republicans used the issue to overcome the accusations of callousness toward the needs of African Americans and to achieve what Kelly called, "compassion on the cheap". According to Kelly said the Democrats saw this as another opportunity to render their Republican opponents defenseless on issues like affirmative action and the radical reform of the welfare system. The Democrats argued that conservative attempts to drastically change those issues inspired the climate of racism.

Kelly asserts the fires afforded President Clinton the opportunity to play a role he relishes --- that of national father in time of crisis. Kelly stated that Clinton's campaign managers knew he could play the part well and made it a central part of his re-election effort.

Knoxville Was the Catalyst

In his article, "Anatomy of a Story", Texas free-lance writer Joe Holley wrote in the Columbia Journalism Review that the Knoxville Inner City Community Church fire was the apparent catalyst which transformed spot news in various papers across the South into big news across the nation. Holley wrote that in just a matter of days the story burst onto the national conscience and, like child sexual abuse at a day care center, it commanded national attention, acquired immense symbolic significance and inspired national soul-searching.

Holley also credited Reggie White as the man who boosted the church-burning story to what he called the "major story stage" in which the national media began to make connections and raised the possibility of racial animosity or a nationwide conspiracy

created by white racist organizations. Holley stated that White had the ear of news organizations around the nation and didn't hesitate to use that rapt attention.

The literature available on the issue of celebrity influence and endorsements does suggest there exists a power to motivate and change public behavior, sentiment and responsiveness. The literature concerning the black church arson fires of 1996 also suggests the power of one individual's celebrity to influence media attention given to an issue and the ability to motivate other individuals and organizations to take part in the discussion of that issue certainly deserves recognition.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

James D. Startt and William David Sloan (1989) in their book, Historical Methods in Mass Communication, say “history investigates things that have happened and seeks to comprehend them in their fullness of meaning. In that manner it hopes to be informative about human behavior, about how people have related to one another and about how they have interacted with the conditions of their time” (Startt & Sloan, 1989).

This historical analysis is meant to provide an examination of how one famous individual effected the media coverage of a series of events. This study’s intention is to show how the power of celebrity can manipulate the coverage media will grant to an issue.

The Lack of Coverage

In the early 1990s, rural black and white churches were burning in the South and the media wasn’t paying attention. As stated earlier in the study, there were 19 black churches burned in 10 Southern states in 1993. There were 27 black church arsons in 11 Southern states in 1994 and 27 arsons in 11 Southern states in 1995. USA Today investigative reporter Gary Fields called it a “journalistic indifference” that still baffles him today.

“I think we were remiss in my profession in covering the burning of God’s houses. I have no explanation and no excuses for why we had not covered the fires before” (Fields, personal interview, May 2000).

Black ministers tried to convince the local media to investigate the situation, but a nearly three-year struggle proved fruitless. Kansas City pastor, the Reverend Mac Charles Jones was one of those ministers trying to get the media to investigate.

“Most of the media was absent. They were not there – period. Black or white, African American or otherwise” (Editor & Publisher, September 1996).

According to Jones, the Jackson Sun in Tennessee and The State in Columbia, South Carolina were the only two Southern newspapers covering the mostly rural church burnings with any consistency, but it wasn’t enough to convince other media colleagues the incidents warranted their attention.

In his autobiography, In The Trenches (1996), National Football League superstar and ordained minister Reggie White acknowledged the lack of coverage given to those fires and said the stories were either buried or not covered at all (White, 1996). When White’s own church burned, that approach changed.

The Intensity of Coverage

On January 8, 1996, Reggie White was preparing for one of the biggest games of his eleven-year NFL career. His team had just defeated the defending Super Bowl champion San Francisco 49ers in San Francisco and the NFC conference championship game with the Dallas Cowboys in Dallas was next on the agenda. White was one game away from a Super Bowl appearance and just hours away from receiving news that his multi-denominational church in Knoxville, Tennessee had been destroyed by fire.

White returned to Green Bay and discovered a phone message from a reporter with the Knoxville News-Sentinel. The message informed him his church had been firebombed (White, 1996).

When White learned from his pastor David Upton, that congregation members were being questioned and, in some cases, polygraphed by arson investigators, he went on the offensive. White knew because of the timing of the incident the media would be interested in his response. Again, in his autobiography, In the Trenches (1996), White conceded there was a high degree of media curiosity.

“Because the Inner City Community Church was the church of an NFL star, and because the fire occurred immediately after our big playoff win in San Francisco and just days before the climactic game against the Cowboys, the event was magnified in the media far beyond what it would have been at practically any other time of the year” (White, 1996).

Knowing that, White chose the opportunity to go on an ESPN sports broadcast and publicize his disagreements with local and federal investigators. At that moment, media reaction to the church-burning story changed. No longer was it a story reporters had to be convinced to cover. This is corroborated in personal interviews with Tom Chester, Deputy Managing Editor of the Knoxville News-Sentinel and Darrell DeBusk, Assignment Manager of WBIR-TV who covered Reggie White and the Inner City Church fire.

“This brings all kinds of pressure to make sure you cover a church fire, which is serious in and of itself, but when you have a high profile individual like Reggie White involved it certainly changes the amount of staff you use on the story, the number of people you try to interview, the scope of the story -- it goes from being a local church fire to a national story” (Chester, personal interview, March 2000).

“It was like everyday he was coming out and was just really up in arms about how the investigation was handled. We couldn’t ignore that and we had to go with it” (DeBusk, April 2000).

White stepped up his criticism of arson investigators and soon began to weave his arguments of a racist conspiracy into his comments to the media. As the number of fires in the South began to grow, it lent some credence, in the eyes of the media, to what White was saying and forced authorities to spend an increasing amount of time answering White’s charges.

Grant McGarity, Knoxville’s resident agent in charge of the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, was that department’s point person when it came to providing media reaction to protestations by Reggie White.

“We have not found anything to date that connects this to the other church fires” (Associated Press, February 1996).

Hallerin Hilton Hill, a local radio talk show host with NewsTalk 99, WNOX, conducted an interview with Reggie White some months after his church was destroyed. In a personal interview for this study, Hill said White conveyed a sense of true sincerity in his arguments about racism.

“I think Reggie had a real passion for justice and I think there were people who had him very convinced that race was a huge factor in the church burning down” (Hill, personal interview, April 2000).

Some of those, it can be said, were his church pastors and congregation members who were quite angry over the tone of the Inner City Church investigation. It can also be stated that those individuals who influenced Reggie were affiliated with organizations

searching for opportunities to advance their causes. Two of those organizations had one man in common. The man who gave Reggie White credit for bringing national media attention to the Southern black church arson fires.

The NCC & The CDR

Prior to the Inner City Church fire, the National Council of Churches (NCC) and the Center for Democratic Renewal (CDR) had not taken a public stand on any of the 27 black church arsons that occurred in the South in 1995. This study could not find any evidence that either organization had issued any public statement, news release, or opinion about the 27 black church fires in 1994 or the 19 black church arsons in 1993. An official with both organizations, Reverend Mac Charles Jones, is on record as saying the black and white press were, in his words, choosing not to cover the issue of black churches burning in the South. However, there are no written documents to suggest Jones or anyone else within the two organizations made public accusations or issued any causal findings between January 1993 and January 1996.

After Reggie White's media appearances in January and February and the subsequent media attention garnered by the church burning issue, both organizations began to make public accusations focusing on racial injustice and a white supremacist conspiracy.

In March 1996, both the NCC and the CDR held news conferences. The National Council of Churches came to Knoxville and charged that acts of white supremacy and racial hatred were the links to arson fires at the predominantly black churches in the South. The organization scheduled their news conference just hours before Reggie White spoke at an area high school (Ferris & Towns, March 1996).

Later in the month, the CDR held a news conference to release a preliminary report, which showed a large increase in black church arsons from 1990 to 1996. Independent investigations of that report by four different journalists found questionable data and misleading statements about the causes of the fires reported (Fumento, June 1997). In a Wall Street Journal commentary in July 1996, columnist Michael Fumento contacted law enforcement officials in some of the states on the list and found conflicting information. Fumento reported that of the ten churches the CDR listed as arson in Alabama, the State Fire Marshal there confirmed only one. The others were either accidental, undetermined at that time or were not fires, but vandalisms. He also reported the list omitted three black church arsons in Alabama in 1994 in which the perpetrators in two of the cases were black. Fumento reported that the study was an apparent effort to make black church fires appear to be increasing (Fumento, July 1996).

Fred Bayles of the Associated Press reported in July 1996 that a review of six years of data provided by federal, state and local authorities indicated arsons were up at both black and white churches. The data also showed only random links to racism. Bayles also reported insurance industry officials said the 1996 toll was well within the normally expected range. In that same article, Bayles reported that from January 1990 to July 1996 there were 248 arsons at white churches compared with 161 at black churches (Bayles, July 1996).

With the media attention came increased scrutiny of the two organizations and in August 1996 the Wall Street Journal published a front-page story critical of the National Council of Churches and its tactics. The Journal reported the involvement by the NCC in the church burning issue was a fund-raising effort to boost an organization's dwindling

coffers. The article noted “even after soliciting funds among normally sympathetic charitable foundations, it found virtually no donors.” The article also noted the NCC was struggling to raise money and by “couching the burnings as a national disaster orchestrated by organized white supremacists groups” and by buying “provocative” advertising in major newspapers, the organization “has raised more money more quickly than it has for any previous cause” (Langley, August 1996). The article also quoted a letter from Diane Knippers, president of the Washington-based Institute on Religion and Democracy. In the letter, Knipper charged the NCC with perpetuating a “great church-fire hoax by exaggerating the church burning phenomenon to promote a radical agenda.” Knipper also said the NCC continued to create a “crisis atmosphere to fuel fears, hurts and misunderstanding between the races, instead of focusing on genuine examples of racism in this country” (Langley, August 1996).

Despite the intense scrutiny, the NCC continued to raise money for its efforts. By August 1996, \$9 million had been secured for the organization’s Burned Church Fund. A NCC representative said 85 percent would be used for rebuilding and 15 percent for administration and programs to address racism (Green, August 1996).

The NCC, the CDR and Reggie White continued their racist and hate group conspiracy theories as the cause of the fires and the media continued to cover them. Between January and June 1996, more than 2,200 newspaper articles were written on the church burning issue (Swett, September 1998). This number is corroborated by a database search which was conducted by Wall Street Journal columnist Michael Fumento (Fumento, 1998).

While the NCC and the CDR continued their activities, the White House and Capitol Hill were using the media's and the nation's fixation on the Southern church fires to create political points.

Clinton, Congress and the National Church Arson Task Force

As the months after the Inner City Church incident progressed, Reggie White turned his attention from the media forum to the political arena. In his autobiography, White talked about two phone call discussions he had with fellow Tennessean, Vice President Al Gore, Jr. The first phone call came from Gore shortly after the Inner City Church fire occurred. In that phone conversation, the Vice President offered his condolences and pledged any help he could give. The second phone call took place shortly before White left for his Pro Bowl appearance in February. White told the Vice President of his concerns about the FBI and ATF subjecting his congregation members to intense investigation and not returning his calls. When White returned from Hawaii, he said in his book, "I found three messages from investigators" (White, 1996).

Those phone calls led to more political involvement in the issue. By June 1996, White and a group of Southern black church leaders met in Washington with Attorney General Janet Reno and Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin to share their concerns about the investigation of the fires. Also in June, President Clinton held an urgent meeting with the governors of southern states "to coordinate a strategy for battling the outbreak" (Taylor, August 1996). That same month President Clinton, in the middle of a re-election campaign, issued a Saturday morning radio address that "vowed to douse the hatred." A spokesman for the National Council of Churches later commented that his message was the "turning point" and "suddenly our issue caught fire" (Fumento, June 1997).

Soon Clinton and members of Congress were vying for political opportunity. Both the House and Senate delivered speeches before C-SPAN cameras denouncing the “racist revival” and entered news accounts of the church burnings into the Congressional Record (Seattle Times Extra, June 1997).

But African Americans did not place a great deal of faith in the actions of the Republican-controlled Congress. Civil rights officials, such as Elaine Jones, director of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, even went so far as to blame the conservative agenda for the situation.

“In this atmosphere of economic insecurity, the Republican-controlled Congress and conservatives have pushed to banish programs that are code words for ‘race’ in America – affirmative action, welfare, set-asides and political empowerment. So it is not surprising that we get once again African American communities under siege and being attacked” (Gilliam, July 1996).

Suddenly, the church burnings in the South became symbolic of the economic and political hardships faced by African Americans through the years. Civil rights leaders, such as Mary Frances Berry of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, began to argue the social and political climate created the environment that gave rise to the church burnings.

“If (white) people don’t have jobs and hear lies (about blacks)....that make (them) feel aggrieved, they have some rationale for acting or speaking unfairly” (Gilliam, July 1996).

In the middle of this discussion, President Clinton created the National Arson Prevention Initiative, which led to the formation of the National Church Arson Task Force and strengthened legislation to investigate arson crimes called the Church Arson Prevention Act. Critics saw the law as unnecessary; Clinton and members of Congress

saw it as a way to make good on a promise to “fight the bigotry and mobilize against the hate” (Taylor, August 1996).

The National Church Arson Task Force began its investigative efforts in early June 1996. By the middle of that month, a sufficient number of fires had been investigated to provide a more accurate explanation of what was going on. The findings did not support a church arson conspiracy, but suggested instead a wide range of causes and motivations (Goeringer, Autumn 1997).

The National Church Arson Task Force Report

Nearly one year after its inception, the National Church Arson Task Force released its initial report on the Southern black church arsons to the President. At a news conference to announce the report’s release, Assistant Treasury Secretary James Johnson told the media, “While we have made significant progress, the work of the task force is far from over. Fires at houses of worship continue. Arrests continue to be made. And defendants continue to be prosecuted and convicted” (CNN, June 1997).

The details of the report were extensive and illustrated the progress made in the investigations.

- 199 people arrested; 110 convicted involving 77 fires
- 160 of the 199 people arrested were white, 34 were black and five Hispanic
- 83 of the 199 people arrested were juveniles
- 81 of the 199 were arrested specifically for arsons at black churches
- Of the 81, fifty-five were white, 25 black and one Hispanic
- In 1997, 82 investigations were opened looking into arsons, bombings and attempted bombings

- 19 of those involved predominantly black churches, 63 involved other houses of worship

The report also made clear there was no evidence to suggest a nationwide racial conspiracy as cause for the Southern black church fires. Instead, the report said motives in the arsons ranged from racial hatred to vandalism and from insurance fraud to revenge (NATF, January 1997).

Reaction to the report was mixed, as evidenced by a remark from Reverend David Upton, pastor of the Inner City Church. "Although I can't say I'm completely satisfied, I have seen an improvement from last year" (CNN, June 1997).

Jerry Upton, Drugs and Money

In April 1996, Reggie White stood before a large crowd of media and Green Bay football fans and received a \$94,782 check to help rebuild his Inner City Church. White accepted the donation and told the gathered throng, "We feel loved" (Zaleski, February 2000).

Standing with him was Reverend Jerry Upton, who along with his brother David, was pastor of the Inner City Church and close friend to White. Upton was equally touched by the gift. "We are going forward with our vision" (Zaleski, February 2000). Almost four years later, that donation and other monies raised for re-building the Inner City Church were the subject of questions by federal authorities after Upton was arrested on drug-related and gun charges.

As reported by the Knoxville News-Sentinel, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel and other media, Upton was sentenced in U.S. District Court in Knoxville on March 27, 2000 to 10 years in federal prison. Upton was charged with helping to operate a

multi-million dollar cocaine ring, in the years since the 1996 Inner City church fire, that trafficked the drug from Miami and Fort Lauderdale, Florida to Tennessee. Federal authorities said Upton used a Mercedes-Benz, provided by the Inner City Knoxville Community Investment Corporation, to make some of the trips (Skiba, March 2000). The Inner City Knoxville Community Investment Corporation is a non-profit arm of the Inner City church which faced its own monetary problems with federal authorities when it was ordered to pay \$60,000 in federal grant money back to the Knoxville Community Development Corporation in September 1998. As of this writing, the Corporation has not received the money (Associated Press, December 1998).

Upton was also charged with possessing a firearm, which he sold to an undercover ATF officer. Because of convictions in 1977 for selling the hallucinogenic drug, PCP and heroin, Upton could not own a gun.

Upton's arrest brought the media's attention, once again, to the Inner City Church fire and resurrected old questions concerning the whereabouts of money raised to rebuild the church. When asked by federal authorities to account for the more than \$900,000 accepted by church officials, Upton said payroll, legal fees and housing rehabilitation expenses of more than \$1 million quickly absorbed the donated funds.

A portion of that money came from the National Council of Churches, (NCC), through its Burned Churches Fund. The fund was established to assist black congregations rebuild after the fires in 1996. Both Upton and the NCC agreed the organization donated money to the Inner City Church, but disagreed on exactly how much. The NCC said its records showed a donation of \$50,000 was given by check in

August 1996 and a wire transfer of \$50,000 was given in July 1997 for a total donation of \$100,000. Upton told prosecutors, during his appearance in federal court, the church received only \$50,000 (Adams, April 2000).

In his autobiography, Reggie White characterized Jerry Upton as his “pastor and good friend” (White, June 1996). In an attempt to prevent Upton from going to prison, White wrote a letter to U.S. District Judge James Jarvis and asked that Upton be placed in White’s custody. In the letter, White characterized Upton as one of the few people who made a profound impact on him and his wife. White said of Upton, “This man is not a criminal, he just cares too much sometimes” (Skiba, March 2000). The judge refused to give White custody of Upton.

After Upton was sentenced, federal prosecutors told reporters the outcome of this investigation would mean renewed efforts in finding those responsible for the Inner City Church arson. As of this writing, the case remained unsolved and a reward still stood at \$105,000.

Summation

Reggie White’s theory of a racial conspiracy as the reason for the destruction of his Inner City Community Church and other similar houses of worship in the South may have been debunked by the outcome of the National Church Arson Task Force report, but his ability to lure the national media into giving more attention, scrutiny and coverage to the black church arsons which occurred in 1996 is undeniable.

Reggie White was the outspoken, charismatic, talented, athletic superstar who gave the issue enough prominence to attract the cameras. At that time, there was no evidence of any other individual in the civil rights or African American church

community who could have taken the issue of burning black churches and brought it national media attention. Certainly Reggie White's emotional ties to one of the churches involved in the series of arson fires must be considered. That incident gave White the motivation to be the national spokesperson he became.

"I clearly think that because of Reggie White's involvement everybody treated this story differently in terms of the amount of resources that they put to it. You can be guaranteed that no national media would have come to Knoxville, Tennessee and covered this story. Jesse Jackson came here because of Reggie White, Mac Jones and the National Council of Churches came here because of Reggie White. David Upton went to Washington, D.C. to a meeting of leaders from across the nation. Do you believe David Upton would have been in Washington, D.C. with other ministers of burned churches if it hadn't been that Reggie White was associate pastor of his church?" (Chester, personal interview, March 2000).

"Reggie brought a tremendous platform to the issue because he has stature and because he is a revered football hero and America covets its athletes more than we covet anything else, including religion. The fact that he was coming to the end of a Hall of Fame career and was playing in a Super Bowl just illuminated the issue that much more" (Fields, May 2000).

"Celebrities make news and impact the news, to be sure. Celebrities draw the camera, just as they draw microphones and tape recorders. Chances are, if they have a press conference, it will be covered. Chances are, their remarks will be in print and broadcast. It's safe to say that this was a high-profile fire given Reggie White's national prominence" (Skiba, September 2000).

Critics who've looked back at the media's performance during this period of time have said Reggie White and the church burning issue offered the media what they feel it always needs.

"For the media, the church burnings make a good, dramatic story, seemingly unclouded by the usual ambiguities. And it is a familiar story. Reporters love familiarity. Struggling on deadline to make sense of the chaos that is the daily world, they operate on a set of conventions, by fitting the confusing and often conflicting facts before them into certain well-established paradigms. Perhaps because there is nothing so confounding in American life as the issues of race, the civil rights paradigm is the strongest in all journalism" (Kelly, July 1996)

In their book The Modern Researcher, (1985), Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff wrote that "history is more than information about customs, objects and situations. It is a chronological narrative of actions by persons with motives" (Barzun, Graff, 1985).

Startt and Sloan (1989) wrote in Historical Methods of Mass Communication, that interpretation is always the most valuable of historical writing. "Without interpretation, historical study remains superficial, with no probing beneath the surface of facts to determine why events occurred and why people acted as they did" (Startt & Sloan, 1989).

The evidence presented here is historical in nature and therefore may not be representative of the entire record. In the future, a scholar may discover some piece of hidden truth that will bring additional significance to this analysis or may take a single aspect of this study and probe further. What this study does represent at this time, is

an analysis of the information and evidence that is available on this subject. From the available evidence, this conclusion has been reached.

The interpretation of this study is that Reggie White and his actions in January 1996 were the conduit from which all subsequent events flowed. If Reggie White had not chosen to be so publicly boisterous with his pain, anger and discouragement over how his church's investigation was going, the media would have continued to pay little attention to the issue of black church arson fires and the number of fires which occurred after the White incident would have been reduced. Without White's power of celebrity to influence media attention and public behavior, there would have been no political or ideological opportunities for politicians seeking re-election or civil rights organizations wanting increased membership and media visibility.

This study has attempted to show what transpired because of Reggie White's actions. The question that begs to be asked then is what would have happened had Reggie White chosen to stay silent?

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

In evaluating the significance of this study, it is important to review the research questions. The contention of this thesis is that Reggie White was the catalyst for the increased media coverage of the Inner City Church in Knoxville, Tennessee and the subsequent black church arsons that occurred in the South during 1996. This study also covered the involvement of political and religious organizations in the issue.

The specific research questions that guided this study were: Would the media have paid any attention at all to the issue of Southern black church arsons if an outspoken athletic superstar like Reggie White had not gotten involved? Did Reggie White's involvement affect the volume of media reports on the issue? Did White's activities and the subsequent media scrutiny hamper efforts to investigate the Southern church arson fires? What impact did the media coverage of the Southern black church arsons have on the issue of racism in America? Politicians, civil rights and religious organizations became key players in the continuing story of the Southern black church arson issue. Did the media coverage supply these groups with opportunities to advance their causes?

Reggie White Provides a Reason

In September 1996, a media symposium was held in Nashville, Tennessee. The symposium was entitled "Strange Fires: Media Coverage of Church Burnings" The topic of discussion was the question of whether or not the media ignored the Southern

church arson story. The answer by the panel participants was a resounding “yes” (Editor & Publisher, September 1996).

USA Today investigative reporter Gary Fields spent the first half of 1996 covering the story. His three-month in-depth investigation of the Southern church arsons clarified a number of misconceptions about the incidents. Fields told the panel, “until this year (1996), a ‘conspiracy of journalistic indifference’ has surrounded church fires”.

The panel also included Reverend Mac Charles Jones, an official with the National Council of Churches, who stated matter-of-factly to the panel that when the black churches were burning, ministers could not get the media interested in the story for almost three years. Jones said that even the African American press was slow to respond to the story.

“We couldn’t initially get anything in the black press – until the white press validated it. Now that’s a telling statement. If you are getting your news from other media and institutions and never talk to the principals, it raises questions about the nature of that journalism” (Editor & Publisher, September 1996).

Jones said there were only two newspapers covering the fires. Those papers were the Jackson Sun in west Tennessee and The State in Columbia, South Carolina.

During the symposium, Gary Fields and his coverage of the church fires were given credit for opening America’s eyes to the issue and putting an actual tally of destruction on paper. Fields’ first report on the fires appeared in mid-February. But Jones seemed to give even more credit to an incident that occurred one month earlier. Before the panel participants, Jones credited Reggie White with bringing national media attention to the church arson issue.

“Bringing this story to prominence was Reggie White, a well-known football player and preacher. When his church was burned, it was a wake-up call” (First Amendment Center, September 1996).

The opinion expressed by Reverend Jones was not unlike the opinions expressed by those interviewed for this research. In those interviews, Reggie White was described as outspoken, charismatic, fascinating, and deeply religious. It would seem that those attributes coupled with White’s superstar athletic status, provided an opportunity for the media to put a recognizable face and voice to an issue that had previously been deemed unworthy of coverage. It is this writer’s view that Reggie White’s determination to go public with his pain, anger, frustration and disappointment made him the focus of the media attention and brought the intense scrutiny of that attention to the issue. His continuing presence in the media convinced other organizations to get speak out and carry the mantle.

The Volume is Increased

Reggie White’s involvement forced the media to increase the number of reports on the Inner City Church fire and Southern black church arsons in general, because Reggie White continued to use his celebrity influence to gain media attention. That presence also motivated other religious and political organizations to get involved which gave the media more reason for continuing coverage.

On two occasions in January and once in February, just prior to the Pro Bowl, Reggie White used national television to discuss his feelings about the progress of the Inner City investigation, the increased number of black church fires in the South and the belief that it was all part of a white supremacist racial conspiracy in the United States.

White never overlooked any opportunity provided by a print or broadcast reporter to make his feelings known. His media sustainability made him the man who, according to a reporter for the Columbia Journalism Review, did more than perhaps anyone to help boost the church burning story to that stage of becoming a story with national implications (Holley, September, 1996).

From January 1996 until earlier in 2000, reporters for the Knoxville News-Sentinel wrote nearly 150 stories on the Inner City Church fire, subsequent Southern church fires and Reggie White. At least 40% of those stories were of White as the main focus or involved White in some fashion, either as a sidebar to the main story or as a mention in the copy of the main story.

“Yes, Reggie White continued to be the story and if Reggie White did something or if Reggie White said something, it was generally presented on page one with the latest developments in the story” (Chester, personal interview, March 2000).

As evidenced by the comments of those interviewed and by the research, Reggie White’s involvement did increase the number of stories written on the Southern black church arsons because White’s continued presence as a celebrity with an emotional tie to the issue allowed the media to sustain its coverage. The organizations that followed White’s lead also allowed the media to continue covering the story.

An Investigation Pressured, but Unhampered

Reggie White’s original frustrations concerning the Inner City Church fire were that authorities

were mishandling the investigation and not working fast enough to catch the perpetrators. His comments and those of other church leaders soon placed a great deal of media scrutiny on local, state and federal investigators.

Retired Fire Chief Bruce Cureton said local arson investigators really began to feel the scrutiny within a short time. "They know they're going to have to answer questions or try to answer questions about the investigation and they're not able to devote one-hundred percent of their time to the actual investigation. It doesn't mean they don't do a thorough investigation—they do. But it takes longer to do it" (Cureton, personal interview, March 2000).

Once the media attention increased so did the pressure, whether actual or suggested. Local, state and federal investigative agencies found themselves trying to conduct a number of investigations, while at the same time attempting to handle the pressure from politicians, church leaders and civil rights organizations to make arrests and convictions and from the media to answer questions about the investigation.

"The danger in discussing the fire and anything that occurred as a result of the fire is that if there is so much media attention and the investigators have to respond, it could jeopardize the investigation" (Cureton, personal interview, March 2000).

Despite the media attention and the pressure to make arrests, the investigative agencies involved did make considerable progress. In November 1996, USA Today reported that the number of people arrested for church burnings increased nearly seven times from 1995 to 1996. The newspaper also reported church arsons were being solved at nearly twice the rate overall. In 1995, 16 percent of all arsons resulted in arrests. By November 1996, that number had increased to 31 percent. There were also 31

convictions in 97 cases in which there were arrests made. The newspaper attributed the increase in arrests to the number of investigators involved. During the summer of 1996, one thousand local, state and federal investigators were assigned to church arsons. As Christmas neared, there were still 500 working on cases (Fields, December 1996).

The protestations by White and other organizations certainly placed considerable pressure on investigative agencies, but it did not hamper their efforts. If anything, several positive developments came from the church arson probe. It resulted in changes in state laws governing the arson of a house of worship. It led to a national database of church arson crimes, convictions and on-going investigations maintained by the U.S. Justice Department. More importantly, it resulted in a new spirit of cooperation between local, state and federal authorities in the investigation of arson.

The Impact on Racism in America

In the early months of 1996, as more church fires occurred, questions arose and discussions were held over the possibility of a “racist conspiracy” as the prevalent cause of the increased arsons.

Reggie White, other African American church leaders, civil rights and political organizations used every media opportunity to point the finger of blame in that direction. Despite the ever-growing investigative evidence that illustrated the contrary, these groups maintained an insistence that a conspiracy of racism and hate perpetuated the burning of Southern black churches.

Soon, African American church and political leaders began drawing comparisons between the church burnings of the 90s and the church bombings of the 50s and 60s. Nelson B. Rivers III of the Washington D.C. chapter of the National Association for the

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) testified before the House Judiciary Committee in May 1996 and voiced that concern.

“These fires raise the specter of a painful, ugly and not-too-distant past in American history. The attacks on so many American churches – in such a brief period – remind us of the tactics used to intimidate and terrorize African Americans for merely attempting to exercise their fundamental civil rights” (NAACP Online, May 1996).

Other historical factors added to the racism discussion. The church fires occurred shortly after the 1990 beating of Rodney King by a group of white Los Angeles police officers. That incident led to the Los Angeles riots in 1992 in which a white trucker, Reginald Denny, was pulled out of his truck and pummeled with bricks by a black man. The church burnings also occurred one year after a not guilty decision in the nationally televised; double-murder trial of internationally known celebrity O. J. Simpson virtually created a racial divide between white and black America.

USA Today reporter Gary Fields also pointed out in a June article that most of the 66 black churches that had burned since January 1995 were founded by slaves or freed slaves. This information added to the concerns by civil rights and church leaders that the church arsons might be a sign of history repeating itself (Fields, June 1996).

Despite the fact that as the Southern church arson investigations continued, mounting evidence whittled away significant portions of the racist conspiracy theory as cause, the issue did create considerable discussion about racism in America. Whether constructive ideas and significant courses of action resulted from the discussions is left up to the individual to decide. It certainly can be said the media attention given to the Southern

church arson fires, as with other issues involving white and black America did foster considerable discussion.

An Opportunity to Advance a Cause

As the racism discussion escalated, it brought together unusual groupings of organizations. Those who led these groups stated publicly that the partnerships occurred as an effort to find those responsible for the “racist terror.” The unheralded cooperation among these groups also allowed them the opportunity to advance an ideology and, in some cases, gain financially and politically.

The first groups to see benefit were the Center for Democratic Renewal and the National Council of Churches. Prior to the Southern black church arsons, these organizations were rarely seen in the public eye. But soon after Reggie White protested the Inner City Church arson and other Southern black church burnings, both organizations went on the media offensive.

In March 1996, both organizations held news conferences in which they proclaimed a well organized; white supremacist movement was the basis of the church burnings. The CDR even released to the media a preliminary report detailing an alleged upsurge in black church arsons since 1990. It was reported later the study was flawed because the organization ignored fires set by blacks and labeled fires as arson that were not (Fumento, July 1996).

But the media coverage of the study and comments made by organizational leaders were enough to place the NCC and CDR in the spotlight. Their message was soon heard and repeated by such unlikely groups as the National Anti-Defamation League and the Christian Coalition. The CDR and NCC both began to see monetary advantage as a

result of the media attention. Fund-raising became a very successful offshoot of the exposure. Particularly for the NCC, which had seen itself struggling with decreasing membership in the years previous to 1996. As a result of its media offensive, donations and membership increased substantially and fund-raising to rebuild burned churches had netted almost \$9 million (Fumento, June 1997).

As previously stated in this study, the issue created political advantage for President Bill Clinton who was involved in a re-election campaign. Both Democrats and Republicans used the issue of the Southern black church burnings to court the African American voter (Kelly, July 1996).

In conclusion, it can be said Reggie White's theory of a conspiracy of racism and hate as the reason for the unwarranted destruction of his Inner City Church and other black churches in the South during 1996, was debunked by the evidence obtained in thorough investigations by nearly one thousand local, state and federal authorities. It can also be stated that numerous political, religious and civil rights organizations and individuals were able to use the ongoing media coverage and discussion of the Southern church arsons as an opportunity to advance their ideological and political causes.

More importantly, this study concludes the preponderance of media activity surrounding the arson attacks on more than one hundred African American houses of worship in eleven Southern states during 1996 was the result of the involvement of Reggie White. White brought an emotional, charismatic and commanding presence to the issue that did not previously exist in the African American church communities. White provided to the media what no one else, at that time, could offer – the power and

influence to shape public opinion, consumer behavior and media attention -- the power of celebrity.

REFERENCES

References Cited

- Adams, John H. (2000, April 6). Convicted Pastor may have taken NCC for \$100,000 ride. The Layman Online.
- Associated Press (1996, February 6). Arson at White's church doesn't appear related to other cases.
- Associated Press (1998, December 9) Reggie White's Former Church In Trouble.
- Barzun, Jacques, & Graff, Henry F. (1985). The Modern Researcher (4th ed.) Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- Bayles, Fred. (1996, July 5). Little supports racism theory in church fires. Associated Press.
- Chester, Tom. (2000, March 28). Interview.
- CNN Interactive. (1996, June 10). Clergy angry, frustrated over church fires.
- CNN Interactive. (1997, June 8). Report: Church arsons still a problem.
- CNN.com (1999, November 8). High schools closed in Illinois town as Reverend Jackson protests expulsion.
- Conrad, Dennis. (1999, November). Jesse Jackson arrested at school in protest over students' expulsion. Associated Press.
- Copeland, Larry. (1996, January 19). Donations pour in to help rebuild church destroyed by a firebomb. The Houston Chronicle, p. 6A.
- Cureton, Bruce. (2000, March 24). Interview.
- DeBusk, Darrell. (2000, April 18). Interview.
- Early, Tracy. (1996, November 14). Big increase in church burning arrests. Ecumenical News International.
- EBONY. (1996, September). What's Behind the Burning of Black Churches? P.108-114.
- Editor & Publisher. (1996, September 28). Did newspapers douse fire story? Vol. 129. P. 14-15.

- Ferris, Gerrie & Towns, Hollie. (1996, March 8). Racial hatred charged in church fires. The Atlanta Journal and Constitution, P. 01D.
- Fields, Gary. (1996, August 7). Arson strikes black churches at record pace. USA Today Online.
- Fields, Gary (1996, December 23). Massive investigation leads to more arrests, fewer Fires. USA Today Online.
- Fields, Gary & Price, Richard. (1996, December 23). Out of the ashes: a sense of unity. USA Today, P. 1A.
- First Amendment Center. (1996, September 6). Church Burning Story Was Ignored by Media: Symposium. Nashville, Tennessee.
- Fumento, Michael. (1996, July 8). A Church Arson Epidemic? It's Smoke and Mirrors. The Wall Street Journal Online
- Fumento, Michael. (1997, June 16). Who's Fanning the Flames of Racism? The Wall Street Journal Online.
- Fumento, Michael. (1998). The Great Black Church-burning Hoax. The Wall Street Journal Online.
- Gilliam, Dorothy. (1996, July 6). The Political Tinder for Church Arsons. The Washington Post, P. 3B.
- Goeringer, Conrad F. (1997, Autumn). The Great and Late Church Arson Conspiracy Hoax. The American Atheist, Vol. 35, No. 4.
- Green, Linda. (1996, August 14). National Council of Churches Responds to Conservative Think-tank's Charges. United Methodist News Service Online.
- Greene, Melissa Fay. (1996, June 24). The Fire Last Time: The civil-rights movement was born amid blazes. Newsweek. P.34.
- Hill, Hallerlin Hilton. (2000, April 16). Interview.
- Holley, Joe. (1996, September-October). Who was burning the black churches? Columbia Journalism Review. P. 26, Vol.35, No. 3.
- Horovitz, Bruce. (1993, November 7). Wishing On a Star: Celebrity Endorsements Draw Big Bucks – But Do They Work? Los Angeles Times. P. 1D. Col. 2.
- Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media. (1996, Fall) Identification as a mediator of celebrity effects. P. 478-495, Vol. 40.

- Kelly, Michael. (1996, July 15). Playing With Fire: Who is burning the churches and who is exploiting the issue? New Yorker P. 28-35.
- Lackey, Skip. (1996, July 2). Jackson Says Business, Courts Fueling Racism. Knoxville News-Sentinel, P. A1.
- Langley, Monica. (1996, August 9). Burning Need: Black-church arson win donors millions – now, how to spend it? The Wall Street Journal, P. A1.
- Loy, Wesley. (1998, January 4). Burning Questions Remain; Inner City Church Fire Still Unsolved, but many wonder why rebuilding hasn't begun. Knoxville News-Sentinel, P. A1.
- Macko, Steve. (1996, July 12). Statistics Paint Different Picture of Southern Church Fires. Emergency Net NEWS Service Online.
- Medical Tribune News Service. (1998, March 12). Celebrities Influence Surgery Decisions. The Arizona Republic, P. HL4.
- Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune Online. (1996, January 13). White says authorities botching investigation into bombing.
- NAACP Online. (1996, May 21). NAACP official testifies at Congress hearings on church fires.
- National Church Arson Task Force. (1997, June 6). First Year Report to the President.
- National Church Arson Task Force. (1998, October). Second Year Report to the President.
- PBS Online Newshour with Jim Lehrer. (1999, November). Zero Tolerance: Jesse Jackson joins the protest.
- Pressley, Sue Anne (1996, January 23). Church Fires Rekindle Pain: Specter of Racism Rises with the Smoke. The Washington Post, P. AO1.
- Seattle Times Extra Online. (1997, June 13). The media, politicians and church fire myths.
- Schmitt, Eric (1996, May 22). Few Links in Church Fires, Panel Is Told. The New York Times, P. A1
- Skiba, Katherine M. (1998, January 4). Amid the ashes, no new church is rising: Reggie White's flock still meeting in a hotel. Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, P. 1.

- Skiba, Katherine M. (1998, November 22). Little is left of Reggie's Church: Despite donations, Tennessee congregation homeless 3 years after fire. Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, P.1
- Skiba, Katherine M. (2000, March 27). Minister at White's church sentenced: '96 Fire still unexplained as Upton gets 10-year term on cocaine, gun counts. Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, P.1.
- Skiba, Katherine M. (2000, March 29). White sought custody of drug-dealing friend: Ex-Packers star asked Tennessee judge for mercy. Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, P.1.
- Skiba, Katherine M. (2000, September 12). Interview.
- Swett, Scott. (1998, September 4). After the Firestorm: A Review of the 1996 Church Fire Scare. Free Republic Online
- Taylor, Jared. (1996, August). Burning with Self-Righteousness. American Renaissance Online.
- White, Jack E. (1999, November 22). Fighting Words: A school dispute escalates into a racial cause celebre. TIME.com. Vol. 154, No. 21.
- White, Reggie. (1996). In The Trenches (1st Ed.) Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville
- Zaleski, Rob. (2000, February 21). Show Me The Money, Reggie. The Capital Times Online.

VITA

Roger Norman Hammitt was born May 27, 1960, in Johnson City, Tennessee where he attended public schools and graduated from East Tennessee State University with a Bachelor's degree in Communications in 1983.

As a student, he began his career in Broadcast Television News with a part-time job as a news reporter/videographer with WJHL-TV in Johnson City. He moved to Knoxville, Tennessee in 1985 to work as a general assignment reporter for WTVK-TV, the NBC affiliate.

There he met his wife, Lisa and later became the weekday news anchor for the 6 and 11 o'clock newscasts when WTVK-TV became WKXT-TV in 1988. In 1991, he left the field of broadcast television news to pursue a career in public relations.

In 1994, he entered the University of Tennessee to pursue a Masters of Science degree in Communications. His son, Ryan was born in 1996, during which time he was the Public Information Officer for the Knoxville Fire Department. In 1998, he became the Public Affairs Representative for the global nuclear clean-up company, BNFL Inc. in its Oak Ridge Operations office.

He received a Masters of Science degree in Communications with a major in Public Relations in December 2000.