

# I

## Hazing Then and Now

To say that no one has known that hazing has been a problem in BGFs for a very long time would be patently false. Concern grew as the twentieth century ended, largely because of shocking Greek-related incidents and the media exposure that followed.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the Michael Davis tragedy was not the result of atypical violent behavior in BGFs. The fact that violence in these groups is not isolated is further supported by injuries and deaths across organizational and regional lines every year. As a result, certain cases involving black Greeks and historically black college and university (HBCU) bands have gained great public attention over the last few decades. In addition to the deaths of Davis and Joel Harris, Omega Psi Phi pledges Van Watts and Joseph Green were killed at Tennessee State University (Nashville) in 1983 and 2001, respectively. Phi Beta Sigma pledge Donnie Wade died at Prairie View A&M University (Prairie View, TX) in 2009. By far, the most high-profile case was the brutal beating death of Robert Champion in 2011 at Florida A&M University (Tallahassee). Many more young men and women have been physically injured, hospitalized, or both during this time. The psychological damage visited on potential initiates is not easily quantified.

Despite the seemingly endless parade of organizational and institutional initiatives, hazing perseveres. It apparently baffles college and university administrators, Greek-letter officials, and an increasingly concerned community at large. Whether they are truly perplexed or simply have neglected the issue is debatable. To be sure, hazing organizations and their supporters have been taken to task in multiple mediums, but hazing incidents continue and remedies remain elusive. This book not only recounts hazing incidents, but explores possible individual, organizational, historical, and societal factors that lead to them. Normatively, it would seem that the “end” of building

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the complete fraternity man (or band member, etc.) through ritualized physical and mental rigor should dissipate when the ceremonial “means” reach such a level as to not only present life-threatening motifs, but actually cause death. In such instances, potential initiates can no longer be viewed as pledges; they must be considered victims. This victimage, however, does not begin or end with individual initiates or their pledge leaders. It is a social, cultural, and political process that involves people in a multilevel network of relationships leading to reification of belief in the BGF pledge/haze process as necessary and generative.

### **CONCERN, CHANGE, AND QUESTIONS**

In response to elevated concern with hazing, BGFs have conducted a number of internal organizational studies since the late 1980s, seeking to explain its continuance in many of their chapters. I contend, however, that the motivations behind some of these studies and the data they have yielded are questionable. The changes BGFs have made within their organizational structures regarding the recruitment and initiation of new members are also debatable. The aforementioned studies and changes are suspect, because one may certainly submit that a good percentage of the membership of these organizations on the national, regional, and local levels has been reluctant to change the way in which they actually conduct the business of initiation. Most statements issued by BGF national offices take the stance that hazing continues because of a minority of “renegade members” who have no true allegiance to the ideals of the organizations. But while initiation procedural policy has been altered from time to time, behavior has remained constant.

The very fact that hazing continues in many BGF chapters lends credence to the idea that the practice is condoned—actively or passively—by a significant percentage of black Greek members. Internal studies, supposed changes to the pledge processes, and executive orders mandating cessation of this behavior are perceived by some as little more than smoke screens for the public’s eye and legal defenses. Kappa Alpha Psi, for example, went so far as to change its initiation ritual (in the face of strong opposition from its membership) in 1993. The rationale behind this change was that the previous version of the fraternity’s ritual had many “gray areas” and statements that could be construed as promoting hazing. Unfortunately, this and other internal

changes obviously went for naught, because Michael Davis was killed the very next year.

The fact that the groups' attempts at self-study and regulation have not been successful in promoting real change brings two possibilities to the fore; one concerns utility and the other control. Either the national offices of the organizations are intentionally misleading in their reports on where their members stand regarding hazing in an effort to relegitimate the fraternities or they are out of touch with the members' beliefs and practices and have lost control of a good percentage of the brethren.

No matter which of the above scenarios is true, three questions are brought to bear when considering the indisputable fact that hazing still exists in black fraternities. First, were the activities and purposes of BGF pledge processes autonomously constructed by these organizations? Second, why is physical hazing regarded as such an integral part of black fraternity initiation? Finally, why do individuals continuously submit to this unsanctioned and sometimes dangerous process? My work here revolves around the belief that hazing of the more physically violent sort encountered in BGFs must be addressed sternly, because this type of abuse poses an immediate threat to black life. Consequently, in a practical and moral effort to save lives, the mortal risk inherent in such a process must be regarded as unacceptable. Unfortunately, although most people in the main have reached this threshold of intolerance, we are far from the historical moment when BGF members themselves submit to the cessation of hazing.

To elaborate on why I support the hypothesis that hazing in BGFs is more physically violent than that found in similar organizations, let us refer to Hank Nuwer's classic book *Broken Pledges*.<sup>2</sup> A quantitative analysis of BGF, white fraternity, and military hazing cases cited by Nuwer reveals interesting trends. The military institutions covered in Nuwer's work include the United States Military Academy, United States Naval Academy, United States Air Force Academy, and the Citadel.

It is important to understand that hazing is a very secretive activity and the numbers presented above only represent "reported" cases at the time of *Broken Pledges*' publication (1990). Unfortunately, the majority of cases are more than likely dealt with within fraternal orders or educational institutions without public scrutiny, so the actual instances

**Black Greek, White Greek, and Military Academy Hazing Since 1838**


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Total Cases of Hazing	441
Cases involving military academies	31
Cases involving white Greeks (WGFs)	241
Cases involving black Greeks (BGFs)	31
Hazing deaths at military academies	4
Hazing deaths involving WGFs	47
Hazing deaths involving BGFs	4
Cases of physical hazing at military academies	7
Cases of physical hazing in WGFs	13
Cases of physical hazing in BGFs	29

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of hazing are probably significantly higher than statistics indicate. The reported numbers suggest, however, that hazing has historically been and continues to be a problem in white fraternities and military academies as well as black fraternities. What the quantitative analysis does not reveal is the fact that hazing usually has very different manifestations in these groups. WGFs have the highest number of reported hazing cases as well as deaths, but their most extreme abuses have most often been alcohol and food related. There were no reported cases of white pledges dying from physical abuse. All forty-seven reported WGF deaths were caused by choking on raw food (i.e., liver), alcohol poisoning, accidental falls (from roofs, cliffs, etc.), or car accidents (i.e., pledges attempting to return to campus after active members abandoned them in some remote area). Of the 241 cases since 1838 involving white Greeks, slightly more than 19 percent of them resulted in death and only 5 percent of the cases involved any physical abuse at all.

The fact that only thirty-one reported cases involved military academies probably speaks to the fact that information concerning hazing at these institutions has always been even more difficult to access than details on fraternal transgressions at civilian colleges and universities. Hazing has also been regarded by some as a necessary tool to mentally and physically prepare men for war. This preparation has

served as one of pro-military hazers' justifications for hazing practices at military academies and ROTC units throughout the country. There also exists an interesting link between military and fraternity hazing. Nuwer cogently points out the potential impact of the military on fraternity hazing as we know it today when he cites the case of young Douglas MacArthur, who was commanded to testify at a congressional court of inquiry ordered by President William McKinley in 1900. "The hearing had two purposes: to deduce whether the unwritten code of hazing had caused the recent death of a young cadet named Oscar Booz of Bristol, Pennsylvania, and to determine if hazing was a significant problem at West Point."<sup>3</sup>

In the end, MacArthur "steadfastly refused to name the upper-classmen who had hazed him, yet he tried to appease the select committee by giving them the names of several men who had already quit West Point for one reason or another. He downplayed the convulsions he had experienced after being seriously hazed, and he most certainly lied on the stand when he said that he could name with certainty only those hazers who had already left the service academy, a Mr. Dockery and a Mr. Barry."<sup>4</sup> Nuwer concludes: "The importance of this study, in retrospect, is the striking similarities revealed between many latter-day hazing practices and West Point abuses. These similarities raise the possibility that military academy drop-outs introduced hazing practices into the colleges they later attended and, thus, played a leading role in the history of hazing on American college campuses."<sup>5</sup>

Just as it stands to reason that military academy dropouts may have influenced hazing at civilian colleges and universities, it is also quite logical to conclude that military academy graduates helped reinforce the hazing of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines as they went through boot camp. A Kappa Alpha Psi member commented on this historical progression:

A lot of people wonder how hazing started in our groups and why it looks like it does today. I'm old enough to have been initiated before all of our founders died. I also know people who were pledged by some of the founders. From what they tell me, most early members were not overwhelmingly concerned with physical hazing or an extensive pledge

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period. Remember, even though our fraternity was founded in 1911, there was no official pledge club until 1919. Even then, physical hazers were of a particular type. This was even true when I was made in 1963. There were three basic types of guys. The smart ones made you remember a lot of information. The athletes exercised you a lot, but they did that stuff along with you. Then there were the guys who weren't very smart and weren't athletic either. These guys were usually the hazers. It was their claim to fame. Also, activities in the process changed a lot after World War I and again after World War II. This is because a lot of guys went to the military and then returned to school after the wars. They brought things like dressing alike and walking in line, along with a few other "unmentionables" back with them.<sup>6</sup>

Although the military may have contributed to hazing in all fraternities, BGF hazing seems to have become the most physically intense variation of the practice. The first of the 241 white fraternity cases reported by Nuwer occurred in 1873 at Cornell University. The first military case was the 1900 case cited involving MacArthur. The first BGF cases do not appear until 1977. Glaringly, between 1977 and 1990, BGFs are cited for the same number of hazing cases as military academies are in a span of 90 years. Furthermore, only 23 percent of the reported military cases involved physical abuse. In contrast, almost 94 percent of the black cases involved physical abuse—with all four deaths being caused by physical hazing. Almost a quarter of a century after *Broken Pledges'* publication, the number of incidents has obviously increased, but the trends in these groups remain steady.

It must be clear that I do not contend that physical hazing only occurs in BGFs. Nuwer's study illustrates that this is not the case. It is also probably true that men who seek to join organizations such as fraternities and the military through violent means belong to a particular personality group. Admittedly, membership in this personality group crosses racial and organizational lines. It should be emphasized that men who seek affiliation with hazing fraternities, bands, or high-risk units of the military are not totally coerced, but are largely self-selected. The striking point of departure is that, at least where fraternal orders are concerned, there seems to be a higher frequency of this type of personality found among black males than any other group under consideration. If true, this helps explain why

the prevalence of physical hazing in BGFs is much higher than in WGFs or even the military. Certainly, an important epistemological question must follow such an assertion. If, in fact, there are more black men in this personality group, how did they come to be this way? This is an issue of paramount importance that chapter 6 engages in depth.

### **THE INFLUENCE OF THE ANCIENT AND MODERN WORLDS ON BLACK GREEK VIOLENCE**

Regardless of the answer to the aforementioned question concerning the personality types of black men who engage in hazing, the theory of BGF violence offered here posits that the pledge process is not a phenomenon unique to (or invented by) black Greek-letter fraternities, but finds its true roots in the ancient world. Black fraternities were created by black collegians in an effort to provide interpersonal, social, educational, and professional support denied to them in many American social and political structures, but they did not autonomously create the process of violent initiation. The manifestation of violence found in BGFs is really another form of sacrifice that has been passed down to black fraternities through multiple ritualistic traditions. As chapter 4 illustrates, ancient sacrificial ritual was usually mortal and public because people believed it impacted the entire community. These rituals were established to intervene in what was seen as inevitable violent social interaction so that violence could be redirected and even legitimized. In societies where the notion of human sacrifice was considered “uncivilized,” the tenets of sacrificial ritual were transferred to social and secret organizations that ultimately served many of the same purposes.

Although the underlying purpose of sacrificial ritual never changed, it was presented in different guises. These altered avenues for sacrifice usually appeared as secret and semisecret orders such as the Egyptian Mysteries, Eleusinian Mysteries, Orphic Mysteries, Mithraism, Freemasonry, and the military. According to some thinkers, these structures (whether secret or not) always serve a societal purpose. By legitimating violence through ritual, one “can precipitate the forging of new social forms that address violence as an autonomous, culturally generative, and meaning-endowing practice.”<sup>7</sup> Though all sacrificial rituals demand some form of sacrifice, they all do not demand death in

the literal sense. This does not mean that the notion of death is absent from any sacrificial ritual. Contrarily, it is forever present. All sacrificial ritual hinges on the expectation of some type of death and subsequent rebirth. In modern times, this death-rebirth process is usually symbolic. This is the case in fraternities, but it does not change the purpose of the ritual.

Violence in these rituals has become integral in BGFs, because it is now regarded as an important tool in the construction of black male identity and manhood. BGFs problems are not only rooted in the fact that they are Greek-letter organizations with unique practices or that their written rituals somehow mandate violent behavior (as is evidenced by the death of Michael Davis in spite of ritualistic alterations). BGFs have historically been concerned with the construction of a particular black American male identity that affirms and continuously reaffirms black manhood. Unfortunately, violent physical struggle is regarded as a key ingredient in the building of this manhood. The dependence on the physical often occurs because many black men feel (rightfully or wrongfully) that they are not privy to the same opportunities to define themselves as their white counterparts in American society. This perception (and reality) will be explored in depth in later chapters. Before reaching these passages, however, I hope the reader will temporarily accept my hypothesis that social and political marginalization help to promote the black male's search for alternate arenas in which he can be regarded as a man. One way to define manhood that has emerged, particularly in black intraracial interaction, is to be physically dominant or able to withstand physical abuse. In this manner, physical toughness is eventually equated with manliness and this phenomenon carries over into BGFs.

This reality helps explain why many individuals continue to submit to hazing—they feel it affirms their toughness and manhood. It must be noted that BGFs do not force black men to join their organizations. Contrarily, a large number of men go to great lengths to convince current members that they are worthy of membership. Many of these men submit to, and even seek, pledging and hazing, because modern BGFs have developed an interaction of domination that largely centers on the narrative of the pledge process. This phenomenon is rigorously engaged in chapter 5. The hegemonic struggle between pro- and antihazers within BGFs has effectively established parameters that



define individual fraternity brothers as legitimate or illegitimate. The criteria for legitimacy are primarily based on whether or not a member has participated in the traditional BGF pledge process. Many black men see membership in a fraternity as one way to respond to negative societal factors and carve out space that truly belongs to them. Along with this space comes some degree of (or perception of) power and camaraderie not easily accessed by the majority of black males in American society. Some of these men see the traditional pledge process that includes hazing as the only way to gain uncontested admittance into this zone of power and brotherhood.

Although the pledge process may have its roots in sacrificial ritual, the current extreme nature of violent hazing in BGFs is augmented by the unique identity of many modern black American males, be they Greek affiliated or not. Some believe this identity may be a historical construct of conscious and unconscious oppression of this group by Anglo American-centered structures of governance and determinants of social and political power. Louis Knowles and Kenneth Prewitt described this system as *institutional racism*.<sup>8</sup> They saw it as one in which the institutions and rules of American society were based on the values of the dominant white racial group and society's goods and services were distributed according to these values. They subsequently concluded that continuing discrimination against African Americans has been one of the most powerful expressions of institutional racism in the society and the most devastating legacy of the white supremacist ethos.

Following this admittedly contested logic, the black male Self created by these realities is only further fragmented by the assault of modernization and the economic and psychological problems it brings to bear. This phenomenon changed the realities and life chances of most Americans during the twentieth century, in that old familiar social forms disintegrated before the new and highly aggressive forces of urbanization and industrialization. In relatively quick succession, family links in America weakened, religious authority waned, face-to-face communal life was replaced by competitive, atomized city life, and custom and tradition were displaced by the cold, brutal rationality of the modern marketplace.

Black Greek-letter fraternity hazing and the particular black male identity that leads to it are bound up in the upheavals of these various

trends in general, rather than the dynamics of fraternal interaction in particular. The historic psychic trauma of black males resulting from chattel slavery and continued post-Civil War marginalization increases the toll of modern American society that often occasions painful dislocations economically, socially, and psychologically. This book seeks to examine and ground the hypothesis that it is in the societal realm, rather than the fraternal, that we can locate many of the realities that allow us to more completely understand violence among black men in BGFs.

**FALSEHOODS AND FAILURE:  
THE EPISTEMIC DOMINO EFFECT AND ETHICS IN GREEKDOM**

Though it is often ignored or misunderstood, inquiries such as this are ultimately concerned with the intersections of epistemological engagement and axiological shifts in cultures. Observers often attempt to separate these matters of the mind into distinct, disconnected entities. The reality, however, is that if one interrogates a culture's epistemic modes of inquiry while disregarding its conclusions concerning values and ethics, a critical link that can help explain behavior is lost. It must be clear that epistemology is not simply the authority by which one purports to base his or her knowledge. Certainly, the questions of What do I know? and How do I know it? are asked in epistemological inquiry, but the real power of the engagement does not end there. Once people draw conclusions about what they know and how they know it (whether the answers are right or wrong), they use this knowledge to construct, affirm, and reaffirm individual and group modes of behavior and traditions. Ultimately, these behaviors and traditions are based on, and subsequently help to create, ethical constructs.

Troubling questions rise out of this progression. What if the answers to the initial epistemic questions are wrong? What if an individual draws conclusions and inferences from skewed, flawed, or even outright false information? Beyond this, there exists the possibility that the formation of identities and the axiological foundations upon which they necessarily rest could be exposed to an identity domino effect. Such an effect occurs if inquiries and answers concerning the authoritative legitimacy of knowledge are not grounded in fact, but in fiction. Carried far enough and reified for long enough, not only do

the answers to questions become wrong, but the questions themselves become flawed.

If epistemological inquiry is necessarily related to the construction of ethical systems, then it may very well be mandatory that our study of the subject at hand be rooted in epistemological means with the purpose of influencing axiological and ideological ends. To be sure, our charge here is not only to encounter, know, and understand, but also to practically impact the behavior, politics, and power structures within the groups in question. Ultimately, difficult challenges must be presented and answers demanded. What is the purpose of BGFs in the modern age, when the black community continues to face overwhelming forces of negativity? It must be acknowledged that black Greeks have built a great historical legacy of placing powerful black men and women at the forefront of the black freedom struggle. The list of names is endless: from W. E. B. Du Bois to Martin Luther King Jr., from Jessie Jackson to Johnnie Cochran. If twenty-first-century black Greeks, however, lose sight of the fact that the community looks to them to behave with decency and integrity—the groups have lost their way.

We must understand that the mission and meaning of black Greekdom can only be respected and needed insofar as they speak to the mission and meaning of black life in general. Black Greeks' worth must ultimately be affirmed by the people they produce and the communities they serve. If some members of the community now hold them in disdain, there is a reason why. The perspective that many people (on campuses and in communities at large) have distanced themselves from Greekdom completely out of ignorance and jealousy simply does not hold under critical analysis. At some point, BGFs must not only address what they are doing right, but also what they are doing wrong. Such intellectual exchange, unfortunately, is largely emptied of its quality by a lack of direction and courage to speak to issues of import to BGFs and the larger community with strength, clarity, and purpose.

When engaging activities within BGFs, we must recognize the strong possibility that what members actually do today is largely a result of the manipulation of identity construction from within as well as from without. The end result of this manipulation is often the production of people who do what many consider to be wrong. This is simultaneously a simple and difficult admission. We would be hard pressed to find

someone who would not admit that the violence, damage, and death visited upon young men such as Joel Harris, Michael Davis, Shawn Blackston, and Robert Champion are wrong. Regardless of this fact, there is an almost immediate attempt by many Greeks to convolute the issue by shifting blame and refusing to take responsibility for their personal involvement in similar violent activities.

When crimes are committed in these organizations, a project almost totally dedicated to the maintenance of the fraternal structures is mobilized. These structures are often maintained through the use of blatant lies and the deception of other members, educational officials, and legal authorities. Often, this deceit is undertaken because of the ethical orientation of members largely borne of epistemic questions and answers provided during their own pledge periods. The ploys are often successful, not because they are well thought out or believable, but because many of the investigators either tacitly condone the actions of the Greeks (sympathetic fraternity officials) or seem to not really care whether groups of black men beat one another to death. The deceptions and those who allow them must be stopped. There is no room for neutrality on this point. Our bias, however, must be guided by care and concern for the preservation of life rather than degenerative judgment grounded in misunderstanding and contempt. Certainly, prejudice fueled by blind rage and folly is negative, but so is the ineffectual stance of the neutral observer in instances such as this. Stands must be taken, and this work is intended to be one.

Consequently, in the following pages I hope to move beyond simply condoning or condemning the BGF pledge process and the hazing that usually comes with it (though this volume certainly condemns it). I will endeavor to transcend the traditional questions as to whether hazing or pledging are morally right or wrong; whether they need to be eradicated or maintained; whether fraternities have outlived their usefulness or not. The thrust of this work is to question why the particular type of violence in BGFs exists, how it relates to the political situation of black males in America, and what can be done to counter it. As a consequence of this engagement, I hope fraternities, university officials, and individual members will revisit their approaches to hazing and their organizations in general.

This is, no doubt, a political project and process. When speaking to the “political” here, I am addressing the process by which any group

or community decides who gets what, when and how.<sup>9</sup> The political, therefore, moves quickly from its colloquial position of referring to electoral politics and distribution of material resources. It is, critically, the process by which not only the allocation of economic and material resources is determined, but it also dictates how different groups in a society see themselves and others and subsequently determines what is acceptable (and in some cases necessary), unacceptable, and even human. This inquiry into humanity is not limited to that which is considered human physically, but also culturally and psychologically.

The way in which this work adds to the body of philosophical, theoretical, and practical knowledge is that it seeks to help us understand a process among a group of men that may at times seem sociopathic and barbaric. My personal feelings about the endurance or demise of the pledge process notwithstanding, before policy can be influenced, a clear epistemological understanding of the true forces at work must be reached. Some may be disappointed that I do not have answers to all the questions posed in this work. Admittedly, no surefire solutions to solving the problem of BGF violence *and* preserving the organizations are offered in these pages. The sad reality is the ritual of hazing is probably too deep-seated in the groups to be halted—short of eradicating them. What this work does offer is a study that draws a distinct line between fact and the fantastic and gets at the root of the phenomenon by being very clear as to why this violence takes place.

There is no doubt that something is amiss here, but it is probably not some intrinsic evil found in black males. The need for perceived power, respect, and acceptance is more than likely the culprit. The quest for these social goods—borne of psychosocial anxieties—plays itself out in fraternities, but would (and does) manifest itself elsewhere if (and when) the fraternal vehicle were not present or accessible. BGF policies change, but behavior among many members and initiates remains constant, because of one simple fact—the fraternities do not produce potential initiates, society does. BGFs simply augment their madness. BGF national organizations continue in the struggle to identify and solve their problems from the wrong perspectives—practical (organizational hierarchies, dues structures, individual chapter and national chapter power relations, etc.) and individual-psychological (levels of active participation, personal approaches to the organizations bred by particular pledge processes, etc.)—rather than examining the

more telling relationship between sociopolitical systems and black male organizational and personal interactions and identities. As a corrective, this study takes a new approach to an old problem that has plagued BGFs for most of their existence.

My research here suggests that oppression is societal in that it is a reality that has been historically integrated into everyday American life through political, economic, and social means. This everydayness has, over time, desensitized us to the very real dehumanization that American structures have fostered where their African-descended citizens are concerned. Black Greek-letter fraternities have not been immune to the effects of this progression. We must, therefore, trace out the true links between the production and cultivation of the inhumane and its effect on black male identity and action—inside as well as outside of fraternities. The reasons for the failure of fraternal policy are multivariate, with the various causes reinforcing one another. Most of these causes are usually (if not always) societal—not individual—and it is there that we must search to change present fraternal realities into generative forces in modern black life.