

The Tale of John Kasper
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

When reading a biography of the Ezra Pound, one of the premier poets of the twentieth century, references to a man named John Kasper caught my eye.¹ According to Pound's biographer, in 1950 Kasper, a twenty-year-old Columbia University student, wrote Pound, who was living in Washington, D.C., an adulatory letter saying that he had just written a term paper that compared Pound favorably to the great German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Pound wrote back, and this began weekly correspondence between the two men. Kasper's letters to Pound are contained in the Yale and Indiana University libraries (evidently, Kasper didn't keep Pound's letters) and are characterized by Pound's biographer as "extraordinary."

After Columbia, Pound's biographer reports, Kasper opened a bookstore in the Greenwich Village area of New York City that stocked Pound's writing. Eventually Kasper moved from New York City to Washington, primarily motivated, it appears, by the desire to be around Pound, whom he greatly admired. Kasper and Pound became quite close, to the point that Kasper has been described as a protégé of Pound's. In any case, it seems clear that Kasper was strongly influenced by Pound's political and social ideas; Pound was a white racial advocate, which included antagonism toward Jews. Kasper started up a second bookstore in Washington and, with a partner, set up a publishing company that published some of Pound's poetry, as well as that of other poets, among them, Charles Olson.

Immediately following the 1954 Supreme Court decision in the Brown case outlawing racially segregated schools, Kasper organized the Seaboard White Citizens Council. The motto of Kasper's organization was "Honor-Pride-Fight: Save the White." Its avowed purpose was to prevent school integration in Washington. As it turned out, it wasn't in Washington that Kasper fought school integration but rather in Tennessee. Pound's biographer refers to the "dramatic events" in the town of Clinton, Tennessee around the integration of Clinton High School, and quotes an historian as saying that Kasper "had a large hand in the violence that plagued Tennessee in 1956 and 1957."

My curiosity was piqued. Who's this John Kasper? I asked myself? I'd been interested for the last decade in white racial consciousness and advocacy--which is what drew me to the Pound reading in the first place--but I'd never heard of John Kasper. Extraordinary letters? Dramatic events at Clinton High School? Violence in Tennessee in 1956 and '57? I knew about the trouble around the integration of Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957—in fact, I'd written about it—but I didn't know anything about what went on in Tennessee. The Pound biography referred to something Kasper had written called "Segregation or Death"—I'd never heard of it.

It hit me that, much less Kasper, I didn't know about any white racial activist who had traveled to the South to *oppose* desegregation. The only people I heard of went to the South in support of black civil rights—Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, who in 1964 were murdered in Mississippi, come to mind. Without really thinking about it, I just assumed that no Northerner would go to the South in support of segregation. Yet, evidently at least one person did, this John Kasper. That realization shook my basic sense of the history of those years that I had taken in from school and the media and held onto despite a good amount of experience and study this past decade that should have brought it into question: that the only people who opposed the black civil rights movement in the 1950s, desegregation of the schools included, were behind-the-times Southern locals.

I decided to look into this John Kasper and what went on in Tennessee back then. This is a report of what I've been able to find out and the meaning I've given it.²

Clinton High School, in Clinton, Tennessee, which is just outside Knoxville, was scheduled to open for the new school year on Monday, August 27th, 1956. The previous year, the Clinton school board had announced its intention to "comply with any and all court mandates." Clinton High would be one of the first schools to be desegregated following the Brown decision. Virtually all whites in Clinton were opposed to racial mixing in the school, but they were resigned to the fact that it was going to happen.

Saturday afternoon, August 25th, 26-year-old John Kasper arrived in town in his battered old car from his home in Washington, D.C. Kasper was tall and clean-cut and wore a suit and

tie. He immediately began buttonholing people on the street in town and going door to door handing out literature he'd put together on his organization, the Seaboard White Citizens Council—which I suspect was just him, really. He talked about what was going to happen on Monday at the high school and how it wasn't right and that the people in town shouldn't just passively go along with what had been imposed on them from afar. He said he was going to give a speech the next afternoon, Sunday, in front of the courthouse and invited people to attend and to tell their friends. That night, he slept in his car.

Sunday afternoon, a smattering of people showed up for Kasper's speech. He was dressed in his suit and tie and was well spoken. He told those in attendance that integration was a leftist plot and would undermine the white race. They needed to stop school integration in Clinton, Kasper said. "We're fighting, and you must fight with us." He told his audience "people are superior to courts" and urged them to picket the high school and he encouraged students to stay away from classes. A Clinton resident who was in the audience that day recalls, "What I remember most about him is that he was so dedicated, so sincere about a project that struck me as being hopeless."

Later that same day, Sunday, Clinton town officials met to decide what to do about Kasper. They tried to persuade him to leave town, and when that failed they had him arrested for vagrancy and inciting a riot and put in jail, where he spent the night.

Monday, the first day of school, with Kasper behind bars, a crowd of about fifty people gathered outside the high school to protest the enrollment of blacks for the first time. However, desegregation went off essentially without a hitch.

Tuesday, Kasper was tried and his case dismissed for want of evidence. He immediately went to the high school and told the principal to "run the Negroes off or resign." He distributed signs he had put together demanding the principal's resignation. He organized a picket line around the high school and recruited some white teenagers into what he called the Junior White Citizens Council. That night he gave a fiery speech to several hundred in the courthouse square.

Wednesday, a crowd of over 100 protesting whites—a mob, the media called them--gathered outside the high school. There were walkouts by white students, and white students chased and attacked

black students. Out of fear of the protestors, or mob, whatever to call it, a number of black students slipped out of the back door of the school.

That night, another Kasper speech. This time, the crowd was 1,000. His speech was interrupted by a federal marshal, who served him with a court order temporarily restraining him from interfering with school integration and notifying him that there would be a hearing the next day on a permanent injunction. Kasper went right back to his speech. A member of the audience that night recalls that when Kasper spoke to the crowd, “he had eyes like you’d never forget.”

Thursday, with Kasper tied up at the hearing--which turned out to be a trial, actually--a crowd of 300 milled around the high school and shouted epithets and hurled tomatoes and stones at black students as they entered and left the school. A judge found Kasper guilty of contempt of a court order—there was no jury. When the judge asked him if he had anything to say before sentencing, Kasper replied, “Stop the integration of Clinton High School.” The judge sentenced him to a year in prison. Before being taken off to jail, Kasper told the press, “Woe to those whose only right is their power. The wild grass will grow over their dead bodies.”

That night, the speeches were from representatives of the Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government, a white advocacy organization that had come to Clinton after hearing about what going on,. Now the crowd was 1,500.

Friday evening all hell broke loose. Asa (Ace) Carter, a white organizer and crowd-stirring orator who had come to town, gave a speech to the 2,000 in attendance attacking the Supreme Court, the NAACP, and the “carpetbagging judge” that had put Kasper in jail. The crowd began shouting “We want Kasper!” A “rioting mob,” as the media called them, marched to the mayor’s house—he was friendly to school integration--and threatened to dynamite it. Traffic was blocked on the major road running through Clinton and cars with blacks were stopped and tilted and windshields were smashed and air let out of tires. This went on until 1:00 a.m., with no arrests.

Saturday, September 1st, the Clinton board of alderman declared a state of emergency in Clinton. A 47-man auxiliary police force was formed and armed with shotguns and tear gas. The rally

that night—3,000 in attendance--was sponsored by five white organizations that had gotten involved when they found out what was going on: The Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government; the Pro-Southerners; the White Citizens Councils; the Tennessee Society to Maintain Segregation; and the States' Rights Council of Tennessee. The newly formed posse, as the news accounts called it, marched in line until it came face-to-face with the whites who had gathered that night and told the crowd to disperse. The whites didn't comply and there was a standoff. Three tear gas grenades exploded in the middle of the crowd, and it started to break up. Three more grenades got the job done.

The next day, Sunday, September 2nd, into Clinton came 633 battle-equipped National Guardsmen, along with seven M-41 tanks and three armored personnel carriers. The nightly rally was attempted again, but the crowd of 1,000 was dispersed by two platoons of guardsmen with fixed bayonets.

The week's remarkable events in Clinton drew worldwide media coverage. "Officers and school officials alike," the local newspaper reported, "blame most of the trouble on a 26-year-old Washington man named John Kasper."

On Monday, the commander of the National Guard, General Henry, ordered public address systems and outdoor public speaking prohibited in Clinton, and pretty much things cooled down in town for the next few days.

Thursday, a judge granted Kasper the right to bail and issued him a permanent injunction against any further interference with desegregation. Two Clinton citizens put up the \$10,000 bond and Kasper was released. A couple of weeks later he was back in jail briefly and released on another bond for a Tennessee state charge of sedition and inciting a riot, with the trial date set for November. The trial lasted two weeks. Kasper supporters packed the courtroom. On November 20th, amid cheers, Kasper was acquitted. On the courthouse steps, he announced he would continue his fight against school integration.

Kasper toured the South giving speeches. His message highlighted the dangers of miscegenation and included an anti-Jewish theme, as he declared the integration effort to be part of Jews' "fanatical effort to subvert existing Gentile order everywhere." He told a Birmingham, Alabama audience, "I'm a rabble-rouser, a trouble-maker. Some of us may die, I may die. I'm not through up

there [in Tennessee]. It may mean going back to jail, but I'm going back to fight. We went as far as we could legally. Now is the time to fight, even if it involves bloodshed." On another occasion, he declared, "I say that integration can be reversed. It has got to be a pressure like a stick of dynamite and you throw in their laps and let them catch it, and then they can do what they want with it, but let them worry about it."

Over the next year, Kasper was in and out of jails in Clinton, Nashville, and Knoxville. He was jailed for vagrancy, loitering, disorderly conduct, inciting a riot, and for "unlawful acts of trespass, boycott, picket, and interference with the free operation of the schools." "I'll never desert the white race in Tennessee until the outcome of our struggle is crystal clear and spells victory over the race mongrelizers," he declared. "I have been interested all my life in the purity of the races. I do not hate Negroes, but I believe that for the progress of the white and Negro races this is best accomplished by segregated institutions."

Shortly after midnight on the opening day of school on September 10th, 1957, a dynamite blast demolished a wing of a newly integrated elementary school in Nashville. Kasper, who had talked of "the shotgun, dynamite, and rope," was suspected of the crime, but no evidence linking him, or anyone else, to the bombing was ever found. He was also a suspect in a series of synagogue bombings in the South, but was not charged in those crimes.

Late in 1957 Kasper was convicted of the federal charge of conspiracy and spent eight months in federal prisons in Florida and Georgia. Kasper referred to himself as a "political prisoner" and said that his federal imprisonment had been the result of "jewishpaper lies." At a "welcome out" party when released from the penitentiary in Atlanta, he declared that both the Republicans and Democrats were committed to integration and the destruction of the white race, and that the country needed a third party. "The answer to the integration problem," he asserted, "lies in a return to Constitutionalism." He then went to Nashville for a trial on riot agitation in that city, for which he spent six months in the workhouse.

As for Clinton, there were sporadic demonstrations and protests—including a return visit and speech from Kasper—and random violence. The Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government tried to halt desegregation in Clinton by state court injunction. However, the Tennessee State Supreme Court ruled

against that petition, declaring “the question is fully foreclosed by the United States Supreme Court.” Early on a Sunday morning in April of 1959, three dynamite blasts reduced Clinton High School to rubble. No one was hurt due to the timing of the blast, and the perpetrators were never apprehended.

The media coverage throughout this period painted a very negative picture of Kasper and the cause he represented. An example, a 1957 *Time* magazine article defined the issue involving Kasper as “racist passion on the one hand and appeal to law and order on the other.” It depicted Kasper as an “interloper,” “meddling,” “a preening cock,” “an emotional idiot,” and a “screwball,” and the article trafficked in the rumor that when he lived in New York he “kept company with a Negro girl” in order to discredit him.³ A recent Knoxville newspaper account looking back on the events in Clinton refers to Kasper’s physical appearance as “rodent-like.” I was struck by that characterization because it was reminiscent of something that I had just read in a biography of ballet impresario Lincoln Kirstein. In 1965, Kirstein, a New Yorker, traveled to Selma, Alabama to participate in the black grievance march from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery. Kirstein was quoted as describing disapproving whites along the march route as “rat-faced” (not far from “rodent-like”), as well as “snake-faced,” “fox-faced,” and “pig-faced.”

In 1964, Kasper was on the ballot as the presidential candidate of the National States Rights Party. He ran unsuccessfully for state representative in Tennessee. I wasn’t able to find out much about what happened to him from there on, and nothing I feel any degree of certainty about. I think he lived in Nashville until 1967 and then moved back up North and dropped out of public activity. He married and had children and worked a series of office jobs. Social security records indicate that he died in 1998 at the age of 68.

It took some doing, but I was able to find the writing that was mentioned in the Pound biography, “Segregation or Death.” It was an article by Kasper in the May 1957 *Virginia Spectator* magazine. It was part of a “Jim Crow” theme issue that was moderated by the novelist William Faulkner. Around this same time, Kasper produced a pamphlet with this same title and material for his Seaboard White Citizens Council that I was also able to obtain. Excerpts from the article:

Any man who fails to distinguish between this thing and that thing may be called ignorant and lacking in reverence. Distinctions come from awareness; they come from respect for intelligence and the process of intelligence.

Only an imbecile or a liar will deny the validity of race, the separate and distinct races of mankind.

He who denies race also denies the important qualities of individuals, as both race and individuality are qualities of the blood, not language, environment, or common living space. Both individuals and race are products of Nature. He who denies race denies the power of intelligence, imagination, and creative power in the individual; perhaps most important: individual courage.

We affirm that all movement in history, the historical process, results from race and personal character. In the flow and surge of mankind there is only the inborn natures of men, and the devotion that they give to the inborn nature. War, economic struggle, art, and benevolent thought are only expressions of the inborn nature of man.

The penalty exacted by Nature for ignoring abundant life and continuing generations, carefully delineated along fixed geographical and racial limits, is eventual sterility, physical weakness and sloth, and finally effacement from life's intricate patterns.

While denying race in one breath, the race fanatics are helping themselves to the loot and bounty of the thousand-year-old civilizations of all races and nationalities to benefit exclusively their own race, the Jewish.

We will not yield segregation as the only known means, proven by all historical evidence, for keeping blood-lines pure, races vital, individuals self-respecting, and diverse people living in mutual harmony and understanding. We will not fail in this struggle, even in death.

During that tumultuous first week in Clinton, one of the speakers at an evening rally that Kasper couldn't attend because he was in jail

was retired admiral John Crommelin, who had traveled from Alabama to be there. “You may not see it,” Crommelin told the crowd, “but someday a statue will be erected on this courthouse lawn to John Kasper.” Of course, no statue of John Kasper has been erected in Clinton or anywhere else. Kasper was vilified and punished at the time, and then discarded down the memory hole of history—very few in our time know about him and what he did over a half century ago. As we conventionally look at things, the person the audience listening to Kasper’s speech that first night in Clinton was right: his cause was hopeless, and he failed. John Kasper was no match for the government and the military and the media. Clinton High school was desegregated, as were the other schools in East Tennessee. The vast majority of people think that was a good thing, and those who know about him think that John Kasper was a misguided and foolish and bad man. I’ll let readers of this writing make that own call about that. What I’ll offer here is that, whatever the merits of Kasper’s outlook and actions, he was in significant ways an admirable man in those years. And even more fundamentally, in those years John Kasper was a man, period—John Kasper was a man.

John Kasper put himself out there, he acted, he took risks, and that’s admirable. Ezra Pound said about Kasper, “Well, at least he’s a man of action, and doesn’t sit around looking at his navel.” Just twenty-six years old, John Kasper packed his suit and the literature he had printed up and got in his car and drove alone to Clinton, Tennessee. He could have stayed home, but he didn’t stay home.

I define integrity as living in alignment with your most cherished beliefs and engaging what you consider to be the most important things. John Kasper had integrity.

To me, courage is doing what is right whatever the consequences and in spite of apprehension and fear. Kasper had to know that he was going to get attacked hard for what he was about to do, and he did get attacked hard, and he had to be scared, and yet he went forward anyway. John Kasper had courage.

The French writer, Albert Camus, wrote about the Greek myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus rolled a large rock toward the top of a mountain only to have it fall back down the mountain--he didn’t get the rock to the top, he didn’t succeed. Sisyphus rolled the rock back up the mountain, and it rolled back down again. And he rolled it back up the mountain. . . and again . . . and again . . . and again . . .

and again. Camus saw the Sisyphus myth as symbolic of the absurdity and futility of our lives. I'll put it in a more positive light.

One way to look at the Sisyphus myth is as a metaphor for our existential challenge as human beings: what makes us human, what makes us a man (and of course I'm talking about both men and women), is to roll the rock—the right things, the most important things—up the mountain even if we never get it to the top. And indeed we may never get it to the top. We are not omnipotent. Circumstances are often bigger than we are. And sometimes there are few who will help us, and sometimes no one will help us. But still, we can still keep rolling the rock as long as we can. That's what makes us a man. John Kasper was a man.

So important to us personally, even if we can't roll the rock to the top, and no matter what happens to us while we try, rolling our particular rock—everybody's rock isn't the same—is the way to achieve happiness in the sense of a pervasive satisfaction with one's life. As Camus put it, "The struggle itself is enough to fill man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." As difficult and debilitating as I'm sure those years were for Kasper, I speculate that, deep down, they were also years of personal gratification for him, even peace. It perhaps got to the point where he just couldn't go on any longer—we all have limits--but still, I'll bet that, amid it all, he was basically happy while it was happening.

I'm taken by the last sentence in the excerpts from Kasper's writing in "Segregation or Death" that I quoted above: "We will not fail in this struggle, even in death." He used the word "we"—to him, this wasn't just his struggle. And when he talked about being successful "even in death," I took that to mean that he viewed the struggle he had taken on as not ending when he was worn out or ground down--with his spiritual death--or with his literal death. Others would follow him, and still others would follow them. The struggle for the existence and wellbeing of white people was, in Kasper's eyes, an historical struggle, a struggle for the ages. What he was doing was what he could while he had the gift of life and the wherewithal to keep rolling the rock.

On May and June, 2007, whites gathered in Knoxville to protest the savage rape, mutilation, and murder of two young white people by blacks and the media's underreporting of this particular crime and the extent of black-on-white violent crime generally. The Knoxville rallies took place just a few miles from the events in

Clinton over a half-century ago. One of the Knoxville protestors at the May rally carried a sign that said “Diversity=Death,” which reminded me of “Segregation or Death.” I wondered how many people gathered in Knoxville those days knew about what had taken place nearby those many years ago, or about John Kasper, who had died nine years before.

From every source, insistent messages come through to white people who care about the fate of their race: “History isn’t about you.” “You are an anomaly.” “Nothing preceded you and nothing will follow you.” “Everything you care about has been resolved; keep quiet and get with the program.” But none of that is valid, and knowing about Kasper, and others like him, will show that. The protestors in Knoxville entered history in 2007, just as John Kasper entered history in his time. The Knoxville protestors weren’t anomalies: others of their kind had preceded them, and others of their kind will follow them. And as a matter of fact, everything hasn’t been resolved, and racially conscious whites are not going to keep quiet, and they are not going to go along with the program. And they won’t fail, even in death.

Notes

1. E. Fuller Torrey, *The Roots of Treason: Ezra Pound and the Secrets of St. Elizabeths* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984).
2. Two major sources of the account that follows: Benjamin Muse, *Ten Years of Prelude: The Story of Integration Since the Supreme Court’s 1954 Decision* (New York: Viking Press, 1964); and Jack Neely, “The Poet, the Bookseller, and the Clinton Riots,” *Metro Pulse* (a Knoxville, Tennessee weekly newspaper), month and day uncertain, 2006.
3. “Victory for Little Bob,” *Time*, August 25, 1957.
4. John Kasper, “Segregation or Death,” *Virginia Spectator*, May 1957.

Robert S. Griffin’s latest book is *Living White: Writings on Race, 2000-2005*. His web site is www.robertsgriffin.com.