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After the Firebombing: A Letter from Hillsborough, NC

Dorothy Potter Snyder — November 8, 2016



Scorched yard signs from the GOP headquarters in Hillsborough, NC. Photo credit: Dorothy Potter Snyder

A two-legged plaster elephant curls its trunk outside the smoke-damaged office of the Orange County GOP headquarters in Hillsborough, North Carolina, as if to avoid the acrid smell of wet ash and melted plastic from a trailer-full of scorched political signs.

When the GOP office was firebombed in the early hours of Sunday, October 16, 2016, FBI and ATF descended on Hillsborough. We are known mostly for our many famous writers and for being one of [America's "coolest" small towns](#). "I don't think this represents the Democrats or really anybody in this county" [said Mayor Tom Stevens](#). The mayor flies both the United States and Rainbow flags from his office, also an art gallery where his own landscapes and figure studies are on permanent display.

Was the firebombing partisan violence? Who knows. On the same night, the Democratic headquarters in Carrboro was [vandalized with graffiti](#) too.

Within hours of the news, a group of out-of-state Democrats raised [nearly thirteen thousand dollars](#) on a GoFundMe site to restore the office. The initial goal of 10k was reached and surpassed in 40 minutes. Two GOP-inspired websites set up later collected few to no donations. Democrats near and far condemned the burning, and, by raising money for the Orange County GOP, sent the message that Democrats value community over politics in a state that could go blue on Tuesday.

When they go low we go high. But who are “they”?

In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Darth Vader goads Luke Skywalker: “Release your anger. Only your hatred can destroy me.” But Democrats refuse to release their anger at Republicans in progressive Hillsborough, despite HB2, known nationwide as “the bathroom bill.” Despite a lot of things, actually. But what if hate, not love, is what the southern GOP really *wants*? What if violence and fire bombings is what they need to prove their apocalyptic version of reality? What if the growing artsy, queer, gay, moneyed, organic love-fest of modern southern progressivism denies them the clash of civilizations they crave? Might they go so far as to firebomb their own HQ?

Some people around Hillsborough think so.

I visit the new Orange County GOP office as a young man affixes a security camera to the wall. A wooden box with the sign “donations welcome” is covered in carefully-preserved soot and sits on a putty-colored folding table at the entrance. I say hello. Eyes are wary, smiles strained. They’re keeping the box as a reminder, says a stout man sitting at the table.

They kept the American flag that was burned, too. “Aren’t you supposed to burn damaged flags?” I ask. He looks uncomfortable, and the three women standing nearby are silent, watching. “There’s a lot of hate out there”, he says instead of answering my question. But what about the outpouring of concern and donations? “Hey,” he asks an older woman with a tight cap of white hair and clear blue eyes that are fixed on me as if I might steal something. “Did we ever get that Democrat money?” “Don’t know,” she says. (According to [a recent update on the GoFundMe site](#) the fundraisers are working with a pro bono attorney to navigate the complex laws regarding donations to political parties.)

Questions about the Hillsborough firebombing linger like the stink of a burnt Barcalounger. Like who did it. Like why the police and the property owners were let into the venue less than an hour after the police tape went up, contaminating the crime scene. Like how the fire managed to “self-extinguish” when a couch was aflame and the old wood building dry as tinder. Like the graffiti spray-painted on the wall of an adjacent building: a swastika and “Nazi Republicans leave town or else” that felt somehow like someone trying to imitate hate speech instead of the real thing. A lot of folks in town think it was a false flag, [an inside job](#), some GOP renegade trying to support the Trump narrative of a “rigged election.” After all, in 1965, the KKK was still burning crosses on the courthouse lawn to protest desegregation, and this past April someone incinerated the gay pride flags outside the United Church of Christ. So while social conservatives around these parts have proven themselves to be handy with a match, fire’s never been the preferred form of expression for progressives around here.

Nor has bombing been typical of Hillsborough. Dave Rutter, 68, a musician with an Americana group called the Pagan Hellcats, was outside Cup A Joe, King Street’s coffee shop, with members of his band. He wondered aloud whether Trump supporters had carried out the attack in an effort to earn sympathy for Republicans. “This is weird,” he [told the New York Times](#). “We have no history of any kind of violence.” Ten yards away, at Carolina Game and Fish, theories that Trump activists are responsible prompted a few snorts of incredulity. “If it was a false flag thing, why would they do it in Orange County?” asked Michael Tulloch, 67, a retired drug abuse counselor who said he had been planning to vote for Donald Trump until the candidate’s recent fumbling of sexual assault allegations. “Most of the people in this area didn’t even know where the Republican headquarters was at,” Tulloch said.

But it’s hard not to think that the firebombing was something more complicated than partisan violence. This morning, I awoke to news that GOP incumbent Richard Burr, now in a tight U.S. Senate race with Democrat Deborah Ross, is apologizing for saying that he was surprised that there wasn’t a bullseye on the photo of Hillary Clinton that’s on the November cover of *American Rifleman*. Like the fire, Burr’s apology feels about as genuine as that two-legged elephant.

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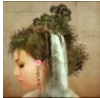
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