

Written Testimony of Hank Klibanoff
Nominated for the Civil Rights Cold Case Records Collection Act Review Board
Confirmation Hearing before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Committee
January 13, 2022

Chairman Peters, Ranking Member Portman and members of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee:

My name is Hank Klibanoff, and I direct the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University in Atlanta, where I am a professor of practice. I also teach nonfiction writing and ethics in the Creative Writing Program. I'm in my 11th year teaching after 36 years as a newspaper reporter and/or editor in Mississippi, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago and the Midwest, and Atlanta.

I was born and raised in Alabama, attended public schools there through high school, then went to college and graduate school in the Midwest.

In my family, which came to America from Eastern Europe on both my paternal and maternal sides between 1905 and 1910, personal and professional recognition doesn't get bigger than this: a presidential nomination.

And now, this opportunity to have that nomination vetted and, I hope, validated by this committee and by the entire United States Senate. You have my deepest appreciation.

I'm sorry that my parents and grandparents are not alive to be part of this. For my dad, who took over his father's family shoe store on one side of Court Street in Florence, Alabama, and a ladies clothing and shoe store on the other side, a day worth remembering was when Sen. John Sparkman or, later, Sen. Howell Heflin, casually walked in, said, "Hiya Morris," and chatted with him as a friend for 15 or 20 minutes. The conversations, no doubt, were about families, the economy, the Small Business Administration, the Tennessee Valley Authority, which was our Muscle Shoals region's lifeblood, or the draft, because my dad was chairman of the local Selective Service Board. If we five children weren't lucky enough to be inside the store and meet these august gentlemen ourselves, we'd hear about it over dinner.

I was in the Senate gallery the day Sen. Doug Jones introduced the bill that created this records review board. Sen. Ted Cruz was presiding and listening as Sen. Jones spoke. If I have my history right, as Sen. Jones was leaving the well, Sen. Cruz stopped him to say he wanted to join as lead Republican sponsor. That was the turning point that propelled the bipartisan legislation that led to creation of this nonpartisan board.

I hope it is long remembered that these two lawmakers from opposite ends of the political spectrum joined forces to do the right and rational thing for the families of victims of racial injustice.

This law you passed and President Trump signed will expand, accelerate and ease access to government-held records about racially motivated killings in the South. At this stage, there are probably few living perpetrators of these racially-motivated murders from the 1940s, 50s, 60s. So while we're not likely to see many opportunities for criminal judgments, we may well see more opportunities for the judgment of history as these records become available. And we may see more opportunities for racial peacemaking among families of perpetrators and victims.

I have seen with my own eyes and felt in my own heart the extraordinary good that can come when families of those who were killed sit down with a couple of hundred pages of government records and unlock decades of mysteries, myths and misunderstandings. I hope to have an opportunity to share a couple of those extraordinary moments with you later.

The law, I believe, is clear and simple about what we are to do. We are not scripting new policies or solving whatever crimes are disclosed in those records. We are here to review and free up the government-held records that may hold clues and to make them available to families of victims, among others, who may not even know the records exist in a government file cabinet.

We don't know how many people were lost to racially motivated killings in all those years of the modern civil rights struggle. But we know that more than lives were lost, because each killing destroyed more than a life. The removal of a father or mother or grandparent often meant the erasure of all memory of a family's entire history. We have an opportunity to provide the records that can enable families to fill in some of those gaps, and give them the wholeness of history they've not had for decades.

There are and will always been hidden complexities we don't anticipate. I believe our task is to navigate those situations sensibly, with open minds and sound judgement, and, in doing so, to fulfill the noble mission you have set forth for us. I humbly and respectfully ask for your support in approving my nomination and moving this mission forward.