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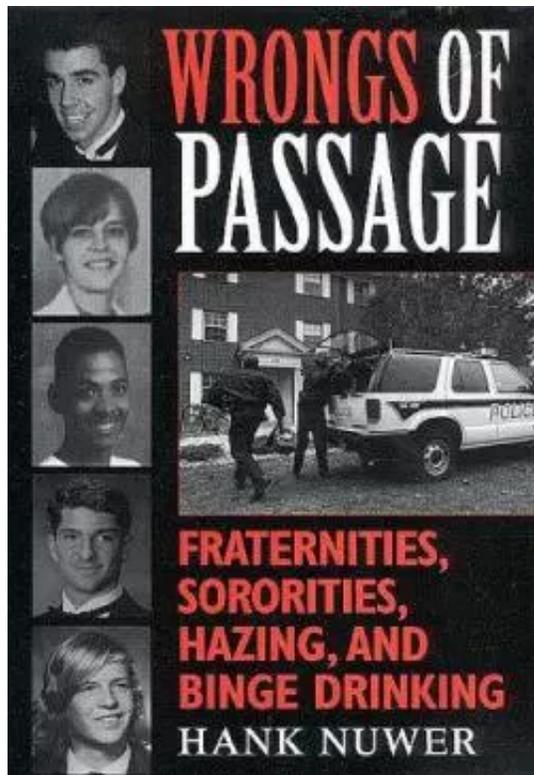
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# The List: The Death of Robert Champion

MAY 7, 2012

by Donelson Forsyth



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The list grows ever longer: Names like Harry Lew, Chucky Stenzel, Chad Saucier, Gabe Higgins, Donna Bedinger, J. B. Joynt...and now Robert Champion. It's the list of people killed by hazing. Champion died of "blunt force trauma" that occurred during the FAMU marching band's "Crossing Bus C" ritual, when his classmates punched and slapped him as he walked down the aisle of the band bus. He suffered so many injuries, inflicted by so many hands, that prosecutors charged 11 members of the band with **felony hazing**.

Hazing should never happen, but it does. Hank Nuwer's *Wrongs of Passage* documents in excruciating detail the way fraternity pledges at some

universities are ritually beaten, ridiculed, harassed, and coerced into abusing alcohol and drugs. New members of sports teams are subjected to physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. The recent suicide of Marine Lance Corporal Harry Lew has been linked to hazing. Marching bands, clubs, schools, businesses, even churches: they psychologically and physically harm their newest members.

Hazing is an entrenched group practice, and has been documented in ancient and modern societies and in all parts of the world. It's a remnant of the modern-day group's origins in the primal horde, designed to humble newcomers, remind them of their lowly status, and teach them to respect the group's chain of command and traditions. Hazing legitimizes the abuse of power by group leaders, who claim the practice will unify the group, weed out the weak and uncommitted, and give newcomers a chance to prove their worth (**Cimino, 2011**).

But hazing is the wrong way to achieve any of these outcomes. Research in social psychology, including the classic study conducted by Elliott Aronson and Jud Mills in the 1950s, suggests that individuals rate

positively groups which cause them to suffer, but other research indicates people like groups that support and reward them even more (Lodewijckx, van Zomeren, & Syroit, 2005). When Raalte, Cornelius, Linder, and Brewer (2007) examined the effects of two type of initiations—ones that involved group outings, swearing an oath, performing in skits, and doing community service and ones that involved kidnapping and abandonment, verbal abuse, physical punishment (spankings, whippings, and beatings), degradation and humiliation, sleep deprivation, alcohol abuse, running errands, and exclusion—they discovered the positive forms increased group unity. The negative forms backfired, creating tension and disunity in the group.



Yet hazing marches on, in part because it so psychologically compelling. Most who haze know that intentionally harming others is wrong. But hazing is sanctioned by the traditions of the group, so it is transformed into a sacred duty. If hazing was called by its correct names—torture and bullying—people

might be more reluctant to carry on the grand tradition. Those who are hazed are part of the paradox as well, for they seem to be willing victims who embrace their own abuse. But even the participants in Stanley Milgram's (1963) famous study of obedience misunderstood the cause of their own actions—they did not realize the power of a situation that so few of them could resist. Like Milgram's subjects, victims of hazing are enmeshed in a group that severely limits their capacity to act of their own free will. A [New York Times article](#) discussing the tragic hazing of Robert Champion quoted a former band member as saying “much of the hazing is voluntary.” It is voluntary in the sense that Milgram's subjects freely agreed to shock another person to death.

Lone individuals are capable of doing great harm to others. People like Timothy McVeigh, Seung Huo Cho, Ted Bundy, James Earl Ray, Ted Kaczynski, David Berkowitz (the “son of Sam”) are the source of much of the world's evil. But if you discover harm that is truly senseless, inhumane, and massive in scale, you will likely find a group is to blame. Hazing is a violent, aggressive action; a morally repugnant form of torture and extreme bullying. Hazing is unlawful in many jurisdictions; people who have been hazed are victims of a crime. Hazing is dangerous and often lethal; each year young people are killed or seriously injured in hazing incidents. And hazing does not even yield the effects that it was introduced to generate. When groups identify shared goals, find ways to

improve their performance, and identify sources of conflict, they become more cohesive. When they victimize their newest members, they irreparably undermine the group's unity. Hazing is one form of group behavior that we no longer need.

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