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Ku Klux Klan - History

Birth of the Klan

Six college students founded the Ku Klux Klan between December 1865 and the summer of 1866 in the town of Pulaski, Tennessee. Former Confederate officers, the six young men organized as a social club or fraternity and spent their time in horseplay of various types, including wearing disguises and galloping about town after dark. They were surprised to learn that their nightly appearances were causing fear, particularly among former slaves in the area. They quickly took advantage of this effect and the group began a rapid expansion. Various factions formed in different towns, which led to a meeting in April 1867 to codify rules and organizational structure.

At this meeting, former Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest was elected Grand Wizard, or supreme leader, of all the Klan. The organization was divided into a number of realms, dominions, provinces and dens, which were in turn led by Grand Dragons, Titans, Giants and Cyclopes.



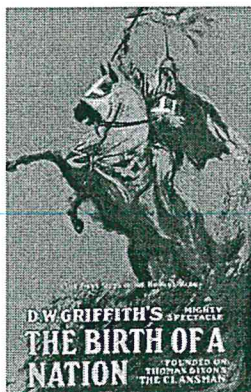
Nathan Bedford Forrest

The policies of Reconstruction -- aiming to extend the rights of Southern blacks -- had the unintended effect of pushing hundreds of resentful and anxious veterans into the Klan, which soon began instituting a systematic policy of violence in opposition to the new social order. Former slaves were the obvious target of this terrorism, but the Klan also harassed, intimidated and even killed Northern teachers, judges, politicians and "carpetbaggers" of all ilk. By late 1867, the movement had spread throughout the small towns of the South, though it did not take hold in urban areas, perhaps because at that time the cities were not suffering the economic hardships of rural regions. Klansmen began waging guerilla warfare against what they perceived as a corrupt system depriving them of rights. This feeling of grievance, which began during the time of the first Klan, would characterize Klan sensibility and ideology throughout the 20th century.

By 1869, internal strife led Klansmen to fight against Klansmen as competing factions struggled for control. The Klan's increasing reputation for violence led the more prominent citizens to drop out and criminals and the dispossessed began to fill the ranks. Local chapters proved difficult, if not impossible, to monitor and direct. In disgust, Forrest officially disbanded the organization and the vast majority of local groups followed his lead. Some number of local units continued to operate but were eventually disbanded or sent into hiding by federal troops.

The First Klan Revival

In 1915, William J. Simmons, a lifelong joiner of clubs, was inspired to reorganize the Ku Klux Klan after seeing the movie "Birth Of A Nation," D.W. Griffith's spectacular account of Reconstruction, told from the perspective of the Klan and adopting the group's mythic vision of a noble and pristine antebellum South (the movie's loathing of blacks is extraordinary to a modern eye and was highly controversial even at the time; President Woodrow Wilson captured the sensation of the film's release -- even as he validated its message -- when he famously declared that the movie was "like writing history with lightning."). Dissatisfied with the many fraternal organizations of which he was a member (or by his lack of control over those groups), Simmons sought to establish his own organization dedicated to "comprehensive Americanism." When "Birth of a Nation" opened in Atlanta, he ran an advertisement for the Klan next to the movie's ad in the Atlanta newspaper.



The timing was perfect. The United States was struggling to meet the challenges imposed by a massive influx of immigrants, many of whom were Catholic or Jewish and few of whom spoke English. Appealing to the middle class and claiming to be a "purely benevolent" club, the Klan drew members immediately. When the United States finally entered World War I, the group capitalized on the conflict by promising to defend the home front against "alien enemies, slackers, idlers, strike leaders and immoral women," as well as African Americans, Catholics and Jews.

Simmons hired publicists Edward Young Clarke and Elizabeth Tyler to help advertise and recruit in 1920, and in the ardently xenophobic atmosphere of post-World War I America Klan membership soared. Becoming more strident, the group now articulated opposition to "Ni--ers, Catholics, Jews...dope, bootlegging, graft, night clubs and

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road houses, violation of the Sabbath, unfair business dealings, sex and scandalous behavior." By 1921, the Klan numbered almost 100,000 members and money flooded its coffers. At its peak in 1924, 40,000 uniformed Klansmen paraded through the streets of Washington, D.C., during the Democratic National Convention. Like a modern political lobby, the group was so influential that many politicians felt compelled to court it or even to join, particularly in the Midwestern states. Senators, congressmen, governors, judges at all levels, even future President Harry Truman donned the hood and robe (though Truman shortly quit, apparently disgusted by an anti-Catholic tirade).

As the Klan grew, so did the number and intensity of violent acts committed by its members. The group's image suffered; the hypocrisy of a self-proclaimed "law and order" organization that utilized lynchings and vigilantism did not escape public censure. Additionally, the central leadership proved incapable of effectively controlling the organization's fringes, largely due to their own infighting and competition over the enormous revenue the organization was generating. Scandal followed scandal and the rank-and-file became alienated by the sexual and alcoholic exploits of its leaders. By the outbreak of the Great Depression in 1929, the Klan had fragmented into dozens of independent realms and membership plummeted.

World War II to the 1970s

Prewar alliances with organizations like the German Bund led to desertions from the ranks and the post-World War II era of unprecedented prosperity further dissipated interest in and support for the Klan. The last of the universally recognized Imperial Wizards, Dr. Samuel Green, died in 1949.



Several leaders throughout the 1950s and 1960s attempted to reunify the movement, but none were successful. Most Klaverns (local units) remained stubbornly independent, although the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s encouraged some unification into independent realms of varying sizes. Outrage over the rising fortunes of African Americans and the perceived inaction or even cooperation of whites led to an increase in

membership. At the same time, American society seemed consciously to turn against the Klan during this period as never before. This shift was most clearly reflected in the new commitment by the F.B.I. and other law enforcement agencies, both local and federal, to monitor, infiltrate and disrupt the Klaverns.

The 1970s to early 2000s

Fragmentation, decentralization and decline characterized the Klan during this time period, though there was a brief Klan revival in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Many of the Klaverns remained at least nominally independent, although a few were attached to national organizations. These national Klans, which were a pale shadow of the organization's former self, included the American Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, the Knights of the White Kamelia and the Imperial Klans of America. Taking a cue from David Duke, former Imperial Wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1970s, many attempted to "mainstream" their image by using euphemisms instead of racial epithets, talking of pride in their "heritage" rather than hatred of other groups and participating in state-run good-citizenship initiatives, like "adopt a highway" cleanup programs. At the same time, other Klan groups adopted camouflage uniforms and paramilitary activities.

Many Klan groups also adopted Christian Identity beliefs. They feared the "New World Order," believed Jews and liberals were attempting to outlaw their religious practices, and considered gays and other "deviants" to be forcing their lifestyles into the mainstream. Although many Klansmen received food stamps and other forms of government assistance, they continually raged at African Americans who received "welfare" and accused them of "sucking the blood out of hard-working real Americans."

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Klan groups increasingly aimed their racist invective at immigrants, particularly Hispanics, who were settling in a number of American cities for the first time in the history of those cities. The anti-immigration theme once again became a major issue used by the Klan to both recruit new members and attract publicity.

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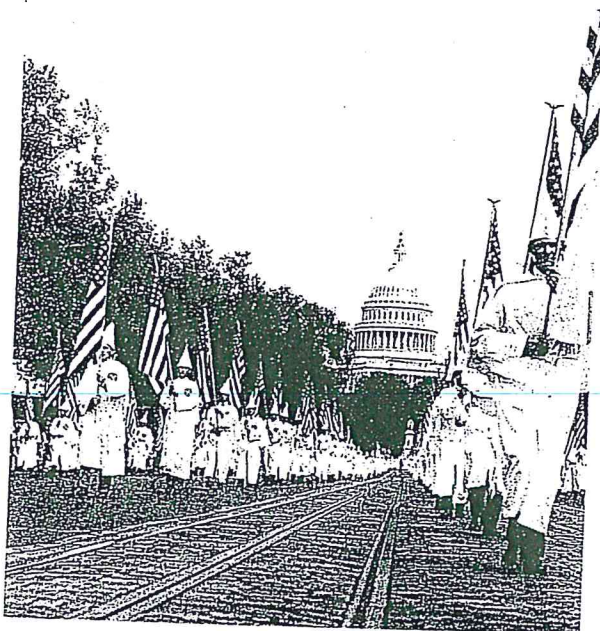
Hooded Hoodlums of the KKK

A new Ku Klux Klan, spawned by the postwar reaction, mushroomed fearsomely in the early 1920s. Despite the familiar sheets and hoods, it more closely resembled the antiforeign "nativist"

movements of the 1850s than the antiblack night riders of the 1860s. It was antforeign, anti-Catholic, antiblack, anti-Jewish, antipacifist, anti-Communist, anti-internationalist, antievolutionist, antibootlegger, antigambling, antiadultery, and anti-birth control. It was also pro-Anglo Saxon, pro-"native" American, and pro-Protestant. In short, the besheeted Klan betokened an extremist, ultraconservative uprising against many of the forces of diversity and modernity that were transforming American culture.

As reconstituted, the Klan spread with astonishing rapidity, especially in the Midwest and the "Bible Belt" South. At its peak in the mid-1920s, it enrolled about 5 million dues-paying members and wielded potent political influence. It capitalized on the typically American love of excitement, adventure, and joining, to say nothing of the adolescent ardor for secret ritual. "Knights of the Invisible Empire" included among their officials Imperial Wizards, Grand Goblins, King Kleagles, and other horrendous "kreatures." The most impressive displays were "konclaves" and huge flag-waving parades. The chief warning was the burning of the fiery cross. The principal weapon was the lash, supplemented by tar and feathers. Ral-

KKK Parade of 40,000 Men in Washington, 1925
(UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos.)



lying songs were "The Fiery Cross on High," "One Hundred Percent American," and "The Ku Klux Klan and the Pope" (against kissing the Pope's toe). One brutal slogan was "Kill the Kikes, Koons, and Catholics."

This reign of hooded horror, so repulsive to the best American ideals, collapsed rather suddenly in the late 1920s. Decent people at last recoiled from the orgy of ribboned flesh and terrorism, while scandalous embezzling by Klan officials launched a congressional investigation. The bubble was punctured when the movement was exposed, not as a crusade, but as a vicious racket based on a ten-dollar initiation fee. At bottom, the KKK was an alarming manifestation of the intolerance and prejudice so common in the anxiety-plagued minds of the 1920s. America needed no such cowardly apostles, whose white sheets concealed dark purposes.

The American Pageant (1999)

Qs

- What is the KKK?
- When, where & why did it first develop?
- Why did it experience a resurgence in the 1920s?