

Origins of the Ku Klux Klan and its significance

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The Ku Klux Klan is America's most infamous and historic white supremacist organization. Founded as an obscure Confederate organization for southern veterans of the Civil War, the Klan grew quickly in the aftermath of a war which took the lives of more than 633,000 people. At the time of its founding in 1866, virtually no one in the United States even heard of this organization. Yet by 1868, nearly all Americans learned of it. The Klan terrorized former slaves, raped women and attacked anyone too closely associated with the Republican Party and its political allies. They demanded that whites alone should govern the United States in general, and southern states in particular. The Ku Klux Klan even became the most powerful political force in some states for awhile. Later it emerged in northern regions during the 1920s. They joined with other white nationalist groups in opposing immigration, opposing the Catholic Church, opposing equality for African Americans, and opposing modern values being taught in schools. What explains the rise of such an organization? How did it become so popular? What eventually drove people away from the Klan, making it a small and obscure grouping of organizations in the United States? This essay will examine these questions.

The Civil War was no easy time for Americans. Beginning in December 1860 and continuing until 1861, eleven states decided to secede from the nation because they bitterly resented the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in November 1860. South Carolina was the first to go. After the New Year celebrations, additional states quickly followed. Mississippi, Florida, and Alabama all withdrew from the Union within a week in January. Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas decided to leave shortly thereafter. Altogether, eleven states formed the Confederate States of America. They selected Jefferson Davis, slave owning Mississippian, as their president. Alexander Stephens, an avowed white supremacist, was chosen as vice-president. Executive departments, a Confederate Congress, and a Confederate Supreme Court were created. Montgomery, Alabama, became the new nation's first capital. Following the secession of Virginia, the capital was moved to Richmond as a way to gain stature to the Confederacy. Virginia, after all, was the home of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. All three owned slaves.

All three believed in states' rights. Confederate leaders hoped that such a move would encourage European nations to recognize the new nation as a perfectly legitimate one.

Abraham Lincoln disagreed. Upon assuming the presidency on March 4, 1861, Lincoln announced that volunteers were needed to restore the Union. He believed that the Confederacy lacked legitimacy because southerners were amply represented in the Congress. He also believed that secession would endanger the Union and that the United States without the south would prove unsustainable. Southerners, aware of Lincoln's position, ordered their military forces to attack Fort Sumter, a Union stronghold, off the coast of South Carolina. The bloodiest war for Americans had begun.

Initially, Lincoln resisted efforts to end slavery. As a presidential candidate, he had promised to limit the expansion of slavery, not to end it. Yet his position changed after the war began. He concluded that freedom was a more compelling goal for the Union instead of merely forcing eleven states to be part of a nation that they did not want to be a part of. Accordingly, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, a measure designed to end slavery in all states that joined the Confederacy. Yet this measure did not end slavery everywhere. Four states remaining loyal to the Union still permitted slavery: Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri. As the Confederacy began to collapse in 1864, Lincoln planned to eliminate slavery everywhere. In 1865, just prior to his assassination, he proposed the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution prohibiting slavery in all states. Tragically, Lincoln's assassination occurred just days after the last decisive battle. John Wilkes Booth, a Confederate sympathizer, decided to kill the president as revenge for the South's defeat. Vice-president Andrew Johnson was inaugurated quickly thereafter.

The creation of the Ku Klux Klan must be seen in the context of this history. Unlike Lincoln, Johnson was a member of the Democratic Party. Republicans had far more progressive views on race relations than Democrats at that time. Johnson, for example, opposed efforts to promote equality while most Republicans favored such measures. He was a southerner who had resisted secession. His goal was to restore the Union and to re-integrate the southern states back into the nation with as little pain as possible for whites. This period after the Civil War is known as Reconstruction. Unfortunately, Johnson offered very little to former slaves who struggled with poverty and overwhelming discrimination after the war's conclusion. It was during this period that a small and hardly noticeable group of Confederate veterans started a fraternal organization in an unremarkable town called Pulaski, Tennessee. Its goal was purely social. It borrowed rituals and other practices from the Sons of Malta, an obscure fraternal organization similar to the Freemasons, and called their new organization the Ku Klux Klan. This name stems from the Greek word "kuklos" which means 'circle'.

Yet Reconstruction soon changed. Upset with Johnson's lenient policies towards southerners in creating new state governments, the radical wing of the Republican Party asserted themselves in the Congress. They placed the south under military occupation again and required new state governments to accept the Fourteenth Amendment and other changes designed to promote racial equality. They insisted that African American men have the right to vote. Predictably, Johnson vetoed most of these measures. The Congress, however, overrode the vetoes. This radical Republican effort infuriated southerners. Quickly, the Ku Klux Klan changed. Their new goal was to attack radical Republican policies in every way. They wanted to restore white supremacy in the south and impose racial restrictions to separate whites from blacks. They decided to use any tactic to achieve their goals, even if this meant murder, racial intimidation, arson, and other crimes.

Nathan Bedford Forrest was an important leader in this effort. A former slave owner and Confederate general, Forrest was most known for his decision to slaughter black Union troops unnecessarily during the Battle of Fort Pillow in 1864. Four years later, Forrest claimed that the Ku Klux Klan had more than 40,000 members in Tennessee alone. Over 550,000 had joined the Klan in the south as a whole. To be sure, Forrest denied that he was a member. This is not surprising. The Klan was a secretive society and concealed the identities of its members. White hoods easily covered the faces of members as they rode through the south on horses, pillaging and plundering black communities. Overwhelming evidence reveals Forrest's membership in the Klan and his leadership role in it. Historians agree that Forrest sincerely repudiated the Klan during his later years. The Klan's violence had become too much even for a man like Forrest to accept.

Eventually, Radical Reconstruction ended. In the aftermath of a disputed election in 1876, Republicans agreed to end the Union occupation of the south in exchange for gaining the presidency. Rutherford B. Hayes was inaugurated as Union troops returned to military bases throughout the American south. Southern Democrats reasserted themselves again. They refused to honor the Fourteenth Amendment and passed "Jim Crow laws" requiring the legal separation of blacks from whites in neighborhoods, schools, and other avenues of public accommodation. They refused to honor the Fifteenth Amendment which affirms that the right to vote shall not be denied on the basis of race. New voting restrictions appeared in the form of unfair literacy tests, grandfather clauses, and other devices to make sure that the great majority of African American men had no access to the ballot. Women were not voting anywhere. The Nineteenth Amendment ended gender restrictions on voting after the turn of the century.

This reassertion of white supremacy pleased southern Democrats. Membership in the Ku Klux Klan rapidly declined because they had achieved their goals. Yet during the 1920s, as immigration from eastern and southern Europe sharply increased, the Ku Klux Klan made a comeback. This “new” Klan grew quickly in northern states because many Americans feared the arrival of Catholics, Jews, and of course blacks who moved into the north from southern states in search of work. Over four million Americans joined the Klan at this time. Their power became so great that they virtually controlled the state of Indiana for awhile. Unfortunately for the Klan, their most visible leader in this state, David Stephenson, brutally raped a woman, Madge Oberholtzer, who later swallowed poison and died. An Indiana jury convicted Stephenson of murder in 1925 and sentenced him to life in prison. Membership in the Klan quickly declined as people realized that the Klan had little to do with traditional values and meaningful patriotism. Gradually the United States refocused its attention on more urgent matters such as the Great Depression and the Second World War.

Yet the Klan never went away entirely. On the contrary, the Klan and other white nationalist organizations reasserted themselves during the 1950s and 60s as the civil rights movement emerged. Violence erupted as Klan members and their supporters resisted all efforts pass civil rights legislation designed to grant all citizens equality under the law. Members of a local Klan organization in Birmingham, Alabama, for instance, bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church on September 15, 1963. Another local Klan organization murdered three civil rights activists in Neshoba County, Mississippi, on June 21, 1964. It took decades for law enforcement to arrest and prosecute those responsible for these crimes. Despite these events, membership in several Klan organizations never reached anywhere near the levels of Reconstruction or the 1920s. This reality is an important consideration that historians must consider in any historical appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan.

In short, the Ku Klux Klan underwent three phases of development throughout its history. The first phase occurred during Reconstruction. The second phase occurred during the 1920s. The third occurred during the civil rights era. The historical question which emerges is this: do these three phases represent a larger undercurrent of white nationalism that exists beyond the actual membership of the Ku Klux Klan, or has the Klan represented only fringe elements of racism that is not reflective of the beliefs and values of most whites in the United States? An equally important question is whether white nationalism is somehow connected with political forces that enabled Donald Trump to win the presidency in 2016.

The first question is the easiest to answer. Throughout its history, the United States has experienced the rise of many groups which have resisted immigration, racial inclusiveness, equality, and modern thinking.

Nativist organizations, for example, grew significantly in the United States during the 1840s when many Americans resented the arrival of Irish Catholics into the country. Large numbers of groups resisted modern science as evolution became the accepted scientific norm in most colleges and universities. Organizations opposing the rights of women, gays, and immigrants have emerged repeatedly over time as the United States experienced rapid demographic changes. It is reasonable to conclude that the Klan, while aberrational in its brutal tactics, reflects a larger undercurrent of people who bitterly resent perceived attacks on what they believe as the American way of life. This segment, to be sure, is a minority. But this is a minority with historical roots that are firmly embedded within the American experience.

The second question is harder to answer. The dilemma is that the election of 2016 happened too recently for scholars to offer real historical insight into the emergence of the Trump movement and its victory in November. Even so, it is possible to begin a process of examining these events historically. Public opinion polling overwhelmingly shows that most Trump voters made their decision largely because of economic considerations. Middle class voters became frustrated that the economic recovery during the Obama years was weak with little growth in jobs or incomes for most people. Immigration was surely raised as an issue. Yet immigration per se has never been rejected by the Trump administration as bad or even harmful. Instead, President Trump has proposed immigration reform designed to address national security concerns in the context of terrorism abroad and illegal entries into the United States. White nationalism continues to exist, of course, as recent events in Charlottesville, Virginia, have shown. But the existence of hate organizations and their activities occurred during the Clinton, Bush, and Obama presidencies as well. Again, white nationalism alone cannot adequately explain Trump's victory because of the overwhelming focus that voters had on economic considerations.

The outlook for white nationalism is bleak in the United States. Within decades, whites will become a minority. Latinos, African Americans, Asians, and other groups will represent an increasing percentage of the American people as a whole. Assimilation and intermarriage continues to result in a blending of groups along with mixed ethnic and racial identities. In short, the United States is a pluralistic nation. This pluralism, and the constitutional and legal order which remain firmly in place, will continue to weaken white nationalism despite individual incidents of racial and ethnic hatred which arises from time to time. White nationalism is on the wrong and losing side of history. Those who embrace pluralism, constitutionalism, pragmatism, and cooperation have much more to offer.

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