

A Hundred Years of Terror IUPUI

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The Ku Klux Klan's long history of violence grew out of the resentment and hatred many white Southerners felt in the aftermath of the Civil War. Blacks, having won the struggle for freedom from slavery, were now faced with a new struggle against widespread racism and the terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan. While the menace of the KKK has peaked and waned over the years, it has never vanished.

The bare facts about the birth of the Ku Klux Klan and its revival half a century later are baffling to most people today. Little more than a year after it was founded, the secret society thundered across the war-torn South, sabotaged Reconstruction governments and imposed a reign of terror and violence that lasted three or four years.

And then as rapidly as it had spread, the Klan faded into the history books. After World War I a new version of the Klan sputtered to life and brought many parts of the nation under its paralyzing grip of racism and bloodshed. Then, having grown to be a major force for the second time, the Klan again receded into the background. This time it never quite disappeared, but it never again commanded such widespread support.

Today it seems incredible that an organization so violent, so opposed to the American principles of justice and equality, could twice in the nation's history have held such power. How did the Ku Klux Klan - one of the nation's first terrorist groups - so instantly seize the South in the aftermath of the Civil War? Why did it so quickly vanish? how could it have risen so rapidly to power in the 1920's and then so rapidly loose that power? And why is this ghost of the Civil War still haunting America today with hatred, violence and sometimes death for its enemies and its own members?

The answers do not lie on the surface of American history; they are deeper than the events of the turbulent 1960's, the parades and cross burnings and lynching of the 1920's, beyond even the Reconstruction era and the Civil War. The story begins, really, on the frontier, where successive generations of Americans learned hard lessons about survival. Those lessons produced some of the qualities of life for which the nation is most admired--fierce individualism, enterprising inventiveness and the freedom to be whatever a person wants to be and go wherever a new road leads.

But the frontier spirit included other traits as well, and one was a stubborn reliance on "frontier justice" - an instant, private, and often violent method of settling differences without involving lawyers or courts. Vigilante justice became the motivation for many who later rode with the Ku Klux Klan.

A more obvious explanation of the South's widespread acceptance of the Klan is found in the institution of slavery. Freedom for slaves represented for many white Southerners a bitter defeat - a defeat not only of their armies in the field but of their economic and social way of life. It was an age-old nightmare come true, for early in Southern life whites in general and plantation owners in particular had begun to view the large number of slaves living among them as a potential threat to their property and their lives.

A series of bloody slave revolts in Virginia and other parts of the South led to the widespread practice of night patrols - white men specially deputized for the purpose of prowling Southern roads enforcing the curfew for slaves, looking for runaways, and

guarding rural areas against the threat of black uprisings. They were authorized by law to give a specific number of lashes to any violators they caught. The memory of these legal night riders and their whips was still fresh in the minds of both defeated Southerners and liberated blacks when the first Klansmen took to those same roads in 1866.

Aftermath of War

The Klan grew out of white Southern anger over the Civil War defeat and the Reconstruction that followed. Northerners saw in the Klan an attempt of unrepentant Confederates to win through terrorism what they had been unable to win on the battlefield. Such a simple view did not totally explain the Klan's sway over the South, but there is little doubt that many a Confederate veteran exchanged his rebel gray for the hoods and sheets of the invisible empire.

And the conditions in the South immediately after the war added to Southerners' fears and frustrations. Cities, plantations and farms were ruined; people were impoverished and often hungry; there was an occupation army in their midst; and Reconstruction governments threatened to usurp the traditional white ruling authority. In the first few months after the fighting ended, white Southerners had to contend with the losses of life, property and, in their eyes, honor. The time was ripe for the Ku Klux Klan to ride.

Origins of the Ku Klux Klan

The origin of the Ku Klux Klan was a carefully guarded secret for years, although there were many theories to explain its beginnings. One Popular notion held that the Ku Klux Klan was originally a secret order of Chinese opium smugglers. Another claimed it was begun by Confederate prisoners during the war. The most ridiculous theory attributed the name to some ancient Jewish document referring to the Hebrews enslaved by Egyptian pharaohs. In fact the beginning of the Klan involved nothing so sinister, subversive or ancient as the theories supposed. It was the boredom of small-town life that led six young Confederate veterans to gather around a fireplace one December evening in 1865 and form a social club. The place was Pulaski, Tennessee, near the Alabama border. When they reassembled a week later, the six young men were full of ideas for their new society. It would be secret, to heighten the amusement of the thing, and the titles for the various officers were to have names as preposterous-sounding as possible, partly for the fun of it and partly to avoid any military or political implications. Thus, the head of the group was called the Grand Cyclops. His assistant was the Grand Magi; there was to be a Grand Turk to greet all candidates for admission, a Grand Scribe to act as secretary, Night Hawks for messengers and a Lictor to be the guard. The members, when the six young men found some to join, would be called Ghouls. But what name to call the society itself? The founders were determined to come up with something unusual and mysterious. Being well-educated, they turned to Greek. After tossing around a number of ideas, Richard R. Reed suggested the word "kuklos," from which the English words "circle" and "cycle" are derived. Another member, Captain John B. Kennedy, had an ear for alliteration and added the word "clam." After tinkering with the sound for a while, group settled on the "Ku Klux Klan." The selection of the name, chance though it was, had a great deal to do with the Klan's early success. Something about the sound aroused curiosity and gave the fledgling club an immediate air of mystery, as did the initials K.K.K., which were soon to take on such terrifying significance. Soon after the founders named the Klan, they decided to a bit of showing off and so

disguised themselves in sheets and galloped their horses through the quiet streets of little Pulaski. Their ride created such a stir that the men decided to adopt the sheets as the official regalia of the Ku Klux Klan, and they added to the effect by making grotesque masks and tall pointed hats. The founders also performed elaborate initiation ceremonies for new members. Their ceremony was similar to the hazing popular in college fraternities and consisted of blindfolding the candidate, subject him to a series of silly oaths and rough handling, and finally bringing him before a "royal altar" where he was to be invested with "royal crown." The altar turned out to be a mirror and the crown two large donkey's ears. Ridiculous though it sounds today, that was the high point of the earliest activities of the Ku Klux Klan.

Had that been all there was to the Ku Klux Klan, it probably would have disappeared as quietly as it was born. But at some point in early 1866 the Club, enlarged with new members from nearby towns, began to have a chilling effect on local blacks. The intimidating night rides were soon the centerpiece of the hooded order: bands of white-sheeted ghouls paid late night visits to black homes, admonishing the terrified occupants to behave themselves and threatening more visits if they didn't. It didn't take long for the threats to be converted into violence against blacks who insisted on exercising their new rights and freedom. Before its six founders realized what had happened, the Ku Klux Klan had become something they may not have originally intended--something deadly serious.

Mischief Turns Malicious

From that beginning in the little town of Pulaski, Tenn., the Klan began to grow. Historians disagree on the intention of the six founders, but it is known that word quickly spread about the new organization whose members met in secret and rode with their faces hidden, who practiced elaborate rituals and initiation ceremonies.

Much of the Klan's early reputation was based on mischief. One favorite Klan tactic was for a white sheeted Klansman wearing a ghoulish mask to ride up to a black home at night and demand water. When the well bucket was offered, the Klansman would gulp it down and demand more, having actually poured the water through a rubber tube that flowed into a leather bottle concealed beneath his robe. After draining several buckets, the rider would exclaim that he had not had a drink since he died on the battlefield at Shiloh, and gallop into the night, leaving the impression that ghosts of Confederate dead were riding the countryside.

In time, the malicious mischief turned to outright violence. The presence of armed white men roving the countryside at night reminded many blacks of the pre-war slave patrols. The fact that Klansmen rode with their faces covered intensified blacks' suspicion and fear. Whippings were used first, but within months there were bloody clashes between Klansmen and blacks, Northerners who had come South, or Southern unionists.

White Rule Victimized Blacks

By the time the six Klan founders met in December, 1865, the opening phase of Reconstruction was nearly complete. All eleven of the former rebel states had been rebuilt on astonishingly lenient terms which allowed many of the ex-Confederate leaders to return to positions of power. Southern state legislatures began enacting laws that made it clear that the aristocrats who ran them intended to yield none of their pre-war power over poor whites and especially over blacks. These laws became known as the Black Codes and in some cases they amounted to a virtual re-enslavement of blacks.

In Louisiana the Democratic convention resolved that "we hold this to be a Government of

White People, made and to be perpetuated for the exclusive benefit of the White Race, and....that the people of African descent cannot be considered as citizens of the United States." Mississippi and Florida in particular enacted vicious black codes, other southern states (except North Carolina) passed somewhat less severe versions, and President Andrew Johnson did nothing to prevent them from being enforced.

These laws and the violence that erupted against blacks and union supporters in the South outraged Northerners who just a few months before had celebrated victory not only over the Confederacy, but its system of slavery as well. In protest of the defiant Black Codes, Congress refused to seat the new Southern senators and representatives when it reconvened in December 1865 after a long recess. Thus at the moment the fledgling Klan was born in Pulaski, the stage was set for a showdown between Northerners determined not to be cheated out of the fruits of their victory and die-hard Southerners who refused to give up their supremacy over blacks.

Ironically, the increasingly violent activities of the Klan throughout 1866 tended to help prove the argument of Radical Republicans in the North, who wanted harsher measures taken against Southern governments as part of their program to force equal treatment for blacks. Partly as a result of news reports of Klan violence in the South, the Radicals won overwhelming victories in the Congressional elections of 1866.

In early 1867 they made a fresh start at Reconstruction. Congress overrode President Johnson's veto and passed the Reconstruction Acts, which abolished the ex-Confederate state governments and divided 10 of the 11 former rebel states into military districts. The military were charged with enrolling black voters and holding elections for new constitutional conventions in each of the 10 states, which led to the creation of the Radical Reconstruction Southern governments.

Ghost Riders

In April 1867, a call went out for all known Ku Klux Klan chapters or dens to send representatives to Nashville, Tennessee, for a meeting that would plan the Klan response to the new federal Reconstruction policy. Throughout the summer and fall, the Klan steadily had become more violent. Thousands of the white citizens of Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi had by this time joined the Klan and many now viewed the escalating violence with growing alarm - not necessarily because they had sympathy for the victims but because the night riding was getting out of their control. Anyone could put on a sheet and a mask and ride into the night to commit assault, robbery, rape, arson or murder.

At the Nashville Klan meeting, leaders sought to grapple with these problems and decide just what sort of organization the Klan would be. They created a chain of command and sanctioned white supremacy as the fundamental creed of the Ku Klux Klan. Throughout the summer of 1867 the invisible empire changed, shedding the antics that had brought laughter and taking on the full nature of a secret and sinister force.

All the now-familiar tactics of the Klan date from this period - the threats delivered to blacks, radicals and other enemies, the night raids on individuals they singled out for rougher treatment, and the mass demonstrations of masked and robed Klansmen designed to cast fear over a troubled community.

By early 1868, stories about Klan activities were appearing in newspapers nationwide and Reconstruction governors realized they faced nothing less than an insurrection by a terrorist organization. Orders went out from state capitols and Union army headquarters to suppress the Klan.

Invisible Government

But it was too late. From middle Tennessee, the Klan quickly was established in nearby counties and then in North and South Carolina. In some counties the Klan became the de facto law, an invisible government that state officials could not control.

When Tennessee Governor William G. Brownlow attempted to plant spies within the Klan, he found the organization knew as much about his efforts as he did. One Brownlow spy who tried to join the Klan was found strung up in a tree. Later another spy was stripped and mutilated, and a third was stuffed in a barrel in Nashville and rolled into the Cumberland River where he drowned.

With the tacit sympathy and support of most white citizens often behind, the Klan worked behind a veil that was impossible for Brownlow and other Reconstruction governors to pierce. But even though a large majority of white Southerners opposed the Radical state governments, not all of them approved of the hooded order's brand of vigilante justice. During its first year, the Klan's public marches and parades were sometimes hooted and jeered at by townspeople who looked upon them as a joke. Later, when the Klan began to use guns and whips to make its point, some civic leaders spoke out against the violence. But in the late 1860's white Southern voices against the Klan were in the minority. One of the Klan's greatest strengths during this period was the large number of editors, ministers, former Confederate officers and political leaders who hid behind its sheets and guided its actions.

Among them, none was more widely respected in the South than the Klan's reputed leader, Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest, a legendary Confederate cavalry officer who settled in Tennessee and apparently joined the Klan fairly soon after it began to make a name for itself. Forrest became the Klan's first imperial wizard, and in 1867 and 1868 he was its chief missionary, traveling over the South establishing new chapters and quietly advising its new members.

The ugly side of the Ku Klux Klan, the mutilations and floggings, lynching and shootings, began to spread across the South in 1868, and any words of caution that may have been expressed at the Nashville meeting were submerged beneath a stream of bloody deeds.

The KKK's First Death

As the violence escalated, it turned to general lawlessness and some Klan groups even began fighting each other. In Nashville, a gang of outlaws who adopted the Klan disguise came to be known as the Black Ku Klux Klan, and for several months middle Tennessee was plagued by a guerrilla war between the real and bogus Klans. The Klan was also coming under increased attack by Congress and the Reconstruction state governments. The leaders of the Klan realized that the order's end was at hand, at least as any sort of organized force. It is widely believed that Forrest ordered the Klan disbanded in January 1869, but the surviving document is rather ambiguous (some historians think Forrest's "order" was just a trick so he could deny responsibility or knowledge of Klan atrocities).

Whatever the actual date, it is clear that as an organized body across the South, the KKK had ceased to exist by the end of 1869. That did not end the violence, however, and as atrocities became more widespread, Radical legislatures throughout the region passed harsher laws, imposed martial law in some Klan-dominated counties, and actively hunted Klan leaders.

In 1871 Congress held hearings on the Klan and passed a tough anti-Klan law modeled after a North Carolina statute. Under the new federal law, Southerners lost their jurisdiction over the crimes of assault, robbery and murder and the president was authorized to declare martial law. Night riding and the wearing of masks were expressly prohibited. Hundreds of Klansmen were arrested but few actually went to prison.

These laws probably dampened the enthusiasm for the Klan, but they can hardly be credited with destroying it. The fact was, by the mid- 1870's white Southerners had retaken control

of most Southern state governments and didn't need the Klan as much as before. Klan terror had proven very effective at keeping black voters away from the polls. Some black officeholders were hanged and many more were brutally beaten. White Southern Democrats won elections easily, and passed laws taking away many rights that blacks had won during Reconstruction.

The result was a system of segregation which was the law of the land for more than 80 years. This system was called "separate but equal," which was half true - everything was separate, but nothing was equal.