
The Ku Klux Klan: Continuity and Change

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The Ku Klux Klan: Continuity and Change*

THE KU KLUX KLAN has seen as its mission the preservation of the institutionalized caste pattern of the South and the promotion of a patriotic ideology. Despite continuity in this mission and the preservation of elaborate rituals over the years, the Klan has undergone a change in its tactics and targets and can no longer be considered a viable social movement.

The history of the Klan falls into three periods. Following the Civil War, the Klan was created to meet the threat posed by the newly freed slaves. Convinced that it had succeeded in preserving the antebellum South, the hooded knights vanished. Another war, the First World War, brought the Ku Klux Klan back to deal with a host of changes in the "American Way," including immigration of aliens to the United States and migration from the rural South to the Northern cities by Negroes. A combination of corruption within the organization and a feeling that some stability had been achieved in the society brought the "second Klan" abruptly to an end. The third period saw the resurrection of the Klan in response to the threat posed by the Supreme Court decisions of the fifties. A fragmented ghost of the past, the contemporary Ku Klux Klan continues to wage its fight against evildoers.

After examining the history of the Klan, two hypotheses emerge. The first is that although racism is the Klan's mainstay, the specific targets and tactics of its propaganda have varied, reflecting societal change. William Bruce Cameron, sociology professor at the University of South Florida, stated that the Ku Klux Klan is the classic example of a movement which has been reborn and that each rebirth has been marked by differences in purposes and in methods.¹ Mayer N. Zald and Robert Asch maintain that changing conditions in the society increase or decrease the potential support base of a movement.² Consequently, Klan tactics have been altered to maximize support and to ensure a large following without forsaking the Klan's mission.

The second hypothesis is that the Ku Klux Klan has changed in the hundred years of its existence from a social movement to a mentality. A movement denotes a large number of people banding together for the express purpose of changing individuals or societal institutions.³ A *klan*

*The author is indebted to the Center for Social Organization Studies, University of Chicago, for the counsel and criticism of its staff and the assistance of Dr. David Street (State University of New York at Stonybrook). This report is taken from a fuller study by the author that constitutes the Center's *Working Paper No. 138* (November, 1969).

¹ William Bruce Cameron, *Modern Social Movements* (New York, 1966), pp. 28-29.

² Mayer N. Zald and Robert Asch, "Social Movement Organizations: Growth, Decay, and Change," *Social Forces*, XLIV (March, 1966), 330.

³ This definition of social movement reflects the thinking of Cameron, *op. cit.*, p. 7, and Zald and Asch, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

mentality refers to an acceptance of what has been the Klan ideology without identifying oneself with the Ku Klux Klan or without even being aware that one's prejudices form the core of Klan thinking. This is not to say that the Klan created racism. Rather, it is to say that the weakening of the Ku Klux Klan did not signal the end of racist thinking.⁴ This was true in the thirties and forties. Despite the collapse of the Klan and the subsiding of the post-World War I hysteria, the immigration quotas based on Nordic supremacy remained.⁵ Similarly, a more accurate assessment of the contemporary Klan leads one to the conclusion that although no longer an effective and viable force in American life, the klan mentality remains, if not thrives, today.

Besides the two theories which appear in this analysis, an examination will be made of the composition of the Klan, which has to some extent varied depending upon the stated goals and the methods employed. The question of what type of people belong to the Ku Klux Klan raised a number of methodological problems that had to be faced. Those who were strongly anti-Klan degraded Klansmen; an instance is Frederick Lewis Allen's statement that the Klan provided "a chance to dress up the village bigot and let him be a knight of the Invisible Empire."⁶ Members and friends of the Klan portrayed it as a fraternal organization composed of professional men, ministers, and civic leaders. To go beyond the statement that the truth lies in between these two descriptions becomes very difficult with a group that prides itself on secrecy. Government investigations, writings of ex-Klan members, and the few academic pieces on the subject appear at times to raise more questions than they have answered. Within this framework of frequently emotional writing and incomplete and often purposefully inaccurate statements, general conclusions, let alone specific postulates on Klan composition, become a challenge.

The Reconstruction Klan

Klan organizations have consistently looked to the past and commemorated the achievements accomplished by their forerunners. Usually Klansmen trace their history to the time when a Confederate Army General, Nathan Bedford Forrest, headed an organization called the Ku Klux Klan in nine Southern states.⁷ The idea for the name, the importance of

⁴ The term *klan mentality* is not a commonly used expression in the literature on this subject. Isolated references are made in Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (New York, 1967), p. 255, and in a publication of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, "The Ku Klux Klans," *The Facts*, XIV (January, 1961), p. 150. The only other reference to this term was made by the Director of the Anti-Defamation League in New Orleans in a conversation with this author on July 3, 1969. A. I. Botnick in speaking of Klan activity in Louisiana said that it is more correct to "speak of the presence of a mentality, rather than an organization."

⁵ Seymour Martin Lipset, "The Sources of the Radical Right," chap xii, in *The Radical Right* (Garden City, 1964), p. 370.

⁶ Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday* (New York, 1931), p. 65.

⁷ In a recent issue of *The Fiery Cross*, the official publication of the United Klans of America, an attempt is made to trace the Klan back to 1768 to Samuel Adam's Caucus Club. In fact, it states the Ku Klux Klan, beginning with Forrest and until the present day United Klans, has had possession of the "secret Archives [sic] of Samuel Adams" (Benjamin Bridgewater, "The Invisible Empire," *The Fiery Cross* (October, 1969), pp. 1, 9, 27-31. This is the only reference tracing the Klan before 1865.

sworn secrecy, and the use of bedsheets as a disguise came from the brief activities of a handful of Confederate Army veterans in 1865 at Pulaski, Tennessee. Since reportedly the purpose of these veterans was merely pure amusement, the Ku Klux Klan in the sense of a movement or organization began in 1867.

Contrary to the legends which have persisted over the years, the Klan was relatively short-lived during Reconstruction. It actually lasted as a formal organization only two years, until 1869, when Forrest disbanded it. As indicated in his testimony before the Joint Select Committee on the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States, he formed the Klan to deal with the animosity that existed between the Union and the rebel soldiers and the apprehension of violence from the newly freed slaves.⁸ The substitution of military governments for the locally created governments called for in the Reconstruction Act of March, 1867, became the signal for the start of the Klan as an organization. The Klan became fairly successful in undermining the actions of the Radical Republicans in Congress by intimidating the freed slaves to keep them from voting. It was in their role as citizens that black men became the target of Klan vengeance. As history professor David Chalmers points out, the lack of overt militia violence on the part of the freed slaves suggests the conclusion that Klansmen were striking against the freed slaves as voters and officeholders and not as lawbreakers.⁹ The Klan struck against real or perceived resentment by the former slaves and quickly mobilized at the scattered signs of blacks achieving economic success.

The composition of the Klan changed quickly. Initially it was composed of the better citizens of the South. Soon it became popular among those elements in the former Confederate States whose status was less differentiated from the freed slaves— “the pore no’count white trash.” Seeing his secret order becoming a salvage pile for the undesirable elements of society, Forrest moved to disband it in 1869. Despite the formal attempt to end the movement, nightriding Klansmen were active until 1877. Several explanations have been given for the eventual decline of the Ku Klux Klan of the Reconstruction period. Although public sentiment grew against its violence and federal legislation curbed its activities to some extent, the reason for the Klan’s demise in 1877 is much simpler. The Klan for all intents had accomplished its purpose.¹⁰ President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1877 withdrew the last of the occupation armies. The government was again in the hands of native-born white Southern Democrats or Conservatives. The South saw the restoration of segregation-oriented governments and jim crow became the law of the land south of the Mason-Dixon line.

⁸ *The Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States by the Joint Select Committee, Report 22* (Washington, February 19, 1872), pp. 80-81.

⁹ David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism* (Chicago, 1965), p. 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-22; *The Present Day Ku Klux Klan Movement* (Washington, D. C., House Un-American Activities Committee, December 11, 1967), pp. 4-5; and Edgar T. Thompson, *Race Relations and the Race Problem* (Durham, 1934), p. 139.

Knights of the Ku Klux Klan

In 1915, the motion picture *The Birth of a Nation* convincingly resurrected the gallant and romantic image of the hooded knights preserving the South. Based on Thomas Dixon's novel, *The Clansmen*, *Birth* by 1926 had been shown to over a hundred million people who saw the Klan punish a mulatto who dared to win the love of Elsie Stoneman (played by Lillian Gish). Despite protests from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Harvard President Charles Eliot, Booker T. Washington, Jane Addams, and others, the movie continued to be shown primarily because it was at that time the best motion picture that had ever been made.¹¹ Combining the talents of producer D. W. Griffith and cameraman Billy Bitzer, this twelve reel movie introduced a number of cinematic techniques. It also introduced phases such as "a single tiger-spring and the black claws of the beast sank into the soft white throat," which appeared in *The Clansmen*.¹² Capitalizing on the movie's premiere in Atlanta, William Joseph Simmons, an ex-garter salesman and habitual joiner of fraternal orders, chartered the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia on December 6, 1915. The Klan had begun its second phase.

Simmons, as this century's first Imperial Wizard, expanded the ritualistic elements of the Reconstruction Klan to create an autocratic hierarchy of officials, an elaborate ritual and a detailed array of regalia. The hierarchy listed such officers of the *klavern* (a local chapter) as the *kludd* (chaplain), *kligrapp* (secretary), *klaragoo*, *klextor*, and *nighthawk* (guards). Such an obsession with ritual and titles prompted the historian Richard Hofstadter to note that the Klan set up a secret organization that in some ways flattered its opponents—e.g., the priestly garments of Roman Catholicism and the secret cells of the Communist Party.¹³ All this ritual and use of impressive titles was not without purpose. The status-exalting nomenclature and rituals helped the Klansmen to set themselves apart from the mass of humanity and to become an indispensable part of the Invisible Empire. As one author suggested, "When a man joins the Ku Klux Klan, a sensation seems to come over him as definite as falling in love. He simply drops out of society and enters a new world."¹⁴

Despite this, the Klan had fewer than five thousand members when Simmons turned to the services of professional publicists, Edward Young Clarke and Elizabeth Tyler, in 1920. Thanks to the use of financial incentives to recruit new members, with Clarke's staff receiving 80 percent of the ten dollar initiation fee, membership climbed to 100,000 within sixteen months. Clarke's publicity got a healthy boost by an extensive series in the *New York World* in September of 1921 "exposing" Klan activities. Carried in eighteen newspapers mentioned throughout the press, the arti-

¹¹ Roy E. Aitken, *The "Birth of a Nation" Story* (Middlebury, Vermont, 1965), p. 56; Everett Carter, "Cultural History written with Lightning," *American Quarterly*, XII (Fall, 1960), 354; and David Lowe, *The Ku Klux Klan: The Invisible Empire* (New York, 1967), p. 14.

¹² Carter, *op. cit.*, p. 353.

¹³ Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," pp. 109-17 in Barry McLaughlin (ed.), *Studies in Social Movements* (New York, 1969), p. 112.

¹⁴ Arnold Rice, *The Ku Klux Klan in American Politics* (Washington, D. C., 1962), p. 17.

cles appeared to do more to arouse people's curiosity than their opposition.¹⁵

Clearly the publicity and organizational experts had to have worked with existing prejudices. In order to create an organization with nine million members, according to some estimates, the Klan officials had to have capitalized on real fears. The years following World War I were marked by an emotional letdown. The heightened patriotism that such a war brought continued after the Armistice. The War was followed by the hysteria that accompanied the Wall Street bombing and the fear of the Bolsheviks. Coupled with these relatively distant concerns were the very real ones of migration, primarily of Southern blacks to the urban centers of the North. The immigrants that had been coming to America now posed a threat rather than a promise. Many Americans saw their way of life being changed. The League of Nations, "Negro upptiness," cosmopolitanism, unhindered immigration all signaled the death of the old American way.¹⁶ The Reconstruction Klan had responded to the perceived threat posed by the North and the freed slaves. Similarly, the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan following World War I responded to different threats reflecting the changes in the larger society. As the forces of change grew, so did the Klan's reaction against them. It became anti-Catholic instead of Protestant, anti-alien instead of pro-American. The propaganda varied throughout the country—anti-Japanese in the Pacific states, anti-Semitic in the Atlantic states, and anti-Mexican in the Southwest. The Klan offered a target for every frustration.

Clearly the Klan had as its targets imaginary as well as real threats. For example, the state of Oregon in 1922 had over 25,000 Klan members despite the fact that its population was 97 percent Caucasian, 85 percent native born American (balance from Canada), 92 percent Protestant, and illiteracy was almost nonexistent. Nevertheless, by a combination of isolation, wartime tradition of suspicion and inquisitiveness, Prohibition, and superior salesmanship, a thriving Klan was created. The speed with which the Klan took over the state is apparent in the statement that the Klan grew from nothing in 1921 to a force controlling Oregon politics in 1922. By 1923 the Ku Klux Klan had elected both the President of the State Senate and the Speaker of the House.¹⁷ At other times and places, the threats were much more real. In Chicago, the Ku Klux Klan of 1921 was strongest on the South Side, particularly in Kenwood, Hyde Park, Woodlawn, South Shore, and Englewood. These areas of the city correspond closely to the sections which felt the political pressure of the

¹⁵ Chalmers, *op. cit.*, p. 38; and House Un-American Activities Committee, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁶ A discussion of the societal conditions contributing to the rise of the Klan is found in Chalmers, *op. cit.*, pp. 33, 109; John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom* (3rd ed., New York, 1969), p. 479; Jackson Schaefer, *op. cit.*, p. 233; Lipset, *op. cit.*, p. 313; Lowe, *op. cit.*, p. 17; John Moffatt Mecklin, *The Ku Klux Klan: A Study of the American Mind* (New York, 1924), p. 102; and Arnold Rice, *The Ku Klux Klan in American Politics* (Washington, 1962).

¹⁷ For an analysis of the Klan in Oregon see Chambers, *op. cit.*; Jackson, *op. cit.*, pp. 196-214; Lowe, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

Roman Catholics and second generation immigrants, and the physical pressure exerted by the rapid influx of blacks into an ever-expanding Black Belt.¹⁸

As indicated above, Frederick Lewis Allen equated Klansmen with the village bigot. Yet the Klan at this time thrived in the University of Chicago area of Hyde Park and *klaverns* were established at Harvard and Princeton.¹⁹ To many native born Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and blacks posed more of a threat than did the Invisible Empire. A few non-random samples exist of the occupational background of the Klan in the 1920's. The Knox County No. 14 in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1927 had 399 members, of whom 29 percent were white-collar workers.²⁰ *Tolerance*, a magazine aimed at exposing the Klan, listed 110 members of the 1922 Chicago Klan, of whom 61 percent were white-collar workers. Despite the fact that the latter figures are biased toward the professionals since it was to the advantage of *Tolerance* to expose high status individuals, the Klan apparently had good representation of all segments of native born white Protestants. As to what social group formed the bulk of Klan membership, Kenneth T. Jackson, upon examination of the above data and analysis of similar statistics from Denver, Indianapolis, and Anaheim, concludes "that in the city the secret order was a lower-class movement."²¹

This leads to a second question concerning the composition of the Klan—was it a rural or an urban phenomenon? Mecklin concluded that: "The Klan is essentially a village and small-town organization. Neither the great city with its hodgepodge of races and groups nor the country with its isolation lends itself to effective Klan organization."²² To say that an organization which resisted alien threats was more urban or rural is to maintain that one part of the nation had a monopoly on prejudice. The Invisible Empire although not strong everywhere attracted widespread support among farmers, townspeople, and city dwellers of many states.

Undoubtedly the most controversial aspect of the Ku Klux Klan is the tactics it employs. For the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, the violent night-ridings were only a small part. The boycotting of business—those which were Jewish-owned or those having some minimal type of integration among the employees or customers—was a frequently successful method for the Klan in achieving its goals. Imperial Wizard Simmons often used

¹⁸ Hyde Park is bordered on the west by the communities of Grand Boulevard and Washington Park, both of which experienced radical change in the twenties. Grand Boulevard "was the scene of conflict as efforts were made to keep new Negro families out of the district." Despite these efforts, Grand Boulevard went from 32 percent black in 1920 to 94.6 percent black in 1930. Likewise, Washington Park went from 15 percent black in 1920 to 91.9 percent in 1930. In both communities the black people displaced Jews of German descent who moved into Hyde Park. Consequently, Klansmen of Hyde Park saw an immediate threat from the Jews and a not too distant threat from the black people. Jackson discusses the involvement of the Klan in the area (*op. cit.*, pp. 96, 114, 126) and Evelyn M. Kitagawa and Karl E. Tauber, *Local Community Fact Book* (Chicago, 1963), pp. 90-91, 94-96, provide demographic background data.

¹⁹ Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

²² Mecklin, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

the phrase *vocational Klanishness*, which meant the "Trading, dealing with and patronizing Klansmen in preference to all others."²³ It was always to the benefit of the Klan to make it seem to those outside the Invisible Empire that it was larger than it actually was. Parades, cross-burnings, and other mass public demonstrations helped it to realize this purpose. In August of 1925, Washington hosted a parade of tens of thousands of Klansmen that lasted three and a half hours. The publicity that came out of such shows of strength aided the Klan as it drew more Americans into the Invisible Empire.

Violence as the collective activity of a local *Klavern's* members occurred frequently in the 1920's. For example, from October, 1920, to October, 1921, the Klan was implicated, although not necessarily prosecuted, in four killings, a mutilation, one branding with acid, five kidnappings, forty-two floggings, and twenty-seven tar and feather parties.²⁴ In looking at the role of violence, it is valuable to go beyond the initial statements made by those who opposed the Klan. Rather than being racially open-minded, opposition to the Klan in the 1920's was often only a protest against its use of violence, with the opponents occasionally using language just as bigoted as the Klan. Fry argued that "experience has shown that the two races get along better when they are segregated," although he conceded the Klan should not bring this about. Rather, he said, "it will come through an enlightenment of public opinion."²⁵ Similarly Bohn in the *American Journal of Sociology* saw the Klan as cruel, but he also saw "barbaric and totally illiterate Negro slaves" coupled with immigrants who "have been invited to join us and hastily receive all the rights and privileges of citizenship" as posing real threats to America.²⁶ A former Klan member summarized this when he wrote that "much of the opposition against the Klan was not so much based upon the Klan's activity against the Negro as it was against the Klan's assumption that it superseded the law."²⁷

Another method used by the Klan of the 1920's was involvement in regular party politics. Never before and not since has the Ku Klux Klan been such a significant force in politics on all levels of government. As Klansmen or pro-Klan candidates got elected to governorships and even to the national Congress, the influence was bound to be felt at the national level. It was felt, for example, at the 1924 Democratic Convention, which saw an anti-Klan plank defeated after a prolonged, heated debate.²⁸ But only four years later, the Democrats nominated Al Smith. As

²³ Charles C. Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1965), p. 95.

²⁴ George Thayer, *The Farther Shores of Politics* (New York, 1967), p. 84.

²⁵ Henry P. Fry, *The Modern Ku Klux Klan* (Boston, 1922), p. 94.

²⁶ Frank Bohn, "The Ku Klux Klan Interpreted," *The American Journal of Sociology*, XXX (January, 1925), 403.

²⁷ *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 16, 1957. Still more examples of anti-Klan, anti-alien sentiment are found in Marian Monteval, *The Klan Inside Out* (Claremore, Oklahoma, 1924), p. 196, who is strongly pro-Protestant: "The least knowledge of history that belongs to any ten-year-old school boy would contradict every piece of pernicious propaganda that the Klan ever disseminated. This is a Protestant country and a Protestant government and has been so from the beginning."

²⁸ *Imperial Nighthawk* (July 2, 1924), pp. 4-5.

Charles Alexander perceptively noted, "Al Smith, son of Irish immigrants, represented everything the Klan, and perhaps most rural-minded Protestant Americans detested— New York City, Tammany Hall, liquor, Catholicism, foreignism."²⁹ Even though Smith was defeated in his bid for the presidency, merely his nomination represented a significant political set-back for the Klan. When the contemporary Ku Klux Klan is discussed later in the paper, the involvement of Klansmen in local politics will be analyzed. In no respect does the group's current flirtation with politics compare to the influence once wielded by the Knights.

There is little question that the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan at one time were a powerful force which appeared to permeate every facet of American life. One only has to turn to the Lynds' analysis of Muncie, Indiana. They note that "one man who was divorced for 'non-support' stated privately that 'She and I split over the G— d— Klan. I couldn't stand them around any longer.'"³⁰ Before too long, there appeared to be a growing number of people who "couldn't stand them around any longer."

The Klan Fades Away for the Second Time

The 1930's brought new targets of Klan propaganda. It also ultimately brought the end of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Soon after the 1924 election, a number of states adopted antimask laws in an effort to curb Klan violence. However, two other reasons are more significant for the drop in membership— internal struggles and the exposure of corruption among top officials.

The Klan hierarchical structure dictated that Klansmen were "to obey their immediate leader and the other officials up the chain of command. They were to follow without question the decrees, commands, and instructions" that were given them.³¹ With the prize huge amounts of money in the form of initiation fees, dues, special assessments, and kick-backs from the production of robes, a number of power plays occurred in the organization that shook the very foundations of the movement. At the same time that internal dissension weakened the hierarchy, the newspapers regularly told of corruption and even immorality of certain Klan leaders. The leader of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, D. C. Stephenson, was convicted in 1926 of the murder and rape of a young girl.³² Members of the Klan who by their oath were dedicated to moral righteousness found this too difficult to accept and left the Invisible Empire.

In the midst of scandal and in-fighting, Indiana's James A. Colescott became the Knights' third Imperial Wizard by replacing Evans in June of 1939. Immediately the new aim of the organization became to "mop up the cesspools of communism in the United States."³³ Needless to

²⁹ Alexander, *op. cit.*, pp. 235-36.

³⁰ Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown* (New York, 1929), p. 122.

³¹ Alexander, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

³² *Chicago Tribune*, December 17, 1951, Part 2, page 3; *Minneapolis Star*, November 15, 1950; Thayer, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

³³ House Un-American Activities Committee, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

say for the Klansmen communism was present in the NAACP and in the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and was supported by money from the Jewish community. For example, in South Carolina, organizers for the Textile Workers Union of America were fair game for nightriding Klansmen, and in neighboring Atlanta thirty-two union leaders were whipped. The underlying reason for the anti-unionism was the explicit equal pay concept behind union organizations. Consequently, a Klansman would receive no more pay than a black member of the same union for the same work.³⁴ What might have been the high point in the Klan's anti-Semitism was reached in 1940, when the Knights became intimately involved in the German-American Bund. In August of that year cross-burning Klansmen appeared side-by-side with swastika-bearing Bundsmen at a rally on the 205-acre Camp Nordlund near Andover, New Jersey. Despite the presence of the Imperial Wizard himself and a Klan wedding at the rally, Colescott later attempted to repudiate the meeting amidst the unfavorable response it received.³⁵

The organization known as the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Inc. officially dissolved itself at an Imperial *Klonvokation* held in Atlanta on April 23, 1944. The immediate cause for its collapse was the filing of a suit for \$685,305 in back taxes by the United States Bureau of Internal Revenue. The more significant cause was its inability to deal with its own success. If the Klan had grown more slowly and more cautiously, it might have taken its place among other exclusive fraternities. As it was, it became subject to its own ineptness; and much like its Reconstruction ancestor, the Klan was undemocratic in organization and in decision-making, and uncontrollable in local action. The national leaders could not have controlled the violence and excesses in propaganda even if they had wished to.³⁶

Despite the exposure of graft and the lack of a positive program, thousands of Americans clung to the Klan spirit; nevertheless, as a viable organization the Klan was dead. The few parades of hooded citizens of the Invisible Empire now held would bring jeers rather than cheers. Blacks, once afraid of these symbols of white supremacy, would line the parade route and shout, "Send us your sheets, white folks, we'll wash'em!"³⁷ Once a special order to which the politicians and businessmen flocked to gain dignity, it had become a pariah to be shunned by the same men. But though the prestige of the Klan was gone, the attitudes which formed its mentality were still very much alive.

Fragments of the Klan

In 1946, Samuel Green, Sr., an Atlanta obstetrician, resurrected the

³⁴ Reference to the Klan's anti-union activities can be found in Chalmers, *op. cit.*, p. 8; House Un-American Activities Committee, *op. cit.*, p. 8; William Pierce Randel, *The Ku Klux Klan* (Philadelphia, 1965), p. 228; and Wellington Roe, "KKK Against America," *Frauds*, II (August-September, 1942), 23.

³⁵ Chalmers, *op. cit.*, pp. 322-23; and Gustavus Myers, *History of Bigotry in the United States* (New York, 1943), p. 394.

³⁶ Chalmers, *op. cit.*, pp. 297, 299.

³⁷ "Is the Klan on the Run?" *The ADL Bulletin*, V (September, 1949), 1.

old Association of Georgia Klans. Unwilling to recharter the Knights of which he was a *klavern* head because of the back taxes due, he attempted to create a nationwide organization. By the time of his death three years later, it was clear that Green had failed miserably in this purpose. In 1953, Eldon Lee Edwards chartered the US Klans of Georgia in a second attempt at Klan return of the post-war period. Despite his failure to organize outside the South, he and the Supreme Court decision on public schools of May, 1954, laid the groundwork for the contemporary Klan.

Today's Ku Klux Klan is marked by fragmentation and the failure of its leaders to agree on a common course of action in response to Klan-selected issues. In reality it is several organizations. The House Committee on Un-American Activities identifies fourteen separate groups ranging in membership from only 25 to over 15,000 dues-paying Klansmen.³⁸ The Klan movement has been a victim of inter-group rivalry with always at least three groups competing for power since 1949. Sometimes the dispute has been over tactics, such as the use of burning crosses to intimidate prospective black voters. More often it has appeared as simply a personality conflict or a struggle for control. Rather than examining all the various Klans, it is more fruitful to concentrate on the group with the largest following.

The largest contemporary Klan group is the United Klans of America (UKA) operating out of headquarters in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, under the front of the "Alabama Rescue Service." Since 1961 its Imperial Wizard has been Robert Shelton, a former rubber plant worker, who holds this post despite his serving a sentence in Texarkana Prison for contempt of Congress before the House Un-American Activities Committee.³⁹ Very recently there have been significant signs that the UKA's hold on local *klaverns* has been weakening. The largest UKA following is in North Carolina, where over half of the group's members reside. In July of 1968, reports began to filter out of North Carolina that Grand Dragon J. Robert Jones was having difficulty keeping his *klaverns* in line. At that time the presence of Federal Bureau of Investigation informants was offered as the explanation for the unrest, but now it appears that policy differences were the reason. On September 15, 1969, a number of North Carolina Klan leaders symbolically burned 125 membership cards on a cross. Claiming to represent half the state's membership, the leaders wished to break away from the UKA because of the overly centralized control of Klan operations. Leadership of the dissident group was to be offered to Jones upon his release from prison in January, 1970, where he was serving a term in a federal prison for contempt.⁴⁰ Despite this bitter dissen-

³⁸ House Un-American Activities Committee, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-62.

³⁹ The UKA national office has referred to him as "a political prisoner." The degree to which he still is revered is reflected in an invitation to attend a "homecoming banquet" on November 28, 1969, which signaled his release from prison and his resumption of duties as Imperial Wizard in the "fight to preserve this Nation" (cf. letter from W. Melvin Sexton, Imperial Kligrapp, October 28, 1969).

⁴⁰ The dissension in the North Carolina Klan organization is discussed in Howard Covington, "North Carolina Klan is Growing Feeble," *The Charlotte Observer*, July 21-23, 1968; Ronnie MacRae, "Break-away Klansmen Put Torch to UKA Member Cards," *The Concord Tribune*, September 13, 1969, pp. 1-2; and *Time*, September 26, 1969, p. 23.

sion, the literature from the national office of the UKA as reflected in *The Fiery Cross* continued to declare, "When you're in North Carolina . . . you're in 'Klan Country.'"

Once again one returns to the question of why people belong to the Klan. Clearly a major reason is racism. There appears to be no question of this in light of such qualifiers as "We don't hate Negroes. We love 'em in their place—like shinin' shoes, bell-hoppin', streetsweepin', pickin' cotton, diggin' ditches, eatin' possum, servin' time. . . ." ⁴¹ An exalted cyclops, the head of a *klavern*, summarizes the Klan's outlook, "Well, now, I'm not saying I approve of what was done there [the murder in Alabama of a white civil rights worker, Viola Liuzzo], but you've gotta remember what she was doing. Anyway, let's face it—this is a war." ⁴² Frequently the sentiment is not so clearly directed. One Klan leader in 1958 justifying the activity of the Klansmen, a justification still used today, declared that "the Klan isn't anything except anti-devil." ⁴³ Present-day Klan literature basically has three targets— blacks, Jews, and communists. Additional ones such as pacifists and civil rights workers are in the eyes of the Klan merely forms of one of these three evils. The New Left has replaced Roman Catholics and immigrants as threats to the Invisible Empire, largely because Catholics and newly arrived immigrants are less frightening to residents of Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and the Carolinas than civil rights workers.

The same controversy over the makeup of the Klan of the 1920's surrounds today's Ku Klux Klan. Richard Flowers, the Attorney General of Alabama, said "the average kluxer is a fifth-grade school dropout, with a background of social and economic failure." ⁴⁴ At the same time a member of North Carolinas' State Bureau of Investigation said that respected "businessmen and professional people are reportedly supporting the Klan, financially and otherwise." ⁴⁵ By examining present-day Klan members one sees virtually all facets of the white Protestant community represented. The study of Duke University sociologist Vander Zanden found that two thirds of the Klansmen he studied were "on the lower rungs of the middle class— gas station owners, small garage owners, or were on the upper rungs of the working class—auto mechanics, etc." ⁴⁶ To supplement and up-date Vander Zanden's data, an occupational-age-educational analysis was made of all the Klansmen called before the House Un-American Activities Committee in its 1965-1966 hearings. There is admittedly the tendency for such a sample to be misrepresentative. The overabundance of leaders rather than followers is indicated by the fact that 7

⁴¹ *Life*, April 23, 1965, p. 33.

⁴² Stewart Alsop, "Portrait of a Klansman," *Saturday Evening Post*, April 9, 1966, p. 2.

⁴³ *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 24, 1958.

⁴⁴ Flowers, "Southern Plain Talk About the Ku Klux Klan," *Look*, May 3, 1966, p. 37; and Thayer, *op. cit.*, p. 87, reaches a similar conclusion.

⁴⁵ Arnold Kirk, "New Hanover Klan One of the Strongest, SBI," *Washington Morning Star*, August 1, 1964.

⁴⁶ James W. Vander Zanden, "The Klan Revival," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXV (March, 1960), 456-62.

percent were full-time Klan employees. Table I, although offering no definite conclusion about the relative composition of the contemporary Ku Klux Klan, provides the latest information available on the range of people who belong. The data indicate the average Klansman is a forty-two year old skilled laborer with a high school education.

TABLE I
COMPOSITION OF PRESENT-DAY KLAN MEMBERSHIP¹

	Percentage of Klan Members	
AGE		
Under 30	13	(7)
31 to 40	42	(22)
41 to 50	27	(14)
51 to 60	8	(4)
Over 60	10	(5)
	100	n=52
EDUCATION		
Grade school or less	14	(8)
Some high school	27	(16)
High school diploma	34	(20)
Some college	15	(9)
College degree or more	9	(5)
	99 ²	n=58
OCCUPATION		
Professional	12	(5)
White-collar workers	5	(2)
Marginal small businessmen ³	12	(5)
Skilled workers ⁴	39	(16)
Unskilled workers ⁵	12	(5)
Farmers	7	(3)
Retired	5	(2)
Full-time Klan employees	7	(3)
	99 ²	n=41

¹ Data taken from witnesses before the Hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, October, 1965 to February, 1966. Includes all those witnesses who were either past or present Klan members whose background was given and excludes those witnesses whose sole purpose for joining the Klan was in the role of surveillance for a law enforcement agency.

² Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding error.

³ *e.g.*, gas station operator, restaurant operator, etc.

⁴ *e.g.*, garage mechanic, electrician, etc.

⁵ *e.g.*, nightwatchman, etc.

One of the important reasons for this type of person belonging to the Klan is the feeling of superiority that becoming a citizen of the Invisible Empire affords. This is now an even more important reason than earlier since many of the other reasons (*e.g.*, the prestige that comes with belonging to the Klan) are absent. Vander Zanden's principal thesis is that Klansmen are men who have been generally thwarted from obtaining certain societal goals. Instead of blaming themselves they turn to scapegoats and speak of plots, conspiracy, and corruption. One writer says the typical Klansmen "feels trapped and sees no way out except by lashing out viciously at the Negro below him and the white power structure

above him.”⁴⁷ The regalia and emotional symbolism literally lift them out of the frustrating lives they lead. The transformation reaches the height of absurdity when Klansmen successfully recruit Catholics and immigrants on the pretext that they “will be accepted as members of the ‘white’ community and thus will enjoy all the benefits available thereof.”⁴⁸

The methods used by the contemporary Ku Klux Klans are not greatly different from those used by the Knights in the 1920’s. Nightriding is still employed but is now more limited in its scope. A recent example of use of this tactic is the case of a movie theater in Gray, Georgia, which permitted blacks to sit in the balcony. Every Friday night fifty carloads of robed Klansmen circled the theater, leading eventually to the closing of the movie house.⁴⁹ Political control is almost completely absent today; although Klansmen still run for office, they rarely get beyond the primary. In the one case in North Carolina where Klansmen were elected in 1966, they had been unopposed in both the primary and the election. Their affiliation with the Invisible Empire soon became an issue. The hollowness of this “Klan victory” was shown when the two men issued statements saying they would not let the Klan influence their jobs as sheriff and register of deeds.⁵⁰ It is only in a few scattered communities and counties that Klansmen can be said to exercise measurable influence over civic officials and law enforcement bodies. Lieutenant Governor Carroll Gartin of Mississippi put it succinctly when he said that “a politician could denounce the Klan in Mississippi and survive; it isn’t that powerful.”⁵¹ Such a description certainly differs from the Klan of the 1920’s when politicians routinely joined the Invisible Empire.

Violence appears still to be intimately related with this secret order. Much of the propaganda from contemporary Klan groups indicates a non-violent posture. In fact the rhetoric borders on a posture of peaceful co-existence with the enemy. A circular from the office of the Grand Dragon of North Carolina reads in part, “in the event of a riot or any type of civil strife please stay at home and protect your family and property. . . . Leave it to the local law enforcement officers, your state police, and the National Guard to put the trouble down, using lawful means.” Yet there is no question that as individuals Klansmen tacitly approve, if not engage in, many acts of violence. Amidst disavowals of his action by Klan officials, a Ku Klux Klansman was arrested for the attempted murder of Fayette, Mississippi’s mayor, Charles Evers.⁵² Rallies featuring cross-burnings arouse emotions sufficient to evoke an audience

⁴⁷ Thayer, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

⁴⁸ *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 2, 1957.

⁴⁹ Lowe, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

⁵⁰ Covington, *op. cit.*, p. 1; and Robert Sherrill, “A Look Inside the Invisible Empire,” *New South*, XXIII (Spring, 1968), 45.

⁵¹ Sherrill, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁵² Joseph Lelyveld, “The Mayor of Fayette, Mississippi,” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 26, 1969, p. 54; and *New York Times*, September 12, 1969, p. 29.

response of "Kill the Niggers!"⁵³ It is not surprising that racial violence in the South often follows a Klan rally. The Klan has formed gun clubs which permitted members until recently to purchase ammunition and guns at reduced rates. Such action groups as the Underground, the Knock-off Squad, the Holy Terrors, the Wrecking Crew, and the Killer Squad are experts in demolitions and judo. Their determination to use violent tactics almost becomes an end in itself.⁵⁴

Despite gains as a result of reaction to the 1960 lunch counter sit ins and the 1961 freedom buses, the Klan has never gone over 20,000 people in membership. One must be cautioned against undue optimism nevertheless. The primary reason for the Klan's limited appeal to the masses lies in the formation of White Citizens Councils who focus their attention only on the blacks and who to some extent have shunned the extremist measures that have characterized the Klan even to the present.⁵⁵ It would appear then that little encouragement can be taken in the slow death of the Ku Klux Klan if it is paralleled by the rise of the White Citizens Council.

The Transformation of the Klan

The Ku Klux Klan throughout its history has retained its outwardly patriotic and ritualistic heritage. The Klan hierarchy of *wizards*, *kleagles*, and *nighthawks* has remained the same whether the Invisible Empire has 5,000 or 5,000,000 members. Basically the Klan's strength has come from the feeling of uncertainty of certain members of American society when they see their life styles threatened.

Rather than confronting the change, the Klansmen have, whether in 1867 or 1967, resisted the change and signaled out certain groups as the agents conspiring to undermine the American way. In the Reconstruction Klan the targets were the freed slaves and the North's occupation armies. As World War I marked a watershed in the social history of the Republic, the scapegoat became the Roman Catholics and the Jews. With the ability to adapt in a macabre fashion, the Knights were quick to seize upon pacifists, Indians, Orientals, and a host of others as the perpetrators of everything bad. Today all the Klan's evildoers are still around— Jews, communists, and pacifists. Klansmen now cringe from the activities of civil rights workers, the mass media, and even the local tavern owner who allows "colored folk" in on weekday afternoons. This constantly changing target of Klan propaganda reflects the changing attitudes of American society. As Zald and Asch suggest, in order to maintain itself as a social movement, the Klan adapted to maintain a large following.

But no longer can the Klan count five million in its Invisible Empire. The Realm's knights barely number enough to raise wooden crosses on isolated farms throughout the South and the Midwest. This suggests the

⁵³ House Un-American Activities Committee, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-120.

⁵⁵ Rice, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

second hypothesis, that the death of a social movement does not necessarily mean that its philosophies, or in this case prejudices, are not still present. One does not need to have a sheet over one's head to feel that evil-doers are at work everywhere. The white construction workers blocking the entry of blacks into trade unions, the White Hats of Cairo, Illinois and similar vigilante groups, and the anti-sex education housewives are all Klansmen just as if they had ridden out of *The Birth of a Nation*. As a movement the Klan may well be dead, but as a mentality it thrives.

One of the violent action groups with connections to the Klan is Nacirema or, ironically enough, *American* spelled backwards. There are many individuals, white and black, who still spell *American* backwards. Who can deny that much of the behavior one sees and reads about today epitomizes a klan mentality in all its hatred?



By SMITH OLIVER

Prophecy IV

(For the Flower People)

In the harlem of a rose
 when petals lock in mortal combat
 with thorns
 the king is crowned
 with sorrow
 and banished to a night
 called tomorrow
 as queens of frightful number rise
 mount a bull of shrieked laughter
 and
 trumpeting dilemma's horn
 ride the heels of howling hounds
 down the possum trail
 into the marble garden
 of forgotten names
 as seven open gates swing a wail
 of rusted hinges whistling horror's empty echo
 through that crowded jail
 of arrested blossoms.