

THE KU KLUX KLAN



One of the most odious secret societies is the Ku Klux Klan, born of a reactionary movement to preserve the white, Protestant character of post-Civil War America, often through intimidation and violence. The Klan originated in December 1865, in response to social changes in the South during Reconstruction and an unprecedented rise in immigration to America.

Most of these immigrants came from eastern and southern Europe, which were predominantly Catholic. At the peak of the influx in 1907, more than 1.2 million people emigrated to the United States, often prodded by poverty or persecution at home. By 1850, Catholics had become America's largest single denomination; by 1890, their population tripled. This led to increasing tensions, particularly in the South. The Ku Klux Klan was formed by six Confederate officers from Tennessee to restore white Protestant supremacy at the expense of Catholics, Jews, and African Americans, many of whom were former slaves. Klansmen set out to terrorize their victims through violence and intimidation, often dressing up as ghosts in colorful robes. Like Freemasons, they referred to their local organizations as lodges, led by a supreme leader called the Grand Wizard.

Originally, the Ku Klux Klan (loosely inspired by the Greek word for circle, *kyklos*) saw themselves as a Christian bulwark against the disintegration of white Protestant society. This heroic view of Klansmen as proud frontiersmen is extolled in books such as

The Clansman by Thomas Dixon, Jr., which formed the basis for D. W. Griffith's 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*. Because most members were hooded and their identities hidden, the group attracted many prominent businessmen, politicians, and even police officers. But reports of floggings, castrations, and lynching forced Washington to act. Two years after Congress issued the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, the KKK had disbanded.

The Terror of the Klan

Though the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1960s was limited, this period saw some of its most vicious acts. In 1964, the KKK was implicated in the murder of civil rights workers in Mississippi; the 1963 bombing of a Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama, that killed four children; and assassinations of activists for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Despite the violence and its alliance with other white supremacist groups, the KKK has never been declared a criminal or terrorist organization.

A colorized photograph of the Grand Cyclops of the Ku Klux Klan of Alabama, taken around 1903

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In 1915, however, the movement resurfaced, this time led by a Freemason and member of an American offshoot of the Knights Templar named William J. Simmons. Positioning Klansmen as white knights, as romanticized in *Birth of a Nation*, the second KKK was more rigorously organized and financed. Dressed in white garb and hoods, the society now focused on intimidating minority populations in the South with parades, cross burnings, and other demonstrations. The movement grew by leaps and bounds, in part because of its effective recruitment efforts among Freemasonry. By 1923, 500,000 of the four-million-strong KKK—men and women—were also members of Masonic lodges. Klansmen began to refer to themselves as the Invisible Empire—a network of

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sympathizers working behind the scenes to preserve Protestant white America. But the Depression decimated its ranks, and Congress suppressed the KKK for a second time in 1944, though not for long. The civil rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s prompted a resurgence of Klan activity. This time, however, it attracted only minor support from among the southern population. Though the Ku Klux Klan was never fully eradicated, some sources put today's membership at around 5,000 to 8,000. ■

OPPOSITE: In 1926, at the height of its power, the Ku Klux Klan paraded down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C. ABOVE: Members of the Ku Klux Klan prepare to march in July 2009 in Pulaski, Tennessee.