

Founded in 1866, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) extended into almost every southern state by 1870 and became a vehicle for white southern resistance to the Republican Party's Reconstruction-era policies aimed at establishing political and economic equality for blacks. Its members waged an underground campaign of intimidation and violence directed at white and black Republican leaders. Though Congress passed legislation designed to curb Klan terrorism, the organization saw its primary goal—the reestablishment of white supremacy—fulfilled through Democratic victories in state legislatures across the South in the 1870s. After a period of decline, white Protestant nativist groups revived the Klan in the early 20th century, burning crosses and staging rallies, parades and marches denouncing immigrants, Catholics, Jews, blacks and organized labor. The civil rights movement of the 1960s also saw a surge of Ku Klux Klan activity, including bombings of black schools and churches and violence against black and white activists in the South.

FOUNDING OF THE KU KLUX KLAN

A group including many former Confederate veterans founded the first branch of the Ku Klux Klan as a social club in Pulaski, Tennessee, in 1866. The first two words of the organization's name supposedly derived from the Greek word "kyklos," meaning circle. In the summer of 1867, local branches of the Klan met in a general organizing convention and established what they called an "Invisible Empire of the South." Leading Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest was chosen as the first leader, or "grand wizard," of the Klan; he presided over a hierarchy of grand dragons, grand titans and grand cyclopes.

Did You Know?

At its peak in the 1920s, Klan membership exceeded 4 million people nationwide.

The organization of the Ku Klux Klan coincided with the beginning of the second phase of post-Civil War Reconstruction, put into place by the more radical members of the Republican Party in Congress. After rejecting President Andrew Johnson's relatively lenient Reconstruction policies, in place from 1865 to 1866, Congress passed the Reconstruction Act over the presidential veto. Under its provisions, the South was divided into five military districts, and each state was required to approve the 14th Amendment, which granted "equal protection" of the Constitution to former slaves and enacted universal male suffrage.

KU KLUX KLAN VIOLENCE IN THE SOUTH

From 1867 onward, African-American participation in public life in the South became one of the most radical aspects of Reconstruction, as blacks won election to southern state governments and even to the U.S. Congress. For its part, the Ku Klux Klan dedicated itself to an underground campaign of violence against Republican leaders and voters (both black and white) in an effort to reverse the policies of Radical Reconstruction and restore white supremacy in the South. They were joined in this struggle by similar organizations such as the Knights of the White Camelia (launched in Louisiana in 1867) and the White Brotherhood. At least 10 percent of the black legislators elected during the 1867-1868 constitutional conventions became victims of violence during Reconstruction, including seven who were killed. White Republicans (derided as "carpetbaggers" and "scalawags") and black institutions such as schools and churches—symbols of black autonomy—were also targets for Klan attacks.

By 1870, the Ku Klux Klan had branches in nearly every southern state. Even at its height, the Klan did not boast a well-organized structure or clear leadership. Local Klan members—often wearing masks and dressed in the organization's signature long white robes and hoods—usually carried out their attacks at night, acting on their own but in support of the common

goals of defeating Radical Reconstruction and restoring white supremacy in the South. Klan activity flourished particularly in the regions of the South where blacks were a minority or a small majority of the population, and was relatively limited in others. Among the most notorious zones of Klan activity was South Carolina, where in January 1871 500 masked men attacked the Union county jail and lynched eight black prisoners.

THE KU KLUX KLAN AND THE END OF RECONSTRUCTION

Though Democratic leaders would later attribute Ku Klux Klan violence to poorer southern whites, the organization's membership crossed class lines, from small farmers and laborers to planters, lawyers, merchants, physicians and ministers. In the regions where most Klan activity took place, local law enforcement officials either belonged to the Klan or declined to take action against it, and even those who arrested accused Klansmen found it difficult to find witnesses willing to testify against them. Other leading white citizens in the South declined to speak out against the group's actions, giving them tacit approval. After 1870, Republican state governments in the South turned to Congress for help, resulting in the passage of three Enforcement Acts, the strongest of which was the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871.

For the first time, the Ku Klux Klan Act designated certain crimes committed by individuals as federal offenses, including conspiracies to deprive citizens of the right to hold office, serve on juries and enjoy the equal protection of the law. The act authorized the president to suspend the writ of habeas corpus and arrest accused individuals without charge, and to send federal forces to suppress Klan violence. This expansion of federal authority—which Ulysses S. Grant promptly used in 1871 to crush Klan activity in South Carolina and other areas of the South—outraged Democrats and even alarmed many Republicans. From the early 1870s onward, white supremacy gradually reasserted its hold on the South as support for Reconstruction waned; by the end of 1876, the entire South was under Democratic control once again.

REVIVAL OF THE KU KLUX KLAN

In 1915, white Protestant nativists organized a revival of the Ku Klux Klan near Atlanta, Georgia, inspired by their romantic view of the Old South as well as Thomas Dixon's 1905 book "The Clansman" and D.W. Griffith's 1915 film "Birth of a Nation." This second generation of the Klan was not only anti-black but also took a stand against Roman Catholics, Jews, foreigners and organized labor. It was fueled by growing hostility to the surge in immigration that America experienced in the early 20th century along with fears of communist revolution akin to the Bolshevik triumph in Russia in 1917. The organization took as its symbol a burning cross and held rallies, parades and marches around the country. At its peak in the 1920s, Klan membership exceeded 4 million people nationwide.

The Great Depression in the 1930s depleted the Klan's membership ranks, and the organization temporarily disbanded in 1944. The civil rights movement of the 1960s saw a surge of local Klan activity across the South, including the bombings, beatings and shootings of black and white activists. These actions, carried out in secret but apparently the work of local Klansmen, outraged the nation and helped win support for the civil rights cause. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson delivered a speech publicly condemning the Klan and announcing the arrest of four Klansmen in connection with the murder of a white female civil rights worker in Alabama. The cases of Klan-related violence became more isolated in the decades to come, though fragmented groups became aligned with neo-Nazi or other right-wing extremist organizations from the 1970s onward. In the early 1990s, the Klan was estimated to have between 6,000 and 10,000 active members, mostly in the Deep South.

The KKK was founded in Tennessee immediately after the end of the Civil War as a sort of social club for former Confederate Soldiers whose influence quickly spread through the decimated Southern states. As Columbia professor **Eric Foner** wrote in his *A Short History of Reconstruction*, in its early days, the group was loosely bound by one main principle: launching a reign of terror against Republican leaders black and white.

Racism was, of course, a guiding principle, but not quite as guiding as the hatred of the Republicans, the party of Lincoln, the Yankees who early Klansmen believed destroyed their homeland through what they termed a “war of northern aggression.”

The Republican Party had been founded in a schoolhouse in Ripon, Wisconsin just 12 years earlier, and Lincoln was its first president. The Klan saw both as just as big a menace as the newly freed slaves. Less than a year after Lincoln’s assassination, the Klan’s anti-Republican ideology spread rapidly.

As Dr. Foner wrote:

In effect, the Klan was a military force serving the interests of the Democratic party, the planter class, and all those who desired the restoration of white supremacy. It aimed to destroy the Republican party’s infrastructure, undermine the Reconstruction state, reestablish control of the black labor force, and restore racial subordination in every aspect of Southern life.

In 1868, the Klan elected its first Grand Wizard, Nathaniel Bedford Forrest. Decades later, his grandson wrote in the **September 1928 issue of the Klan’s Kourier Magazine**:

I have never voted for any man who was not a regular Democrat. My father ... never voted for any man who was not a Democrat. My grandfather was ...the head of the Ku Klux Klan in reconstruction days.... My great-grandfather was a life-long Democrat.... My great-great-grandfather was...one of the founders of the Democratic party.

Under the elder Forrest, the Klan’s violence grew almost uncontrollable. In the time leading up to the 1868 presidential election, the Klan’s activities picked up in speed and brutality. The election, which pitted Republican Ulysses S. Grant against Democrat Horatio Seymour, was crucial. Republicans would continue programs that prevented Southern whites from gaining political control in their states. Klan members knew that given the chance, the blacks in their communities would vote Republican.

Across the South, the Democrat controlled Klan and other terrorist groups used brutal violence to intimidate Republican voters. In Kansas, over 2,000 murders were committed in connection with the election. In Georgia, the number of threats and beatings was even higher. And in Louisiana, 1000 blacks were killed as the election neared. In those three states, Democrats won decisive victories at the polls.

Democrats. Not Republicans, not Tea Partiers. Democrats.

And now blacks, who apparently know little or nothing of their history and heritage because they have been purposely kept uneducated by Democratic laws and policies, enthusiastically embrace their former murderers, completely unaware that they have once again been subjugated to the white-supremacy ideology of the Democrats. Yes, black friends, you and your forebearers were hunted down, burned out of your homes, tortured and murdered by white men. But what has been left out of the narrative is that they were **Democrats**, the very people whose asses you now kiss with glee. And they are all laughing at your stupidity.

David Duke, former Grand Master of the KKK, plans to run for U.S. Senate office in Louisiana, saying, “The time is right.” Keep your eyes on this one.