

Radical Republicans versus the Ku Klux Klan

Benjamin Wood chronicles the efforts to destroy the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction

THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN Republican government officials and the Ku Klux Klan began almost from the birth of this terrorist organization in 1866 and lasted throughout the years of Reconstruction. The policy known as "Radical Reconstruction" began with a series of federal laws which were passed between March 1867 and March 1868. From the beginning, the Republican majority in Congress was at odds with President Andrew Johnson. The President, as Lincoln before him, wished to allow the seceded states to re-enter the Union with a minimum of difficulty and as soon as possible. Congress had other plans. Most Republicans felt that real political change had to be foisted upon the defeated Southern states before they could be readmitted. This new order included such provisions as acceptance of the Fourteenth Amendment (which guaranteed equality for all US citizens regardless of race) and, even more distasteful to most Southerners, the adoption of state constitutions that called for Black male suffrage. The conflict between Congress and the President would see Congress pass three Reconstruction Acts, each time overriding Johnson's veto and would end in an unprecedented presidential impeachment trial.

To show that Congress was serious, it divided the South, save Tennessee, into five military districts each having a commander responsible for maintaining law and order. These generals were allowed to replace state officials



A celebration of the abolition of slavery in Washington, D.C.

who, in their views, opposed reconstruction. Some commanders exercised this option more frequently than others and quite a few officials (on both the state and municipal levels) including four governors were replaced by Republicans. In total, some 20,000 federal troops were assigned to occupy the former rebel states.

Birth of the KKK

It was into this environment that the Ku Klux Klan was born. This secret society was formed by returning Confederate soldiers in Pulaski, Tennessee in 1866. The name derives from the Greek *kuklos* meaning circle. The Klan spread rapidly to every Southern State (except Virginia which was

already partially controlled by the Democratic Party), playing on White resentment of Republican rule and fears of Blacks gaining a greater measure of power in society. Although the Klan drew its membership from all social classes, the average Klansman was usually a poor farmer fearful of Blacks as economic competitors.

The first "Grand Wizard" was Nathan Bedford Forrest, a former Confederate general, who had traveled frequently in 1868 promoting the "service" the Klan was providing to the South and recruiting members. Once formed, however, each "den" was for the most part independent of the higher structure of the organization; thus when Forrest called for the dissolution of the Klan in January 1869, citing violent excesses in some regions, many local chapters either reorganized under different names or simply ignored the order.

The Ku Klux Klan targeted three main groups as part of their "Southern resistance" to Radical Reconstruction. These people included carpetbaggers (Northerners who moved South following the war), scalawags (Southerners who voted for the despised Republican Party) and the millions of former slaves.

Methods of Mayhem

The methods used to intimidate opponents are well known. Members used verbal threats, whippings, beatings and murder to achieve their ends. As for their dress, Klansmen "disguised" themselves in white sheets and

hoods, partly to perpetuate the story that they were the ghosts of Confederate dead to frighten rural, illiterate, superstitious Blacks, but mainly to hide the identity of the wearer.

The Klan's White victims included Northern entrepreneurs who migrated South to buy cheap land, or start businesses in the reconstructing states. The carpetbaggers were not welcomed or wanted by the White conservative population. These men and women were viewed with suspicion and rarely accepted into polite society, even after years of living in the South. By far the most hated carpetbaggers were teachers employed in schools for Blacks since they sought to raise their pupils' educational (and thereby economic, political and social) standing. In the antebellum South, education had been reserved for the children of the aristocracy. Following the war, however, education became universal, albeit in segregated schools. Many Southern landowners resented being taxed to support schools in general and schools for Blacks in particular. These same "respectable" men were often leaders of, or bankrolled, the Klan. There are numerous examples of violence against teachers; these acts of hate were usually directed at men, but occasionally female teachers were targeted. The Klan often claimed that action was necessary to prevent Blacks from being exposed to "subversive Yankee ideas".

While some Black schools were run by private charities, such as the American Missionary Association, most were controlled and funded by the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and



"Franchise. And Not This Man?"

Abandoned Lands, or as it was commonly known the Freedmen's Bureau. This government office was created by Congress in 1865 to provide food, clothing and assistance to the newly freed slaves. In all, an 1868 War Department report estimated that there were some 2,295 teachers, of both races, educating Blacks of all ages in the South. Despite the violence, including the burning of schools, many of these dedicated people refused to be intimidated while so

much work was left to be done.

If carpetbaggers were seen as "foreigners", scalawags were viewed as outright traitors. These men were thought to be betraying the South and were to be shown no mercy. White men who voted for the party of Lincoln did so for a variety of reasons. Some truly believed in improving the lot of Blacks in their part of the country. Many had been members of the Union League, which had been formed years before as an anti-secession organization. The Union League was open to Blacks and Whites alike and, by 1867, it had become an influential force for recruiting Blacks to the Republican Party.

Scalawags by the score were "kluxed" for selling land to Blacks or for engaging in other "unpardonable" acts, such as testifying on behalf of Freedmen in court. Prominent Republicans were in constant fear for their lives as the Klan threatened leaders and disrupted party rallies. In one of the most brazen acts of the era, North Carolina Klansmen lured Republican State senator John Stephens into the Yanceyville courthouse where he was murdered.

Without a doubt the Klan's most venomous hatred was reserved for Blacks. According to Southern tradition, these people were expected to know and remain in their place. Despite federal law, this did not include exer-

cising the right to vote. Black men were prevented from voting in part because the vast majority would, of course, vote the Republican ticket. After all, it was this party that had given them freedom, the right to



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The three Reconstruction Presidents of the United States.

vote and was perceived to be looking out for their interests. By contrast, the Democratic Party was universally held to be the party of conservatism and White supremacy.

As Blacks attempted to vote, confrontations with Klansmen and their supporters escalated. The pattern of violence and intimidation that accompanied state elections came to be known as the Mississippi Plan after Mississippi Democrats vowed to use any amount of force necessary in order to win control of the state government.

The Violence Grows

As outright violence spread, Republican state governments attempted to deal with the growing violence. The effectiveness of these efforts varied greatly from state to state. The only Southern state in which the Klan was totally vanquished was Arkansas, and much of the credit must go to Governor Powell Clayton. Of Northern birth, Clayton, who served the Union during the war, settled in Arkansas following the conflict and became active in the Republican Party. In the wake of his election in 1868, violence grew statewide and Clayton took an uncompromising stance in dealing with the KKK. By calling upon the militia (composed of loyal Republicans), the Governor was able to crush the local chapters within a short period.

As for actions in other states, Republican strategies in Tennessee and North Carolina met with mixed results. In the "Volunteer State", Governor William Brownlow formed militia units comprised of men from eastern Tennessee, where the Klan had little influence. Since the Governor did not formally declare martial law, the militia was denied the power to try Klansmen in military courts, having to rely instead on local sheriffs and prosecutors. Naturally, many of these officials refused to carry out their duties, either because they were intimidated by, or were in league with, the Klan. Nevertheless, the presence of the state militia did reduce



The First Vote from *Harper's Weekly*, by A.R. Waud

Klan activity both in 1867 and again in 1869.

The situation was much the same in North Carolina. By the spring of 1870, with state elections nearing, violence flared in most counties. Governor William Holden, following Clayton's example, summoned the militia (in this case, men from western North Carolina). As the militia advanced, arresting dozens of Klansmen for terrorist activities, peace slowly returned to the state.

Despite this success, since the North Carolina constitution did not allow the militia to try the prisoners before a military court, they were, as in Tennessee, turned over to the local authorities. Predictably, those arrested, including men guilty of murder, were released within a short period of time.



The Ku Klux Klan made life "worse than slavery" for Southern Blacks.

Unfortunately, Holden's career did not parallel that of Clayton. The heavy handed actions of the militia alienated much of the White population, and the Governor found himself vilified in the Democratic press. In August, the Democrats won control of the legislature and quickly moved to impeach Holden. William Holden became the first governor in US history to be removed from office in this way.

In other parts of the South, state efforts to control the Klan met with absolutely no success. These states included Georgia, Mississippi and South Carolina. Below the Mason-Dixon line, governors could rely on Blacks to serve in the militia, but for a variety of reasons, few chose to make use of them. Although loyal to the Republican cause, Blacks, having recently emerged from slavery, lacked the experience and morale to stand toe to toe with groups of Whites comparably armed.

Indeed, in many areas the presence of Black militia units actually provoked Klan violence. In 1870 and 1871, Klansmen in South Carolina beat militia members, burned their homes and murdered their officers. The situation grew so bad that Governor Robert Scott finally disbanded the militia companies altogether.

Controlling the Klan

By 1870 Radical Republicans in both the North and South were pleading with the federal government to take action. The majority of Democratic politicians on the other hand, felt the Klan's activities were exaggerated to further the Republican agenda.

The problem, of course, was that almost all of the crimes committed by the "invisible empire" (e.g. murder, assault) were state rather than federal offenses. Since it was obvious that most state governments could not control the Ku Klux Klan, the job was left to the federal government. As more reports of lawlessness reached Washington, the Republican-controlled Congress took firm action.

The Enforcement Acts

On 31 May 1870, lawmakers passed the first Enforcement Act; a second followed on 28 February 1871. These laws were designed to deal with civil rights violations in general, and to bolster the provisions of the Fifteenth Amendment in particular, which granted voting rights regardless of race. The Acts declared that the use of violence or intimidation to prevent citizens from exercising the right to vote was to be punished by fines and/or imprisonment. In addition, the new laws stated "That it shall be lawful for the President of the United States to employ such part of the land or naval forces of the United States... as shall be necessary to aid in the execution of judicial process issued under this act."

With this terrorist group specifically in mind, in April of the following year, the Senate and the House of Representatives passed a third Enforcement Act, which was popularly known, as the Ku Klux Klan Act. It provided penalties for people conspiring together or going "in disguise... for the purpose of depriving any person or class of persons of the equal protection of the laws."

The Act further empowered the President to suspend the writ of habeas corpus. This legislation gave President Ulysses Grant the ammunition he needed. Grant, along with his Attorney General Amos Akerman, firmly supported the Fifteenth Amendment and other federal laws protecting the rights of the Black population.

Armed with the Enforcement Acts, Grant selected South Carolina in which to demonstrate the federal government's resolve. The President declared nine counties, in which the Klan was most active, to be in a state of insurrection and dispatched federal troops to restore law and order. On 17 October 1871, Grant suspended the writ of habeas corpus and autho-

alized mass arrests of members of the Ku Klux Klan.

Soldiers of the Seventh Cavalry soon began rounding up Klansmen, many on the charge of "conspiracy and murder". Several hundred known members were arrested and more than 800 fled the state. Since the Enforcement Acts did not allow the military to try civilians, the prisoners were transferred to the state capital of Columbia, and in November the trials began in US District Court.

Publicity and Mixed Results

The government, despite its efforts, became a victim of its own success. The sheer number of those arrested swamped the primitive, outdated court system. Although Congress pledged more money, the Justice Department was allocated only \$2 million — not nearly enough to modernize



A woodcut showing a lynching of White men from Ohio by the Ku Klux Klan. The donkey, symbol of the Democrat party, is depicted with its back to the crime.

the courts and handle the additional workload. By late 1871, only five Klansmen had been tried and convicted.

The government's actions were of intense interest to the public, however, and the trials received nationwide press coverage. This, in turn, brought the Klan's illegal and brutal activities to the attention of the American people. Despite the low conviction rate, the publicity of the court proceedings and the determination of the government smashed the power of the KKK in South Carolina.

Texas was the only other southern state in which the federal government completely destroyed this organization. This was due in large part to the fact that the military had the manpower in place, dealing with Indian tribes and Mexican bandits, to strike at the Klan in force.

Despite the successes in South Carolina and Texas, the record of federal victories over the Klan was spotty. President Grant, unwilling to be perceived as a military dictator, intervened less and less often in the South. After 1874 his administration virtually stopped helping Republican state governments altogether. Several factors led to the federal government's lack of will to enforce civil rights laws. In 1874, the Democrats captured a majority of seats in Congress (this was the first time this had occurred since before the war)

which assured that the legislative branch would make only token efforts in the South. In late 1871, in a purely political move, the President fired Attorney General Akerman. Grant took this action in order to appease wealthy Republican donors whom Akerman had offended by making unfavorable decisions relating to their railroads. The new Attorney General was far less committed to civil rights than had been his predecessor.

The US Army had also become less enthusiastic about intervening in the South. Since 1865, the Army had been mustering out troops and those that still served were needed on the western plains. On the political front, in the mid 1870s, the Republican Party seems to have lost its idealism and much of its momentum in dealing with Reconstruction. Its two most influential leaders, Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner, had died and many rank and file members became more concerned with personal accumulation of wealth than with events occurring in the South. Americans were also distracted by the numerous scandals

that engulfed members of the Grant administration. In addition to these events, beginning in 1873, the nation found itself struggling through an economic depression that would last until 1878. The most important factor, though, was that the public became tired of the constant struggles over Reconstruction. There was a general feeling that it was time for the country to look ahead rather than deal with intractable problems such as race relations.



Scenes from the resurrected Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s.



End of An Era

As for the Ku Klux Klan, its membership and activities declined substantially in the deep South in the latter years of Reconstruction due primarily to the fact that state governments reverted to what was called "home rule", that is, control by native Democrats. Without the support of the federal government, Republican state governments collapsed. Local Democrats won control of Texas in 1873 and Arkansas and Alabama in 1874. Although these elections were characterized by fraud and intimidation, Washington took no action to overturn the results. By 1876, only Louisiana, South Carolina and Florida were still in Republican hands.

The era of Reconstruction came to an end with the so called "Compromise of 1877". As the results of the presidential election of 1876 were in dispute, the Republican candidate, Rutherford B. Hayes, who actually lost the popular vote, agreed to a deal in order to win the majority of electoral votes which would put him in the White House. In exchange for their support, electors from Louisiana, South Carolina and Florida received a pledge from Hayes to withdraw Army units stationed in the South. On 24 April 1877, Hayes, true to his word, ordered the last federal troops to depart the region. Over the next

few years, Southern legislatures passed the infamous "Jim Crow" laws which demanded segregation, as well as imposed literacy tests and poll taxes designed to deny Blacks their voting rights. In the South of the latter half of the 19th century, Blacks were legally reduced to the status of second-class citizens.

With Southern Democrats in control of the South once more, and Jim Crow laws in place, many people saw little need for the Ku Klux Klan. As Reconstruction ended and a sense of "normalcy" returned to the South, the Klan, for all intents and purposes, temporarily died out. It would be resurrected in 1915 and gain strength following WWI.

In spite of its popularity in certain rural areas of the South, the Klan, by itself, was never able to bring down a single Radical Republican government. Obviously, this was because the group's activities were clearly criminal and occurred at a time when most Northerners favored a strict policy of Reconstruction. In the end, of course, Klansmen and

their supporters achieved their ends as the hated Republican governments fell and discriminatory laws aimed at Blacks were established. Throughout this era, state and federal efforts to destroy the Klan met with mixed results. Had President Grant attacked the organization with the same vigor and determination with which he had fought the Confederacy, and had Congress given the courts the money needed to see the job through, the KKK could have been decimated in 1871. Had the resolve been present in the 1870s, organized segregation might not have become the order of the South, and the unrest, violence and nation-wrenching struggle that would characterize much of the next 100 years, might have been avoided. Instead the Klan moved into a dormant stage, only to reemerge stronger and better organized in the next century.

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1. Why would Johnson want to allow the seceded states to re-enter with *minimum* difficulty?

2. What could be the possible effects of having military districts in the South?

3. What were the goals of the KKK? What social class is mostly represented in that group?

4. Nelson Mandela once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." How is this quote supported by the actions of the KKK?
5. What were the benefits and drawbacks of having the militias, especially during election season?

6. What were the examples of the federal government effectively fighting the KKK? What made them successful?

7. Why didn't the federal government continue the fight?

8. What are Jim Crow laws?

9. How did these laws contribute to the decline of the KKK?