

History of ku klux klan in 1920s

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In a time where the United States had just emerged as a predominant world power, a time when everyone seemed to be thriving in the nation, an era known for its opulence and extravagance just wasn't quite as it seemed on the surface. The 1920s are in many ways painted with a golden aura, a time for indulgence, fun and "success". The United States was experiencing an economic boom, increases in wealth, consumer industry growing, innovations and new inventions around every turn waiting to make life better, make life easier. Opulent, sparking and exciting are perhaps three of the words that anyone depicting the time would surely use; while the twenties have historically been considered a "golden age" many underlying events belied that moniker. The dark unpinings of that era would lead to serious problems that would not be solved until many decades later. Part of the dark underbelly of the decade was the resurgence of one of the nation's darkest secret societies. The resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan wouldn't be done in secret however, new goals, tactics and enemies emerged early in the 1920s. Fueled by Americanism, fear of the rapid societal changes and fear of immigrants the Ku Klux Klan was able to fuel an impressive comeback only to decline just as quickly.

Turning back the clock from the twenties, it is important to first understand the beginnings of the Ku Klux Klan to be able to see how their second rise was possible. Following the end of the Civil War a group was founded with the main purpose of being the vehicle for the resistance coming out of the South during the reconstruction that were being pushed by the Republican party. The bones of the first terrorist organization can actually be traced back to the days on the frontier where hard work, individualism and a special

form of social justice, swift, private and immediate, were everyday life. Perhaps those roots are where the violent traits of the organization truly formed. This violence can be seen in the way that the Southern Klansmen took to their paths of burning crosses and hooded rallies, scare tactics that were being used to force their views into the public eye. Not only were the Southerners fighting against agendas they did not agree with, they were also retaliating for the destruction and occupation that the Civil War had left in its wake. The methods of the first wave of the Klan were bloody and violent. As this violence from the group grew so did the turbulence within the group itself. The Klan also faced more scrutiny from the United States government and local authorities, putting pressure on founding members to perhaps do something about the group. It is speculated that the leader of the Klan in early 1869 sent out an actual disbandment order, perhaps just a ruse to give himself plausible deniability of the heinous acts his group was making around the country. More laws were enacted putting down the activities of the Klansmen which naturally led to a decline in the groups activity. After elections were held in the 1870s the effect of the Klan scaring off African Americans from voting had proven fruitful and Southern Democrats had regained control of their governments and subsequently passing their own local laws to relinquish rights of the African Americans.

The purpose of the Klan was slowly diminishing and they faded away into the background until 1915. By the early 20th Century, support for the Klan had waned but in 1915 the group saw a transformation at the hands of William J. Simmons. This transformation came to Simmons following the release of the film Birth of a Nation. The film brought to the silver screen the novel written

by Thomas Dixon The Clansman which told a fictional story from the 1860s following a family in the North and a family in the South. The film was hailed as a glorification of the Klan and led to many riots and protests outside of theaters showing the film. A news article published in The Atlantic Constitution described this new era of the Klan as a “ secret organization with a view to taking an active part in the betterment of mankind” Enrollment into this new society was slow and in 1920 Klan membership was in the low thousands. Simmons took action and hired out for publicity and began to spread the new Klan message even further, casting a wider net to encourage membership. The second Klan sought an America that was without immigrants, one that was controlled by protestant whites and only held those who could walk in unison to this homogeneous ideal.

The twenties, known as the Gilded Age, a term coined by Mark Twain in his writing in the late 1800s, was one of rapid growth and change. Following the war the United States saw changes across the board in social, economic, and political categories. Railroad industries saw enormous growth as did the stock markets. Consumption of consumer products also exploded as new products were made available and purchasing power through credit made it easier for the public to buy large ticket items. Social norms were also changing as women enjoyed new roles and began to change how they lived their lives. Beneath the exterior of the twenties’ opulence the country was facing a lot of strife. Immigration and the first red scare were knocking at the door, threatening the security of these new fancy lives.

Following World War I the United States, a nation built of immigrants, began to retreat into itself. Early in its newfound role as a world power the nation was not ready to accept the responsibility that came with this new deal of power. From this retreat one could conclude that a fire was lit under the nations views on immigration. In 1917 legislation was passed to heavily restrict and control immigration. Immigrants were thought to be causing trouble in the country and inundating an already flooded job market. Some argued that the only way to push forward as a nation was to eliminate any additional entrants into the country. They argued that immigrants were not properly assimilating into our society either due to their not having a desire to do so or there being too many immigrants for our country to properly help them assimilate.

Going hand and hand with the perceived threat of immigration was the idea of Americanism or nativism. The feelings embedded in Americanism were the belief that those who are American born, native born and specifically white protestant born, had superior rights to those were were foreign born. These fears were compounded with the fear of communism and socialism which then also played into the desire to sem immigration. In September of 1924 Hiram Wesley Evans, the Klan's Imperial Wizard gave a speech on "The Klan of Tomorrow". " Americans find today that the aliens, whom we had believed would join with us to preserve the liberties which they share with use, have, instead of joining, challenged and attacked us. They seek to destroy Americanism in the name of philanthropy [ie the good of all] by substituting for patriotism universalism [allegiance to a global ideology] under which freedom and representative democracy alike would die..."

Evans viewed the Klan as the defenders of Americanism while others would publicly argue that Americanism was merely an ideal “ a faith in freedom, tolerance, humanity. It cannot discriminate because of color birthplace or creed; nor can it tolerate caste, class, or religious distinctions in politics, social life, or legal standing; especially it cannot for a moment endure the breeding of exploitation of hatred and prejudice s a means to sway public opinion and win political power’. To counter this in the same publication several months later Evans would argue that “ This is said without offense to other civilizations, but we do believe that ours, through all possible growth and expansion, should remain the same kind that was brought forth upon this continent...We hold firmly that America belongs to Americans, and should be kept American...The whole purpose of the Klan is to bring this belief to fulfillment.”

After the start of World War I and the United States entrance into the conflict, war production consequently increase dramatically. African Americans were enticed to migrate from their southern homes to industrial cities in the north for work opportunities. It is estimated that close to 1 million African Americans left the South during the Great Migration. This migration created extra strain not only on the competition for jobs but also living accomodations. This racial tension was felt throughout the nation and was just another catalyst for the emergence of a second Klan. The original Klan focused their efforts and membership on the South, it was what fit their reach and their agenda. Following the great migration the earner which the Klan had to target with propaganda rose as did their messaging. They had new goals to achieve. Walter White wrote in The Forum “ The Ku Klux Klan,

by spreading its propaganda in Northern industrial centers, seeks to oust Negroes from employment, thinking that they will be forced to return to the South" (White 1921)

The Klan played on the white public's sense of fear, humiliation and victimization. They spread misinformation and planted false news stories about conspiratorial Jews and the greedy Catholic priests. This expanded breadth of undesirables they clearly had a larger target to aim for. The Klan was no longer singularly targeting African Americans, they expanded their list to Asians, Roman Catholics, Jews, immigrants, bootleggers. This new Klan operated in the daylight as opposed to the shadows of the night they had once operated under. They organized events, recruited from ads in newspapers and members were proud to boast of their affiliation to the Klan. Things were changing quickly in the country and many sought to place blame for the changes and return to the "old ways". The Klansmen were able to play on these insecurities and doubt of the rural agricultural communities and would attack the intellectuals, the elite, the change makers. Blame was being placed on the liberal professionals in the urban areas, those who the Klansmen felt were looking down on them referring to them as stupid and out of step with modernity.

Propaganda was a huge factor in the growth of the 1920s Ku Klux Klan. It was necessary to the survival of the organization to gain and retain members. In *The Ku Klux Klan: Citizens of Dallas, Texas, Takes Actions Against the Activities of the Klan* the methods of propaganda are explored. Among these the "simplest of propaganda expedients is the masked parade.

This is calculated to inspire curiosity on the part of those outside the Klan and makes them want to be inside". (1922) Other methods included sending their masked members to local organizations and locations such as funerals, hospitals and churches. As the novelty of these activities wore off members also took to hosting more "charitable" operations, small amounts of money were donated to families suffering hardship as a means to put a charitable face forward and create a more thoughtful view of the Klan.

While violent actions were still a feature of this new Klan, members around the nation were also hired to preach to congregations of the Klan's views. These members would brand their message to the particular area to which they were speaking. For example in communities with larger Japanese or African American populations a message of white supremacy was used while in other areas a message of anti-Catholic or anti-Jewish might be more relevant. The new Klan was organized and also careful with their criticism not wanting to alienate anyone who held actual economic or political power.

The Klan of the 1920s was one that was very mainstreamed. As the group grew in size they acquired their own media outlets and even boasted the ownership of Cavalier Motion Picture Company. These acquisitions allowed the Klan to put their message out further and in front of more potential members. Members benefited from the networking opportunities that this new Klan provided, there was a sense of prestige and was seen as a way to raise their economic and social status. Members were proud to belong to this new society. It can be surmised that perhaps the Klan was at its most popular at this point in time. Feeding off of opportunity and a new found

expanded purpose their membership in the twenties was able to reach estimations between 3 and 5 million with millions more in sympathizers nationwide. Out of their veiled secrecy they held public events and social gatherings, all disguised with a small town sense of community, a way to entice the average American into their group and into the fold where they would feel a part of something. Their methodology for attracting membership was able to attract those who were fearful and unsettled, those who could perhaps be manipulated from not just citizens harboring feelings of bigotry but to those who would be willing to act on them in forms of harassment, intimidation and even violence against those seen as undesirable. Actions that would be done simply out of a sense of patriotism. Historically speaking the rise and fall of the Klan can be traced to the ebb and flow of fear and tension in the United States.

The eras in which the Klan is able to promote, grow in numbers, and are seen as most active are those when they are able to capitalize (need a different word) on the racial and social tensions, playing into the fears of whites across the nation. This can be drawn out with the decline of the Klan in the twenties and into the thirties. The idea that America was doomed because of immigration and external foreign factors was one that never came to fruition. As the fears stemming from World War I began to subside Americans were able to move forward and enjoy a more prosperous time. The fuel to the fire of fear the Klan depended on had run out. Immigration and the great migration continued without causing as much conflict as was predicted by the propaganda of the Klan. It is possible that one of the final nails in the coffin of their 1920s run was the passage of the Immigration Act

of 1924 that placed strict limitations on those entering the United States from eastern Europe, creating a higher sense of stability and security in the minds of Americans.