

THE KU KLUX KLAN

A Look at the Beliefs Rituals and Strategies of Terror

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The Ku Klux Klan is one of the oldest and most famous terrorist organizations in the United States. The Klan which originated in 1866 has lasted through government intervention, the Civil War, and the civil rights era (Ridgeway, 1995). However, the Ku Klux Klan has gone through the stages of a prominent social organization, a secret society, and even split into different factions throughout the changing history. To fully understand the U.S. born terrorist organization, one must investigate the beliefs, rituals and strategies of terror of the Ku Klux Klan.

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The beliefs of the Ku Klux Klan are interesting and help explain the motives and justification for their rituals and strategies of terror. Yet, a correct understanding of the history of the Ku Klux Klan and the United States helps to better understand the origins of their beliefs. Following the Revolutionary War, the United States was led by the majority of white Protestants who shared the old Puritan belief in their elite status. This elite group believed that the responsibility of self-government and the full liberties and civil rights gained from independence belonged only to them. Many white Southerners had a long family history of owning slaves and felt superior to the African Americans. The emancipated blacks living in the South were resented and perceived to be inferior by most white Southerners. As America continued to receive thousands of immigrants from diverse cultures and ethnic backgrounds, some white Protestants viewed the change as a threat to their image of the ideal America and their belief of their superiority. Despite the American ideals of equality and democracy, the Ku Klux Klan emerged following the

Revolutionary War against religious, ethnic, and cultural groups who they targeted as non-American. (Kelly, 1998)

The Ku Klux Klan was founded in 1866 by retired Confederate soldiers who looked for a social group and activity to fulfill their time. At first, the Klan targeted African Americans as a source to play their humorous pranks on. However, the Klan soon was organized into a military hierarchy and gained hundreds of thousands of members who were politically and emotionally driven against the blacks and equality politics. Following the Reconstruction, Klan members described the purpose of their organization as a peace-keeping organization aimed at self-defense. Many members feared the rise of independent blacks, thinking that they were becoming violent and that they threatened the safety of the white Southerners. The Klan believed that the U.S. government and police keeping authority were incapable of providing immediate and effective defense for the white Southerners. In response to this feeling, the KKK assumed the responsibility of defending their territory against their perceived threat. Soon, the Klan began terrorist actions against the blacks to prevent them from participating in voting and other civil liberties. The escalation in violence led Congress to intervene and ended the first-era Klan (Martin, 2006). In the second-era the Klan became a secret organization, but in the third-era the Klan grew to a glorified public organization with three to four million members (Martin, 2006). The widespread popularity of the Ku Klux Klan came from the shared beliefs in nativism and nostalgic ideas of a previous better America. The Klan became an organization focused against the fast changing world and the perceived threat to its existence and value system. (Ridgeway, 1995; Stalcup, 1995)

Following the third-era, the Klan was rejuvenated in 1946 which was called the

fourth-era of the Klan. However, during this time the Klan was made up of separate factions instead of one national identity. These factions acted independently while only some endorsed terrorist strategies. During the civil rights movement many factions of the KKK committed extreme violence. Soon, the Ku Klux Klan was prosecuted for crimes against civil rights and the KKK slowly receded. Following the civil rights period and continuing to the present time is called the fifth-era of the Ku Klux Klan. In today's era the Purist Klan is very traditional and sometimes violent while the Moderate Klan is more politically active and rarely violent. Both of these categories contain numerous factions of the KKK including the Aryan Nations, The Order, and the White Aryan Resistance. These groups sometimes interact at a minimal level but often differ in exact beliefs and goals. (Martin, 2006; Ridgeway, 1995)

The KKK belief system was centered on the issues of the deteriorating country and value systems. The KKK often held fundamentalist views and believed that the Anglo-Saxon Protestants were the divine elite group who held the right to govern and viewed the African Americans, Jews, Catholics, and other ethnic minorities as a threat to their values and traditions. Many Klansmen believed that their very own rights were under attack because of the growing equality between the white working class and other minorities. Klansmen used their targets as scapegoats for their dissatisfaction with current economic and social conditions in the United States. They often believed that they were the victims of the changing nation and believed that their actions were in self-defense of their rights and liberties. ("Ku Klux Klan," 2005; Ridgeway, 1995)

the rituals of the Ku Klux Klan.

The rituals of the Ku Klux Klan are an integral part to the organization and social

activity. Although much of the terrorist activities were part of a ritual, not all rituals were terrorist activities in the KKK. Some rituals were militaristic and politically fashioned. The first ritual of the Klan is the oath taken by inducted members professing their commitment, obligations to their organization and their friends, and their political standing. The oath was published by a grand jury's report to the U.S. Circuit Court in Columbia in 1871 (Stalcup, 1995). The grand jury also reported that the Klan had a constitution and bylaws to govern the organization (Stalcup, 1995). The Klan often had regular meetings with parliamentary procedure style structure. These meetings were presided over by local or high Klan officials. The business addressed by the members included membership dues, materials needed, and public actions to address. These regular meetings provided the organization with a calm social club appeal to the members and also provided order. The Ku Klux Klan also incorporated a military fashioned hierarchy to instill order, leadership, and a chain of command. The chain of command included leadership positions of Imperial Wizard, Grand Dragon, and Klokard along with numerous locally held positions that were closely related to offices such as secretary, treasurer, and sentinel. These officers were designated by different ceremonious cloaks and hoods and were often present at rituals to provide legitimacy, leadership, and support. The KKK also had their own exclusive terminology which helped create camaraderie during rituals, meetings, and ceremonies. (Kelly, 1998)

The Klan also started to have a ritualistic nature in 1915 during the reign of Imperial Wizard William Joseph Simmons who was a former minister and head of the Klan. Simmons began to mimic the Klan's rituals after religious ceremonies (Ridgeway, 1995). The Ku Klux Klan is often affiliated with the ritual of cross-burnings which

became a part of regular meetings and ceremonies. The burning of crosses was often used to excite members and the public, raise the morale of the group, and to remind them to act like Jesus Christ and serve the Klan. With the linkage to the Protestant religion, some Klan members believed they were God's army against the enemies of God's chosen people. The KKK regularly incorporated religion into its beliefs and actions. The Klan was tied to religion very closely through ministers to the point that the Klan would be called upon during church to give announcements or speak to the public about issues. (Maclean, 1994)

the strategies of terror of the Ku Klux Klan.

The Ku Klux Klan used various strategies of terror to influence, terrorize, and support their cause. Because of their strong beliefs the KKK commonly used terrorism and felt justified in their actions. The Klan believed that they were the only ones able to provide defense for their civil liberties and social order and terrorism was a common method for their defense. In addition to the terrifying dress of white robes and hoods, the KKK regularly practiced additional terrorist methods. One common method was the public or secret lynching. The Klan would kidnap and execute the victim by hanging, burning, and many other extreme violent acts. In the early 1920's the Klan lynched blacks who were accused of raping or killing white women. Soon, the society became unstable enough that strong evidence or cause for action was not needed to hunt down and publicly lynch African Americans. This public lynching escalated in number and instilled terror in other African Americans. (Maclean, 1994)

The Klan also made numerous death threats and destroyed public buildings that were predominantly occupied by blacks or beneficial to the black community. The Klan

tried to keep economic and social power by eliminating prosperous black businesses and owners. The KKK also destroyed buildings owned by whites who provided aid to the black community or spoke out against the actions of the Klan. These strategies of terror insured that no one would speak out against the Klan for fear of violent action or further punishment. However, the Klan also used flogging as a strategy of terror to enforce values and proper conduct among members of the community. During flogging raids the KKK would kidnap victims in the middle of the night, take them into the country outside of city limits, and whip them repeatedly with leather straps in order to provide punishment and force rehabilitation. (Maclean, 1994)

Another method of terror was public notes that served as threats to African Americans to leave the area or to abide to the Klan's wishes. This method was often backed up with nightly shootings into houses, flogging, and lynching. These terrorist methods were aimed at instilling fear and driving African Americans and white supporters of the black community from their property and out of the Klan's domain. The property and businesses left behind were often bought cheaply to help support the "supreme white race." The goal of the Klan was to purify their region to only white, respectable, Protestant men and women. Some of the strategies of terror practiced by the Klan were non-violent including burning crosses which were used to strike fear and to raise the morals of the Klan. Another non-violent action was the public marching of the Ku Klux Klan in their white robes and hoods which served to publicly terrorize the black community and other enemies of the Klan. (Maclean, 1994)

One reason for the public humiliation of African Americans was to excite other white Protestants into joining the Klan or contributing to their cause. While terrorizing

whites that helped the black community helped deter future support for blacks, the acts of terror were also aimed at influencing votes for Klan members or Klan supporters in public office. The Klan had constant ties to public offices, police, judges, and other influential positions in order to keep safe the Klan's interests and actions. The actions of the Klan during the post-civil war era were rarely prosecuted due to the extensive cover-ups and support by the Klan members and supporters. The failure to properly prosecute KKK members for violent actions in the South allowed the strategies of terror used by the KKK to be effective. The Ku Klux Klan was not nearly effective with terrorist actions in other parts of the country where the KKK was easily prosecuted. (Kelly, 1998)

During the civil rights movement and the fourth-era of the Klan the violence and terror quickly escalated. It was estimated that 500 individual cases of racially motivated violence or acts of terror were performed by the Ku Klux Klan and supporters following the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. the Board of Education* (Kelly, 1998). The KKK of this period was less ceremonial or ritualistic, however, the Klan continued to use public beatings, murder, and marching to terrorize the black community and their white supporters. The traditional view of the white hooded KKK was replaced during the fourth and fifth-era by camouflage uniforms. Many KKK factions including Miller's White Patriot Party were trained at paramilitary training camps. Many of the common KKK rituals of cross burnings and lynching were replaced with political campaigns and assassinations. The Ku Klux Klan focused on assassinating key targets of opposition rather than practicing broad terror on the masses. During this period the KKK factions also interacted with the Aryan Nations and other neo-Nazi groups. Even the terrorist strategies of harassment and assassinations were often joint efforts between the numerous

groups. The Ku Klux Klan continued to act in violent repression against the civil rights movement until the late 20th century. (Kelly, 1998; Ridgeway, 1995)

The Ku Klux Klan is the longest lasting United States born terrorist organization. The Klan has lasted almost 150 years through government intervention, civil rights movements, and public opposition. The KKK has a long and extensive history that sprouted from Protestant and fundamentalist beliefs. The Klan's beliefs allowed the organization to appeal to millions of whites and to build a framework for an extensive structure of rituals. The rituals of the Ku Klux Klan have provided unity and appeal throughout history. The KKK has also been very successful in deploying strategies of terror to support and wield the organization's interests. The terror harvested by the KKK was extremely influential in the history of the U.S. Other terrorist organizations have borrowed strategies and beliefs from the KKK. Today, the U.S. continues to provide strict prosecution to racial hate crimes and terrorist activities to prevent the KKK and other U.S. born terrorist organizations from being successful as the former Ku Klux Klan.

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