

📖 Topic Page: [Ku Klux Klan](#)

Definition: **Ku Klux Klan** from *Collins English Dictionary*

n

1 a secret organization of White Southerners formed after the US Civil War to fight Black emancipation and Northern domination

2 a secret organization of White Protestant Americans, mainly in the South, who use violence against Black people, Jewish people, and other minority groups

[C19 *Ku Klux*, probably based on Greek *kuklos* circle + *Klan* clan]

> Ku Kluxer or Ku Klux Klanner *n*

> Ku Kluxism *n*



Image from: [Early members of the Ku Klux Klan display the... in Encyclopedia of Emancipation and Abolition in the Transatlantic World](#)

Summary Article: **Ku Klux Klan**

From *Encyclopedia of American Studies*

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) has been reborn three separate times in the course of American history and exists today as a scattering of competing far-right organizations under different leadership and somewhat different ideologies. The first KKK was created in Pulaski, Tennessee, in 1866 by ex-Confederate officers as a kind of white supremacist, fraternal organization, with its name coming from the Greek word *kuklos*, meaning “circle.”

The KKK quickly transmogrified into a terrorist organization dedicated to resisting Reconstruction and to suppressing the civil rights of blacks. Under its imperial wizard, the former Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest, the Klan terrorized blacks and whites who sought to promote black rights. In 1870 and 1871 Congress passed three antiterrorist Force Acts. The Force Act passed in April 1871 is known as the Ku Klux Klan Act. In 1871 President Ulysses S. Grant utilized these acts to suppress the Klan in South Carolina by, among other tactics, suspending habeas corpus. Southerners then looked to legal means, such as Jim Crow legislation, to secure white supremacy.

In 1915 William Joseph Simmons, a former Methodist circuit rider, reinstated the Klan with a cross-burning ceremony on Georgia's Stone Mountain. Simmons had been inspired by his Klansman father's tales of the glories of the old Klan and by D. W. Griffith's silent film classic *Birth of a Nation*.

The second Klan also exalted in its Negrophobia, but it acquired a new set of antipathies as well. The new Klan feared and hated Jews, Catholics, and immigrants from other than northern Europe. Portraying itself as the champion of religion and morality, it defended conservative Protestant denominations and claimed to fight lawlessness and immorality, such as gambling, prostitution, homosexuality, and miscegenation.

During this period the Klan engaged in violence such as intimidation, lynching, and burning homes and businesses; openly participated in politics; and held large rallies and marches throughout the nation. No longer an exclusively Southern phenomenon, the Klan became active in every state to some degree. By

1924 the Klan boasted more than three million members nationwide.

The second Klan succeeded in large part because it operated as a fraternal organization, used professional recruiters who worked on a commission basis, and employed the techniques of modern marketing; and also because its rituals, garb, and strange titles (such as imperial wizard, exalted cyclops, kleagle, kludd, and so on) appealed to the human desire for mystery. By the late 1920s the Klan had seriously declined, owing to the publicity surrounding several financial and moral scandals involving prominent Klan leaders and its obvious inability to fulfill many of its promises.

The second Klan ended in 1944, when the Internal Revenue Service revoked its status as a charitable organization and the "Invisible Empire" was hit with demands for substantial back taxes. By 1946 the third Klan had emerged as a small militant group, but it grew in reaction to the successes of the black civil rights movements, although it never matched the membership numbers or the power of the second Klan and remained largely a Southern phenomenon with scattered chapters in the North and West.

Opposition to the civil rights movement concentrated in middle-class movements such as White Citizens Councils and avoided the Klan, which had become associated in the public mind with lower-class membership and extreme violence. In 1961 Klansmen assaulted freedom riders who attempted to desegregate intercity bus service, and in 1963, in a most horrific act of racist violence, Klan members murdered four black children in a Birmingham, Alabama, church bombing. In 1964 the murder of three civil rights workers in Mississippi led to a concentrated infiltration of the Klan by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and to the breakup of much of the movement. Membership declined from fifty thousand in 1964 to less than seven thousand by 1975.

Succeeding decades witnessed attempts to reinvigorate the Klan by projecting a more pleasant public image, including the accession to its top leadership of David Duke, a handsome, college-educated, and articulate young man who in the 1980s ran for governor and then senator in Louisiana. Catholics have been admitted to membership and female members given equal status; nevertheless, membership has remained low and has been plagued by constant divisions into separate organizations. In addition, some Klan organizations have suffered legal reverses, losing civil suits for substantial sums brought by victims of the Klan's racial violence.



Ku Klux Klan parade on Pennsylvania Avenue. Washington, D.C. 1926. Photographic Prints 1920-1930, Library of Congress.



Visit of the Ku Klux. Harper's Weekly. 1872. Frank Bellew, artist. Prints and Photographs, Library of Congress.



Ku Klux Klan members supporting Barry Goldwater at the Republican National Convention. San Francisco, California. 1964. Warren K. Leffler, photographer. U.S. News & World Report Magazine Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.

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