

The Ku Klux Klan

At the end of the American Civil War radical members of Congress attempted to destroy the white power structure of the Rebel states. The Freeman's Bureau was established by Congress on 3rd March, 1865. The bureau was designed to protect the interests of former slaves. This included helping them to find new employment and to improve educational and health facilities. In the year that followed the bureau spent \$17,000,000 establishing 4,000 schools, 100 hospitals and providing homes and food for former slaves. Attempts by Congress to extend the powers of the Freeman's Bureau was vetoed by President Andrew Johnson in February, 1866. In April 1866, Johnson also vetoed the Civil Rights Bill that was designed to protect freed slaves from Southern Black Codes (laws that placed severe restrictions on freed slaves such as prohibiting their right to vote, forbidding them to sit on juries, limiting their right to testify against white men, carrying weapons in public places and working in certain occupations).

The election of 1866 increased the number of Radical Republicans in Congress. The following year Congress passed the first Reconstruction Act. The South was now divided into five military districts, each under a major general. New elections were to be held in each state with freed male slaves being allowed to vote. The act also included an amendment that offered readmission to the Southern states after they had ratified the Fourteenth Amendment and guaranteed adult male suffrage. Johnson immediately vetoed the bill but Congress re-passed the bill the same day. The first branch of the Ku Klux Klan was established in Pulaski, Tennessee, in May, 1866. A year later a general organisation of local Klans was established in Nashville in April, 1867. Most of the leaders were former members of the Confederate Army and the first Grand Wizard was Nathan Forrest, an outstanding general during the American Civil War. During the next two years Klansmen wearing masks, white cardboard hats and draped in white sheets, tortured and killed black Americans and sympathetic whites. Immigrants, who they blamed for the election of Radical Republicans, were also targets of their hatred. Between 1868 and 1870 the Ku Klux Klan played an important role in restoring white rule in North Carolina, Tennessee and Georgia.

At first the main objective of white supremacy organisations such as the Ku Klux Klan, the White Brotherhood, the Men of Justice, the Constitutional Union Guards and the Knights of the White Camelia was to stop black people from voting. After white governments had been established in the South the Ku Klux Klan continued to undermine the power of blacks. Successful black businessmen were attacked and any attempt to form black protection groups such as trade unions was quickly dealt with.

Radical Republicans in Congress such as Benjamin Butler urged President Ulysses S. Grant to take action against the Ku Klux Klan. In 1870 he instigated an investigation into the organisation and the following year a Grand Jury reported that: "There has existed since 1868, in many counties of the state, an organisation known as the Ku Klux Klan, or Invisible Empire of the South, which embraces in its membership a large proportion of the white population of every profession and class. The Klan has a constitution and bylaws, which provides, among other things, that each member shall furnish himself with a pistol, a Ku Klux gown and a signal instrument. The operations

of the Klan are executed in the night and are invariably directed against members of the Republican Party. The Klan is inflicting summary vengeance on the coloured citizens of these citizens by breaking into their houses at the dead of night, dragging them from their beds, torturing them in the most inhuman manner, and in many instances murdering."

Congress passed the Ku Klux Act and became law on 20th April, 1871. This gave the president the power to intervene in troubled states with the authority to suspend the writ of habeas corpus in countries where disturbances occurred. Although Ulysses S. Grant used this legislation several times, the Ku Klux Klan. However, because its objective of white supremacy in the South had been achieved, the organisation practically disappeared. The Ku Klux Klan was reformed in 1915 by William J. Simmons, a preacher influenced by Thomas Dixon's book, *The Ku Klux Klan* (1905) and the film of the book, *Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith. The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) became the main opponent of the Ku Klux Klan. To show that the members of the organisation would not be intimidated, it held its 1920 annual conference in Atlanta, considered at the time to be one of the most active Ku Klux Klan areas in America. After the First World War the Ku Klux Klan also became extremely hostile to Jews, Roman Catholics, socialists, communists and anybody they identified as foreigners.

In November 1922 Hiram W. Evans became the Klan's Imperial Wizard. Under his leadership the organisation grew rapidly and in the 1920s Klansmen were elected to positions of political power. This included state officials in Texas, Oklahoma, Indiana, Oregon and Maine. By 1925 membership reached 4,000,000. Even on the rare occasions they were arrested for serious crimes, Klansmen were unlikely to be convicted by local Southern juries. After the conviction of the Klan leader, David C. Stephenson, for second-degree murder, and evidence of corruption by other members such as the governor of Indiana and the mayor of Indianapolis, membership fell to around 30,000. This trend continued during the Great Depression and the Second World War and in 1944 the organisation was disbanded.

In the 1950s the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement resulted in a revival in Ku Klux Klan organisations. The most of important of these was the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan led by Robert Shelton. In the Deep South considerable pressure was put on blacks by klansmen not to vote. An example of this was the state of Mississippi. By 1960, 42% of the population were black but only 2% were registered to vote. Lynching was still employed as a method of terrorising the local black population. On Sunday, 15th September, 1963, a white man was seen getting out of a white and turquoise Chevrolet car and placing a box under the steps of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Soon afterwards, at 10.22 a.m., the bomb exploded killing Denise McNair (11), Addie Mae Collins (14), Carole Robertson (14) and Cynthia Wesley (14). The four girls had been attending Sunday school classes at the church. Twenty-three other people were also hurt by the blast. A witness identified Robert Chambliss, a member of the Ku Klux Klan, as the man who placed the bomb under the steps of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. He was arrested and charged with murder and possessing a box of 122 sticks of dynamite without a permit. On 8th October 1963, Chambliss was found not guilty of murder and received a hundred-dollar fine and a six-month jail sentence for having the dynamite. In 1964 the NAACP, the Congress

of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Non-violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC) organised its Freedom Summer campaign. Its main objective was to try an end the political disenfranchisement of African Americans in the Deep South. Volunteers from the three organisations decided to concentrate its efforts in Mississippi. The three organisations established 30 Freedom Schools in towns throughout Mississippi. Volunteers taught in the schools and the curriculum now included black history, the philosophy of the civil rights movement. During the summer of 1964 over 3,000 students attended these schools and the experiment provided a model for future educational programs such as Head Start. Freedom Schools were often targets of white mobs. So also were the homes of local African Americans involved in the campaign. That summer 30 black homes and 37 black churches were firebombed. Over 80 volunteers were beaten by white mobs or racist police officers and three men, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan on 21st June, 1964. These deaths created nation-wide publicity for the campaign. The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing was unsolved until Bill Baxley was elected attorney general of Alabama. He requested the original Federal Bureau of Investigation files on the case and discovered that the organization had accumulated a great deal of evidence against Chambliss that had not been used in the original trial. In November, 1977 Chambliss was tried once again for the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing. Now aged 73, Chambliss was found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment.

In 1981 the trial of Josephus Andersonan, an African American charged with the murder of a white policeman, took place in Mobile. At the end of the case the jury was unable to reach a verdict. This upset members of the local Ku Klux Klan who believed that the reason for this was that some members of the jury were African Americans. At a meeting held after the trial, Bennie Hays, the second-highest ranking official in the Klan in Alabama said: "If a black man can get away with killing a white man, we ought to be able to get away with killing a black man." On Saturday 21st March, 1981, Bennie Hays's son, Henry Hays, and James Knowles, decided they would get revenge for the failure of the courts to convict the man for killing a policeman. They travelled around Mobile in their car until they found nineteen year old Michael Donald walking home. After forcing him into the car Donald was taken into the next county where he was lynched. A brief investigation took place and eventually the local police claimed that Donald had been murdered as a result of a disagreement over a drugs deal. Donald's mother, Beulah Mae Donald, who knew that her son was not involved with drugs, was determined to obtain justice. She contacted Jessie Jackson who came to Mobile and led a protest march about the failed police investigation.

Thomas Figures, the assistant United States attorney in Mobile, managed to persuade the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to look into the case. James Bodman was sent to Mobile and it did not take him long to persuade James Knowles to confess to the killing of Michael Donald. In June 1983, Knowles was found guilty of violating Donald's civil rights and was sentenced to life imprisonment. Six months later, when Henry Hays was tried for murder, Knowles appeared as chief prosecution witness. Hays was found guilty and sentenced to death. With the support of Morris Dees and Joseph J. Levin at the Southern Poverty Law Centre (SPLC), Beulah Mae

Donald decided that she would use this case to try and destroy the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama. Her civil suit against the United Klans of America took place in February 1987. The all-white jury found the Klan responsible for the lynching of Michael Donald and ordered it to pay 7 million dollars. This resulted the Klan having to hand over all its assets including its national headquarters in Tuscaloosa.

After a long-drawn out legal struggle, Henry Hayes was executed on 6th June, 1997. It was the first time a white man had been executed for a crime against an African American since 1913. On 17th May, 2000, the FBI announced that the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing had been carried out by the Ku Klux Klan splinter group, the Cahaba Boys. It was claimed that four men, Robert Chambliss, Herman Cash, Thomas Blanton and Bobby Cherry had been responsible for the crime. Cash was dead but Blanton and Cherry were arrested. In May 2002 the 71-year-old Bobby Cherry was convicted of the murder of Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley and was sentenced to life in prison.

