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Ava Jackson

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

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The Fight for Purity: Hiram Evans and the Second Ku Klux Klan

Long Analytical

Ava Jackson

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The Klu Klux Klan of the 1920s, known as the second Klan, built its three to six million members quicker than any previous group. The second Klan surfaced after the film, *Birth of a Nation*, which gathered attention nationwide. According to Linda Gordon, author of *The Second Coming of the KKK*, the Klan continued the traditions of earlier generations, including the notorious robes, masks, and racist attitudes toward African Americans. In addition, anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism grew, which further increased animosity and reshaped what it meant to be a terrorist in America. Through the leadership of Hiram Wesley Evans, a small-practice dentist, who quickly rose in the ranks to later become Imperial Wizard of the Klan in 1922, the Klan was altered in a way never seen before (Gordon pp.40-42).

Many believe the secrecy and animosity of the Klan were crucial to its success. The first Klan hid during attacks on the Republican south. The third Klan attempted to shade their identities from the public during the Civil Rights movement as they focused on bombing and attacking activists. The second Klan stands out from the other two, yet is often overlooked in discussions of the Ku Klux Klan. No longer hiding meetings and agendas, the second Klan carried messages in newspapers and radios open to the public. In 1921, *the New York World* published a 21-part exposé on the inner workings of the second Klan, drawing in two million readers nationwide. Opinion columnist from the *New York Times*, Charles M. Blow, described the effect of the discovery on the Klan. “After The World’s exposé, the Klan didn’t shrink; its membership surged.” Just four years later, under the leadership of Evans, 30,000 to 50,000 Klan members marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in D.C., which was described as “one of the

greatest demonstrations this city has ever known,” according to *The Washington Post* (Blown.p.). This media attention only furthered the growth of the second Klan, an idea that puzzled many.

Although an increased media presence in the 1920s brought thousands to involve themselves in the second Klan, the specific ideology of the second Klan became lost in history. Most people think of the Ku Klux Klan as having the same ideology from Reconstruction to the 1960s. Each “phase” of the Klan seemed continuous and was narrated as a movement of white savior beliefs. While the second Klan did continue white savior beliefs, the second Klan was primarily responsible for the rise of Nativism. The introduction of Nativism, responsible for the discrimination of Catholics and Jewish citizens, became a fear-mongering tool not used in previous Klan generations. According to a report to *The Illinois General Assembly* titled, *The Ku Klux Klan in Illinois*, membership was limited to white, Protestant (primarily male) citizens all over the country, who were respected in their roles as workers ranging from farmers to business owners. The second Klan elected thousands to political positions and shaped the course of national policies in the early 1900s, focusing intently on educational reform. The second Klan was more fraternal and social than the first, recognizing moral commitments and threatening expulsions and investigations among all members (pp. 24-28). In *The Kloran of the Knights of the Great Forest*, a handbook initially written by William Simmons and updated by Evans in 1928, Evans said that the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church and “the distinction between the races of mankind as same has been decreed by the Creator and shall ever be true in the faithful maintenance of White Supremacy” (Ku Klux Klan 2).

The vast majority of these new ideas resulted from the efforts of Hiram Wesley Evans. Evans appealed to many through his ordinary stature as a middle-class citizen and was known to

be modest. Evans pushed the Klan to become a nationwide group, using specific techniques to ensure fear and commitment were held between members. Evans used the discussion of religion to justify his belief in white supremacy and became the focal point for media attacks on Catholics and Jewish people. Throughout his time as a leader in the second Klan, Evans faced challenges. The rapid growth of followers, *New York World's* exposure of violent affairs in the KKK with Simmons, and the brutal crimes committed by member D. C. Stephenson proved the second Klan was far from immortal. A rapid decline hit the second Klan in 1939, which forced Evans to sell the organization. Despite the decline, Evans' leadership in the second Klan set high standards for future Klans, paving the way for 2020 groups such as The Proud Boys and the "MAGA" campaign by President Donald Trump. With eerie similarities between all three groups, the impact of the second Klan proved to be a dangerous legacy.

Without the influence of Hiram Evans, the Ku Klux Klan would not have gained the traction crucial to the rise of Klan emotion and ideology in the 1920s. Evans made the Klan something new, a White nationalist, nationwide group as well as a segregationist group, creating a lasting impact over a hundred years later.

The Ku Klux Klan was formed in the summer of 1867. Local branches met to establish what they claimed was an "Invisible Empire of the south," coinciding with the Reconstruction Era. Nathan Bedford Forrest, the Klan's first leader, was known as the "grand wizard." Forrest was quick to take charge and extended the group to almost all of the southern states by 1870. The Klan's primary goal was to reestablish white supremacy through democratic victories across the south. They promoted fear, especially among black people. *History.com* editors noted the violence Black legislators faced and wrote, "At least 10 percent of the Black legislators elected during the 1867-1868 constitutional conventions became victims of violence during

Reconstruction, including seven who were killed” (n.p.). A letter from the Klan to a man named Davie Jeems, a black Republican recently elected sheriff in Georgia, exemplifies how powerful the Klan was. In 1868, the Klan wrote,

I am here now as a locust in the daytime and at night I am a Ku Klux sent here to look after you and all the rest of the radicals and make you know your place. I have got my eye on you every day... We nail all, radicals up in boxes and send them away to KKK... no n*gger is safe unless he joins the Democratic Club... Take heed and govern yourself accordingly and give all your friends timely warning. (“Notice” 1)

Attacks were carried out at night. Klansmen valued their anonymity and wore long white robes and hoods. One of the most notorious zones of Klan activity was in South Carolina. In January 1871, 500 masked men attacked the Union county jail and lynched eight Black prisoners (*History.com* Editors n.p.). This violence was not shocking to Americans and could be witnessed all over the country.

With violence and fear spreading across the country, Republicans had to work fast. President Ulysses S. Grant promoted three enforcement acts, crushing Klan activity. According to the United States Senate, these acts, also known as the Ku Klux Klan Acts, enforced the Fourteenth Amendment and the Civil Rights Act of 1866. The acts placed control of national elections into the hands of federal judges and United States marshals, allowing them to supervise local polling places. The acts also empowered the president to use armed forces against groups when necessary (U.S. Senate n.p.).

The first Klan was put to a halt and soon the members' activities died down. The second Klan would not make a noticeable impact on America until 1915. According to *Wikipedia*, the 1915 film, *Birth of a Nation* was used as a recruiting tool for the second Klan. The film described

the Reconstruction era, where eleven states reintegrated Black people into American society, as catastrophic and promoted the idea that black people were predators, intellectually inferior, and a threat to civilization. D.W. Griffith, the film's director, glorified the original Klan by basing the story on *The Clansman* and *The Leopard's Spots*, both by Thomas Dixon Jr, who said his purpose was "to revolutionize northern sentiment by a presentation of history that would transform every man in my audience into a good Democrat." The white costume and burning cross of the modern Klan are imitations of the film. Not known to many, the film based these concepts on Dixon's romanticized concept of old Scotland rather than on the Reconstruction Klan ("Ku Klux Klan" n.p.).

The film shot to popularity after the supposed endorsement and screening by President Wilson in the White House. Wilson resegregated the civil service by promoting this film. The film gathered attention for its plot and the way it was made. According to the author of *The Birth of a Nation*, Dick Lehr, critics of the film thought the film romanticized the Ku Klux Klan and were in awe of "the pure spectacle of it all" (Clark n.p.). Lee Pfeiffer, author of "The Birth of a Nation" in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, described the impact of the film. After its release, the film continued to be screened and became a recruiting tool for new Klansmen. Klansmen leader William Simmons was inspired by the imagery of the burning cross from the film and recreated it on top of Stone Mountain. This act sparked the beginning of the second Klan, gathering attention and interest in the new statement and drastically altering the way the KKK would congregate (Pfeiffer n.p.).

According to Library of Congress statistics, between 1900 and 1915, a surge of more than 15 million immigrants arrived in the United States, equal to the total number of immigrants of the last 40 years combined. Immigrants clustered in cities, making overcrowding and disease

common. Tension grew between existing American citizens and newcomers. The rise in immigration and preexisting racism against Black Americans became popular views among the group (Library of Congress n.p.). A speech by D.C Stephenson, Grand Dragon of the second Klan, was printed in *The Fiery Cross*, a newspaper shared amongst Klansmen. *The Fiery Cross* mentioned Stephenson, who explained that Klan members viewed immigrants from Europe, mainly southern and eastern Europe, as the “new” immigrants who had traits such as mental illness or poverty. These “scientific facts” created by Klan leaders shaped the way the Klan gathered members and retained beliefs. Evans backed these beliefs by using a variety of techniques to scare and keep members (Stephenson pp. 1-7).

Hiram Evans focused heavily on anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism and professed his beliefs openly after taking over the second Klan. Evans’ use of propaganda, which was similar to the Nazis, was successful in arguing that Jewish people were part of a non-American culture and promoted fear of “the other” amongst the Klan. Evans spoke of Jewish people as “incapable of true patriotism because they were not white...[the Jews] jealously guarded separatism [making them] unfit...for co-operation.” During an address delivered on the occasion of Klan Day at the State Fair of Texas in October 1923, Evans outlined the Klan’s perspective on immigration. “They are a people apart from all other peoples. They always will be...their homes are not American but Jewish homes, into which we cannot go and from which they will never emerge for a real intermingling with America” (*The Menace of Modern Immigration* 24). Evans claimed the Jew was “alien and unassimilable” listing faults such as “careers in banking and finance and materialism” (Lamb 21). Although Evans was against Jews, he often contradicted his statements during speeches held in Georgia. The booklet handed out at the first Grand Dragons annual meetings in 1923 titled, *Principles and Purposes of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan*, states, “You

must either join the Klan and throw your influence on the side of decency, Christianity and law enforcement, or join the lawbreakers, Negro preachers, Roman Catholics and Jews” (*Papers Read at the Meeting of Grand Dragons* 127). In contrast, a few pages before that statement, Evans reported Jews as unthreatening to the Klan’s ambitions of white supremacy. Evans said Jews were believed to be an “unassimilable” race that “reject[s] intermarriage” and that their “religious and social rites and customs are inflexibly segregative” (*Papers Read at the Meeting of Grand Dragons* pp.117-123). These contradictions highlighted the Klan’s ambiguity in their view of Jews beneath Evans’ power. Evans further concluded his outline with a solution. One, is for Congress to stop all immigration, with exceptions for separated families. Two, to institute a thorough governmental investigation into all “aliens.” Evans said, “All our people must be fully informed because, in the final analysis, it is public opinion that counts for weal or woe under our Republican form of government” (“The Klan’s Fight for Americanism” 28). Evans was persuasive. So much so, Evans and the second Klan were a major factor in convincing Congress to pass the Immigration Act of 1924. University of Virginia’s article, titled “Harding, Coolidge, and Immigration” shared that this act limited the number of immigrants admitted to the United States to no more than 150,000 a year. President Calvin Coolidge signed the bill stating, “America must be kept American” (“Harding, Coolidge, and Immigration” n.p.).

While anti-Semitism was heavily focused on, the second Klan held a similar disgust towards Catholic people in America. Evans’ focus on anti-Catholicism furthered his belief in nativism, promoting a scapegoat and a sense of fear within his followers. During the 1920s, the pope faced conspiracy reports and faced ongoing accusations. The second Klan claimed the pope ordered immigrants to come to the United States and devised strategies to Catholicize school children’s minds. In author Linda Gordon’s book, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux*

Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition, Hiram Evans said, “Sixty-two percent of all our political positions, elected or appointed” and ninety percent of police forces were “occupied by Roman Catholics” (56). In an article titled, *The Catholic Question as Viewed by the Ku Klux Klan*, Evans further claimed that “[Catholics] have become so numerous and powerful that they could now work great injury” (*The Catholic Question* 563). Simmons held a different belief, claiming that during his role in the 1915 Klan, there were no thoughts “on his part or of his associates of anything affecting Catholics, Jews or any religious sect.” Simmons claimed that “there was no prejudice, but there was pride. There would not have been a white race on earth if the man had not been proud... There was never an organization projected among men that had higher or nobler principles based on patriotism and honor” (*Klan Is All 'Bluff'* 7).

Under Evans’ control, the second Klan projected its anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism towards violations of Prohibition, blaming violations on the “wrong” religion. Unsurprisingly, many Klanspeople drank, yet the Klan continuously contradicted itself through speeches and publications, accusing Catholics and Jews of these occurrences. George Clason, an editor who compared and contrasted Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and Klan members in the 1920s, wrote that when a Jewish Rabbi was convicted of securing alcohol in large quantities and selling it, newspapers attacked Jewish people. The newspapers ignored the fact that the purchase was for sacramental purposes. Clason wrote, “The newspapers intimate that the Jewish people, under cover of their church, were going into the wholesale bootlegging business... if members of the Klan were proven guilty of this outrage or any of the others mentioned so frequently in our press, its officials would take just as forcible and drastic action against them as would the Catholic hierarchy against a dishonored priest” (pp.58-59). In a collection of Klan chapter meetings in the 1920s titled, *Inside the Klavern: The Secret History of a Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s*, it was

documented that the Ku Klux Klan had a liking for alcohol. On January 16, 1923, members wrote, "After this discussion...we forgot our crave for moonshine for the time being and took up the issue of more subtle things" (Horowitz, D., and Ku Klux Klan 53). According to Linda Gordon, author of *The Second Coming of the KKK*, Evans tried to protect the Klan's respectability to stop anyone attempting to jeopardize its profitability. Gordon wrote, "Klan leaders not only denied that members ever broke the law but insisted that the accusations were calumnies spread by Klan opponents." The Klan not only denied these claims, but they blamed others for their actions. Gordon wrote, "When Klansmen were seen, leaders typically claimed that the guilty ones were 'aliens' who masqueraded in white robes to defame the Klan- 'thugs parading under the guise of the Invisible empire,' as a Washington Klan minister put it" (Gordon 97).

Anti-Catholicism within the second Klan influenced Evans to push for increased funding in schools, a task not accomplished by past leaders. Evans worked on reforming schools and education, claimed it was necessary to strengthen patriotism, and successfully gained attention towards his movement. Anti-Catholicism made Klansfolk supporters of the Sterling-Towner bill of 1919, a bill that aligned with the Klan views of Americanism. The bill's objectives were towards creating a cabinet-level department of education ("Horace Mann Towner" n.p.). While the bill failed to pass, the Klan was inspired to take further action on education. The Klan's goal was to deny Catholic schools the ability to teach children. The Klan presented its school initiative as furthering "the interest of those whose forefathers established the nation." To avoid heavy debate, the Klan pursued the idea that only public schools must teach children and all private schools must be discarded. The Klan strategized and argued strengthening Americanism and unity on what kids learned was necessary. Through this strategy, the Klan drew in

supporters, even those who were against outright discrimination against Catholics (Gordon pp. 149-153). In an address in 1923 titled, the *Menace of Modern Immigration*, Evans argued that education must be achieved. “The first and most important duty of a nation is the training of its boys and girls for economic, civic, and social life...six percent of our present population of youth and adults are unable even to read and write” (11). Evans furthered his statement, and said, “I submit that this nation should at once take steps adequately, universally, to provide for the education of her children, both native and adopted...It must be publicly sponsored and paid for, without a single parochial exception. There should be a Cabinet Department of Education, second to none in its public importance” (12). Evans used harsh wording to get his message across. According to Adam Laats, author of “Red Schoolhouse, Burning Cross: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and Educational Reform,” the Klan’s actions impacted both the North and South. “As Evans crudely put it in a speech to a sympathetic audience in Michigan, this reform would allow the Klan to “take every child in all America and put him in the public school of America... [w]e will build a homogenous people, we will grind out Americans like meat out of a grinder” (Laats n.p.). The Klan accused Catholics of acting malicious towards public institutions, argued editor George Clason, author of *Catholic, Jew, Ku Klux Klan*. Clason quotes a Catholic rebuttal to these claims. “Just because he does not make use of [public school systems]...is no sign of hostility.” Clason goes on to suggest that criticism of the school system should not have been limited to Catholics, that the Klan contradicted their own words. “Catholics criticize the public school system severely, it is true, but it is equally true that thousands of prominent non-Catholics do that also. Criticism is not a Catholic trait alone, but an American one as well” (Clason 51). Despite the shared criticism, Evans’ devious methods secured support for the Klan.

As a result of Evans' contradictions of Jewish and Catholic people, urban-educated elites publicly belittled the Klan. In return, Evans spread misinformation and turned criticism into victimization, portraying the Klan's enemies as liars. This technique, along with limited media coverage of the Klan, limited any kind of diverse perspective for followers. In a study on American culture in Muncie, Indiana, called *Middletown*, Robert and Helen Lynd reported on the 1920s Klan. "Klan feeling was fanned to white heat by constant insistence," Lynd and Lynd wrote. A lawyer from the state capitol at a Klan rally said, "Every method known to man has been used and is being used by the alien-minded and foreign influence to halt our growth" (483). Author and Bishop, Alma White, wrote extensively on the lives and events of the Klan. White endorsed Evans and supported his leadership. In White's book, *The Ku Klux Klan in Prophecy*, White wrote, "The media accused the Klan, 'tar-buckets, floggers, thieves, murderers,' etc., but never in a single instance have they been able to prove their accusations" (White 98). When describing the second Klan, Hiram Evans proudly stated, "We are a movement of the plain people, very weak in the matter of culture, intellectual support, and trained leadership... We are demanding... a return of power into the hands of the every day, not highly cultured, not overly intellectualized, but entirely unspoiled and not de-Americanized, average citizen of the old stock" ("The Klan's Fight for Americanism" 49). Evans also used misinformation to steer anxiety around the Klan. Author Linda Gordon wrote, "One Klan provided numbers: 288,000,000 Catholics worldwide as compared to 161,000,000 Protestants" (60).

While Evans' ability to grow a large movement for the Klan was highly successful, his techniques were not limited to victimization. Evans forcefully implemented purity among Klan members, pushing the idea that to belong and assimilate, you must be a white, Christian man against other races and religions. According to author Linda Gordon, purity in the Klan promoted

both an urge to stay innocent and a fear of pollution. The Klan started with whiteness, white skin, or racial purity, with its seclusive membership. Hiram Evans said, “The Negro is not the menace to Americanism in the same sense that the Jew or the Roman Catholic is a menace” (Gordon 4). In 1926, in “The Klan’s Fight for Americanism,” Evans described the white race as “supreme not only in America but in the world.” Evans describes this idea as “undebatable, except on the ground that the races might live together, each with full regard for the rights and interests of others, and that those rights and interests would never conflict. Such an idea, of course, is absurd.” To add on, Evans claimed that the world was made so each race would “fight for its life.” The Klansman believes that the whites will not become slaves, and he does not intend to die before his time. . .” (“The Klan’s Fight for Americanism” 21). The second Klan feared interracial marriages. According to author Thomas Pegram of *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan*, Evans cited “biology and anthropology” as reasons blacks would always be inferior to whites. To Evans, the fear of interracial mixing “threatened to dilute the characteristics of the American race” (50). Evans stated in *The Klan’s Fight for Americanism*, “In short, the Klansman believes in the greatest possible diversity and individualism within the limits of the American spirit. . .he believes also that few aliens can understand that spirit, that fewer try to, and that there must be resistance, intolerance even, toward anything that threatens it, or the fundamental national unity based upon it” (21).

The legacy of the second Klan is evident in American society to this day. The “Make America Great Again,” otherwise known as the “MAGA” campaign, led by former President Donald Trump, pushed for a call to action. Trump’s promise, to remove the tarnish of a “ruined” country and to prove its worth, echoed the words of second Klan remarks. According to an article by Alan M. Kraut from *The Center for Migration Studies*, the loudest supporters of

Trump's MAGA campaign were nativists, who believed America's resurgence depended on excluding those who diminished the country with their presence, those were deemed inferior or dangerous (Kraut n.p.). A sociologist in 1914 named Edward Alsworth Ross feared what he called "race suicide." Ross wrote *The Old World in the New*, a volume well-known and quoted by immigration opponents. Ross insisted, "By their presence the foreigners necessarily lower the general plane of intelligence, self-restraint, refinement, orderliness and efficiency," (Ross n.p.). Similarly, Donald Trump spoke of Mexican individuals as "rapists" in his announcement speech in 2015. "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best... They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists," (Trump n.p.). What Donald Trump said of Mexicans and Central Americans is almost identical to the words spoken by Ross and other Klan members of the 1920s.

In addition to the "MAGA" campaign, The Proud Boys face striking similarities to the Klan of the early 20th century. Claiming to be a fraternal group simply spreading "anti-political correctness," the Proud Boys spewed similar hatred of the Klan 100 years before. A Telegram channel associated with the Proud Boys shared a quote by a member. "The true minority in this world are whites. White children are less than 3% of the worlds [sic] population. I think since white majority countries are on a pathway to extinction we should correctly refer to non whites by their true names. Worldwide majority" (SPLC n.p.).

The second Klan surpassed its ancestors in a way never seen before. Evans' push for anti-immigration policies created a lasting impact on the Klan. Not only did Evans' nativist beliefs distinguish the second Klan from the first and third Klan, but it also stood as a transition of strategy. The addition of anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic beliefs made the second Klan a

national group. Ignoring the impact of the second Klan risks misunderstanding the pull of hate groups. The Ku Klux Klan, in particular, continued on through the Civil Rights Movement and the present day. Nativism and right-wing populism are still on the rise, reminding us how little history has changed. While in the 1920s, most Americans agreed with Klan values, opinions shifted in 2022. Right and left-wing politics are continuing to shift, and with citizens understanding the importance of their voices, change is possible. Studying Evans' style and influence on past and present-day people can help further understand the pull of modern hate groups and how ordinary citizens can alter American history.

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