

WHY THE KLAN?

PROBLEMS FACED AT THE END OF THE WAR

Restore a working relationship between the former C.S. States and the U.S.

Rebuild the shattered economy of the South

Decide the status of the “freedmen”

Restore a sense of loyalty to the U.S. among former Confeds.

Progress was made on #1 but only slowly. Andrew Johnson set up a plan in April 1865; Congress overturned it in December 1865.

Several states had met the Johnson plan and then had to start over.

Nothing was done about #2. The South became a source of cheap raw materials to be exploited for benefit of the rest of the nation.

The 14th and 15th Amendments were supposed to define the status of the “freedmen” but these amendments were widely rejected in the North. As a result, Southern states were told they had to ratify the amendments even they were not legally states.

These events made it difficult to rebuild a sense of loyalty to the U.S. In the former Confederate states.

SOCIAL CONDITIONS WHICH MADE KLAN-LIKE ORGANIZATIONS

POSSIBLE

During the War, the U.S. Government passed a series of laws which allowed for the confiscation of property belonging to Confederates. These “confiscation acts” were still on the law

books and were sometimes enforced. These acts prevented any Confederate from collecting damages from the U.S. government while allowing their taxes to be used to pay damages to their pro-Union neighbors.

Most of the former C.S. states, now under Reconstruction military government, passed laws preventing ex-Confeds from voting.

This meant that as civilian rule was restored the voting majority would be white pro-Unionists and newly enfranchised former slaves.

And, these state legislatures would have the legal right to confiscate the property of ex-Confeds.

There is also the undeniable racial bias against former slaves now being put into positions of leadership and the hostility left from the war time about those who took “the other side.” The war was over but hard feelings were not forgotten.

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that organizations arose to oppose the policies of Reconstruction on both the state and national levels. The original Klan began as a social club but soon recognized that it had political potential and changed its focus.

WHAT WAS THE KLAN?

There was no “the Klan.” There was never, during the Reconstruction period, a single, monolithic, South-wide organization called the Klan.

There were many night-riding secret organizations who shared the goal of destroying the Reconstruction governments and they shared tactics and objectives just as they shared this over-riding goal. But they were separate organizations, with their own leaders.

In Middle and West Tennessee, North Alabama, and North Mississippi the Klan existed.

In West Tennessee, Arkansas, Texas, and part of Louisiana the night-riders called themselves “the Palefaces.”

Along the Gulf Coast the opponents of Reconstruction were organized as “The Knights of the White Camelia.”

Georgia and North Carolina had “The White Man's League.” And in South Carolina one found “The Red Shirts.”

At no time did these groups come together into a single, South-wide organization.

This means “the Klan”, as popularly known, was/is a myth. It was not until the 1920's that a single organization spread across the nation calling itself “The KKK.”

During the Reconstruction period the reality was the existence of several regional groups which opposed the Reconstruction governments but which maintained their separate identity and organizations.

“The Klan” is the creation of popular imagination which has imposed an event from the 1920's on a period 50 to 60 years earlier.

WHAT MOTIVATED THESE GROUPS?

First and foremost, these groups were motivated by politics. They wanted to destroy the Reconstruction governments. They hated all Republicans, white as well as black, and were as likely to be violent toward one race as the other.

Because most of the Republican votes in the South came from African American voters much of the violence was directed toward this group but white Republicans were not exempt. A white Republican living in Marshall County testified in Circuit Court that a group of Klansmen had come to his door in the middle of the night to tell him to get out of town. He replied that he had two

Colts and a Spencer and that they were welcome to come in the house to discuss the matter with him, although the first 19 through the door would be dead men. He testified that he had no more trouble.

A reading of the newspapers of that time supports the claim that the Klan was politically motivated although they were racially focused on the support of their political opponents.

HOW LARGE WAS THE KLAN?

The Klan was a secret organization and no records were kept as to membership. They were also an illegal organization so rolls of members would have been dangerous. Therefore, the information as to the size of the Klan is scanty; but it is safe to say it was not large. It did have the tacit support of a lot of people but the active membership does not seem to have been great.

In Bedford County, an area thought to be a stronghold of the Reconstruction Klan, the largest number ever assembled for a public demonstration was under 200. In Shelby County, with a large population, it was estimated by the U.S. Provost that the Klan did not number over 300 to 350. In Davidson County one of the Klan leaders, John Morton, said the organization had about 50 members.

In the towns and counties where the law-enforcement agencies took a firm stand against it the Klan was readily contained.

We will never know how large the Reconstruction Klan was but it is certainly larger in hindsight that it was in reality.

WAS THE KLAN EFFECTIVE?

In 1876 the U.S. government abandoned its plan of Reconstruction, including enforcement of the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution. The Klan played a role in this decision being

made.

An even larger role in this decision was played by the loss of interest in the plight of African Americans by the majority of the U.S. population. The nation was expanding West in a hurry, industry was booming, we were looking abroad, people were interested in other issues.

The Klan, and similar organizations, were violent; they used intimidation to control their opponents; but they were relatively small in number. If there had been a commitment by the entire nation to carry out the goals of Reconstruction the Klan could not have stopped this from happening. But, when there was shallow support for such an effort the actions of the night riders helped tip the balance in a different direction.