

“Mobilizing the Invisible Army” (1994)¹

Nancy Maclean

If there were such a thing as a typical Klan meeting, the klonklave held by the Athens Klan on the night of September 15, 1925, would qualify. Exalted Cyclops *J.P. Mangum*,* a fifty-two-year-old policeman, called the meeting to order at 8:30 in the Klan’s klavern (meeting hall). Presiding over the evening’s events with *Mangum* was a full complement of twelve “terrors” (officers). In many regards, the meeting resembled one any other organization might hold: minutes read and approved, new members voted in, dues collected, plans laid for a recruitment campaign, an educational discussion, and even niceties: members received thanks from *Mangum* for having visited him when he was sick and from the board of stewards of a local church for having attended its recent revival meeting with a contribution.

Yet, mundane as the proceedings were, a few signs indicated that this club differed from others—notwithstanding the order’s policy of not allowing discussions in meetings of “any subject, which, if published, would reflect discredit upon our great movement.” Among the humdrum bills paid, for example, was one for labor and materials for a “fiery cross.” Then there were the applications to join, some from previous members, that the Klansmen in attendance voted to reject. The chapter had recently reorganized due to a public scandal over the use of extralegal methods to combat vice, and it seems these men were viewed as possibly disloyal—“loose-mouth,” “weak-kneed,” or “traitors,” in Klan parlance. Finally, one brief item in the minutes hinted at why absolute loyalty was so necessary. *L. S. Fleming*, the chapter Klokkan (investigator), reported the case of a man who had been brought to the Klan’s attention for failing to support his family. Not a few such delinquents found themselves kidnapped and flogged by crews of masked men in the 1920s.

Such blending of the ordinary and the extreme was common in the Klan of the 1920s; indeed, the blurring proved a source of strength. The order’s overlap with the mainstream made it possible to win the enthusiasm of men like *Chester D. Morton*, a local Mason, Shriner, Boy Scout leader, and member of the Booster Club and the board of stewards of the First Methodist Church. An ambitious young mortician who would soon become president of the Athens Lions Club and vice-president of the Georgia Funeral Directors’ Association, *Morton* was not the type to belong to a fringe group. But then again, neither was he likely to pay monthly dues to an organization that merely replicated what he enjoyed through his other affiliations. In *Morton*’s case, a clue to the Klan’s special attraction comes from his rivalry with Jake and Mose Bernstein, first his employers, and later his competitors for trade and for position on the State Board of Embalmers. Since the Klan admitted only white, native-born, gentile, adult men who believed in Christianity, white supremacy, and “pure Americanism,” at the least it would keep out Jews such as the Bernstein brothers—unlike the Athens Elks, for example, who three times had elected

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* Names in italics have been changed. See Appendix for explanation.

businessman and civic leader Moses Gerson Michael to their highest office. But the Klan might even manage to drive the Bernsteins and other Jews out of business altogether.

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The second Klan's founder, William Joseph Simmons, had not explicitly included such things among the Klan's goals when he established the order in 1915. The son of a poor Alabama country physician, Simmons was a man chronically on the make. Having tried his hand at farming, circuit-riding as a Southern Methodist Episcopal Church preacher, and lecturing in Southern history at Lanier University, by 1915 he had settled into a mildly lucrative position as the Atlanta-area organizer for the Woodmen of the World, a fraternal benefit society. Unsatisfied, Simmons dreamed of reviving the hooded order his father had served in as an officer after the Civil War.

For years, he thought about creating a new Ku Klux Klan. By October of 1915, he was ready to unveil the plans to a group of like-minded friends. Together, the group petitioned for a charter from the state. Then, on Thanksgiving night, they met atop Stone Mountain, an imposing several-hundred-foot-high granite butte just outside Atlanta. With a flag fluttering in the wind beside them, a Bible open to the twelfth chapter of Romans, and a flaming cross to light the night sky above, Simmons and his disciples proclaimed the new Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Their passion for ceremony was not matched by a talent for organizing, however. Unclear about exactly what their message was, Simmons and his partners floundered over how to spread it. By early 1920, they had only enrolled a few thousand men.

That would soon change. In June of that year, Simmons signed a contract with Mary Elizabeth Tyler and Edward Young Clarke, partners in the Southern Publicity Association. Having organized support for the Red Cross, the Anti-Saloon League, the Salvation Army, and the War Work Council, the two had mastered the art of modern propaganda. Hiring a staff of seasoned organizers, they set to work to amass a following for the Klan and a small fortune for themselves. Within a few months, membership jumped to an estimated 100,000. A wife at age fourteen and a widowed mother at fifteen who went on to make a career as a businesswoman, Tyler had a knack for turning adversity to advantage. When in 1921 the *New York World* set out to destroy the Klan by documenting over one hundred and fifty separate cases of vigilante violence charged to it—an exposure so damning that it prompted a congressional investigation of the order—Tyler turned both into recruiting opportunities. In the four months after the *World's* exposé, the Klan chartered two hundred new chapters; overall membership leapt to some one million.

Seasoned promoters, Tyler and Clarke knew not only how to sell, but what would sell. To Simmons' initial blend of white supremacy, Christianity, and the male-bonding rituals of fraternalism, they added elements geared to tap the fears of many white contemporaries in the anxious years after the Great War. Declaiming against organized blacks, Catholics, and Jews, along with the insidious encroachments of Bolshevism, the order put itself forward as the country's most militant defender of "pure Americanism." It stood for patriotism, "old-time

religion,” and conventional morality, and pledged to fend off challenges from any quarter to the rights and privileges of men from the stock of the nation’s founders. The message took. Although Tyler and Clarke had expected only Southerners to respond, men from all over the country did. “In all my years of experience in organization work,” Clarke told Simmons, “I have never seen anything equal to the clamor throughout the nation for the Klan.”

One month after the Klan’s founding in Atlanta, Imperial Wizard Simmons spoke at a meeting called to promote the new order in Athens. Yet, for several years, no more was heard of it in Clarke County. No doubt it was outflanked by the officially sponsored hysteria of the war years. With the state government enacting “work or fight” laws, Athens schoolchildren compelled to sing patriotic songs and buy thrift stamps to avoid ostracism, “slackers” and government critics branded as “traitors,” and civic leaders preaching that only the United States Army stood between local residents and the “German Horror” of rape, pillage, and slavery—and with cotton prices high all the while—the Klan lacked a distinctive appeal. At any rate, not until well after the Armistice did the Klan reappear in Athens. Then, following a much-touted return engagement of *Birth of a Nation* in January of 1921, the Klan renewed its efforts to win local men.

Following a strategy devised by the Atlanta-based national office, Athens Klan promoters worked existing networks in the community to accumulate members. They looked to two areas in particular where it seemed their message might be well-received: fraternal orders and Protestant churches. The Klan presented itself to prospective members as the active embodiment of “the principles of the better class of lodges.” Simmons, a member of fifteen other fraternal organizations himself, rallied men with odes to “the united powers of our regal manhood.” To enhance the Klan’s mystique, he designed a special alliterative lexicon for the movement. And he painstakingly worked out the details of elaborate rituals whereby members advanced in the order by obtaining “degrees” as they did in other fraternal orders. When he first came to Athens to advertise the new order in 1915, Simmons in fact emphasized “its unrivaled degree work.” Many local Klansmen took the bait; they delighted in impressing their fellows with their mastery of Klan ritual.

In presenting their order thus, Klan organizers staked a bid for the loyalties of participants in the long tradition of fraternal association. The country had over six hundred secret societies by the mid-1920s; together, they enlisted over thirty million people. The Klan curried support from a number of these groups, especially those of common mind. It endorsed the *Fellowship Forum*, an anti-Catholic publication that claimed a readership of one million white, Protestant fraternalists. The junior Order of United American Mechanics (JOUAM), an anti-Catholic, nativist fraternity whose better-known members included populist leader Tom Watson and President Warren Harding, was also known as “a close ally” of the Klan. Indeed, the Georgia JOUAM shared its weekly Atlanta-based publication, *The Searchlight*, with the Klan until the Klan formally took it over in October of 1923. The distinction between the two was moot in any case, since Klan leader J. O. Wood edited the newspaper.

Klan leaders cultivated their common ground with fraternal orders to reap a bumper crop of recruits. Almost all the traveling organizers (kleagles) hired by the Imperial Palace were Masons, an affiliation they used to meet prospective Klansmen in new communities. Soon after arriving, they approached leaders of societies such as the Masons, Elks, Odd Fellows, and

Orangemen. Often these officials would allow the Klan to meet in their lodge halls, as the Masons did in Clarke County. Indeed, the Athens experience conformed to the larger pattern. When Simmons arrived to advance the new order in 1915, he came as the guest of C. A. Vonderleith, an organizer for the Woodmen of the World, whom Simmons already knew from his work with the Athens Woodmen. I. A. Hogg, an officer of the local womens' auxiliary of the Woodmen, would soon add the Klan to his roster of associations.

The strategy worked. Even the meager records available for local fraternal orders reveal that a minimum of 120 Athens Klansmen, or twenty-nine percent, belonged to at least one. Among those that shared members with the Klan were the Woodmen of the World, the Elks, the Masons, the Odd Fellows, the Knights of Pythias, and the Shriners. Several Clarke County Klansmen also held office in these groups. Local Kligrapp (secretary) *Roy P. Yarborough*, for example, was a twenty-five-year veteran of the Odd Fellows and reportedly its most popular member ever. Known to his fellows as "Uncle Roy," Yarborough also served as clerk of the Woodmen of the World, and belonged to the Knights of Pythias.

But the most ardent fraternalist in the chapter was *Wiley Frank Doolittle*, a Mason, Shriner, and Woodman. Enchanted by the magic of organized manhood, *Doolittle* had accumulated over the years an unrivalled library on fraternalism. "No one in Athens," the press eulogized upon his death in 1930, "possessed such knowledge of Masonry"; members of a half dozen local fraternal orders paid him tribute as honorary pallbearers. Nationwide, the Klan boasted that 500,000 Masons had joined by 1923. Along with members of other fraternal organizations, they often formed the backbone of local chapters.

As fertile a harvest, organizers found, could be gleaned from Protestant churches. Imperial Wizard Hiram Wesley Evans, who assumed the helm from Simmons in 1922, described his organization as "a recruiting agency" for Protestant churches. Whether or not this was true, the reverse was. Throughout the country, evangelical Protestants in particular flocked to the Klan, primarily Baptists, Methodists, and members of the Church of Christ, the Disciples of Christ, and the United Brethren. Men in more elite or liberal denominations, in contrast, such as Unitarians, Congregationalists, Lutherans, or Episcopalians, appeared less likely to join. In Clarke County, Klansmen also tended to be religious enthusiasts. Even the patchy church records available showed that at least forty-three percent of Athens Klansmen belonged to a church—about the same proportion as that of all white county residents. Of these, thirty-seven percent were Baptists; thirty percent, Methodists; and smaller proportions scattered among other denominations.

Many Athens Klan laymen helped lead their churches. At least forty-six held positions such as deacon, elder, steward, committee member, usher, or Sunday School participant. Twelve Klansmen took part in the Men's Sunday School class at First Methodist Church alone. Some members advanced the cause in other ways. Klansman *L. T. Curry* served as Treasurer of the Businessmen's Evangelistic Club, while *N. O. Bowers* championed "personal evangelism" among young people through the Christian Endeavor Society. The wives and mothers of many local Klansmen, for their part, participated in the women's missionary societies of their churches.

Like laymen, many clergymen cooperated with the Klan. Of the thirty-nine national lecturers working for the Klan at one point, two-thirds were said to be Protestant ministers. Each Klan chapter, meanwhile, had its own kludd (chaplain). By 1924, the Klan boasted that it had

enrolled 30,000 ministers. In that year, the Klan also claimed as members three-quarters of the 6,000 delegates to the Southeastern Baptist Convention. In Clarke County, of the white Protestant churches had some connection to the Klan. Either their pastors belonged, or they allowed announcements of Klan meetings or robed visits of Klansmen during services, or they accepted Klan aid in evangelistic efforts.

At least ten ministers belonged to the Athens Klan; several helped lead it. The Reverend M. B. Miller of First Christian Church, for example, served in the mid-'twenties as the Exalted Cyclops (chapter president) of the local Klan; his assistant, the Reverend Jerry Johnson, acted as Kligrapp (secretary). The Klan so valued the work of their member the Reverend B. Postell Read of Young Harris Memorial Methodist Church that, when he left his Athens congregation, Klansmen and women attended his last service in a body to express appreciation for his "service" to the community. The Reverend *B. B. Couch* of West End Baptist Church, also a Klansman, likewise won fulsome praise from his entire congregation upon his departure.

Through such channels, the Klan built up its numbers. By 1923, its ranks included "three hundred of the finest men in Clarke County." Confident of their future, they began building a new klavern to hold their meetings. Members proudly announced that the hall would sport a forty-foot-tall electric cross. With its membership hovering around three hundred the next few years, the local chapter was a "baby Klan," as *The Searchlight* put it. The chapter drew in approximately one in ten of the native-born, Protestant white men eligible for membership—a considerable proportion, but small relative to some of its counterparts.

Statewide, the Klan also thrived in the first half of the decade. Since Atlanta hosted the Klan's national office, or Imperial Palace, Georgia always played a significant role in Klan affairs. The Atlanta Klan enrolled upwards of fifteen thousand members and boasted the largest fraternal hall in the city. By the mid-'twenties, chapters blanketed the state. Cities like Macon, Augusta, and Columbus yielded larger absolute numbers, but towns like Pelham and La Grange, and hamlets like Dewy Rose and Tallulah Falls, held their own in ardor. Large and small, urban and rural, Klan chapters cooperated to achieve their common goals and to build numbers at each other's parades and rallies. A 1926 internal report maintained that Georgia was now second in membership in the South.

In the nation as a whole, Georgia ranked eighth among states in estimated membership. Among regions, the North Central and Southwestern states enrolled the most members, followed by the Southeast, the Midwest and Far West, and, finally, the North Atlantic states. By mid-decade, the total reached perhaps as high as five million, distributed through nearly four thousand local chapters. Yet the numbers barely suggest the reach of the Klan's tentacles. If its membership claims were true, the order enrolled as many members as the American Federation of Labor at the peak of its strength. "Outside business," reported one sympathetic contemporary journalist, "the KU Klux Klan has become the most vigorous, active and effective organization in American life." Indeed, in the five months after the order established a formal national lecture bureau, its speakers addressed audiences of well over 200,000 people. Those who missed the lectures could stay abreast of issues through the order's press. Supplementing the publications issued by the national office, state and local Klans published some forty weekly newspapers. Numbers like these created a legitimacy of their own.

But their effect was enhanced by the kind of men the Klan was able to attract. The typical member, in Athens as elsewhere, was not the uprooted angry young man one might expect; he was middle-aged, married, and probably a father as well. Ninety-two percent of Athens Klan members were married men; more than two-thirds were fathers, with an average of between three and four children. While most local Klansmen were family men, not a few were civic leaders. Klansman *G. M. Harris*, the county tax receiver, had served two terms as mayor in the 1880s. The wealthy *Wiley Doolittle* was described by the Athens press as among the “most influential citizens.” The roster of offices he had held included mayor (three terms), president of the Chamber of Commerce, president of the Booster Club, president of the Kiwanis Club, and chairman of the Clarke County Democratic Executive Committee, which four other Klansmen also served on. One of them local Kligrapp (secretary) *Roy Yarborough* was also a county commissioner, a notary public, and a justice of the peace. Joseph Kenneth Patrick, for his part, was a charter member and later president of the Athens Lions Club, a member of the Board of Directors and the Rural Committee of the Chamber of Commerce, and a future state senator.

Just as the Klan recruited men from the mainstream, so it boosted members’ morale with the kinds of family and community activities that clubs and churches also sponsored. Although excluded from the Klan itself, Klansmen’s wives and sons could join parallel orders: the Women of the Ku Klux Klan, created in 1923, and the Junior Klan, created in 1924. Here, without distracting attention from the leading roles of their menfolk, family members might work for shared ends. Athens Klanswomen and men thus cooperated to reward a visiting minister with an automobile for his leadership of a successful revival at East Athens Baptist Church in 1926, winning themselves the gratitude of the church’s chairmen and deacons. The following year, they collaborated on a fund-raiser whose end was “to place a Flag and Bible” in the city high school.

Klan chapters promoted sociability and mutual aid as well. At Klan picnics such as the “Great Klan Barbecue” hosted by Athens Klansmen in 1928, members gathered with their families and friends for afternoons of music, sports, and swimming, along with speeches. Sometimes, Klan rallies featured weddings of members, public rituals that interwove personal and political commitments. More important, fellow Klansmen were on hand in times of trouble. When a member fell sick, his brothers came to visit. When his family lost a loved one, they sent flowers and expressions of sympathy. And when he died, they stood ready to conduct a stately funeral. When crisis struck, Klansmen dug into their pockets for one another. When the bicycle of a local minister’s son was stolen, for example, his fellow Klansmen voted to buy the boy a new one. After *E. D. Todd* lost his home in a fire, the chapter established a committee to inform his fellows of his needs. How much such courtesies meant was evident when the mother of two local Klansmen and grandmother of another passed away. Her six children and their spouses, “representing forty grandchildren and twenty great-grandchildren,” joined to thank the Athens Klan and ask “God’s richest blessings” for each of its members.

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And yet Klansmen were not just Odd Fellows in robes and hoods. For all the ties that bound Klansmen to commonplace community networks and habits, the Klan was different. Leaders reminded members that their organization was “not a lodge,” but “an army of Protestant Americans.” As a “*mass movement*” to secure the alleged birthright of Anglo-Saxon Americans, it could achieve that goal only through “an aggressive application of the art of Klancraft.” That required winning the confidence of the community by recruiting respected local men and making the Klan a “*civic asset*.” In short, breaking into church and fraternal networks was part of a larger strategy to accrue power. And that power would be used toward ends some people in these networks might balk at.

Signs that the second Klan would be more than just another community organization were there from the beginning, not least in its name. The first call to re-establish the Klan came, not from William Joseph Simmons, but from Tom Watson. The foremost leader of Georgia’s Populist movement in the 1890s, Watson had long since given up the struggle for interracial economic justice. Recently, he had turned his attention to Catholic and Jewish subversion. In August of 1915, he informed readers of his Georgia-based *Jeffersonian* magazine that “another Ku Klux Klan may have to be organized to restore Home Rule.” Georgia’s governor had just commuted the death sentence of Leo Frank, a Jewish factory supervisor convicted of the murder of Mary Phagan, a young white woman in his employ. The governor’s mercy enraged those who believed Frank guilty, Watson among them. Four days after he issued his incitement, a body of men calling themselves the Knights of Mary Phagan kidnapped Frank from the state prison farm, took him to her home town, and hanged him from a tree.

Three months later, Simmons resurrected the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in Atlanta, where Frank’s alleged crime and his trial had taken place. The Frank case has often been cited as a catalyst for the creation of the second Klan, whose founding members, according to popular myth, included some of the Knights of Mary Phagan. In fact, no one has ever documented a direct connection between the two. The “truth” of the link lay less in personnel than in a common vigilante spirit. An appeal to that spirit would always be part of the Klan. Its promise of swift and secret vengeance, more than anything else, distinguished it from contemporary organizations with whom it shared ideas, rituals, and members.

Nothing in the early years helped more to make that promise come to life than D. W. Griffith’s film extravaganza, *Birth of a Nation*, released in the same year as the second Klan’s creation. In this racist epic of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the restoration of white rule, Griffith harnessed all the emotive power of modern film-making technique to convince viewers that black men were beasts and white vigilantes were the saviors of American civilization. Given the right to vote and hold office, the film averred, African-American men dragged society into chaos; worse, they used such power to stalk white women. Griffith left no doubt about how this fate had been averted. In the final, climactic scene, the hooded and robed members of the Ku Klux Klan rode in to save his young white heroine from rape—by castrating and lynching her black would-be assailant. Their act ended sectional fratricide among white men and gave birth to a reunited America.

For the Klan, the film proved a boon. When it came to Atlanta for a three-week showing, record-breaking white crowds packed the theaters to cheer on the white-robed crusaders. Recognizing an opportunity, Simmons ran newspaper advertisements for the revived order next

to those for the film. Thereafter, the Klan routinely exploited showings of *Birth of a Nation* to enlist new members, for it sent the message the Klan wanted delivered. “No one who has seen the film,” commented journalist Walter Lippman in 1922, “will ever hear the name [Ku Klux Klan] again without seeing those white horsemen.” Not surprisingly, the NAACP sought—in vain—to have the film removed from circulation.

Black Americans in fact understood from the beginning that the second Klan was different, even from other racist organizations. In the view of many, it was an immediate threat. One month after the second Klan’s founding ceremony, Georgia Republican leader Henry Lincoln Johnson begged the governor to make the order change its name, on the grounds that the Klan’s re-establishment would encourage “mob outlawry.” “My people (the colored people),” Johnson predicted, “will be the helpless, and often vicarious, victims.” He was right. “Nobody knows,” complained a Black Atlanta lodge officer to the NAACP in 1921, “the great distress” that this “great evil” had brought upon the black people of Georgia. The state’s leading African-American newspaper, *The Atlanta Independent*, for its part, said of the second Klan that, like the first, its “aim and purpose is to terrorize helpless black men and women.” “The epitome of race hatred and religious intolerance,” it constituted “the most dangerous menace that ever threatened popular government.

Outside Georgia, members of other groups the Klan pitted itself against made it clear that they, too, saw the order as outside the framework of ordinary politics. The editor of the *Catholic World*, for example, warned in 1923 that if the Klan were allowed to persist and the state failed to protect Catholic citizens from its provocations, they would employ “self-defense, even to the extent of bloodshed.” In that year, in fact, Catholics were the leading force in organizing a militant anti-Klan group called the “Red Knights,” or “Knights of the Flaming Circle.” The group welcomed anyone opposed to the Klan and not a Protestant, and was said to be recruiting well in Pennsylvania and West Virginia, and later in the industrial cities of Ohio as well. In several parts of the country, often under the auspices of the Red Knights, Catholics responded to the Klan’s provocations with mass, armed counterattacks so determined that the National Guard was called out on at least one occasion.

Some radical farmers and unionists shared the Red Knights’ assessment of the novel danger posed by the Klan. Iowa farmers charged a Klan meeting with pitchforks; their counterparts in the Arkansas mountains turned shotguns on Klan intruders, killing one and wounding several. The United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), a renegade in the contemporary craft-dominated labor movement because of its commitment to interracial industrial unionism, tried to close ranks against the Klan. In 1921, while leaders of the American Federation of Labor equivocated, refusing a black delegation to its national convention the right to introduce a resolution calling for the suppression of the Klan, the UMWA barred from its ranks miners who joined the Klan. Although unable to rid the union of Klan influence, many militants tried. Oklahoma UMWA members spied on a Klan meeting and expelled the miners who attended, while their Pennsylvania counterparts put union members suspected of Klan membership on trial.

The imminent dangers perceived by the Klan’s targets offer a clue to why the order did not take off until 1921. For one thing, an organized national vigilante movement would probably have seemed superfluous before that. The suppression of challenges to prevailing relations of

power was official federal policy in the war years. When *Wiley Doolittle*, former mayor of Athens and future Klansman, proclaimed at a flag-kissing ceremony in June of 1918 that “hereafter disloyalists might expect to be branded on the forehead and on either cheek, and the rope would be the end of traitors, in legal process of law or otherwise,” other civic leaders were not scandalized. On the contrary, Atlanta’s leading newspaper quoted him approvingly. Similarly, an Alabama-based Justice Department official writing in the same year made clear his assumption that vigilante activity was legitimate. Having found that, so far, the mobs had confined themselves to attacks on black people, workers, and wartime dissenters, he described the night-riders as merely “potential sources of lawlessness and disorder.”

The Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917 and 1918 backed community pressures for “one hundred percent Americanism” with censorship and possible prison terms for dissenters. Insulating the war effort from criticism was only part of their purpose; suppressing domestic labor struggle and left-wing radicalism was as important. These strictures had barely been lifted before the postwar Red Scare, the most extensive peacetime violation of civil liberties in United States history, began. Its climax was the Palmer Raids of January 1920, a nationwide dragnet against radicals named for the Attorney General under whose direction they proceeded. As national leaders gradually began to breathe more freely after 1920 and favor a return to normal methods of rule, so did many local elites. Then the kind of methods they had recently endorsed came to seem excessive, even illegitimate.

In Athens, some became nervous when the Klan sought to keep the wartime spirit alive for its own purposes. When the Klan returned to Athens in 1921 and promoted itself as a force for “law and order” the implicit promise was that it would enforce its concept of order in a manner similar to its namesake’s. Recoiling, some one hundred “good citizens” signed a petition against it. Their numbers included many prominent civic and business leaders. The signers declared that the “announced purposes of the Ku Klux Klan...have the approval of all good citizens.” They took issue with the order on only one point: its usurpation of the powers of lawfully “constituted authorities.” The Klan may have performed a necessary service during Reconstruction, they argued, but “no such necessity exists now.” Hence its re-establishment was “ill advised,” and its “self-constituted guardians of the peace, working at night and in disguise” were mistaken in their zeal. However timid their criticism of the Klan, the signers did understand its penchant for violence. To silence them, Klan leaders rounded up more imposing voices.

Just as the Klan used burning crosses to sanctify its message, so it used ministers to sanctify its methods. So valued was their function that the Klan chased after them systematically and allowed them to belong without paying dues. The harvest such policies reaped distressed Klan opponents beyond measure. The Atlanta-based Committee for Interracial Cooperation (CIC) reported in 1923 that Southern ministers “who approve the Ku Klux Klan methods” far outnumbered those who objected to them; “this type of minister,” the CIC concluded, “has made the Ku Klux Klan possible.

Indeed, as the community leaders thought most capable of interpreting God’s will, Klan clergymen seemed to give his blessing to the order’s activities. By 1926, CIC director Will Alexander, a former minister himself, confessed privately that “the large number of [Methodist and Baptist] ministers who are in the Ku Klux Klan...renders me hopeless as far as the masses of ministers are concerned.” Such despair was more than justified in Athens, where only one

minister ever publicly condemned the Klan—and then quite late in the day and not by name. In 1927, the Reverend J. D. Mell, president of the Georgia Baptist Convention, condemned the vigilante activities of “masked mobs” Even then, he was careful to qualify his remarks by stating that “good men” participated.

For their part, the men charged with responsibility for training the minds of Georgia’s youth maintained a stance of benign neutrality toward the Klan. Asked by the *New York World* to take a stand in a campaign to push the 1924 Republican and Democratic national conventions to adopt anti-Klan planks, the chancellor of the University of Georgia had only this to say: “Organizations with secret membership have a tendency to produce reliance on group action which is not in accord with the American spirit of personal responsibility and independence.” The university’s community governing board, a Prudential Committee composed of leading businessmen, became more agitated over liberal dissent. It acted to censor student journalists who criticized some of the state’s cities, and one of its members, newspaper editor Hugh Rowe, called for the expulsion of a campus YMCA staff member who organized interracial student discussion groups on the grounds that he was probably a paid Russian agent. Prudential Committee members insisted, calling upon university rules for support, “that there be no political criticism at the University of our government.”

Thus intimidated, even the few faculty members who despised the Klan hesitated to speak out. “The trouble with us,” reflected English professor John Wade, “is that we have as little courage as we have voice. But with things as they are now in Georgia, more courage would likely mean martyrdom, not of the effective variety.” In such a climate, it is perhaps unsurprising that more than a third of the freshmen trying out for the university’s debating society in 1923 defended the proposition that “the activities of the Ku Klux Klan as now practiced are of the best interests to the United States.”

Just as the endorsement of clergymen and the equivocation of educators could shield the Klan from criticism, so could the backing of politicians protect it from hostile legislation or prosecution. The Klan, of course, needed the help of public officials to realize such elements of its program as immigration restriction, Prohibition enforcement, opposition to American participation in the League of Nations and the World Court, tax relief, prohibition of interracial marriage, exclusion of Catholic teachers from the public schools, the closing of parochial schools, and prohibition of property ownership by non-citizens.

Yet the order went about electoral politics with a zeal beyond that of other contemporary organizations. It pushed members, not only to go to the polls themselves, but also to turn out family members, friends, and neighbors. Such prodding paid off. As Exalted Cyclops *J. P. Mangum* boasted to the Grand Dragon in November of 1925: “We have just had an election in the city and [won] out[;] they dont know how we did it but we did our stuff and sed nothing.” “Our stuff” most likely referred to such Klan tactics as the mass distribution of model ballots; the “decade system” in which, after the order had decided on a candidate, each member would then go out and talk up him up with ten non-members; or the “poison squads” of Klanswomen who used ordinary gossip networks to spread malicious rumors about those opposed by the Klan. The Klan also organized public shows of strength to sway wavering non-members and frighten opponents at key times. More importantly, the Realm office warned recalcitrant public officials to beware “the invisible eye.” The threats were not idle. The Klan kept extensive files on public

figures to blackmail them if need arose. Where evidence of impropriety was lacking, the order sometimes tried to manufacture it. Imperial officers thus deployed prostitutes and bootleggers in vain hopes of entrapping racial liberals like Will Alexander, and the ministers C. B. Wilmer, Plato Durham, and M. Ashby Jones.

Through such varied means, the Klan steamrolled opposition and gained influence in Georgia. Broker of the votes of an estimated 100,000 of the state's 300,000 Democrats by 1923, the Klan held "the balance of power" in state politics, as even a reporter who sought to play down its domination had to admit. The order enrolled such well-placed officials as Governor Clifford Walker, Chief justice of the State Supreme Court Richard B. Russell, Sr., State Attorney General George M. Napier, Atlanta Mayor Walter A. Sims, Solicitor General (district attorney) of Fulton County John M. Boykin, and Fulton Superior Court Judge Gus H. Howard, in addition to many less strategically placed men. Some evidence suggests that the roster also included Georgia's United States senators Tom Watson, Walter George, and William J. Harris; United States congressman and past president of the Anti-Saloon League W. D. Upshaw, and President of the Georgia State Senate Herbert Clay.

Similar patterns prevailed elsewhere. In 1923, for example, at least seventy-five congressional representatives were said to owe their seats to the Klan; at the annual conference of state governors the year before, only one was willing to discuss, let alone condemn, the Klan. The reason was not hard to find. The Klan held sway in the political life of many states; it dominated some outright, such as Indiana and Colorado; and it swept anti-Klan governors from office in a number of others, most spectacularly in Oregon and Kansas.

The ability to dispose of opponents so handily where it had the requisite numbers gives an indication of why Klan leaders put such a high premium on electoral politics. "It is of vital importance that our friends be placed in office," Georgia's Grand Dragon explained; "the life of our organization" might hinge upon the outcome of elections. The election of Klan enemies to the legislature, such as Athens resident Andrew Erwin, could not be tolerated and should be reversed. The Grand Dragon's own command of the votes of at least half the state's delegates to the 1924 Democratic Party national convention helped ensure that the convention would vote down a platform plank against the Klan; of Georgia's fifty-six delegates, only *one*—that same Athens resident—supported the plank. Indeed, wielding its power in the nonpartisan style of the Anti-Saloon League, the Klan managed to prevent either major party and all the nation's presidents in the decade from condemning it publicly.

But it was back at home that the insulation mattered most. With it, the Klan could fend off measures that might have made its night-riding operations more difficult, such as a 1922 bill—aimed at the Klan—to prevent the wearing of masks on Georgia's public highways. The order went on to deliver one of the biggest electoral defeats in state history to the governor who proposed it, Thomas W. Hardwick. His successor, Clifford Walker, a Klansman himself, learned the lesson. As governor, he consulted Klan leaders before introducing new initiatives to the state assembly. On the local level, prosecution of Klan violence was hardly likely when municipal governments, police departments, and courts were rife with Klan members and sympathizers. "Everybody in the courthouse belonged to the Klan" in Atlanta, recalled a local city attorney; "virtually every judge, the prosecuting officers...all the police and the mayor and the

councilmen.” If he exaggerated, it was not by much. With the cards thus stacked in its favor, the Klan could act with impunity.

Indeed, newspaper editors in the South, like politicians, tended to quaver in the face of Klan’s power. Clearly, they did not view the order as an innocent analogue of other fraternal lodges. While local papers boosted these, most maintained an eerie silence regarding the Klan’s activities. Few offered outright support, yet neither would they investigate or expose it. With the notable exceptions of the *Columbus Enquirer-Sun* and eventually the *Macon Telegraph*, no Georgia newspapers condemned the Klan until the second half of the decade, when its power had begun to wane. The Athens press was no exception. On the contrary, its editor denounced Julian Harris, the anti-Klan editor of the *Enquirer-Sun*, for giving comfort to “the South-haters” with his coverage of the movement. “Nothing unpleasant must ever be printed” seemed to be the operating principle of most newspapers, observed one Athens educator and resident; another later recalled, “they put only nice things in the *Banner-Herald*.”

Night-riding and inciting hatred were not nice; neither were they “newsworthy” if their targets were blacks or poor whites. The topic was just too ticklish to touch. Coverage of the Klan’s activities, after all, might deter outside investors, agitate blacks, and stimulate discord among whites—to say nothing of losing subscriptions. Yet, uneasiness about the Klan’s methods remained. The Athens press thus gave editorial support to two area judges who came out against the Klan in 1926 for its “lawlessness,” its efforts “to intimidate men and...dominate who shall run for office,” and its habit of “trying men in secret.” Throughout the South, in fact, the most commonly stated rationale for elite opposition to the Klan was, in the words of one Texas judge, that society could not abide “two systems of government for punishing crime,” one “working at night with a bucket of tar and a sack of feathers.”

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The Klan’s internal structure and methods of operation were well suited to such activities. All power ultimately resided in the hands of the Imperial Wizard, whose reign, in the words of one observer, was a “virtual dictatorship.” Indeed, short of overthrow, no real checks on his power existed. All Klan officials at the national and state levels received their positions by appointment from above, not election from below. Local klaverns, once chartered, could decide whom to admit as members, participate in the selection of local officials, and plan their own activities. But their sovereignty was more apparent than real. Chapter decisions were always subject to the veto of the state Grand Dragon, who also had the power to withdraw charters and thus self-government. Klan officials no doubt saw in this organizational structure a safeguard for the lucre of office.

Yet the command structure also matched the organization’s ultimate mission: combat. Klansmen regularly described their organization as “an army” and “a fighting machine” and their projects as “battles.” “Ours is a military system, requiring performance of duty and honor above all else,” explained a manual for building local chapters. Describing the Exalted Cyclops as “the commander-in-chief,” it went on to elaborate the duties of the rest of the “military machinery” in

like vocabulary. Democratic debate and decision-making might undermine the Klan's larger program for the imposition of social order. One Klan leader admitted as much in an apologia for its "complete dictatorship." "The only way in which the Klan can be protected," he said, from "demagogues who might be able to sway a portion of the membership...is to have a government strong enough to suppress all such attacks." Such discussion and voting as occurred within the national Klan, in fact, bore more resemblance to plebiscites than to democratic processes. In 1926, for example, the order boasted that Imperial Wizard Evans had been re-elected and changes made in the Constitution "with out a single dissenting vote." What national leaders proposed, the ranks disposed.

The Klan was not alone among voluntary organizations in its lack of democratic process; yet the commitment to secrecy that accompanied these procedures did appear singular. And it made sense for a movement that had so much to conceal. The order's internal publications often stressed confidentiality, particularly about "Secret Work." One advised chapters with members who "cannot keep their mouths shut" to expel them. Keeping one's mouth shut included telling lies under oath in court if necessary, something Klansmen routinely did on the rare occasions when members of their movement faced indictment. Secrecy also served to intimidate potential opponents and stifle public discussion, since no non-members could be sure of whether or not their white acquaintances belonged to the Klan.

Public silence was but one element of the absolute fidelity the order demanded. Prospective members had to pledge their loyalty to the Klan and promise to willingly endure any penalty devised by their brethren if they proved "untrue" to this vow, among them "disgrace, dishonor and death." Members who might consider violating this pledge were forewarned of the danger. "The Klan is cruel to those who betray it," an internal document reminded the fainthearted; "pause to consider the status of those who have betrayed it." The Klan punished, sometimes brutally, men who betrayed their oaths. W. S. Coburn, an aide to then-deposed Imperial Wizard Simmons, lost his life for indiscretion in 1922; Philip Fox, a member of Imperial Wizard Evans' staff, confessed to the assassination.

The stress the Klan placed on internal hierarchy and obedience was part of a more general militarism. Militarism, as historian Alfred Vagts has shown, is associated with war and armies, yet it goes beyond military purposes and may even interfere with them. Historically, the term has connoted "a domination of the military man over the civilian." Enthralled with martial rank, prestige, and custom, militarists exalt "caste and cult, authority and belief." The principal exponents of modern militarism have not been military men, but civilians disenchanted with the banalities of bourgeois politics and the quest for material gain, yet also inimical to liberalism, labor, and the Left. For inspiration, they have looked to the ceremony, discipline, and mystical nationalism of militarism, through which they expressed their desires for a society organized along corresponding lines.

Klansmen demonstrated their fealty to martial values in numerous ways. Most visibly, they chose to present themselves to the public in elaborate ceremonies, hidden beneath masks and uniforms that wiped out their individual identities. These outfits, in turn, varied according to members' places in the internal hierarchy. Rank-and-file Klansmen donned simple white robes and hoods; Exalted Cyclopes and Grand Dragons, more ornate ones; and the Imperial Wizard the most ostentatious and colorful regalia of all. The salutations required for the Imperial Wizard

likewise showed infatuation with castelike warrior traditions: “His Majesty,” “His Excellency,” even “Emperor of the Invisible Empire.” Expressing its aspirations to the powers nationhood conferred, the Klan referred to the society outside itself as “the alien world.” To be admitted to the Klan, an “alien” had to undergo an initiation ceremony described as “naturalization.” Not surprisingly, the movement became a magnet for men imbued with martial values. Around the country, law enforcement personnel and military men joined the Klan in large numbers.

Klansmen’s discomfort with civilian values and their embrace of a lock-step hierarchy within their own movement suggested a profound uneasiness with the direction they saw their society heading. What they meant when they pledged to defend “pure Americanism” will become clearer through an examination of the time and place that produced the movement. For the bonds solidified by fraternalism, by common religious feeling, and by family involvement and mutual aid did not simply enhance members’ loyalty to one another. These bonds also steeled them for battle against “alien forces.”