

In addition, 1923 saw the formation of the [Women of the Ku Klux Klan](#) (WKKK) as a support mechanism for the exclusively all male Klan. The new organization's first Imperial Commander was [Lulu Alice Boyers Markwell](#) former president of Arkansas' chapter of the [Women's Christian Temperance Union](#) (WCTU). The plan was to coordinate with pro-Klan women's groups, including the [Grand League of Protestant Women](#), the [White American Protestants](#) (WAP), and the [Ladies of the Invisible Empire](#) (LOTIE). However, the group was ultimately short lived, waning in influence with its male counterpart.

At its peak in the 1920s, [14 & 16] the membership of the Klan exceeded 4 million people. By the end of 1924, the Klan had begun to lose members when the dispute between Evans and Simmons culminated in the latter's banishment. Several factors intervened to spell its demise besides the struggle over control (which led to the formation of several independent Klans in 1925). Important, too, was the diminishing fear about a communist takeover in the United States. Violence was undoubtedly a factor in the Klan's decline. Many Klan enemies were quick to attribute all acts of violence to the group. But the greatest factor in the Klan demise appears to have been the organization's inability to produce results. It could not stimulate a moral revival. Indeed, many of its leaders were exposed as morally lacking. Furthermore, bootleggers proliferated faster than the Klan ever had. They had no impact on America's demand for "Demon Rum." Finally, by 1925, racial tensions had eased, and Americans had lost interest in the Red Scare.

Essentially, the Klan grew and maintained membership only by appealing to the emotions of people. Emotional appeal followed emotional appeal. But when exposed dangers were not followed by concrete action, people became disillusioned and dropped out.

Klan membership rapidly fell off after 1924, although it experienced a slight resurgence in 1928 when [Alfred Smith](#), a Roman Catholic, ran for President. This rekindling of anti-Catholic sentiment burned out again following Smith's defeat at the polls. The onset of the depression in the following year reduced the Klan to only a few thousand members nationwide. The Klan was all but forgotten in most areas of the country.

In 1939 Hiram Evans stepped down after 17 years as the Imperial Wizard, and [James Arnold Colescott](#) took over. And in 1944, the Klan went out of existence when the Internal Revenue Service demanded over \$500,000 in back taxes.

Birth of the Third Klan

Although several independent Ku Klux Klan organizations formed shortly after the Second World War, it was not until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and early 1960s that it became active again. The 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision in [Brown vs. Board of Education](#) (declaring school segregation unconstitutional) that the Klan once again gained the national spotlight. Following that decision, [Eldon Edwards](#), ([Video](#)) an Atlanta factory worker chartered the U.S. Klans, Knights of the Ku Klux Klans, Inc. During the '50s Edwards' organization, largest of the several Klans active at the time, grew to approximately 15,000

members spread over nine states. Edward's primary focus was on the maintenance of school segregation. However, his literature was also strongly anti-Semitic, anti-communist and anti-Catholic.

In the wake of the Supreme Court decision, racially inspired bombings, beatings, arsons, and murders became commonplace throughout the South. Between 1954 and 1958, a coalition of civil rights groups identified over 500 such incidents. Since the incidents coincided with an increase in Klan membership, many people identified the Klan as the cause. But this was not the case. To be sure, acts of violence were committed by Klansmen, or were Klan inspired by them—but most were not. Both the violence and the Klan were products of overwhelming Southern sentiment against school integration.

By 1959, racial tensions had subsided somewhat. Consequently, so too did Klan activity. But in 1960 lunchroom "sit-ins" by blacks caused a Klan resurgence, which was temporarily disrupted by the death of Edwards. After his death, the quality of leadership in the U.S. Klans declined and its membership, which was the largest of the more than 20 Klan organizations active at the time, dropped. The Klan appeared destined to break up into scores of tiny splinter groups.

Eventually stepping in to fill the leadership void was [Robert Marion "Bobby" Shelton](#), a salesman from Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Shelton had been the Grand Dragon of Alabama for the U.S. Klans, but in 1958 he and Edwards had a disagreement. Shelton was tossed out of the U.S. Klans and promptly formed his own organization--the Alabama Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. In 1961, Shelton arranged a merger with other Klan splinter groups and formed the [United Klans of America](#) (UKA) with him as the Imperial Wizard.

In addition to smaller numbers the Klan movement of the '50s and '60s differed in at least two respects from earlier movements. First, few prominent community members were involved in Klan activity as they had been in the past. Second (possibly the result of the first), this period was characterized by much more factionalism than past periods, and there was very little organizational stability.

Another significant aspect of the Klan movement during the '50s and '60s, possibly related to lower quality leadership than in previous periods, was the convergence of several issues into one. White supremacy has always been a Klan rallying point. But whereas in the 1920s the Klan saw several distinct threats to American society--Catholicism, communism, racial strife, immorality, and Jewish domination of the economy--during the 1950s the Klan combined these problems into a strange amalgam. In the '50s, the Klan, not content with a simple racial issue, proposed that there existed a Jewish-communist-black conspiracy designed to deteriorate the moral underpinnings of the country and to foster race-mixing (thereby creating a nation of inferior "mongrels"). When both objectives were accomplished, the U.S. would be ripe for a takeover by the Soviet Union.



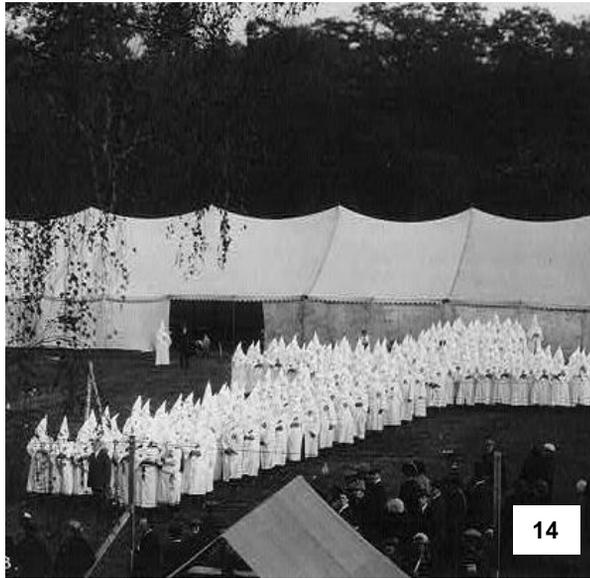
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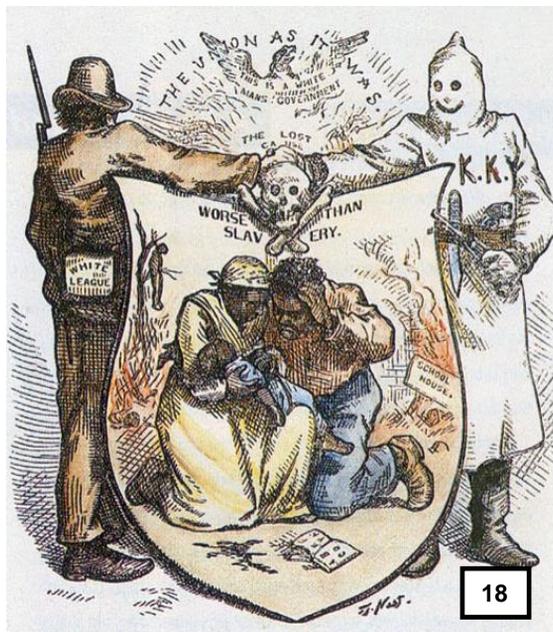
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11. Hugo La Fayette Black, 1886; 12. House committee (HUAC) investigating the Ku Klux Klan, 1921; 13. Two members of the Ku-Klux Klan in their disguises, 1868; 14. Ku Klux Klan gathering at Portland, Maine, 1923; 15. Promotional Poster, 1916; A Ku Klux Klan meeting in Gainesville, Florida, 1922; 17. Klansman trying to lynch a carpetbagger, 1871; 18. White League man shaking hands with Ku Klux Klan member over Black couple with baby, 1874.

Jewish communists in the United States, who were painted as agents of the Soviet Union, were viewed as leading this conspiracy and as employing blacks as pawns in their designs. The 1954 Supreme Court decision, the civil rights demonstration, and the 1964 Civil Rights Act were the outward manifestations of this underlying conspiracy, according to the Klan line. The Klan intended to break the conspiracy by preventing integration and by exposing the conspirators.

In attempts to halt integration, Klan activity and violence peaked between 1964 and 1966. Although most violence in the South was not committed by Klan members, it was the violence committed by Klansmen that led to the decline of the Ku Klux Klan. Following the deaths of civil rights workers, and in October 1965 the [House Committee on Unamerican Activities](#) (HCUA) [12] initiated an investigation of the Klan. None of the men arrested for any of the murders was convicted in state courts. However, the federal government prosecuted and convicted of violating the victims' civil rights. Evidence for these prosecutions had been gathered by [Bureau of Investigation](#) (FBI).

The Congressional investigation also led to a further reduction in Klan activity, but it evidently was only an in-direct consequence. Shelton was subpoenaed before the HUAC but refused to reveal Klan membership information and was cited for Contempt of Congress. A legal battle ensued that consumed much of his time. He lost the battle and spent almost all of 1969 in federal prison. Shelton's organization suffered greatly while he tried to untangle the legal mess in himself. Consequently, the UKA, the largest organizations active then, began to break up went to prison. By the time he was released 1969 only the remnants of his Klan remained. It never recovered.

Post-1970

Since the 1970s the Klan has been greatly weakened by internal conflicts, court cases, a seemingly endless series of splits and government infiltration. While some factions have preserved an openly racist and militant approach, others have tried to enter the mainstream, cloaking their racism as mere "civil rights for whites." During that period, one of its leaders was convicted felon [David Duke](#), who according to the [Anti-Defamation League \(ADL\)](#) is "perhaps America's most well-known racist and anti-Semite, promoter of anti-Semitic and white supremacist views as the leader of the white supremacist European American Unity and Rights Organization, writer of anti-Semitic tracts, and, in recent years, as an international figure who has promoted his anti-Jewish ideology in Europe and the Middle East, devoting particular attention to Russia and the Ukraine."

Leadership of the Klan from 1975 to 1981 was headed up by [Bill Wilkinson](#) [5] of Denham Springs, LA. His official title was the Imperial Wizard of the Invisible Empire, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. He retired in 1984.

As the Klan faltered, neo-Nazi organizations like [Aryan Nations](#) and the [National Alliance](#), as well as other white supremacist factions like the [Church of the Creator](#) and [Tom Metzger's](#)

[White Aryan Resistance](#), rose to prominence during the 1980s and 1990s.

In March 1965, President [Lyndon B. Johnson](#) publicly denounced the organization in a nationwide television address announcing the arrest of [four Klansmen](#) in connection with the slaying of a civil-rights worker, a white woman, in Alabama.

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- 1-2. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1922-06-29/ed-1/seq-17>;
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Notes for students, teachers and researchers:

This story was based on “A Report to the Illinois General Assembly,” by the Illinois Legislative Investigating Commission, 300 West Washington Street, Chicago, Illinois 60606 , October 1976. <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/46433NCJRS.pdf>