Confederate Haunts: How the Public Relegated the Ku-Klux Klan to the American Imagination

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On New Year's Day 1871, formerly enslaved African American Henry Lipscomb relocated to a Spartanburg, South Carolina farm to sharecrop sugar alongside a white tenant. Later relaying the petrifying experiences which would follow to a congressional investigative committee, Lipscomb remembered that on January 2, "*they* came at midnight." Shrieking vulgarities and banging on his front door, Lipscomb's assailants broke into his house, threw him outside, and choked him before leading the man off to the woods to be stripped naked. Once in isolation, "three [men] beat me," Lipscomb recounted, "but seeing them by the moonshine, there looked like there were eight or ten men." Recognizing his assailants proved impossible, as they "had on white altogether, plumb all around, and a disguise across the face, a little white, and [he] could see red eyes and lips." Considering thousands of similar reports across the post-Civil War South, the investigative committee asked Henry Lipscomb if southern blacks were intimidated. "They were not afraid to start," Lipscomb confided. When the enslaved were emancipated and granted suffrage, "they went up and voted, every one of them, and some swam the river in order to, and some waded; but after the Ku-Kluxing started, and they whipped some, and killed some, and got their guns, they were scared and laid out; they couldn't stand it."[1]

Today, the Civil War and its aftermath still invoke fractious historical memories. The war continues to be a referendum on the nation's moral character, while misplaced memorials to secession and debates over Confederate symbolism remind us that battles of the Civil War are ongoing. This discord in Civil War history was first deliberated during the twelve-year postwar period of Reconstruction. How postbellum Americans concurrently

[1] Dedicated in memory of Ray Verches and Oliver Williams; *Testimony Taken by Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States – South Carolina, Vol. 2* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 681-683.

understood (or misunderstood) Reconstruction would ultimately make sectional reconciliation and national unity an impossible endeavor. With Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Reconstruction set about integrating newly freed African Americans into citizenry, installing and supporting anti-slavery governments, and totally rebuilding a war-ravaged South. From the ashes of southern defeat, a new challenge to emancipation would cause the very foundations of Reconstruction to falter. A nocturnal convention of Confederate veterans, local officials, and disaffected yeoman farmers birthed the Ku-Klux Klan. The first incarnation of Ku-Klux presented an imminent, enigmatic threat to African Americans and all those enacting Reconstruction. This article argues that popular representations of the Reconstruction-era Ku-Klux Klan informed the American public about how to interpret Reconstruction itself. From 1868 to 1871, recurrent, contradictory reports about Klansmen made understanding the group highly contentious. Klansmen were iconic in political and cultural discourse for their outrageous and performative violence. Public familiarity with their misdeeds adapted the brutalities of Ku-Klux violence to hold imaginative or symbolic meanings for Recon-struction.

Reconstruction historiography began with William Dunning's assertion that the Ku-Klux Klan (KKK) were comprised of "thousands of serious and respectable whites [looking] for some means of mitigation, if not complete salvation, in the methods of the secret societies."[2] Following the social movements of the

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[2] William Dunning, *Reconstruction Political and Economic 1865-1877* (London: Harper & Bros. Publ., 1907), 122. Reconstruction historiography originated in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century with the "Dunning School." Named for historian William Archibald Dunning, the Dunning School wrote Reconstruction history informed by postbellum racism. Early Reconstruction history presented facile narratives of northern oppression, Republican tyranny, southern victimhood, and black anarchism. By the mid-twentieth century, Reconstruction found renewed national relevance during the racial reckonings of the Civil Rights Movement. Revisionist Reconstruction historians reexamined Dunning School scholarship and challenged many of its original claims and interpretations. Topical histories on Reconstruction's feats and innovations emerged, such as Otis A. Singletary's *Negro Militia and Reconstruction* (1957), which showcased the capacities of freedpeople to organize and uphold order in the South. Revisionists like Singletary set about

1960s, revisionist Reconstruction historians like Allen Trelease produced more comprehensive and corrective accounts of the early KKK.[3] In recent years, scholars like Elaine Frantz Parsons have furthered revisionist insights by placing them within broader cultural, political, and geographical scopes.[4] While historiographies of the original Klan and Reconstruction were founded upon racial prejudice and were severely reductive, modern works like those of Trelease and Frantz are central to understanding the effects and implications of Ku-Klux on their public audiences as well as their victims.

This article relies on records of congressional testimonies relaying postwar political perceptions of the KKK. *The Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States* contains volumes of partisan inquiries around the Klan between 1868 and 1870. Primary sources available from the Library of Congress' historic newspaper database *Chronicling America* help convey public receptions of Klan reports. Taken together with the works of Trelease, Frantz, and other contemporary Reconstruction historians, a complex portrait of the Ku-Klux emerges from the mouths and pens of Klan critics, supporters, participants, and victims. It becomes evident that Klansmen served as figurative lenses through which Americans processed and remembered broader developments in Reconstruction.

Reconstruction commenced immediately after the Civil War's closure in 1865. It fizzled out in 1877, when the controversial election of President Rutherford Hayes preceded the withdrawal of federal troops from the South, permitting former

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recovering and restoring the distorted legacies authored decades earlier. More recent Reconstruction histories have situated its developments within broadened geographical scopes and incorporated interdisciplinary scholarship. The gold standard reference for modern Reconstruction histories is Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (1988). Foner provided a synthesis of preceding revisionist work by focusing on the centrality of the black experience, the remodeling of southern society, evolving racial relations, the expansion of federal powers, and Reconstruction's impact on northern and western developments.

[3] Allen Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1971).

[4] Elaine Frantz Parsons, *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan during Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

Confederates to return to public office. Faced with the reconciliation of the nation and the transition of four million humans from enslaved property to freedpeople, Reconstruction itself was a task of unprecedented scale and cooperation in the country's brief history. The Republican Party led the charge enacting Reconstruction policy. Defeated southern secessionists retreated to the Democratic Party. After President Abraham Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson, failed to uphold emancipatory gains for freedpeople in the years immediately after the war, Reconstruction became the duty of congressional Republicans and their anti-slavery "Radical Republican" contingency. New social hierarchies, systems of labor, and ideals for a multiracial democracy were envisioned as the bipartisan, revolutionary venture of the North and South. However, factionalism and corruption among political parties, poor electoral appeals, northern war fatigue, and, most importantly, racialized southern violence stemmed Reconstruction's aspirations. "Whether measured by the dreams inspired by emancipation or the more limited goals of securing blacks' rights," historian Eric Foner concludes, "Reconstruction can only be judged a failure."[5]

The state of Tennessee provides significant insight into the KKK's evolution from local triviality to national infamy by 1868. Historians largely recognize that the Klan was birthed in Pulaski, Tennessee in Spring 1866. First convening as a social club for middle-class Confederate veterans, the group's actions evolved following recurrent Klan meetings in new dens across Tennessee in the summer and fall. As the first secessionist state to earn readmittance to the Union under Reconstruction, Tennessee experienced the vicious cycle of Republican control, black suffrage, and white backlash before most other southern states.[6] A pro-Union Republican state government was established, and local Union Leagues encouraged African Americans to use their voting power. In response to this fervent Unionism, the KKK adopted a more overt political character. In April 1867, the head of Pulaski's den called a meeting of delegates from other localities to charter a formal hierarchy and doctrinal details. Delegates

[5] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863 – 1877* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2014), 603.
[6] Trelease, *White Terror*, 6.

agreed for dens to operate as autonomous cells while using the same terminologies and code. Inspired by the prospect of terminating Reconstruction, Klansmen set about victimizing freedpeople and their Republican allies. From this development, a groundswell of southern white men embraced the resonant cause of a Confederate past. With its birth in Pulaski, the Klan was seen by southern whites as an expedient and vigilant response to the problems of federal occupation, local lawlessness, and general anxieties over black empowerment. While Union Leagues promoted Republican politics and black enfranchisement to prop up Reconstruction state governments, Republican officials mobilized militias comprised of African Americans to intimidate white southern dissidents.[7] Such antagonisms required reprisal. By 1868, Klansmen had become compelling forces in Reconstruction politics and southern society. Klan dens were widespread across rural and upcountry counties, operating independent from one another while exercising the same rituals and terminology.[8] In response, the efforts of federal troops and Tennessee's state militias were called upon to protect prospective black voters and quell reactionary white violence through the spring and summer. These perpetual provocations of southern white fears forced "Ku-Klux" to take on meaning which would resonate far beyond the Tennessee upcountry.

Perpetual political violence elevated the KKK to a level of infamy in Reconstruction politics and soon defined the months preceding the 1868 presidential election.[9] On the ballot, Republicans nominated Union Army General Ulysses S. Grant to run against a Democrat from New York, Horatio Seymour, in the first elections in which both ex-Confederates and the formerly enslaved could vote. What proved remarkable about the 1868 elections and the preceding years of early Reconstruction was what Eric Foner termed as "a startling reversal of political tradition." The Republican Party, so insistent on radical change before the war, now clamored for stability once Reconstruction policy yielded pro-Union governments. The Democratic propo-

[7]Trelease, *White Terror*, 13-14, 20.
[8]Trelease, *White Terror*, 28-29.
[9] Carol Emberton, *Beyond Redemption: Race, Violence, and the American South after the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 154.

nents of honor and antiquated tradition transformed into counter-revolutionaries.[10]

This was made evident by the way in which Ku-Klux became an alluring recurrent subject in Republican discourse during a particularly important moment in Reconstruction. As the most widely accessible form of nineteenth-century information circulation, newspapers were essential to Americans' learning of events beyond their immediate community. Print journalism in the wake of Reconstruction was a sectional and partisan tool as news of southern developments piqued the attentions of citizens across the nation. In fact, the immediate postwar years were defined by northern journalists pouring into the South to report volumes of "objective" regional news. Consequently, news out the South was reduced to a facile narrative of anarchy and backwardness familiar to northern audiences. As a fixture of newspapers in circulation, the most persistent problem in Ku-Klux coverage was agreeing upon the group's nature.[11] Depictions ranged between regional reporters and partisan publications, and each one sought to appropriate facets of Ku-Klux for their own purposes. Stylized exaggerations of the Klan's occult character blunted the seriousness of violent Ku-Klux allegations. Considering the representations of Klansmen across print culture, the American public was confounded and conflicted about how to respond to such cruel yet absurd reports.

For northern journalists descending upon the alien landscapes of a postwar South, news of the mysterious KKK was horrifying yet enthralling. Despite their normative associations of violence with southern life, the reported severity of Klan atrocities by 1868 was unprecedented, and thus compelling amongst northern journalists and readerships alike.[12] The northern press was filled with stories of violent outrages attributed to the KKK, reflecting gross actions of injustice and the anonymous enactors responsible. Such stories perpetuated a tradition of portraying Klan attacks as coordinated and methodical. A list of Klan outrages published in *The Jeffersonian* of Stroudsburg, Penn-

[10] Foner, *Reconstruction*, 343.
[11] K. Stephen Prince, *Stories of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 30; Parsons, *Ku-Klux*, 145.
[12] Prince, *Stories of the South*, 62.

sylvania described the murder of Radical Republican George Ashburn. It reportedly occurred when "a body of men from twenty-five to fifty in number, all disguised… broke open his door after refusal to open it [and] a number of shots were fired by a portion of the party, three of which took effect, one in the forehead, of which he instantly died… None of the witnesses could identify any of the number engaged in the transaction."[13]

An equally important trope was the unidentifiability of Klansmen predominating northern Ku-Klux accounts. Lending itself to the Klan's self-perpetuating mysticism, this led to even greater speculative embellishments by northern journalists. *The Daily Argus* of Rock Island, Illinois printed two editorial notes regarding the Klan's proliferation across the South. The first pondered whether the Ku-Klux nomenclature derived "from the noise of the cocking of a rifle, significant of shooting at sight," or "from the clucking of a hen." The note that followed described a darker practice by the Klan. Klansmen, pretending to speak as Republican-voting freedpeople condemned to the "infernal regions" for their politics, wrote "letters written in blood" to the "most superstitious and influential" black political leaders in the Reconstruction South.[14] For northern readers these reports reiterated an innate savagery associated with southern life and its rebellious spirit. Through northern journalism's speculation and sensationalism, Klansmen became enigmas that the North could neither reconcile with nor ignore.

Republican newspapers shared some northern perspectives on the Klan, but unequivocally condemned their alleged violence and explicitly political malice. In Republican publications, the Klan's political motives were important to note. In July 1868, the official organ for Louisiana's Republican Party published a telegraph dispatch to Washington, D.C. that claimed the Klan felt emboldened controlling the western portion of the state. Referencing the 1868 Democratic presidential candidate and his running mate, Klansmen were reported to be riding around in

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[13] Theodore Schoch, "The Ku-Klux Klan: Outrages by the Klan in Georgia," *The Jeffersonian*, April 16, 1868.
[14] J.B. Danforth Jr., "Untitled Editorial Notes," *The Daily Argus*, April 14, 1868.

broad daylight as "Seymour Knights" and "Blair Guards."[15] A few months later, a Republican paper from Wisconsin issued an explicit condemnation of the Klan's ingratiation with the Democratic Party in a telling editorial titled "The Ku Klux Party." Condemning the Klan as a danger to American liberty, the editor chastises: "In old times Democrats used to love to turn out en masse for the purpose of hearing the questions of the day openly discussed – but not so now; as night comes on modern 'Democrats' slink off to some hidden retreat, and like a band of counterfeiters, lock the doors behind them, and hold a secret 'political' meeting."[16] Combining the overt political character of Klansmen with the graphic horrors noted by journalists, Republican papers reproduced the mystery and ambiguity the Klan exuded themselves. Republican readers, even if disgusted by the content of such reports, were nonetheless intrigued by the southern melodrama unfolding.

Southern and Democratic newspapers blended their coverage of Ku-Klux incidents. Newspaper reports implicitly and explicitly endorsed KKK activities by feigning incredulity and reluctantly acknowledging their offenses. For southern journalists and their white readerships, the alleged Ku-Klux offenses were conflicting. The Klan struck back at the impositions of Reconstruction in spectacular fashion. They also provided a point of scrutiny from which the nation directed further ire at southerners. South Carolina's *Daily Phoenix* reluctantly recognized Klan outrages and rejected them as representative of the South as a whole. An editorial titled "Working Up a Sensation" condemned Republican papers for conjuring sectional animosity through their Klan reports by "making that whole [southern] community responsible for the alleged crimes of a very absurd organization, and laying at the doors of that organization every act of violence and outrage which occurs in any part of the South, whether there is any proof that members (real or imaginary) of the Ku Klux Klan had anything to do with it or not."[17] It proved beneficial for southern and Democratic papers to charge responsibility for racial

[15] "Reports from the South – Louisiana Ku-Klux," *The New Orleans Republican*, July 31, 1868.
[16] "The Kuk Klux Party," *The Watertown Republican*, October 21, 1868.
[17] "Working Up a Sensation," *Daily Phoenix*, April 10, 1868.

outrages elsewhere. Democratic newspapers opted to cast blame on Reconstruction officials and the party in power instead of their own. *The Home Journal* relayed an article in Spring 1868 which disparaged assertions of the Klan as an explicitly Democratic entity. The author argues that masked men parading through the South at night "may or may not be Radicals."[18] This article depicts how Democratic publications circulated the idea that Republicans manufactured the Klan as partisan propaganda. Such conspiracies by southern Democrats only intensified the politicization of Ku-Klux reports. Thus**,** comprehending and assessing Ku-Klux was a difficult task for Americans initially confronted by reports of masqueraded marauders. The Klan emerged as a crude, mystic, and enthralling feature of the South. Such characteristics served as fodder for political officials and concerned citizens experienceing Reconstruction amid electoral contests. Sensationalist journalism piqued public curiosities and raised many questions about the peculiar nature of Klansmen. The extensive, patterned violence detailed in archival newspapers posited disjointed definitions of Ku-Klux and Klansmen that ranged from the mysterious to the trivial. Early impressions of the KKK persistently inform how many Americans continued tracking the progress of Reconstruction and its sociopolitical dynamics.

National discourse surrounding the KKK lost much of its luster in the two years following the 1868 elections. The tumult of Reconstruction politics in the South and developments in the North and American West siphoned attention away from continued Klan violence. The 1868 electoral victory of Ulysses Grant and Republican-retained control of Congress punctuated a period known as "Radical Reconstruction." By consolidating their partisan power in the Executive and Legislative branches of government, Republicans felt hopeful and prideful in their progress since 1865. However, lasting implications from 1868's polarized politics were still to be felt. Horatio Seymour's success in Georgia and Louisiana proved Democratic voting power was on the rise with the decimation of Republican and black political organization through Klan violence. Republican electorates also declined in the states that Grant carried.[19] Nevertheless, social, cultural, and

[18] "The KuKlux Question," *The Home Journal*, April 23, 1868.
[19] Foner, *Reconstruction*, 343.

political provocations in the South continued mobilizing Klansmen. Reconstruction state governments rewrote laws on domestic relations, funded health care, and established schools and welfare institutions.[20] Many newly elected African Americans filled local, state, and federal offices in the South between 1868 and 1871. The 1868 elections served as a testament to the power and influence of southern black voters in the postwar American body politic. Consequently, enfranchisement and active participation in elections also explained persistent, exacerbated Klan violence by 1869.[21] Obstructing the progress of Reconstruction remained urgent for white southerners as federal oversight of Reconstruction policy continued.

Witnessing their own potential to alter politics, new Klan enclaves found their way into counties in Alabama, Georgia, the Carolinas, Mississippi, and other formerly seceded states. Such manifestations were concentrated in counties where African Americans were minorities or small majorities of the population, as well as places where Democratic and Republican demographics were closely split.[22] With state elections on the horizon in 1870, masked and politicized violence remained a rampant issue. Despite the spread of Klan dens across the former Confederacy, official redress of Klan outrages and the punishment of perpetrators was rare. Southern white communities protected Klansmen, and local Democrats hindered attempts to uphold law and order. Ku-Klux had taken hold at the grassroots of southern society and became a regional element. In an episode known as the "Kirk-Holden War," North Carolina's Republican Governor William Holden raised a militia under Colonel George Washington Kirk to arrest and hold military trials for hundreds of alleged Klansmen. Violations of civil rights and Democratic opposition undid Holden's jurisdiction and led to his impeachment.[23] Similarly, many other reprisals of Ku-Klux across the South in 1869 and 1870 failed to bring accountability for Klan atrocities. As the

[20] Foner, *Reconstruction*, 364.
[21] W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Free Press, 1998), 439-440.
[22] Foner, *Reconstruction*, 430.
[23] Trelease, *White Terror*, 224.

movement continued and intensified throughout the South, it remained on the cultural radar of many Americans.

The widespread violence inaugurated in 1868 spilled over into new counties and communities through 1869 and 1870. As a result, the Klan never completely exited the national discourse, but rather became relegated to an unresolved question for continued debate. Partisans at state and federal levels continued to grapple with the realities and illusions of Ku-Klux activity as it served their respective purposes in the grander project of reconstructing the South. The task of assuaging southern whites and upholding the promises to freed African Americans was greatly complicated by this. As the news of Ku-Klux spread from their activities and documentation in the region, newspapers continued to reproduce distinct portraits of the Klan with polarizing characteristics.

The year 1871 brought about the ultimate accounting of the Klan's prominence and the most consequential attempt to stop its proliferation altogether. Since 1868, Ku-Klux had garnered a visceral existence among Reconstruction partisans and had churned in the imaginations of the American public. Local efforts to counter the omnipresent Klansmen ranged in their efficacy yet, but their unchecked violence continued. Even in their failure to directly overthrow Republican governments, historian David Blight credits the Klan for "[launching] a pattern of counterrevolutionary violence and political intimidation" that would extend through the 1870s and ultimately hasten the demise of Reconstruction. Militant dismantlement of the Republican Party and disruptions to black civic life became longstanding characteristics of the South.[24] As hardly any state remained untouched by Klan dens and Klansmen by 1871, South Carolina became the touchstone for a final dispute between the nation and the KKK.

Circumstances surrounding South Carolina's fierce confrontation with the Klan from late-1870 into 1871 exemplified the recurrent escalation of Ku-Klux outrages across the South. By 1868, South Carolinians wrestled with how post-emancipation political representation and administration would work as enfran-

[24] David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2001), 113-114.

chised blacks and Republican hegemony chafed South Carolina Democrats. Klan dens maintained a close kinship with Democratic Party politics, collectively engaging in racialized terrorism and dissuading Republican electorates.[25] Ulysses Grant's reelection meant that South Carolina's Klan activity diminished but didn't disappear. When state and local elections in 1870 failed to return power to southern white Democrats, a resurgence of Ku-Klux violence gripped the state. Prior to 1870, violence in South Carolina had subsided more so than in any other southern state.[26] With renewed Klan attacks, re-elected Republican Governor Robert Scott chose conciliation with the Klan over reprisal. Meeting with local white leaders and Democratic officials, Scott offered to disarm black militias and appoint pro-Democratic figures to local judgeships in exchange for a quelling of Klan activity. Intended to stem the tide of violence, historian J. Michael Martinez argues that Scott's gesture had an adverse effect, emboldening southern dissidents even more: "If state leaders could be brought to heel with threats of violence, imagine what power could be exercised through actual violence."[27] The intensified violence in Fall 1870 and Scott's previously unfulfilled requests for President Grant's military assistance thus positioned South Carolina as being ripe for federal intervention.

Spurred by violence in South Carolina, federal legislation finally addressed KKK outrages and held their perpetrators accountable. To complement the newly passed Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, Republicans in Congress passed three "Enforcement Acts" protecting black voters. The third, passed in April 1871 and known as the "KKK Act," made conspiring to obstruct elections a federal offense and authorized the President to suspend writs of habeus corpus to arrest suspects. Grant would formally invoke the powers of the Klan Act six months later and order the forced apprehension of suspected Klansmen. [28] During this six-month period, U.S. Cavalry Captain

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[25] J. Michael Martinez, *Carpetbaggers, Cavalry, and the Ku-Klux Klan* (Plymouth: Rownan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 108-109.
[26] Trelease, *White Terror*, 349.
[27] Martinez, *Carpetbaggers, Cavalry, and the Ku-Klux Klan*, 126.
[28] Writ of habeas corpus: a requisite order for an individual detained by law enforcement to be brought in front of a court and provided reasoning as to why they are imprisoned.

Lewis Merrill began his own investigations of the Klan in three upcountry South Carolina counties. Merrill's thorough investigations would greatly inform congressmen from the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States.[29] Following the passage of the Enforcement Acts, the 42nd Congress convened a bipartisan committee of seven senators and fourteen representatives to collect the testimonies of Ku-Klux victims, alleged Klansmen, and witnesses.[30] The committee traveled across southern states and compiled their findings in a thirteen-volume report that included twelve volumes of testimony. It was the most detailed accounting of the Klan to date. Produced during the ongoings of Reconstruction, the report itself was a politicized record.

Within the report, findings of the Republican-led majority and Democratic minority are obvious exhibitions of divergent partisan attitudes toward the Klan. As the party in power, Republicans ideologically framed Congress' report. The committee's Republican majority prefaced the voluminous report with their main finding: "Whatever other causes were assigned for disorders of the late insurrectionary States, the execution of the laws and the security of life and property were alleged to be most seriously threatened by the existence… of organized bands of armed and disguised men, known as Ku-Klux."[31] The politically disruptive purpose mobilizing hierarchies of Klansmen forced politicians to acknowledge their credibility. Congressmen perpetuated and regurgitated tropes of Klan mythology and secrecy found in journalism. To explain difficulties in procuring testimony, Republicans explained that "the origin, designs, mysteries, and rituals of the order are made secret; the assumption of its regalia or the revelation of any of its secrets... will be visited by 'the extreme penalty of the law'"[32] Mystical attributes were paired with admonitions of the Klan's political character. Republicans condemned southern complicity in the Klan

[29] Martinez, *Carpetbaggers, Cavalry, and the Ku-Klux Klan*, 140.
[30] Prince, *Stories of the South*, 75.
[31] *Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 2.
[32] *Report of the Joint Select Committee*, 14.

conspiracy, holding liable white southerners who "permit the remnants of rebellious feeling, the antagonisms of race, or the bitterness of political partisanships to degrade the soldiers of Lee and Johnston into the cowardly midnight prowlers and assassins who scourge and kill the poor and defenseless."[33] By emphasizing the Klan's threatening nature and implicating white southerners at large, the official report forged a reductive portrait of Ku-Klux. Republican sentiment surely made sense of the KKK as a natural byproduct of southern dispositions.

Congressional Democrats on the committee wrote their dissenting opinion in a "Minority Report." Democrats argued against the majority's findings of pervasive Klan activity, showing remarkable continuity in their perceptions of the Klan since 1868. In the Minority Report, Democrats detracted from sensational Ku-Klux accounts by explaining endemic southern violence as the logical conclusion to Reconstruction and northern interventionism.[34] Democratic opinion shifted blame for the KKK by leveling criticism onto Reconstruction politics and policy. The Minority Report severed the Klan's alleged political connections. Democratic dissent did not "intend to deny that bodies of disguised men have... been guilty of the most flagrant crimes;" rather, southerners saw them as "the worst enemies of the South," giving the federal government further cause to "maintain war upon them, and to continue the system of robbery and oppression which [Republicans] have inaugurated."[35] Publicly naming the Klan as "enemies of the South" allowed Democrats to cast doubt on the partisan motives Klansmen openly espoused. While Ku-Klux denialism was farcical, white southerners absolving themselves of complicity allowed Democrats to fault the postwar hardships of Reconstruction for alleged Klan misdeeds. The Klan's proliferation "was the legitimate offspring of misrule; it follows and disappears with its parent." Militant southerners learned "the strength and power of secret and disguised organizations from the operations of… KKKs," whose actions "rarely had any political significance."[36] At the highest levels of American society, linking

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[33] *Report of the Joint Select Committee*, 99.
[34] Prince, *Stories of the South*, 77.
[35] *Report of the Joint Select Committee*, 292.
[36] *Report of the Joint Select Committee*, 448.

Reconstruction to the Klan's presence was increasingly becoming a rallying cry for Americans.

Congressional testimony solicited from victims, witnesses, and suspects convey the biased attitudes among partisan investigators. For Republicans, black victims of Ku-Klux violence provided unambiguous testaments to the Klan's nature. Cutting through the spectacle and sensation typified by journalism, victim testimony was elicited to streamline Klan narratives for national consumption. Whereas Democrats sought to cast doubts on the veracity of Ku-Klux outrages, Republicans used victim testimony to emphasize the savage capabilities of southern whites and the powerlessness of southern blacks. Doing so had immense political utility for Republicans, justifying their increased involvement in southern affairs.[37] South Carolina farmer Jefferson Huskins detailed to Congress his encounter with Klansmen in January 1871. Huskins recounted how the Klan knocked down his door and ordered him out of his house. As punishment for voting Republican, "I had to cuss [Governor Robert] Scott; I did it… They commenced whipping me… and the sentence was 'twelve lashes apiece'… but I did not know the men."[38] Other instances of Republican questioning like this focused on conveying details of the attack rather than the victim themself. By relaying Huskins' capitulation to the Klan, similar testimonies contrast the intentional, brutal nature of Klansmen with freedpeople's passivity. The congressional committee needed stories of terrorized African Americans to affirm the dire circumstances of the South.

Congressional interrogation of southern witnesses to Ku-Klux violence also exposed partisan tendencies. Witnesses wavered on identifying Klan members, enablers, and principles. Hundreds of southern white witnesses, many of them supporters or Klansmen themselves, provided statements ignoring and discrediting victimized freedpeople.[39] Accompanying many witness statements were condemnations of Reconstruction. When

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[37] Parsons, *Ku-Klux*, 127.

[38] *Testimony Taken by Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States – South Carolina, Vol. 1* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 580.

[39] Trelease, *White Terror*, 394.

charged as "the chief" of Cleveland County's Klan, ex-judge Plato Durham categorically denied his involvement with Ku-Klux in North Carolina but did concede that an "organization for mutual protection and defense" did exist. When asked to elaborate, he recalled the Kirk-Holden War and white angst about mobilized black militias. Durham claimed, "the people were alarmed. They did not know what the result would be... The obligation [of the organization] was to support the Constitution of the United States and the constitution of North Carolina, to protect each other, and… to vote for white men for office."[40] White witnesses from across the Klan-infested South took cues from Democratic leadership in realizing the importance of distanced deniability. Just as Durham evaded direct acknowledgement of the Klan, other southerners took similar opportunities to imply that southern unrest was a result of Republican malfeasance. Georgian Henry Lewis Benning was asked whether he had any knowledge of local masked vigilantes, he claimed no knowledge "except [for] what are called Loyal League clubs or Union clubs, which are composed of republicans – chiefly freedmen" that solely served "political purposes – to force the black vote to go unanimously one way."[41] Taken together, congressmen certainly saw a correlation developing between southern dispositions and tensions created by Reconstruction. For southerner whites, the Klan was means of aggravating such tensions.

Political necessity fueled the congressional investigation of Klan activities during 1871. After having witnessed and heard Ku-Klux legends over recent years, politicians had entrenched themselves deeper in their respective beliefs. This hyper-politicization was inevitable. Republican aims at corroborating presumptive southern volatility and legitimizing federal intervention were offset by Democratic determinations to muddle concrete understandings of Ku-Klux. Both positions hinged on polarized views of Reconstruction. The Klan was simultaneously

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[40] *Testimony Taken by Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States – North Carolina* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 317.

[41] *Testimony Taken by Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States – Georgia, Vol. 1* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1872), 182.

the root cause of tumult in the South and a symptom of larger political malpractice. While Congress gathered evidence against Klansmen, Americans began rendering their own visions of the Ku-Klux conspiracy. Reinvigorated journalism about the Klan paralleled increasing federal interventions by early 1870. As a cultural icon inextricable from developments in the postwar South, the ideas encircling the KKK became a vehicle for all Americans to judge both Klansmen themselves and the project of Reconstruction as a whole. Until 1871, the Klan's implications for Reconstruction gravely threatened the national trajectory toward reconciliation. Both northern and southern journalists, as well as their readerships, used reports about the Klan to draw increasingly divergent conclusions. As more and more news of the Klan was reprinted nationwide, newspapers became a forum for emblematizing Ku-Klux.

Northern and southern newspapers were more closely aligned in their shared understandings of the Klan in 1871 than they had been in 1868. Northern papers and their readerships took a peculiar stance on Klan violence. The crude eccentricity of reported Ku-Klux outrages and the protections Klansmen enjoyed among local white communities affirmed an innate backwardness northerners had long conferred onto southerners. Interestingly, northerners also began forming novel prejudices against freedpeople targeted by the Klan. The cruelties inflicted on African Americans reportedly incapable of self-defense reinforced doubts about southern blacks' abilities to fend for themselves as citizens. In an newspaper from Clearfield, Illinois, an article argues that Klan reports taught northerners that freedpeople had regressed toward the "comforts of insolence" once assured that northern Yankees "would help [blacks] to keep the Southern white man under him, and the whole course of the Radical party and the government tended to confirm that belief." Once considered "quiet, submissive, and civil," freedpeople supposedly became dependent upon federal laws and troops when "carpet-baggers and scalawags began filling his head with ridiculous notions about equality."[42] Six years after the end of the war, northern exasperation gave voice to feelings of resignation toward southern

[42] Goodlander & Hagerty, "Insolence of the Negroes," *The Clearfield Republican*, Dec. 13, 1871.

resistance and resentment toward freedpeople fueling the dissent. The exasperation and resentment extended to Reconstruction itself. One newspaper from New York offered a pointed assessment of the 1871 congressional Klan investigations. Only in southern states "where the negroes predominate, and where unscrupulous Northern adventurers called carpetbaggers have control of affairs, [do] gross frauds, social disorganization, Ku Klux, political corruption and the pretended necessity for martial law exist."[43] Criticism of Reconstruction soon became common commentary alongside Klan coverage in northern journalism. This shift indicated changing northern attitudes about southern affairs and federal intervention. By 1871, some northern commentators accommodated Ku-Klux injustices and found the roots of southern unrest in Reconstruction's perceived inefficiencies.[44]

White southerners were most directly impacted by federal directives against the Klan. The southern press was most expressive in denouncing renewed displays of force imposed on the region. Like Democrats in Congress, southern journalists humanized and romanticized Klansmen while faulting Reconstruction and federal interventionism as the chief cause of rampant racial violence. Amid the Kirk-Holden War in 1870, a paper from Tarboro, North Carolina characterized the KKK as being a "purely defensive organization… [which] numbered the oldest, best, and most peaceable men."[45] The heroism or nobility of Klansmen became a popular southern trope. South Carolina's *Sumter Watchman* likened the Klan to a "vigilance committee," arguing that "the victims of Ku-Klux have been bad men – dangerous citizens and well-known murderers."[46] The distortion of Ku-Klux violence into acts of righteous vigilantism was tied to southern scorn for Reconstruction. Southern journalism absolved the Klan of its criminality through conspiratorial reasoning. A correspondence published in November 1871 furthered Democratic hearsay that Ku-Klux was a manufactured myth. It argues that "many

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[43] James Gordon Bennet, "Frauds, Social Disorganization and Political Troubles in the South," *The New York Herald*, Nov. 15, 1871.
[44] Prince, *Stories of the South*, 86.
[45] William Biggs, "The Ku-Klux Klan – What it Was, Why Organized, and Why Disbanded," *The Tarboro Southerner*, March 24, 1870.
[46] "The Ku-Klux Klan – The Real Feeling Among the people of Upper South Carolina," *The Sumter Watchman*, March 1, 1871.

[alleged Klansmen] are colored, half of them are Radicals, and most of the latter are members... of the Loyal League, far more dangerous to the peace of South Carolina than the Ku-Klux bogy."[47] For southern journalists, the Klan was a mere footnote in a broader, more sinister scheme. Southerners found various ways to disfigure the nature of Ku-Klux, making it a tool and expression of opposition to Reconstruction. Like their counterparts in the North, southerners saw that embracing and appropriating the KKK was closely tied to discontinuing Reconstruction.

Initial impressions of the KKK in 1868, and perpetuations of the same impressions through 1869 and 1870, conditioned Americans for how they would reassess the group in 1871. Congressional records and print journalism convey an increasingly stark polarization of politics and public opinion as Reconstruction dragged along. Divergent characterizations of the Klan's existence were indicative of postbellum misinformation amplified by various actors. This widening chasm of politicized misinformation and public misunderstanding was borne in competing perspectives on Reconstruction in the South. In 1871, Republicans and northerners stressed the overwhelming evidence of Klan violence for different reasons than they had in 1868. The events of 1870-1871 in South Carolina and other secessionist states gave cause to demonize Klansmen through sensationalism. Vicious portraits of Klansmen required immediate federal engagement and justified Reconstruction measures. By contrast, Democrats and southerners positioned themselves even further on the defensive. Faced with mounting evidence of its existence, the conservative position disarmed the group of malevolence and refocused blame on the factors which supposedly instigated southern unrest and terror. Vacillation over Klansmen as either threatening Democratic spectacles or imaginative Republican inventions made reconciling Ku-Klux inextricable from resolving Reconstruction.

While the realities of the Ku-Klux Klan left visceral impacts on the emancipated people they assailed, imaginative conjecture was just as damaging in the grand scheme of Reconstruction. Ku-Klux attacks fatigued the American conscience,

[47] "Manufacture of Ku-Klux Testimony," *The Anderson Intelligencer*, November 23, 1871.

which manifested itself in the creation of irreconcilable and partial historical memories. Lack of bipartisan, popular consensus about the existence and nature of the Klan implicated a deeper national divide grounded in debates over the post-emancipation regeneration of American democracy. Struggles over the Klan question were directly tied to struggles over numerous ideological questions about Reconstruction. Americans relegated the KKK to their collective imaginations in different ways. Intentional or not, Republicans amplified Klan outrages and legitimized their conduct for the sake of politics, advocating urgently for redress and validating Democratic charges of alarmism. Sensationalist Klan reports made Northern readerships dismissive, as they normalized Ku-Klux as a peculiarity among premodern southerners rather than a coordinated threat to Reconstruction. Likewise, Democrats went to great lengths to simultaneously defend the Klan's motives but deny its actual existence. They maintained a vested interest in the Ku-Klux activism and distanced themselves from the group while also nurturing its public image. Southern constituents feigned ignorance, downplaying the gravity of the Klan's reported injustices, while utilizing it as an outlet for southern white resistance to Reconstruction.

Discerning fact from fiction about the KKK and its undercutting of Reconstruction proved impossible for postbellum Americans. A litany of information about Klansmen, often contradictory and fictive, polluted the national conscience. The chasm between actual Klan horrors and popular representations of them created polarizing historical legacies. Since 1866, conspiratorial violence and discriminatory conjecture have stunted the full realization of multiracial democracy in America. The emergence, appropriation, and partial suppression of the KKK imparts an imperative for Americans to reject reductivism. By acknowledging and rectifying contradictory memories of Reconstruction, the KKK, and United States history at large, Americans can begin a more equitable process of national reconciliation.