The Klu-Klux-Klan During Recon Essay, Research Paper

Joshua D Broome

The Ku Klux Klan During Reconstruction

The Ku Klux Klan and other intimidators like the Louisiana Knights of the White Camellia, spread rapidly throughout the south as an answer to radical reconstruction. Nathan Bedford Forest formed the Ku-Klux-Klan in Tennessee during 1866. Forest, a former Confederate general and slave trader, was the Ku-Klux-Klan s first Imperial Wizard. This essay will weigh the evidence supported by the traditional view, that is, the Ku Klux Klan was an organization of white Southerners who resisted the horrors of reconstruction and halted the northern encroachment. This traditional view can also be dubbed the, white is right or racist view. The other popular view is called the revisionist view and it deems the Ku Klux Klan a violent and disrespectful organization set on overthrowing rule by negros, scalawags, and carpetbaggers. This essay will look at the horrific acts committed by the Klan during the period of radical reconstruction, question the morality of such acts, and conclude that it is indubitable that the Ku Klux Klan was in fact a terrorist organization which hindered social and political integration: that if these evil men had let congress win the new south would have been a better place.

In 1866 congress was battling with President Johnson over reconstruction policy and congress was winning. The 10 per cent policy and admittance of state governments comprised of former confederates made some think the war was fought in vain. The Black Codes, laws enacted to repress the black man, had been struck down by the Radical Republicans. The radicals believed they should not accept the enemy back as prodigal sons. The passing of the fourteenth amendment as a stipulation of re-admission to the Union and the erecting of barbarous black governments; many southern whites hung up their gray uniforms and put on white hooded cloaks.

The Ku Klux Klan was formed to serve three measures in late rebellious states: to promote social and political terror in the black man, to regain and maintain southern white control of governments and society, and as defense mechanism against an unpopular Reconstruction Policy enacted by a Radical Republican Congress. Through these means the southern whites accomplished the end of repressing the black class to a system of servitude little better than pre-war bondage. W. E. B. Du Bois said, The former slaves were intimidated, beaten, raped, and butchered by angry and revengeful men…. Almost every law and method ingenuity could devise was employed by the legislatures to reduce the Negroes to serfdom, — to make them the slaves of the state, if not of individual owners. This was true and proof can be found in the fact that when reconstruction was over new Black Codes were erected to segregate blacks and hinder most rights gained from the Civil War amendments.

The Klan used terrorist acts to counter the conditions the Yankees imposed on their homeland. President U. S. Grant said in his message to the House of Representatives about the condition of affairs in the Southern states that: Powerful combinations popularly known as Ku Klux Klans …by force and terror…prevent all political action not in accord with…members, to deprive colored citizens of the right to bear arms and of the right to a free ballot, to suppress schools in which colored children were taught, and reduce the colored people to a condition closely akin to that of slavery…. That they [KKK] had perpetrated many murders and hundreds of crimes to minor degree, all of which were unpunished. Grants message to the 42nd Congress told the Klan s goals and methods to subvert the black vote and freedman schools. Southern whites and many of their northern counterparts saw the Klan actions as justified while the Republicans and former abolitionist saw the acts as terroristic. Even today some traditionalist say the Klansmen were knights in shining armor who protected white rights and fought off the submission of radical authority. The fact is that the Ku Klux Klan was a terrorist organization who committed heinous acts upon the blacks and Republicans. Ku Klux Klan actions are unjustifiable because they were against the Negro as a citizen one attempting to be a voter and at times, the social equal of other men rather than against the Negro as a violator of law or the infringer upon the rights of other men. But quite often people have deep prejudices that overcome any rational moral choice. Southerners felt a deep contempt for foreign rule, and blacks were though to be scientifically inferior. William M. Lawton, a former slave plantation owner said, The common sense creed, of the low down and inferior organic nature of the negro, as compared even with the Mongolian and Indian races…that the class of presumptuous fanatics who assert their [black] equality with the white or Caucasian race, are visionary skeptics of God s infinite decrees, and they may be ranked as Atheists. This view is an example of what most white southerners believed, to them equality of the races was an absurd idea. Equality of the races was an idea most Yankees also thought to be ludicrous. Ultimately the racism of America would destroy the chance of freedom for the blacks.

The many actions of the Klan were aimed to break the moral of the enemy: One party had taken an obnoxious negro from a cabin where he had taken refuge and so maltreated him that he died a few days after…. One Powell, a carpet-bagger, and just voted for as Judge of Probate, was found on a public road, near Milam s Trestle, with several bullet holes through his head and body; and, by his side, the body of a negro man, also murdered as brutally as himself. These accounts of the Klan s actions show how they achieved their goals. The Klan used evil deeds and intimidation to generate fear; this fear ultimately broke the moral of the victims and allowed a resurgence of conservativeism. It only took a few murders to generate fear amidst the freedmen and Republicans. Klan enemies knew their fate if they went against Democrat ideals, intimidation proved to be an effective plan on the Klans part.

After congressional reconstruction the white south enacted a caste system that was held in place by black codes. By the end of Radical Reconstruction the Klan had suppressed many dissenting opinions and votes. The suppression of Black voting rights was a huge goal of the Klan. Many accounts of the Klan s actions show that their goal was deeply rooted in black, Republican, and Yankee hatred. Southern whites, said one intimidated black laborer, often expressed their beliefs openly: the damned Republican party has put niggers to rule us…intelligence shall rule the country instead of the majority… the colored men [have] no rights that white men are bound to respect. This is what most southern white and the Klan believed. The Klan was a popular organization among southern whites and was seen as good people promoting good values.

The Ku Klux Klan was an organization with a political agenda. The most prominent goal of the Ku Klux Klan was to suppress the black vote and hinder Republican control in the south. Freedmen s Bureau officials and Republicans played a leading part in organizing the Negroes against their late masters through means of the Union League and its secret ritual. The Union League s goal was to recruit blacks into the Republican Party. During 1867 the Union League began instructing the freedmen of their political voice and hoped to secure Republican majorities. This made Union League members and organizers a prime Klan target. Nathan Bedford Forest makes this evident at a Joint Committee held in Washington, D.C, on June 27, 1871: There were a great many Northern men coming down there, forming Leagues all over the country. The Negroes were holding night meetings; were going about; were becoming very insolent; and the Southern people were very much alarmed. Parties organized themselves so as to be ready in case they were attacked…men of southern states, citizens…some called them Pale Faces; some called them the Ku-Klux. Mr. Forest did not really organize the Klan because he was afraid of northern men or ex-bondsmen, but to terrorize these groups into submission. Some have argued that the KKK and the Democratic party were indistinguishable. Shapiro suggest that: It [was] impossible in many places to separate the violence engaged in by groups of Democrats from that of organized Klans…. Political murders were part of an extensive campaign of intimidation….[that] the objectives of the Klan were clearly political. This is a fact because the Democrats and the Klan had something in common, that is, they were bound by race and coveted political power.

The Klan also had a social goal on their agenda. The Klan did not want freedmen to have the rights of white men, and therefore enacted a policy of terrorization to prevent integration. W. E. B. Du Bois said, The work of any instrument of social regeneration was in large part foredoomed to failure…. that life amid free Negroes was simply unthinkable, the maddest of experiments. The actions of the Ku Klux Klan show a social objective, a white judge, William Champion, was raided because he was supposed to have advocated social equality between the races…. A white iron foundry owner testified that one of his Negro workers was whipped by the Klan because the Negro had been a replacement for a white worker dismissed for demanding a wage increase. The Ku Klux Klan undertook many other actions to promote social inequality, such as burning black schools and beating or murdering of white and black teachers. W. E. B. Du Bois said, The opposition to Negro education was bitter in the South, for the South believed an educated Negro to be a dangerous Negro…. For education among all kinds of men always has had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent. The Ku Klux Klan was an enemy of anyone supporting black education, as even the blacks believed education, which they had long been denied, as a necessary vehicle for success. By these examples one can conclude that the southern white classes intended to create a caste system to exclude blacks from competition.

Some freedmen felt themselves to be inferior to white men and promoted a policy of non-violence, but others were tired of being intimidated and enacted a policy of self-defense. The freedmen mobilized into forces to protect politicians, voting rights, and themselves. In Macon Georgia when Klan threats had been made on the black politicians, Henry Turner and Jefferson Long, the blacks put a guard of 150 men around the two leaders homes and banned all whites from the area, including local police. An alarmed city council called a meeting of conciliation after the freedmen threatened to burn the city if another black man was killed. This shows that the blacks were very loyal to their political leaders. The blacks also showed some retaliation in defensive of their political rights. In South Carolina Governor Scott organized the Negro militia to counter the hindering of black political rights. Governor Scott suspended the writ of habeas corpus and organized the militia to be used against white citizens. Scott, by doing this, made militia supplies and members targets of the Klan. An account of a conflict in Laurens County South Carolina was given by John Leland: on election day the accidental firing of a pistol by a white guy provoked the blacks, they fled to the militia s armory and began firing at the white masses. Soon the whites had gathered shot-guns and canes, and proceeded to storm the armory so violently that the blacks fled out its back windows and doors. Several whites took shots at the fleeing blacks. Many were wounded but only one black man was dead. Retaliation proved to be a bad measure for the blacks because what followed were many days of terror by the Klan that left several blacks and carpetbaggers dead, and a pending congressional Klan investigation. Obviously Leland was writing an edited account of the proceedings as one finds it hard to believe the accidental firing of a pistol would provoke the freedmen. The pistol was fired to intimidate the blacks, and they rebelled. The disbanding of the South Carolina black militia became a major objective of the Klan. From the two previous examples one comes to the conclusion that the former slaves did try to protect themselves but quite often it provided a backlash of Klan violence.

The Ku Klux Klan won the battle for social and political inequality, which allowed a resurgence of conservativeism. William Bedford Forest said in January of 1869 the invisible Empire has accomplished the purpose for which it was organized. Civil law now affords ample protection to life, liberty, and property; robbery and lawlessness are no longer unrebuked; the better elements of society are no longer in dread for the safety of their property, their persons, and their families. This example shows that Forest believed that the Klan s acts of violence and lawlessness accomplished the goal of putting the freedmen in their place. Fear of violence often led the Negro, and his rights, into submission. Conservativeism necessarily followed the hindrance of the black political voice and former Confederates again took office. Black Codes were once again erected to deny the freedmen of their political and social rights.

The failure of reconstruction led to the death of the black freedom and placed them in a state similar to slavery. The freedmen actually gained few rights from the Civil War and Reconstruction: they had no vote, no property, no respect, no upward mobility, and no real function in society except that as a agricultural laborer. Mobility however was a substantial gain for the freedmen. Former slaves could now go to and from any function as they pleased. Tenant farming took the place of the slave labor system. The black man could now choose whom to rent land from. This allowed the invisible hand capitalism to motivate labor contracts, and the south as a whole benefited. What if congressional reconstruction had succeed? What would the New south be today? Would the south be better today if reconstruction had not failed? Yes, the south would indeed be a better place; there would be fewer prejudices and more harmony. Maybe the south would have had pre-war prosperity sooner if the caste system had not been put into effect. The Confederate flag may not be flying over the South Carolina Statehouse today if congressional reconstruction had worked. Congressional reconstruction failed and the Union turned its back on the loyal freedmen only to embrace their enemy.

The Ku Klux Klan, the White League, the Louisiana Knights of the White Camellia, and other racist fraternities flourished among southern whites as an answer to radical reconstruction. This essay looked at the evidence supported by the traditional view, that, the Ku Klux Klan was an organization of white southerners who resisted the horrors of reconstruction and halted the Northern encroachment. The traditional view embodies ideals that a racist would have. The other popular take on reconstruction, the revisionist view, deems that the Ku Klux Klan was a violent and disrespectful organization set on overthrowing rule by negros, scalawags, and carpetbaggers. This essay looked at the horrific acts committed by the Klan during the period of radical reconstruction and questioned the morality of such acts. One fact remains, the Ku Klux Klan was a terrorist organization, which hindered social and political integration: that if these evil men had let congress win the New south would have been a better place.