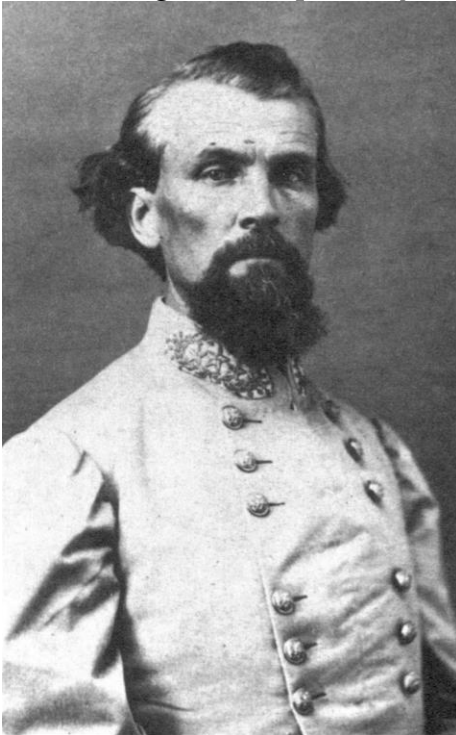# The First KKK

The Ku Klux Klan, a terror organization, gained political footing during Reconstruction in the postbellum South.

Overview
- The Ku Klux Klan was a white supremacist terrorist group that emerged during Reconstruction. It took egregious, violent steps to undermine the Republican party, hoping to maintain black economic instability and ensure white racial and economic superiority in the antebellum South.
- Congress countered the KKK with the Force Acts and the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, which made Klan violence and political intimidation illegal under federal law.
- Republicans lost hold within the South largely due to Klan violence, allowing the South to maintain a ruling racial order that morphed into Jim Crow.

The First KKK

In 1866, General Nathan Bedford Forrest founded the **Ku Klux Klan** in Tennessee as a "social club." The name was supposedly derived from the Greek word "kyklos," meaning circle. The Klan was not maintained by centralized national organization, but instead, operated as a network of local violent initiatives. The Klan referred to themselves as the "**Invisible Empire of the South**," spearheading an underground movement against Radical Republicanism and Reconstruction in the hopes of maintaining white supremacy in the post-war South.

Photograph of Nathan Bedford Forrest.
General Nathan Bedford Forrest. Photo courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

The Klan committed acts of violence primarily undercover, wearing the disguise of a long, flowing white robe and hood, capped by horns. They sometimes claimed to be ghosts of Confederate soldiers. The Klan primarily performed heinous crimes against African Americans, especially those running for office in the South. In addition, many white Republicans and sympathizers were also targets of Klan violence. It is estimated that the KKK performed over 3500 racially-motivated lynchings in the South

between 1865 and 1900. Furthermore, white Republicans who sympathized with African Americans, decried as "**carpetbaggers**" and "**scalawags**," were frequently attacked.

Democrats relied on the Klan to secure election victories, as Klansmen oftentimes threatened or killed competing Republican candidates. Many southern Republicans actually abandoned their campaigns due to the inability to hold meetings and attract voters while living in constant fear.

If Democrats could not achieve desired results using sheer violence, the Klan oftentimes voted for literacy tests and conducted voter fraud to dilute the black vote. This happened most frequently in districts composed of nearly equal numbers of African American and white voters, where the Klan felt they must assert control over Reconstructionist, more progressive racial systems.

The Klan also worked to restrict the African American laboring class by incapacitating black economic empowerment. Any white people who encouraged black economic autonomy, like merchants who purchased cotton from black farmers, were also threatened, beaten, and killed. The Klan disassembled African American and Republican community-organizing initiatives by terrorizing **black churches**, as well as many schools established by the **Freedmen's Bureau**.

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ailed attempts to dismantle the Klan's racial control

The Klan maintained their control since many were terrified for their lives to testify against a Klansman if he were to be arrested—which was very rare to begin with.

In response, Congress passed the **Force Acts** of 1870 which required the South to fully recognize the guarantee of equal protection stipulated by the **Fourteenth Amendment**. Since the Force Acts inadequately addressed persisting violence, Congress passed the **Ku Klux Klan Act** of 1871 soon thereafter. The Ku Klux Klan Act was the first piece of US legislation that made individuals and states punishable under federal law for hate crimes or disenfranchising citizens on the basis of race. President Ulysses S. Grant used the Act to challenge Klan activity, most prevalent in South Carolina.

Yet as Reconstruction came to a close, so did counter-Klan measures. The Klan gradually reasserted control over the South as the system of **Jim Crow** segregation took hold. The Klan would experience a huge resurgence in the 1920s with the nativist movement, and another uprising in the 1950s following *Brown v. Board of Education*. At its height in the mid-1920s, the KKK had four million members nationwide dedicated to intimidating, torturing, and killing African Americans and allied activists. The KKK still exists today.

What do you think?

How did the KKK contribute to the polarization and sectional alignment of political parties in the late nineteenth century?

How did the KKK change or maintain the cultural landscape of the antebellum South?

How did Congress expand federal control over hate crime? How successful were their measures?