



THE SECOND COMING OF THE KKK

The Ku Klux Klan
of the 1920s and the
American Political Tradition

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The Klan's mobilization of evangelical ministers foreshadowed—and probably helped generate—the entry of Christian Right preachers into conservative politics fifty years later. One of the first great radio and tent evangelists, Robert Shuler, based in Los Angeles, frequently lauded the Klan—“as sweet music as my ears have ever heard,” he called Klan rhetoric—in his thunderous sermons denouncing threats to white

supremacy. He called the KKK the only hope to save the city from liberals and black people and even joined Klansmen in vigilante actions against speakeasies.³⁹ Anticipating more recent Christian Right leaders, Shuler also became a significant force in Los Angeles politics; in 1929 he chose the winning candidate for mayor.⁴⁰ Evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson similarly endorsed the Klan in her tirades against Japanese Americans—she labeled them Satan's saboteurs—and depended on its support. In 1926, after she was charged with faking her own kidnapping, presumably to collect a ransom, rumors circulated that she had actually been off on a tryst with her lover. The Klan repaid her loyalty, defending her by smearing her prosecution as a Catholic plot, and she was acquitted.⁴¹

The Klan gave one of its largest donations—\$1,568 (worth \$22,500 in 2016)—to the Rev. Bob Jones, to help him establish his conservative whites-only Bob Jones University.⁴² (The university grew out of Jones's distress after his friend William Jennings Bryan was so humiliated in the Scopes trial.) Jones campaigned for Alabama Grand Dragon Bibb Graves in his 1926 winning campaign for the governorship, and Graves delivered the keynote address at the groundbreaking that same year.⁴³ The school grew considerably during the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, when pro-segregation White Citizens Council members sought to avoid integrated education. It would not enroll African Americans until 1971, and then only if they were married and would therefore not live in dorms, even as it tightened its rules against interracial dating. Noted Christian Right evangelists and politicians, including Billy Graham, Billy Kim, Tim LaHaye, Terry Haskins, and Asa Hutchinson, have been among its students.

The Klan's vision of majoritarian or plebiscitary democracy was not entirely the opposite of authoritarianism. Democracy seemed a safe bet for Klanspeople because, in the 1920s, they could hardly imagine a United States in which "right" Americans would not be a majority. In this respect the Klan differed sharply from today's right-wing populisms, when such a loss of majority threatens.

The Klan's electoral work illustrates, perhaps, its greatest divergence from fascism: it sought ideological hegemony but planned to achieve it without fundamental changes to the political rules of American democracy. The KKK was a political machine and a social movement, not an insurrectionary vanguard. It is quite possible that in the 1920s a majority of American citizens shared Klan values. This context illuminates also the Klan's contrast with today's right-wing populist movements, which are often distinctly oppositional, because they face an America in which liberal values have to some degree taken root in the majority of the population. For the majority, segregation and discrimination are wrong, freedom of speech is widely endorsed, racism is a pejorative term, and tens of millions of those the Klan considered "aliens" are respected citizens. True, these values are neither universal nor entirely secure, and many who enunciate them in principle violate them in practice. But today's right-wing populists, even as they can win elections, face majorities who reject their values.

Every such movement arises also from specific local and national contexts, and all are different. But they share characteristics, as a particular but recognizable type of conservatism. Illiberal in their suspicion of dissent and the rights of minority groups, clinging to fictive images of their nations as homogeneous and destined to be so, resentful of cultural elites yet accepting the dominance of economic elites, they direct anger at big-city cosmopolitans and at groups outside their imagined homogeneity. In the United States these movements and their populist, racist, demagogic, and incitatory orientation are a

continuing part of our history, if sometimes dormant. The Klannish spirit—fearful, angry, gullible to sensationalist falsehoods, in thrall to demagogic leaders and abusive language, hostile to science and intellectuals, committed to the dream that everyone can be a success in business if they only try—lives on.