

THE WAR ON ALCOHOL

PROHIBITION AND THE RISE
OF THE AMERICAN STATE

LISA MCGIRR



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THE Ku Klux Klan had flourished during the Reconstruction era in the nineteenth century; its white supremacist terrorism was memorial-

ized in D. W. Griffith's film *Birth of a Nation*. In 1915, William Joseph Simmons, a one-time southern Methodist circuit rider turned Woodmen of the World fraternal organizer, revived the Klan in Atlanta to defend native-born white Protestant supremacy. Only a few thousand members joined its ranks until 1920. Then membership snowballed. Postwar social conflict, including a new militancy among organized labor and African-Americans, and more permissive sexual norms, fueled white Protestant nationalist anxieties and created a fecund climate for Klan mobilization. Savvy promoters contributed to mushrooming growth. In 1920 Joseph Simmons signed a contract with the publicists Elizabeth Tyler and Edward Young Clarke of the Southern Publicity Association. Their claim to fame rested in no small part on their successful fund-raising earlier for the Anti-Saloon League and the Salvation Army. Tyler and Clarke marketed the hooded order by creating a motivated "sales" force to peddle it. "Kleagles" pocketed a portion of the initiation fee when they "naturalized" a new member and attracted bumper crops of new recruits with promises of restoring patriarchal white Protestant cultural values in public life.²⁴

Nothing, however, helped the Klan to turn itself into a dynamic social movement more than the new opportunity provided by the war on alcohol. The Klan leveraged the broad scope of the law to pursue its anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, and white-supremacist agenda, winning two to five million Americans to its ranks by 1925. Already in 1920 Klan organizers broadcast a mission to "clean up" communities by putting bootleggers, moonshiners, and "vice operators" out of business. The Klan frequently gained a foothold in communities, and new recruits, by waving the flag of "unearthing the bootlegger." In Orange County, California, the Anaheim klavern attracted public attention when it warned a local hotel owner, J. H. Clark, accused of peddling bootleg liquor to his clientele, to "leave town in ten days or suffer the consequences." Soon afterwards, the Klan became a powerful force in the city as well as in the county. The southwestern Klan thrived by advocating "rigid economy" and "merci-

less law enforcement, particularly of Prohibition laws." In Fremont, Colorado, another Klan stronghold, a national Klan speaker championed similar themes: "Money and politics must cease to play a role in our courts . . . particularly in Prohibition enforcement." In Athens, Georgia, too, the local klavern gained early recruits by promising to clean up rife liquor-law violations.²⁵

The Klan supplemented the militant temperance sentiment of the Anti-Saloon League and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union with promises of militant action, selling itself as an upholder of law and order. In Jackson City, Oregon, the local klavern promised to "aid the officers of the law." In Denver, Colorado, the kleagle lambasted the local "vice" and "crime" situation, proclaiming, "We . . . assist . . . at all times the authorities in every community in upholding law and order." Where local authorities failed to do their job, the Klan promised to step up to the plate. As one Denver Klan leader, a Methodist minister, railed: "If our officials cannot enforce the law, we should teach them how. . . . I have no respect for the official who winks at the law." Their activities provoked controversy, but also praise—sometimes in surprising places. One Chicago judge who presided over the trial of a liquor-law violator praised the Klan for "going in and handling a case when and where the police fail."²⁶

In regions where sheriffs, local police, or state authorities resisted Klan activism—from Inglewood and Los Angeles, California, to Niles, Ohio—vigilantism turned into gunfights and, sometimes, open warfare. Such violent contests provoked controversy and, eventually, the erosion of support for Klan activity. But in many places, vigorous cleanup actions won the support of local and state enforcement agents under public pressure to shut down sources of liquor supply. From Jackson City, Oregon, to Birmingham, Alabama, the Klan worked closely with local police. Indeed, Klansmen and officials were not infrequently one and the same. In Anaheim, California, local police officers patrolled the streets in full regalia at the height of Klan power. In Birmingham, Alabama, Klan member and police chief J. J. Shirley advised a Nash-

ville, Tennessee, colleague to organize his own klavern to assist police in law enforcement and the public safety commissioner welcomed Klan aid in antiliquor raids. Sheriffs, police, and justices of the peace in such regions deputized Klan members to win additional foot soldiers for vice cleanup. In Texas, Klan chapters claimed credit for citizen arrests, winning gratitude from law officers. In Ohio, Texas, Indiana, Colorado, and Oregon, Klansmen arrested thousands of liquor-law violators who were arraigned in court and frequently convicted.²⁷

These cleanup raids characterized the Klan as militant Protestant warriors in the dry cause: an army upholding Anglo-Saxon white Protestant nationalism. Not surprisingly, the Klan targeted "foreign bootlegging" as the central problem in achieving compliance. The dry mission intersected perfectly with its anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, and white-supremacist agenda. When the La Grande, Oregon, police cracked down on liquor-law violators, the Klan buttressed its forces, targeting Italian, African-American, and Mexican neighborhoods. In Denver's Little Italy, the Klan provided manpower for police raids—conducting door-to-door house searches in antiliquor raids that netted predominantly Italian Americans. In Inglewood, California, the local klavern raided the home of a ranching family of Mexican origin, a "suspected winery." The Klan aided local police in a series of antiliquor raids on "Chinese cafes" in Birmingham in 1924. Klansmen made up the volunteer squads of vigilante raiders who targeted ethnic working-class communities in the massive liquor raids and "reign of terror" in Youngstown and Niles, Ohio. In Madison, Wisconsin, the chief of police along with the Dade County federal Prohibition officer, to their credit, refused Klan offers to clean up liquor violations in "Little Sicily." The mayor, however, did not hesitate to deputize Klansmen in antiliquor raids conducted in 1925.²⁸

When President Harding lambasted the "national scandal" of non-compliance in 1922, the Klan offered evangelical Protestants a solution. Aggrieved over widespread violations and affronted by the social change they associated with it, the Klan would serve as a citizen

enforcement army. They would uphold the values of the militant anti-liquor crusaders and wage war for “100 Protestant Americanism.” Prohibition effectively explains why the second incarnation of the Ku Klux Klan snowballed when it did. Widespread flouting of liquor laws crystallized in concrete form a wider host of dangers to the survival of white Protestant patriarchal nationalism—from shifting gender norms to the increased power of Catholic immigrants and religious modernism. The Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act, and the many state enforcement laws, provided the hooded order, and white Protestant nationalists more generally, an unprecedented opportunity to wage a wider war to safeguard white Protestant native supremacy.

The millions of grassroots men and women who joined the Klan's ranks did not simply find it attractive because of its character as a “social and civic organization” much like others for white Protestant Americans—such as the Lion's Clubs or the national temperance organizations—as some interpretations of the order suggest. Members joined because the Klan promised more: it was willing to take action where the “official” temperance bodies and white Protestant civic organizations would not—to take violent vigilante action against the enemies of white Protestant nationalism. Controlling drink—when produced and consumed by deviant “others”—proved a powerful tool in the Klan's arsenal of weapons, and a mandate for its activities. *The Fiery Cross*, the Indiana Klan newspaper, articulated this mission: “The Klan is going to drive bootlegging forever out of this land. It is going to bring clean moving pictures to this country. It is going to bring clean literature to this country. It is going to break up the road side party, and see to it that the young man who induces a girl to get drunk is held accountable.”²⁹

The order's virulent anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism gave a practical direction and focus to its dry mission. The old Right, within and outside of Klan ranks, identified Jews with a national slide into moral decay and linked that slide to flagrant liquor violations. As one anti-Semitic tract fulminated in 1922: “This idea of drink will be maintained by means of the Jewish stage, Jewish jazz and the Jewish

comics until somebody comes down hard upon it as being incentive to treason to the Constitution.” The use of sacramental wines for religious purposes by the “enemies” of white Protestant nationalism made them easy scapegoats as sources of bootleg liquor. Henry Ford, perhaps the best-known anti-Semite of his day, helped spread such ideas. His newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*, went so far as to declare “bootlegging a 95 percent Jewish controlled industry.” The *Colonel Mayfield Weekly*, a Dallas-based Klan paper, proclaimed, “My fight right now . . . is against the Homebrew and the Hebrew.”³⁰

The Klan's conspiratorial world view also targeted the Catholic Church as the “Antichrist.” Once again, the Klan leveraged the war on alcohol to battle the threat. *The Dawn*, the Illinois Klan newspaper, in one issue alone printed four stories with these headlines: “Priest sent to jail for drunk driving,” “Catholic Father held for liquor forgeries,” and “Drunken priest kills pastor.” The linkage led raiders to target not just Catholic immigrants but their parishes and religious symbols. In a series of antiliquor raids in 1923, a Catholic priest recalled raiders who ripped crucifixes from the walls of Catholic immigrant homes and stomped and spat on them. Klansmen targeted the priest's church too, smashing the parish's sacramental wine.³¹

Native Protestant trespassers of Klan “morality” were not exempt from Klan “justice.” Protestants who strayed from its moral vision—through adultery, moonshining, or family desertion—faced Klan retribution. But the Klan's instrumentally applied cleanup agenda was more deeply concerned with the drinking of others than with its own. Stories abounded of raiders who confiscated liquor only to drink it themselves. One Colorado klavern was even run by a local “vice operator” who served liquor at local meetings. His Klan position likely bolstered the power he required to control supply and shut down competing sources. Despite their avowed mission, Klansmen were not total abstainers. The Klan secretary in Le Grande, Oregon, remarked that the knights at one social event forgot their “craving for moonshine” and devoured “hot dogs and Ku Klux Klan cake.” When they spilled

into public view, the drunken escapades of Klan leaders, from Grand Dragon D. C. Stephenson to publicists Tyler and Clark, eroded the membership and prestige of the hooded order.³²

Such incidents do not signify that the Klan's antialcohol mission was mere window dressing for its goal of terrorizing immigrants, Catholics, and other minorities—though it served that purpose well. Many militant evangelical Protestant pastors throughout the midwest, south, and west who along with their flocks championed the order truly judged liquor an “evil” and the “Devil’s drink.” In Colorado, chapters worked to bar from membership “notorious moonshine drinkers.” If they were going to succeed in upholding their white supremacist Protestant vision, however, reining in liquor-law violations by those deemed significant threats to Protestant nationalism was crucial—even if members of the righteous army sometimes lapsed into “sinful” behavior.³³

In some states, Klan organizers astutely revived old laws still on the books as a legal tool to justify their enforcement activities. Indiana Grand Dragon Stephenson built a powerful Klan enforcement arm with a nineteenth-century regulation, the Horse Thieves Act, authorizing “citizens . . . not less than ten” to form into companies “for the purpose of detecting horse thief and other felons and for mutual protection.” In 1924, about 22,000 of the 25,000 members of the Horse Thief Detective Association were Klansmen. With authorization from sympathetic county commissioners, the “detectives” carried weapons, made arrests, and, in the absence of warrants, held persons in custody. In one series of sensational raids in Indianapolis, the association arrested 125 persons on charges of operating speakeasies and gambling establishments and purchasing liquor—a crime by Indiana statute. The wholesale convictions that followed made plain the cooperation of judicial officials charged with upholding antiliquor laws. Klan leaders claimed credit for more than three thousand cases of Prohibition law violations brought to the Indiana courts from June 1922 through October 1923, largely through the efforts of the Horse Thief Detective Association.³⁴

The Klan's organizational independence from its enforcement body in Indiana and its veiled public references to this role protected the order from the kind of official scrutiny that had earlier prompted a series of congressional investigations into Klan vigilantism. *The Fiery Cross* mentioned “some force at work for law enforcement” and “parties of citizens” assisting sheriffs in raids. Where the Klan flourished, whether raiders donned their white masks or not, Klan backers knew whom to thank, while opponents knew who was responsible.³⁵

Vigilante enforcement raids were the radical edge of a broader dry mission that included political reform strategies. Wherever the Klan achieved a significant degree of political power, liquor-law observance was high on its agenda. When Klan members won four seats on the Anaheim, California, city council, they adopted a strict “law enforcement” ordinance. It provided for harsh punishment of liquor offenders, outlawed slot machines, and tightened traffic laws. In Colorado in 1924, Klan-backed candidates won the governorship, both senate seats, and the state attorney general's office on a platform of government efficiency, spending cuts, and better Prohibition enforcement. And that same year in Indiana, when the Klan-dominated Republican Party won control of the legislature, the pope and demon rum were its campaign's primary issues. The following year the legislature passed anti-Catholic measures and a new “bone-dry” bill to strengthen and codify state Prohibition legislation in one all-encompassing, draconian law. Drafted by Indiana Anti-Saloon League superintendent Reverend Shumaker, the act required jail time for first-time possession of even small quantities of alcohol.³⁶

The Klan's war against alcohol provided it with powerful allies among the large and well-organized antiliquor crusade bodies—the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League. Together, these three organizations wove together an army of citizen enforcers, forging the first massive entry of the Christian Right of the twentieth century into public view and into national politics. As an intertwined social movement, the organizations had much in common.

All were evangelical Protestant efforts to shore up the United States as a Christian nation, and all embraced coercive and disciplinary means to do so. At the national level, the ASL and WCTU ignored the raging controversy over the Klan's virulent intolerance and the violence of its dry mission, but their silence spoke volumes about the complicity of many members. State ASL and WCTU leaders teamed up with the Klan in the midwest, south, and west. They did so most publicly on political platforms, sharing the stump in their campaigns for white, Protestant, and dry political candidates.³⁷

These groups cooperated in other ways too. Women could not join the hooded order, but many WCTU members found their way into the Women of the Ku Klux Klan. In Indiana, prior activism in the antiliquor crusade proved the most common avenue into the WKKK. The national WCTU ignored the controversy and criticism raging nationally over the racism and vigilantism of the Ku Klux Klan, but it quietly publicized the efforts of local "citizens" who banded together to conduct investigations and were deputized to join in antiliquor raids. The organization's members, in regions with supportive ideological waters, skirted close to the Klan's strains of virulent racism, conspiratorial vision, and vigilante action.³⁸

Regional Anti-Saloon League leaders collaborated even more closely with the "white knights." Indiana league superintendent E. F. Shumaker told national leaders that the "Klan is doing many things we would like to do." Hugh Pat Emmons, Klan Exalted Cyclops in Saint Joseph County, claimed that Shumaker met with him to encourage cooperation among the Klan, the Anti-Saloon League, and the Horse Thief Detective Association. In some places, league leaders were prominent Klan leaders as well. South Carolina ASL superintendent E. M. Lightfoot, a Baptist minister, was a Klan kleagle and actively recruited for the order. In Alabama, J. L. Musgrove, a national chairman of the Anti-Saloon League, was a proud member of the Klan and a substantial financial backer to imperial headquarters. When liberal iconoclast Clarence Darrow declared that "the father and mother of the Ku Klux

is the Anti-Saloon League," he was close to the mark. Washington-based league lobbyist Wayne Wheeler, concerned over the damage such affiliations might do to the league's national reputation and ability to fund-raise, sought to distance the organization from the Klan, but many state and local league affiliates worked hand in glove with the organization.³⁹

Many of the grassroots men and women who had worked in the antiliquor crusade through the ASL or the WCTU found a new champion in the more militant Klan. Pietistic ministers, Methodists, Baptists, and Disciples of Christ who established law-enforcement leagues frequently backed the formation of Klan klaverns at the local level. Liquor-law enforcement provided them a concrete tool to defend militant Protestant Christianity from modernist and un-American threats. County "dry leagues" and local "civic leagues" often walked in lockstep with the Klan in the battle for a dry land.⁴⁰

The nation's war on alcohol fueled a powerful citizens' army. The WCTU, the Anti-Saloon League, and the Ku Klux Klan knew that the success of the war hinged on citizen backing. This shadow enforcement force buttressed the better-known federal, state, and local enforcement apparatus of Prohibition agents, customs officials, the Coast Guard, and the Border Patrol with contributions of personnel and funding. Overwhelmed enforcement officials frequently welcomed the aid from this vibrant grassroots movement. Once in motion, however, the actions of the dry warriors proved difficult to control. Their activities sparked controversy, raised alarms, and catalyzed opposition. When they unleashed violent social conflict and brought national headlines, they raised to national level growing doubts about the merits of the war on alcohol.