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## **Sidestepping the Shadows of Scandal: Ku Klux Klan Media Responses to Violence in the 1920s**

### **Introduction**

Whilst the modern-day Ku Klux Klan exists as a radical fringe group, the hooded order of the 1920s attempted to mobilize itself into a mass political movement with the aim of enacting nationwide change. This directive met with considerable success and, between 1922 and 1923, the Klan would help to elect governors in Oregon and Georgia, a senator in Texas and numerous representatives across the United States.<sup>2</sup> This was a drastic departure from the original post-Civil War Klan, which operated from the shadows in a short-lived spree of violence and terror. Indeed, as Charles Alexander wrote, during the 1920s ‘the [second] Klan was, more than anything else, a political organization’ and the KKK’s platforms of anti-immigration, defence of the traditional family unit and gender values, and hyperbolic patriotism proved popular with large numbers of the disenfranchised white populace, who helped elect Klan-backed candidates into office.<sup>3</sup>

However, reports and tales of Klan-perpetuated violence consistently haunted the hooded organisation, threatening the group’s reputation and questioning their commitment to law and order. Indeed, the *New York World’s* exposé drew national attention to crimes committed by the invisible order (giving them free publicity), with the exposé’s fourteenth article claiming that ‘Members of [the] Institution, Who Substitute Terrorism for Law, Kidnap, Beat, Tar and Feather Victims’.<sup>4</sup> These victims were often outspoken and ‘uppity’ African Americans, Jews, and

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest*, (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 159.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest*, p. 158.

<sup>4</sup> [No author], “New York World’s Expose of the KKK.” *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, 19 September 1921, p. 3.

Catholics, despised by the Klan's fiery brand of Protestantism for their apparent loyalty to Rome over the USA and their synonymy with Italian, Slavic, and Irish immigrants. Alongside the *New York World*, other papers would draw similar attention to instances of flogging, branding, and kidnapping perpetrated by the KKK, which particularly in the South-West was directed in the form of moral intervention against bootleggers or adulterers. Klan engagement with the wider public became crucial here, and multiple press organs operated by the KKK sought to present counter-narratives towards the scandals reported on by the mainstream media. This article will examine how the KKK's press attempted to spin potentially damaging instances of Klan initiated violence, and how the hooded order's newspapers attempted to convince the public that the organisation remained lawful and benevolent. Here, the KKK's media organs typically argued that in these instances of violence the Klan was consistently the innocent party, and that it was Catholics and other minorities who were guilty, giving greater credence to their wider anti-immigrant and anti-minority rhetoric. As David Chalmers has suggested, 'Americanism under attack by foreign ruffians was always a good theme and the excitement of violence acted like a tonic to recruitment'.<sup>5</sup> Klan newspapers thus served the purpose of placing a spin on controversy, and manipulating public opinion through a mixture of conspiracy thinking, sensationalism, and a distortion of the facts.

This violence conducted by the second Klan of the 1920s has often been overlooked. This article aims to contribute to two aspects of KKK historiography that are lacking. Firstly, newspapers published by the hooded order have typically been overlooked by Klan historians; in recent decades academics such as Leonard Moore and Christopher Cocoltcho have focused on regional, micro-studies of individual Klan chapters, giving minimal attention to sources that demonstrate the organisation's national agenda. Moreover, earlier studies of the second KKK tended to view

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<sup>5</sup> David J. Goldberg, *Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 119; David Mark Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism, The History of the Ku Klux Klan*, (New York: Duke University Press, 1981), p. 239.

the average Klansman as a rustic, ill-educated redneck, whilst the records show that the membership was more middle-class. Resultantly, these scholars paid little attention to newspapers, which were perceived as being incompatible with the rural Klansman who faced ‘seclusion from the world of ideas and information’.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, this article will examine how the Klan responded to instances of KKK-related violence on a national level, which again has been neglected in recent decades by ‘post-revisionist’ studies, such as Moore’s and Cocoltchos’, which have focused more upon the Klan’s links to community and operation in everyday life. This piece thus forms an important study, as it enables an insight into the nature of the 1920s Klan and how propaganda was used to sway public opinion. It reveals the contemporary society’s expectations of how media functioned, and how morality was structured via the defence of the KKK offered by their media publications. Most importantly, it details some of the foundations of ‘media unreliability’, and perhaps suggests the historic origins of the so-called ‘fake news’ that haunts the American political scene today.

This article will focus on four major newspapers: the *Imperial Night-Hawk*, the *Dawn*, the *Fiery Cross* and the *Fellowship Forum*. The first, the *Imperial Night-Hawk*, was the official press organ of the Klan and ran a total of eighty issues during the Invisible Empire’s peak until December 1924 when it was replaced by the *Kourier*.<sup>7</sup> The second paper is the *Dawn*, a Chicago centred weekly which ran from 1922 until 1924. In April 1923 it boasted of 50,000 subscribers, also claiming readers across every state, as well as Mexico and Canada.<sup>8</sup> Thirdly, this analysis will examine the *Fiery Cross*, an Indiana based, semi-official weekly which ran from 1922 until 1925. In March 1923 it claimed a readership of around 100,000, although by the following month this figure was given as ‘over

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Tannenbaum, *Darker Phases of the South*, (Michigan: G. P. Putnam and Sons, 1924), p 135.

<sup>7</sup> Rory McVeigh, *The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan: Right Wing Movements and National Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> [No author], ‘Tribute to Dawn and its Founder, Klansman Edwin John Parke,’ *The Dawn*, 3 November 1923, p. 22; [No author], ‘Dawn Circulation Climbs to 50,000 as Fight for Americanism Stirs Nation Wide Interest,’ *The Dawn*, 7 April 1923, p. 6.

150,000’.<sup>9</sup> The *Cross*’s purpose was to ‘strive to give the American viewpoint on published articles and separate the dross from the pure gold in the current news of the day’. The *Cross* was typically more conspiratorial than the other papers, and perhaps the most vehemently anti-Catholic, reflecting the nature of the Klan within Indiana.<sup>10</sup> Finally, this article will discuss the *Fellowship Forum*. The *Fellowship Forum* was not an official Klan paper, and reported more generally on wider fraternal, and in particular, Masonic affairs. By the mid-1922, however, the *Forum* started disclosing ‘regularly on Klan activities in an openly supportive way’ and was endorsed in 1924 by Imperial Wizard Hiram Evans who sent the paper a donation of \$500.<sup>11</sup> Due to the price of having multiple subscriptions, these papers formed a key source of information for thousands of Americans, and these papers frequently discussed wider world and national news as well as information relating to the Klan.

Whilst it is unclear precisely how involved the KKK was in the multitude of violent incidents they were indicted in, the narratives provided by the Invisible Empire’s press were meant to be believed. This article will analyse how the Invisible Empire’s media attempted this through conspiracy and cognitive dissonance that fed into the public image which the KKK aimed to foster. It will then proceed to analyse the Klan media’s typical response to general violence using the Burroughs branding incident, where a Catholic was supposedly mutilated by Klansmen, as a case study, as well as the threats of violence made through menacing letters. This article will proceed to investigate how newspapers sympathetic to the Klan covered national scandals such as the KKK-perpetuated kidnappings in Mer Rouge, Louisiana, and the ‘Bloody Williamson’ murders in Illinois, and will provide an analysis of how these were framed into wider narratives of anti-Klan persecution. Finally, this article will provide a cross-analysis of two case studies, the riots at Notre

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<sup>9</sup> [No author], ‘Klansmen, Attention!’ *The Fiery Cross*, 16 March 1923, p 3; [No author], ‘Advertisers,’ *The Fiery Cross*, 27 April 1923, p 9.

<sup>10</sup> Leonard J. Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> [No author], ‘Klan News from Everywhere,’ *The Fellowship Forum*, 11 August 1923, p 4; Miguel Hernandez, *Fighting Fraternities: The Ku Klux Klan and Freemasonry in 1920s America*, (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Exeter, 2014). p. 137.

Dame and at Lilly, and the similar responses given to both violent outbreaks. As a connecting theme, this article will examine the binaries used by the Klan which portrayed the Invisible Empire as America's saviours against anarchism and subversiveness. This was combined with frequent claims of lawfulness on the Klan's behalf, and cultivating this image was instrumental in the leadership's attempts for the Invisible Empire to be perceived as a serious political force by the wider public. Furthermore, this article will argue that the Klan's narrative of persecution was used to legitimise the order's message by demonstrating the desperation of the group's foes.

### **Violent assaults**

The KKK was often charged with kidnapping and mutilating enemies, using branding as a form of silencing victims and terrorising communities.<sup>12</sup> Here, the Klan press again responded to select instances and by removing Klan blame from these cases could infer that all such instances were carried out by the actions of non-Klansmen. That multiple victims were branded by the letter's 'K.K.K.' was not an issue; the culprit was likely a Klan enemy possessing 'a twofold purpose; first, to take suspicion from themselves, and secondly to try and harm the Klan'.<sup>13</sup> This was the case with Nelson Burroughs, a Catholic convert from New Hampshire, who in July 1924 excited national papers through his claim that he had been threatened, kidnapped, and then branded with three Ks by individuals he believed to be Klansmen.<sup>14</sup> The story threatened to be a national scandal for the KKK, giving absolute proof of the Klan's barbarous attitudes towards Catholics, until it was revealed that the story had been a fabrication, the burn marks a result of self-flagellation.<sup>15</sup> The Klan papers took full advantage of this, and the *Fiery Cross* suggested soon after that the false nature of the case was easily applicable elsewhere, as 'these same publicity stunts have been tried and have all found to be fake'.<sup>16</sup> Klan media drew particular attention to the revelation that the

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<sup>12</sup> David A. Horowitz, *Inside the Klavern: A Secret History of a Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), p. 55.

<sup>13</sup> [No author], 'Brand Thugs are Sought by Klansmen,' *The Fiery Cross*, 25 July 1924, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Hernandez, *Fighting Fraternities*, p. 295.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> [No author], 'Woman Brands Self, Puts Blame on Klan,' *The Fiery Cross*, 8 August 1924, p. 11.

‘Roman Catholic who burned own body to cast stigma on Klan... is member of Knights of Columbus’, who were a militant Catholic fraternity, perceived by the Invisible Empire as subversive organisation that aimed to overthrow American Protestantism.<sup>17</sup> Coupled with the repetition across coverage that Burrows was ‘a religious fanatic’, the KKK’s media implied that there lay behind the scenes an insidious Catholic conspiracy, organised by the Knights of Columbus’ militant branch that sought to discredit the hooded order, and whose existence enabled the Klan to discredit other cases more easily.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the KKK press reassured readers that this conspiracy was not to be feared, as it was a result of Klan organisational growth and national success. The *Fiery Cross* explained that ‘it could only be an effort to discredit the Klan, which is gaining rapidly in members in Rochester’, the town in New Hampshire where Burroughs originated. This implies that the case was a Catholic reaction to the order’s success, and that further accusations are just proof of the Invisible Empire recruiting more Protestant Americans.<sup>19</sup>

### **Threats and letters**

Klan terror often involved non-violent threats, which frequently included menacing and extorting letters signed ‘K.K.K.’ This became a serious issue for the Klan’s reputation and was taken up by opposing publications to denounce the order.<sup>20</sup> Charles Alexander noted that, whilst these attempts were generally directed towards bootleggers and other such criminals, Klansmen would also threaten the official lawmen of the community to prompt them into further action, and these tactics in particular could suggest to the public that the Invisible Empire was not an organisation that co-operated with the law.<sup>21</sup> As such, the Klan’s own press saw the necessity in downplaying the use of threats and extortion to uphold public opinion of the order.

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<sup>17</sup> [No author], ‘Fanatic Who Branded Self Now in Ugly Predicament,’ *The Fiery Cross*, 1 August 1924, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> [No author], ‘Knights of Columbus Organizer Brands Self and Roman Newspapers Blame Ku Klux Klan,’ *The Fellowship Forum*, 19 July 1924, p.1.

<sup>19</sup> [No author], ‘Fanatic Who Branded Self Now in Ugly Predicament,’ *The Fiery Cross*, 1 August 1924, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest*, (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 75.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

Both the *Night-Hawk* and the *Fiery Cross* stressed that the Klan was on the side of the recipients and would do all in its power to find the true culprit, a message which re-enforced the national Klan line of lawfulness. In Kansas, the *Night-Hawk* responded to the *Wichita Eagle's* publication of a threatening letter sent to a black man by stressing that 'a full investigation was ordered of the affair and the Klan posted a reward of \$150 for the arrest and conviction of the person guilty'.<sup>22</sup> In Ohio, Mrs Helen Shalter received an intimidating letter and the *Fiery Cross* reassured its readers that the Invisible Empire was aiding in every way possible, proudly stating the Klan's innocence through Mrs Shalter's statement that 'We do not blame the K. K. K. for this letter'.<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere, the *Fiery Cross* continued the narrative of anti-Klan persecution, headlining that 'Klan Members Still Receiving Letters Signed KKK', suggesting that the hooded order itself was a victim more than an aggressor.<sup>24</sup>

One article took advantage of these threats even further and, writing on the Ohio case, claimed that the writer 'declared that she "got the idea" of writing the letters from a magazine which carried "an exposé" of the Klan'.<sup>25</sup> The article, titled 'The Hen and the Egg', suggested that these letters were part of a cyclical process, as the press 'exposé' was founded upon similar instances, and from the 'exposé' is hatched more threatening letters."<sup>26</sup> Thus, the *Fiery Cross* suggested that, rather than the blame lying with the KKK, the responsibility for these threats belonged to the order's critics and general anti-Klan sentiment. These tactics therefore detracted blame from the KKK, whilst also informing the public that anti-Klan campaigns were fuelling lawlessness and crime.

Moreover, the Klan media also used accusations of violence to ridicule their opponents. The *Fellowship Forum* in one instance responded to a claim that a threatening letter signed by the Klan had been sent to several Jewish boys, and wrote how this accusation was false, as 'the K.K.K.,

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<sup>22</sup> [No author], 'Klan Offers Reward for Letter Writer,' *The Imperial Night-Hawk*, 8 August 1923, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> [No author], 'Klan Aids Woman in Poison Pen Mystery,' *The Imperial Night-Hawk*, 18 January 1924, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> [No author], 'Klan Members Still Receiving Letters Signed KKK,' *The Fiery Cross*, 5 January 1923, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> [No author], 'The Hen and the Egg,' *The Fiery Cross*, 14 December 1923, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

however, proved to be three boys, a messenger and two chums, who thought it would be a joke to scare their Jewish friends'.<sup>27</sup> The *Night-Hawk* produced a similar response to a supposed lynching in Clarksburg, West Virginia, where authorities received reports of a body hanging from a tree. The *Night-Hawk* gleefully announced that 'it was discovered that body was nothing more than a straw dummy' and that 'suspicion has now turned to mischievous schoolboys'.<sup>28</sup> By informing the readership that these crimes were no more than pranks, the notion that stories of Klan crimes in general should be believed came under ridicule, thus suggesting that the enemies of the organisation were easily duped, with a limited investigatory and journalistic prowess.

### **Narratives of persecution**

A further recurring tactic of the Klan press in countering accusations of violence was to turn the narrative on its head by portraying the Invisible Empire as an order that faced regular persecution as response to its patriotism and American values. No other group was as widely targeted, the KKK's media argued. As Evan's expressed in the *Night-Hawk*, 'you never heard of a meeting of Negroes being jumped on in the South; you never heard of an assemblage of Jews being murdered, did you? We white folk protect all these other folk in their rights'.<sup>29</sup> By making this level of persecution appear unrivalled amongst other groups, the Klan could suggest that this was part of a titanic struggle of American values against subversive foreigners, which fed into the group's conspiratorial rhetoric.<sup>30</sup>

Readers of the Klan press were usually informed who these lawless enemies were. One article, titled 'What's in a Name,' implied that the usual culprits were European immigrants, and whilst not stating this outright, the *Fiery Cross* wrote, 'in Indianapolis the names that prominently appear as fighting the Klan are: O'Brien, Mullin, Glenn, McNamara, Rikhoff...'<sup>31</sup> On an attack by enraged

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<sup>27</sup> [No author], 'KKK Threat is boy Prank,' *The Fellowship Forum*, 17 February 1923, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> [No author], 'Klan Quickly Cleared of One Crime,' *The Imperial Night-Hawk*, 30 April 1924, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> Hiram Wesley Evans, 'Wizard Tell about Assaults on Klan,' *The Imperial Night-Hawk*, 12 September 1923, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, (Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*



locals on a Klavern in Rushville, Indiana, the *Fiery Cross* placed the blame on ‘the reign of terror, launched to intimidate Protestants, and feed on the flames of hate created by the American Unity League’, placing responsibility directly on one of the Klan’s enemies who had in other instances claimed the Klan as violent.<sup>32</sup> The *Fiery Cross* repeated this mentality elsewhere and when a Klan Flag Day parade in Bloomfield, New Jersey was struck by missiles, the paper attributed the attack to the Catholic Knights of Columbus and wrote that it was an irony that ‘those of the opposition are accusing the Klan of unlawful acts and at the same time are taking the law into their own hands and committing acts of violence against those who are peaceful in meeting’.<sup>33</sup>

The *Fiery Cross* made this narrative of persecution personal by publishing numerous articles about how its paper sellers were being routinely arrested or physically assaulted on the streets. The *Fiery Cross* wrote that frequencies of these attacks were a ‘systematic persecution of newsboys’ whose only ‘crime’ was exercising their freedom of speech in selling the publication.<sup>34</sup> That many of these newsboys were children or teenagers was emphasised, as it furthered the brutality of the anti-Klan attackers and demonstrated the newsboys’ innocence. In Cleveland, it was reported that newsboys were ‘continually threatened by a ring of toughs and pugilists’, suggesting some organised element to these assaults.<sup>35</sup> Some articles gave Klansmen and prospective Klansmen some optimism about this struggle, however. For example, the *Fellowship Forum* wrote that a Klavern in Wilmington, Delaware, had been threatened with dynamite, and this threat had failed to materialise. This suggested some weakness on behalf of the Klan’s enemies, and that the Wilmington Klan, ‘despite recent clashes’ with anti-Klan mobs’, would hold an open-air demonstration as a show of strength.<sup>36</sup> To the *Forum*’s readers this suggested that, whilst the threat against Americanism was

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<sup>32</sup> [No author], ‘Pat and Bob Open the Battle at South Bend,’ *The Fiery Cross*, 23 March 1923, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> [No author], ‘Klan Marchers are Victims of Assault,’ *The Fiery Cross*, 29 June 1923, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> [No author], ‘Systematic Persecution of Newsboys,’ *The Fiery Cross*, 27 April 1923, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> [No author], ‘Newsboy Assaulted at Cleveland,’ *The Fiery Cross*, 23 March 1923, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> [No author], ‘Threat to Dynamite Wilmington Klansmen Fails to Materialize,’ *The Fellowship Forum*, 29 September 1923, p. 4.

grave, the strength of the Klan could defeat it, showing how the Klan media could manipulate violent events to publicly demonstrate the order's vitality and advertise the group's ethos.

### **Kidnapping and murder**

Perhaps the most infamous example of Klan violence that caught the attention of the national media was the instance at Mer Rouge, Louisiana.<sup>37</sup> Mer Rouge was a small, 'wet', town that was constantly at odds with the local Klan, whose Exalted Cyclops had 'launched a flogging campaign to upgrade local morale' and enforce prohibition.<sup>38</sup> Relations were worsened when the Klan kidnapped and tortured two prominent white citizens, whose bodies were found in a lake soon after. Swiftly indicted, the Invisible Empire received damnation across national media, and the order's press found itself having to issue numerous responses to defend the organisation, the critics of which were often using the Mer Rouge murders to support the *New York World's* exposé of the previous year.<sup>39</sup>

Much of the Klan media's response was highly conspiratorial and, in light of the evidence against Klansmen, viewed the whole case as a contrived, anti-Klan plot. The *Dawn* described 'the whole affair a pack of newspaper lies' and that 'it was the most damnable outrage ever perpetuated in an effort to get the Klan, but like all other such plots, it failed miserably'.<sup>40</sup> The *Dawn* gave vague evidence to support this, such as claiming that the medical records of the victims countered the official narrative, although provided no supporting proof.<sup>41</sup> In a similar vein, the *Forum* boldly reported that one of the victims, Thomas Richard, had not been murdered at all, but had been seen alive after the supposed murder.<sup>42</sup> Whilst again providing no actual evidence, the paper claimed victory over the case, the confidence perhaps persuading some, and ran the subheading,

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<sup>37</sup> [No author], 'First Photos of Victims of Klan Murders in Louisiana, Scene of the Crime, and State Officials Investigating,' *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, 26 December 1922, p. 28.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Newton, *The FBI and the KKK: A Critical History*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p. 25.

<sup>39</sup> Robert L. Duffus, *Salesmen of Hate: The Ku Klux Klan*, (New York: World's Work Publishers, 1923), p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> [No author], 'Ol' Cap'n Skip' Tells Bastrop 'Murder Facts', *The Dawn*, 25 August 1923, p. 6.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> [No author], 'Klan Victim' Seen Alive at Mer Rouge,' *The Fellowship Forum*, 3 November 1923, p. 7.

‘The Forum exposed plot; Fraternal weekly proved that Romans conspired to ruin order’.<sup>43</sup> One reader’s letter sent to the *Forum* was also used to support this, and it held that the ‘Mer Rouge “Mystery” must have been framed!’ because of a lack of proof of Klan involvement, and by publishing this letter the *Forum* could suggest that the public had sided with the KKK, encouraging other readers to do so.<sup>44</sup>

The *Fiery Cross* displayed the most conspiratorial thinking regarding Mer Rouge, describing how the incident formed an elaborative plot constructed by America’s enemies. The *Cross* claimed to have unearthed a Knights of Columbus dispatch, which was ‘one of the best summaries of Catholic activities in America that we have ever seen’.<sup>45</sup> The supposed Catholic communication contained snippets, such as a reveal of the Pope’s master plan, and how Romanists would ‘bring his holiness here and establish him in the White House at Washington, where... he can assume his rightful position as ruler of the world’.<sup>46</sup> Mer Rouge formed an integral part of this subterfuge, and the dispatch confessed that the story was fabricated by a Catholic agent, ‘our brave boy... in order to give cause against our enemy, the K. K. K.’<sup>47</sup> The *Cross* used this fabricated dispatch to emphasise the Klan’s role in this upcoming struggle, which had claimed, ‘in order that we make America Catholic in 1924 it is necessary that we smash all organizations such as the K. K. K....’<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, it portrayed the Klan as the sole organisation capable of stopping a Papal dictatorship, purporting that ‘Freemasons and the Jr. O. U. A. M. [other Protestant fraternities] are no more than debating societies now, but the K. K. K. is really dangerous to our plans’.<sup>49</sup> Whilst this attempt at conspiratorial scaremongering may seem transparent, to many at the time it played upon the binary fears that saw Americanism pitted against foreign, subversive elements, and whilst

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> James F. Fulkerson, “Mer Rouge ‘Mystery’ must have been framed!” *The Fellowship Forum*, 4 August 1923, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> [No author], ‘Enlightening at the Least,’ *The Fiery Cross*, March 2, 1923, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

it remains unclear how effective these types of articles were, the Mer Rouge affair did not, at least in the short term, have a significant impact on the Klan's expansion.<sup>50</sup>

A further case in which the Klan became entangled with violence and received national condemnation was in Williamson County, Illinois. Dubbed 'Bloody Williamson' for the region's history of violent confrontation, here Klansmen under the leadership of S. Glenn Young savagely combatted bootleggers, immigrant mineworkers, corrupt law officials, and those Protestants not upholding moral values.<sup>51</sup> The Klan took control of towns such as Herrin, raiding saloons, and arresting over one hundred individuals.<sup>52</sup> By the end of the anarchic fighting, twenty people lay dead, forcing intervention from the National Guard.<sup>53</sup> National papers such as the *New York Times* held the Invisible Empire accountable, and once more the Klan media was pressed into acting to defend the organisation's actions.<sup>54</sup>

The predominant tactic employed by the Klan newspapers was to stress how successful the order had been in cleaning up Williamson. *The Fiery Cross*, in an article titled 'The Truth about Williamson County, Illinois, is Gradually Seeping through to the Public,' boasted of the Klan's success: 'for the first time in history Herrin is dry. There's not a roadhouse in Williamson County'.<sup>55</sup> The *Forum* argued that the KKK had 'restored law and order' and stressed that only criminals had found the Klan's ire, writing that 'seventy-nine bootleggers and gunmen taken in series of raids that close 100 saloons in Williamson County'.<sup>56</sup> The *Cross*, whose readership covered Illinois, also argued that the raids were without controversy and necessary for the community, 'sensational only in the sense

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<sup>50</sup> Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 239.

<sup>51</sup> Paul M. Angle, *Bloody Williamson: A Chapter in American Lawlessness*, (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1952), p. 141.

<sup>52</sup> Taylor Pensoneau, *Brothers Notorious: The Sheltons, Southern Illinois' Legendary Gangsters*, (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 34.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s*, (Chicago: Ivan R Dee, 2011), p. 137.

<sup>54</sup> Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, p. 33.

<sup>55</sup> [No author], 'The Truth about Williamson County, Illinois, is Gradually Seeping through to the Public,' *The Fiery Cross*, 21 March 1924, p. 3.

<sup>56</sup> [No author], 'Klan Restored Law and Order in Herrin Law Mine District,' *The Fellowship Forum*, 29 December 1923, p. 1.

that the yellow newspapers distorted the news, misrepresented the conditions, and took sides with the lawbreakers'.<sup>57</sup> The *Dawn* meanwhile emphasised that law violations occurred only on the side of the corrupt town officials, such as Herrin's Sherriff George Galligan, and told readers that Galligan, alongside nine convicted bootlegging prisoners, initiated a 'Kangaroo court' that convicted one police officer to flogging as punishment for having sent law violators 'running to cover'.<sup>58</sup> Maintaining the Klan's lawfulness and the anarchic tendencies of the Klan's enemies is here representative of a wider common strategy of the Invisible Empire's press in managing similar cases, and it served to highlight the Klan's claims that the mainstream media was adverse to the order and its ideals.

Part of the Klan propaganda surrounding Williamson County was to create a heroic image for local Klan leader, S. Glenn Young, who led efforts to combat bootleggers and other undesirable elements in the region. The *Fellowship Forum*, portrayed him as 'redoubtable', 'far-famed' and a 'Stormy Petrel'.<sup>59</sup> The Klan press was willing to bend the truth about his past; the *Forum* described him as a Klan leader even after he had officially been removed from the organisation for his conduct.<sup>60</sup> Both the *Forum* and the *Night-Hawk* provided his actions with legitimacy by stressing that he was a Federal Dry Agent, despite Young having been in the position for only four months before being dismissed for unwarrantedly killing a suspect.<sup>61</sup> Defending Young was important for the Klan press; despite Young having been removed from the order, he still directed the Williamson Klansmen, maintaining a tight association with them.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, the Herrin Grand Jury had found Young guilty of attempting 'to overthrow the civil authority in Herrin and Williamson... without any legal authority whatsoever', and via association the Klan had been

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<sup>57</sup> [No author], 'The Truth about Williamson County, Illinois, is Gradually Seeping through to the Public,' *The Fiery Cross*, 21 March 1924, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> [No author] 'Anti-Klan Sheriff is Involved in Assault on Brave Policeman,' *The Dawn*, October 13, 1923, p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> [No author] 'Glenn Young Meets Death at Latest Outbreak at Herrin,' *The Fellowship Forum*, January 31, 1925, p. 1.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> [No author] 'Injured by Bullets from Passing Car,' *The Imperial Night-Hawk*, May 28, 1924, p. 4.

<sup>62</sup> Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, p. 142.

indicted alongside him.<sup>63</sup> Combating this, the *Cross* used stylised photos of Young posing heroically, whilst the *Forum* stressed he was there at bequest of concerned citizens, and when entering Herrin, ‘the law abiding citizens of the community at once chose Young to act as chief of police’.<sup>64</sup> Combined with the claim that he was still a member of a government taskforce, this portrayal suggested he was an all-American hero, dashing, proud, and skilled, and with a lawful purpose, which further aimed to suggest the Klan attracted men of this calibre to its ranks, legitimising the order’s wider activities through the quality of its membership which, according to these papers, contrasted with the violent image of the Klan held by more mainstream publications.

### **Martyrs, rallies, and riots**

Klansmen who were injured or killed in these attacks were held up as martyrs and portrayed by the KKK’s press as the embodiment of Klannish and American ideals. As John Craig writes, ‘Klan leaders recognised the value inherent in an emerging image of the Klan as a victim of mob violence,’ and this victimhood was achieved through certain Klan casualties being used as figureheads to help gain public sympathy.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps the most prominent of these was Thomas Abbott, a World War One veteran who was killed at a 1923 riot in Carnegie, Pennsylvania, after disruption from a crowd of local citizens who had forced the Klan to retreat under a hail of bricks.<sup>66</sup> Whilst Abbott was a Klansman of no real significance, having only recently been initiated, arguably as recently as the day prior to the riot, the Klan press emphasised his virtue.<sup>67</sup> The *Night-Hawk* wrote across issues that he was ‘a real man’, ‘a martyr for the cause’, a ‘hero’ and ‘a veteran of the World War’.<sup>68</sup> Other papers garnered sympathy by portraying the death as part of a wider struggle against lawless anti-Klan elements. The *Dawn* wrote that Abbott had fallen ‘victim to the murderous

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>64</sup> ‘Resignation of Gallagan is Demanded,’ *The Fiery Cross*, September 12, 1924, p. 1; ‘Paid Roman Catholic Gunmen Kill Klansman in Herrin, Illinois,’ *The Fellowship Forum*, February 26, 1924, p. 10.

<sup>65</sup> John Craig, *The Ku Klux Klan in Western Pennsylvania, 1921-1928*, (Maryland: Lehigh University Press, 2015), p. 72.

<sup>66</sup> Goldberg, *Discontented America*, p. 136.

<sup>67</sup> Gerard F. O’Neil, *Pittsburgh Irish: Erin on the Three Rivers*, (United States: The History Press, 2015), p. 122.

<sup>68</sup> [No author], ‘Abbott Trust Fund Approaches \$5000 Mark as Klan Aids Fatherless Babies,’ *The Imperial Night-Hawk*, 10 October 1923, p. 7; [No author], ‘Abbot Fund Growing Steadily as Klans of the Nation Aid Family of Hero,’ *The Imperial Night-Hawk*, 3 October 1923, p. 7.

mob', similar to the *Forum's* description of him as 'a victim of Catholicism', drawing attention to the number of Irish Catholics at the riot.<sup>69</sup> In the *Fiery Cross*, adverts appeared for a ninety page booklet titled *The Martyred Klansman*, and as David Goldberg argued, this was a clear attempt by the Klan to capitalise on the murder in a recruitment drive.<sup>70</sup> Despite there being no direct evidence of new initiates flocking to the Klan, the *Fiery Cross* certainly claimed this following the incident, writing of a 'most astonishing jump in membership'.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, as Chalmers has stated, 'in young Tom Abbott, the Klan had gained its hero'.<sup>72</sup>

The Abbott murder was used by the Klan press to demonstrate to the wider public the charitable nature and fraternal goodwill of the Invisible Empire. A trust fund was created, which, managed by the Imperial Treasurer at Atlanta, would 'care for little children murdered by religious fanatics' and which was portrayed by the *Fiery Cross* as a way for Klansmen to vent anger by showing 'their condemnation of criminal mobs through their humane and liberal contributions towards the support of innocent victims of bloody rioters'.<sup>73</sup> That Abbott had left behind a widow and children was exploited, and once again the brotherhood could portray itself as a defender of families and womanhood by questioning, 'Klansmen, have you contributed to the Abbott Trust Fund? Have you done anything towards helping the widow and little babies of a man who died for the cause which you represent?'<sup>74</sup> This was made personal to each Klansman and Klavern, as each week until the end of its publication, the *Night-Hawk* ran a list of each donation freshly received from individual Klaverns, which advertised the charitability of Klannishness.<sup>75</sup> This tactic seemingly worked, and money poured in from across the United States.<sup>76</sup> On its final issue, the *Night-Hawk*

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<sup>69</sup> [No author], 'Catholic Faces Murder Charge in Abbott Case,' *The Dawn*, 10 November 1923, p. 4; [No author], 'Ku Klux Donate to Abbott Fund,' *The Fellowship Forum*, 30 October 1923, p. 8.

<sup>70</sup> Goldberg, *Discontented America*, p. 137.

<sup>71</sup> [No author], 'Klankraft Spreads Over Pennsylvania,' *The Fiery Cross*, 21 September 1923, p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, p. 239.

<sup>73</sup> [No author], 'Abbott Fund is now Being Created,' *The Fiery Cross*, 21 September 1923, p. 9.

<sup>74</sup> [No author], 'Abbott Fund Growing Steadily as Klans of the Nation Aid Family of Hero,' *The Imperial Night-Hawk*, 3 October 1923, p. 7.

<sup>75</sup> [No author], 'Have you Helped the Abbott Fund?' *The Imperial Night-Hawk*, 24 October 1923, p. 3.

<sup>76</sup> David Horowitz, *Inside the Klavern*, p. 164.

claimed that a total of \$16,709.99 had been donated.<sup>77</sup> By repeatedly updating readers on the growth of this fund, and emphasising that it was for the widow and children of an American martyr, the Klan press was able to invert an act of violence and demonstrate both the Klan's Christian nature and persecution from hostile forces that would tear American families apart, further demonstrating the Klan's national program of commitment to conventional household values.

As well as multiple articles detailing martyrs, repeated coverage was given to the violent rallies themselves. Here the Klan press used similar tactics in defending the Invisible Empire's role in these clashes, enforcing the notion that the order was peaceable and lawful, and that their opponents were violent and anti-American. Two of the riots that received the widest national coverage exemplify this. In April 1924, Lilly, a Pennsylvanian mining town with a high Eastern European migrant and Catholic population, witnessed a procession of four hundred Klansmen which ended with fatal shots killing three townspeople.<sup>78</sup> The following month, in May 1924, a Klan parade clashed with students at the Catholic University of Notre Dame at South Bend, Indiana, leaving many injured.<sup>79</sup> These two cases bear strong similarities in the response from the KKK press and demonstrate the Klan media's strategy in dealing with reputation damaging events.

Reassigning blame was vital in these instances. In Lilly, both Kenneth Jackson and Eric Davin hold the Klan responsible, as the hooded order had made threats and kidnappings against the town.<sup>80</sup> At Notre Dame, Thomas Pegram likewise perceived the Klan as antagonistic for marching into a Catholic campus in an attempt at provocation.<sup>81</sup> However, the Invisible Empire's press argued otherwise. The *Fiery Cross* claimed they had access to one unnamed witness, who informed

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<sup>77</sup> [No author], 'Abbott Trust Fund,' *The Imperial Night-Hawk*, 12 November 1924, p. 7.

<sup>78</sup> Craig, *The Ku Klux Klan in Western Pennsylvania*, p. 72.

<sup>79</sup> Todd Tucker, *Notre Dame vs the Klan: How the Fighting Irish Defeated the Ku Klux Klan*, (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2004), p. 66.

<sup>80</sup> Kenneth Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 171; Eric Leif Davin, *Crucible of Freedom: Workers' Democracy in the Industrial Heartland, 1914–1960* (Virginia: Lexington Books, 1960), p. 107.

<sup>81</sup> Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American*, p. 83.



them that ‘the first hostility came from the Lilly crowd’ and that ‘the Klansmen marched in an orderly fashion and did not pay to any attention outside their ranks’.<sup>82</sup> The *Night-Hawk* blamed Romanist lawlessness, claiming that ‘the first shot was fired- by a portly Italian’, and the *Forum* echoed this in portraying the Catholic crowd as wild and beyond control, describing them as ‘a frenzied alien mob’.<sup>83</sup> Notre Dame was similar with the *Fiery Cross* republishing an independent article that stated, ‘it appears to have all been the work of Notre Dame students’ whilst the *Night-Hawk* wrote that ‘the Klansmen, as is their custom, refrained from fighting back those who opposed their movements and actions, again proving to world that they are law-abiding citizens, willing and ready to let the law take cause’.<sup>84</sup> Here, the reprinting of supporting non-Klan press articles and using independent witnesses helped in enforcing the Klan’s official line of non-violence and lawful conduct.

Attacks on women and children were also used to garner further sympathy for the Klan, similar to the Klan press coverage of Thomas Abbott and the emphasis on his widow. Regarding Lilly, the *Forum* wrote that ‘even Protestant women, who cheered Klansmen from side lines, are trampled under feet of dirty foreigners’ and this demonstrated that ‘there is no mercy for the womanhood of America’.<sup>85</sup> A later article bore the subheading ‘Mob Attacks Woman and Child Who Cheer Marching Klansmen’.<sup>86</sup> The comparison at Notre Dame is striking, where a woman with a perambulator was attacked and one rioter ‘tore the [American] flag from the carriage and pulled out the little baby. He slapped the baby first on one side of the face, then on the other’.<sup>87</sup> This was coupled with wider instances of rioters ‘trampling U.S. flags and tearing clothes from Protestant women’.<sup>88</sup> Coupling violent attacks on women and children (with sexual connotations

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<sup>82</sup> [No author], ‘Eyewitness Tells of Lilly Riot,’ *The Fiery Cross*, 18 April 1924, p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> [No author], ‘Three Dead and Many Injured on Attack on Pennsylvania Klansmen,’ *The Imperial Night-Hawk*, 9 April 1924, p. 5; [No author], ‘Catholics and Foreigners Start Riot in Lilly,’ *The Fellowship Forum*, 13 April 1924, p. 6.

<sup>84</sup> [No author], ‘Non-Klan Editor Tells of Notre Dame Riot,’ *The Fiery Cross*, 6 June 1924, p. 5.

<sup>85</sup> [No author], ‘Catholics and Foreigners Start Riot in Lilly,’ *The Fellowship Forum*, 13 April 1924, p. 6.

<sup>86</sup> [No author], ‘Proper Exposes Injustice of Lilly Riot Trials,’ *The Fellowship Forum*, 2 August 1924, p. 1.

<sup>87</sup> [No author], ‘Non-Klan Editor Tells of Notre Dame Riot,’ *The Fiery Cross*, June 6, 1924, p. 5.

<sup>88</sup> [No author], ‘Arrogance of Notre Dame Students Gone,’ *The Fiery Cross*, 13 June 1924, p. 1.

towards the former) with immigrants continued the trope of savage foreigners as extremists preying on innocent womanhood, which had been fostered by the Klan from the beginning of Reconstruction when it was feared free-slaves would violate white women.<sup>89</sup> Residing within long standing rhetoric, this would have resonated with many people in the 1920s who had concerns on immigration, and to this audience the Klan might have emerged in a favourable light following these riots. The juxtaposition of orderly Klansmen against frenzied, aggressive foreigners was certainly aimed to demonstrate the calibre of the KKK's membership and, with no sense of irony, the organisation's commitment to opposing extremism. As witnesses, the Klan liberally made accusations against their enemies, and the Invisible Empire here responded by levelling charges against the opposing rioters that were more severe than the charges they themselves were facing, averting blame through the audacity of their defence.

Certainly, the Klan press argued that these instances simply aided rather than diminished the order. Gerard O'Neil has held that the Lilly 'riot was a propaganda coup for the Klan' and the *Forum* treated it as such, writing that 'applications are flooding every Klan in the state' and the state membership drive of 60,000 would be doubled because of the riot.<sup>90</sup> As demonstrated, this was a frequent response of the brotherhood throughout the many instances where the Invisible Empire was implemented, and consistently the KKK's media told their opponents that criticism would only increase their strength.<sup>91</sup> Some writers, however, have been more critical than O'Neil on the long-term effects of the organisation's engagement with violence. Goldberg, for example, has argued that 'the incidents did not merely block the Klan's advance; they played a role in its decline... the string of confrontation associated the Klan with violence and made it easier for enemies of the KKK to attack it'.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Martha Hodes, 'The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South after the Civil War,' *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 3, No. 3, (Jan 1993), p. 403.

<sup>90</sup> O'Neill, *Pittsburgh Irish*, p. 122; [No author], 'Lilly Riot Aided Klan,' *The Fellowship Forum*, 10 March 1924, p. 7.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Goldberg, *Discontented America*, p. 137.

## Conclusion

Overall, these confrontations certainly placed the Klan media in an awkward position; by ignoring the instances altogether, the group was handing their critics a free rein to damage the organisation. By responding to mainstream press coverage, which was generally damning towards the Invisible Empire, the Klan were highlighting just how numerous these instances were and that the Klan had at least some involvement. This was particularly troublesome for cases like Williamson County, where the Klan had taken the law entirely within their own hands.<sup>93</sup> Whilst the KKK's media may have had little impact on amending the hooded order's association with violence, this coverage and use of tactics which involved removing Klan blame, claiming mainstream accounts were no more than Catholic accounts and creating a counter narrative where the Invisible Empire was facing regular persecution, all demonstrate how the Klan press operated as a propaganda system, and how willing this system was to challenge public belief.

The Klan organised media certainly showed a willingness to face accusations levelled against the Invisible Empire head on, even if simply to deny the facts and discount them as conspiracy. The KKK's newspapers gave lengthier responses to those select cases that best suited the organisation's conspiratorial rhetoric and through undermining these cases could imply that all similar reports of Klan initiated violence were equally false. Often these reports were inverted to demonstrate Klan morals; emphasis on the Thomas Abbot fund demonstrated both Klan charitability and the group's victimisation from external forces, enabling these articles to act both as an advertisement for the order and as a means to defend integrity. The mainstream media was unequivocally portrayed as false, dishonest, and anti-American, and through some Klan publications selectively printing letters from readers, the illusion that the public was on the side of the KKK was formulated, created a binary between honest American consensus and the 'fake news' perpetuated by more renowned media publications. This was indicative of the extent that the KKK's press

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<sup>93</sup> Angle, *Bloody Williamson*, p. 33.

organs were forced onto the defensive; leading to the repeated suggestions that it was the Klan, and not minorities that were the victims of unjustified persecution. This was achieved through reporting on the order's innocence in riots, attacks on Klan paper newsboys, and the public shaming of S. Glenn Young, and was enhanced by articles mocking these persecutors, such as columns detailing how attacks on the order were frequently the result of schoolboy pranks, indicative of the weak arguments that the Klan's enemies levelled against them.

Regardless of how much of this propaganda was ever truly believed by the paper's readers, these publications ultimately failed to provide the Klan with a lasting moral legacy. Today, the Ku Klux Klan remains associated with lynching, murder, and racial persecution. Whilst the crimes committed by the Reconstruction Klan and the KKK of the Civil Rights Era add to this overall image of the hooded order, so to must the failures of the 1920s Invisible Empire, which failed to fully come to terms with the all too frequent criminal scandals which hindered its efforts to act as a nationwide force that could influence the political scene across the United States.

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