Violence, the KKK, and the Struggle for Equality

by NEA, CIBC, and CEA

White supremacist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan are not just a thing of the past. The Oklahoma bombing and the shooting by soldiers in Atlanta are just a few of the recent events which alerted the nation to the contemporary existence of groups based on racial hatred. Therefore a curriculum developed in 1981 titled Violence, The Ku Klux Klan and The Struggle for Equality is still very useful today. We have reprinted three lessons from the curriculum which can help students analyze why White supremacist organizations are formed, study their impact on a democratic society, and learn ways that people are countering the activities of these racial hate-groups.

Violence, The Ku Klux Klan and The Struggle for Equality was prepared by the Connecticut Education Association, The Council on Interracial Books for Children, and the National Educational Association. The editors explained that the “material in this handbook has been assembled with the conviction that given the proper combination of factual resource information and positive, thoughtful analysis, classroom teachers at all grade levels can be strong and effective instruments for peacefully and creatively countering the violence of the KKK and its underlying racism and for advancing the positive struggle for equality.”

Guidelines

These lessons are likely to be used in a variety of settings—in all-Black schools, all-White schools, in schools where the students body consists of students from several minority groups, in newly desegregated schools, and in several other situations. This curriculum will also be used in communities in which the Klan is and has been active. It is entirely conceivable that there will be students who have been exposed to pro-Klan sentiments by significant adults in their lives. It is also conceivable that some teachers using this curriculum may find that some of their colleagues espouse pro-Klan sentiments. In addition, there may be some students who themselves have been the victim of Klan violence. These situations may exist singly or in combinations, creating an atmosphere of tension. It is therefore of critical importance that:

• Basic principles which guide the discussion of any controversial issue be observed;
• The teacher treat this curriculum as an integral part of the total classroom experience;
• In the classroom there is respect for the ideas of others and appreciation of differences;
• The total classroom environment reflects the humanistic values and anti-racist attitudes implicit in this curriculum in terms of visual displays, classroom assignments and activity groupings;
• The teacher is familiar with the information and procedures in the lessons.

Procedure

1. Prior to doing these lessons, determine how much students know already and find out what they want to know. In a brainstorm, ask students to list all the names of White supremacist organizations that they can think of. Then ask them to discuss in pairs and share with the group what they know about White supremacist organizations. (If the students are quiet, you can raise some questions such as when and why do they tend to form, who joins them, who benefits

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and who loses from the existence of the groups, etc.) Place their answers in a column on a sheet of chart paper. Then ask them to share questions they have about these groups. Place the questions in a second column. Keep the paper to refer to during the lessons.

2. Explain to students that you are going to bring in some readings and activities that will help them explore their questions and determine whether what they knew already was fact or myth. Tell students that although the lessons focus on the KKK, this is a case study. What they learn about who benefits and who loses from the KKK and how to counter the organization can be applied to other White supremacist organizations.

You may also want to explain why you are introducing these lessons at this time. Ideally this will be part of a larger unit on U.S. history or the institutionalization of racism in this country. Within that context, you could point out that White supremacist organizations have played a role throughout U.S. history and continue to be active today in their opposition to racial equality. They are a force which should be understood in order to be effectively challenged in society today.

Additional Resources

For current information on the Ku Klux Klan and how people are working to oppose it, contact Klanwatch, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, www.splcenter.org

Birth of the Ku Klux Klan

Objectives
- Students will be able to present information about the origins and early activities of the Ku Klux Klan.
- Students will be able to contrast what the Klan practiced with what it preached.
- Students will be able to state in their own words the benefits that Reconstruction offered both Blacks and poor Whites and its potential for building a more just society.
- Students will be able to identify those who benefited from the Klan and those against whose interests the Klan worked.

Time Required
One homework assignment and one to two class periods.

Materials Needed
- Copies for each student of History of the Klan.
- Copies of testimonies selected by teacher for each student who will present testimonies and for hearing officers.

Teacher Preparation
Teacher should be familiar with the History of the Klan as well as all testimonies. Teacher should decide which of the testimonies to use given time restraints of class, being sure to include that of John B. Gordon.

Student Preparation
Have students read History of the Klan and selected testimonies prior to the discussion.

Assignment of Homework
1. Tell the class that the next period will be used to reenact congressional hearings held in the 1870s to investigate Ku Klux Klan violence. (All testimonies are based on information presented at actual congressional hearings or on writings of people at that time. Some of it has been “modernized” and abbreviated to save time.)
2. Ask for or select students to testify and others to serve as hearing officers. Give these students a copy of the testimony they will present or the questions they will ask.
3. If General O.O. Howard’s testimony is to be used, ask the student who will present it to become familiar with the gist of the material, be prepared to outline the scope of violence mentioned, and select a few sections to read.
4. Give all students a copy of Background Information and ask students to read these pages prior to the next class period.

Classroom Procedure
1. Explain that the hearings were designed to investigate Klan violence in order to learn more about what the Klan did and why.
2. Have hearing officers sit in front of the class, receiving testimony from witnesses. Witnesses can appear in any order, but it is suggested that John B. Gordon, the Georgia Klan Leader, appear last, after class has learned of Klan activities from other witnesses.
3. Initiate a class discussion of the testimony. Questions to be asked might include:
   a. What targets does the testimony suggest the Klan chose for attack? (Black voters, Blacks who were farming successfully, teachers and the schools to which Blacks were flocking to learn to read and write, Blacks meeting to discuss politics and other concerns, Whites and Blacks who socialized.)
   b. Why would the Klan seek to terrorize and intimidate these people? Who was threatened by industrious Black farmers, Blacks who could read and write, Blacks who attended political meetings, Blacks who voted? Who was threatened by Whites working with Blacks to build democracy and a better life for all?
   c. How does the Klan’s statement of purpose and testimony by the Klan leader contrast with the rest of the testimony?
   d. What were some of the ways people responded to the Klan’s activities? How would students feel had they been some of the people whose testimony was presented? How would they have reacted?
4. Tell students that such hearings helped bring about the passage of the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, which imposed heavy penalties on those “who shall conspire together, or go in disguise . . . for the purpose . . . of depriving any persons of the equal protection of the laws, or of equal privileges or immunities under the law.” Tell them that in areas where officials strongly enforced the law, Klan violence declined. Ask them why they think groups working against Klan violence today believe it is crucial that local, state and federal officials strongly enforce existing laws in the face of rising Klan violence. *
History of the Klan

Post Civil War

Slavery ended after the Civil War with the ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865. However, the governments of the ex-Confederate states—controlled by the pro-slavery Democratic party which had governed before the war—soon created what were called the Black Codes. Although somewhat different in each state, the Black Codes generally deprived newly freed Blacks of the right to vote, hold office, serve on juries, testify in court against Whites, or assemble without official permission. Central to all the Codes were regulations restricting the freedom of Blacks to work.

The South Carolina Code, for example, required Blacks to have a special license for any job except farmhand or servant, and it required an annual tax of from $10 to $100 for the license. Mississippi’s Code forbade Blacks to rent or lease land. Louisiana’s required all agricultural workers to make contracts with employers during the first ten days of each January. Workers could not leave their employers until the contract expired, and refusal to work was punished by forced labor. The Black Codes thus enabled wealthy Whites who owned big plantations to make Blacks work for little or no pay, thus virtually re-enslaving them.

Reconstruction Era

Some Republicans in Congress were genuinely concerned about the treatment of Blacks and feared that the hard-won gains of the war would be lost. Other Republicans worried that with Blacks now counted as whole persons yet denied the vote, Southern Whites would have increased representation in Congress, enabling the Democratic party to win control. Others deeply resented the South for the bloodshed and destruction of the Civil War. Thus from motives of justice, party-interest and vengeance, Republicans responded decisively to Southern developments.

In 1867, Congress passed the First Reconstruction Act, which invalidated the Black Codes, placed the South under military rule, and mandated elections in which all males over 18—Black and White—could vote (some White men who held public office before secession and then supported the rebellion against the United States were disqualified from voting). These elections were to select delegates to state conventions that would draft new constitutions for each of the former Confederate states. In order to be accepted back into the Union, the newly reorganized states would have to ratify the 14th Amendment, which provided all citizens equal protection under the law. The U.S. Army was to protect the freedpeople from those Whites who wanted to prevent them from exercising their newly gained rights.

Reconstruction lasted ten years. During that time, a coalition of Blacks, poor Whites and some Northern Republicans who had moved South enacted far-reaching political and social reforms in the constitutional conventions and newly elected legislatures of the South. The new state constitutions provided universal male suffrage (a few state constitutions disfranchised some former public officials who supported secession, but the disqualifications were minor and temporary). This gave the vote for the first time to newly freed
Black men, as well as to thousands of poor Whites, who before the Civil War had been deprived of the vote because of property-ownership qualifications. For the first time, Southern states provided free public schools for tens of thousands of poor White children who previously had been denied education. The property rights of women were protected, divorce laws written and imprisonment for debt abolished. Orphanages, asylums for the insane and schools for the blind and deaf people were established.

Blacks were involved in all the state conventions that drafted the new constitutions, and many were elected to the new state legislatures. Contrary to the myth of “Black Rule” promoted by those Whites who opposed the social and political changes, Blacks made up a majority of the representatives in only one state—South Carolina—and then only in one house of the legislature. During Reconstruction, Blacks were elected lieutenant governor in three states and served in various positions—such as secretary of state and state treasurer—in others. Twenty Blacks were elected to the U.S. House of Representatives and two Blacks served in the U.S. Senate.

During Reconstruction, some Blacks and Whites worked together raising food for their families, and some pooled their money and bought land. Most poor Whites, however, had little to do with Blacks. For the most part, poor Whites had hated slavery, seeing it as the cause of their poverty. However, their anger had been directed more toward the Black slaves, whose labor they saw as competition, than at the White slavocracy that dominated and exploited both groups for its own benefit. Oppressive as their lives were, White supremacy had given them the illusion of benefit by telling them that at least they were superior to Blacks. This sense of White superiority and prejudice against Blacks was deeply ingrained.

Most poor Whites were either tenant farmers on large plantations or owned their own small plots of land, usually in the least fertile hill or mountain areas. These were all that remained after the development of large plantations pushed White small farmers out of the most fertile areas. After the war, there was talk of breaking up the massive plantations and dividing them among the roughly four million Blacks and five million poor Whites. Such land reform would no doubt have encouraged large numbers of poor Whites to cooperate more fully with Reconstruction efforts. However, the federal government (which was then giving away millions of acres of land to immigrant homesteaders and to railroad owners) refused to take this decisive step.

With land to farm, the freedpeople—who had been forced to work all their lives without pay—would have had the economic independence necessary to secure their political rights. Some successful farming communities of freedpeople developed in areas where they had access to land. For example, in 1863 the Mississippi plantations of Jefferson Davis and his brother were divided, and 70 freedpeople were given 80 acres each, while a Black regiment protected them from Confederates. This “Davis Bend” program was so successful that by 1865 another 5,000 acres were given to 1,800 Blacks organized into 181 companies. The government supplied equipment and materials, which were paid for when crops were sold. The people opened stores, established a school, set up a government and provided free medical services to all who could not afford a doctor. In 1865 they cleared $160,000 after paying expenses. But such successful ventures were destroyed when the ex-Confederates were pardoned by the federal government and given back the land.

For both Blacks and poor Whites, the Reconstruction era offered hope of significant improvement in their lives. It was a period in which the South—indeed the nation as a whole—came closer to being a truly democratic society than ever before. But the social and political changes were not welcomed by those who wanted to regain their former privileges and power. Their appeal to poor Whites for race solidarity, backed by years of intensive racist indoctrina-
tion and by great social and economic pressure to stay in line, kept most poor Whites aligned with those of similar skin color, rather than with those in a similar economic position. Control of the land and most resources enabled wealthy Whites to pressure many Blacks, who were economically dependent on them, not to exercise their political rights. Yet in spite of this economic and social power, significant numbers of Blacks and many poor Whites continued to struggle to build a more just, free and democratic society. The response was a campaign of terror, violence and intimidation designed to crush these social changes and restore the former elite to power.

**Birth of the Ku Klux Klan**

After the Civil War, there was a great deal of turmoil and devastation in the South. In addition, four million enslaved people were now free. Even before the Black Codes were adopted, a variety of White vigilante and terrorist groups, determined to keep Blacks under White control, had sprung up across the South.

These groups had their genesis in the prewar slave patrols. The ubiquitous slave patrols had been a semi-official force required to police 4 million enslaved people who lost no opportunity to escape from or rebel against the dehumanization and oppression of chattel slavery. In most of the slave states, the patrols played a major role in the system of control, and almost all adult White men, whether or not they were slave owners, were liable for periodic patrol service, generally performed at night, on horseback. The “paterollers,” as an integral part of their duties, bullied, whipped, beat and intimidated Blacks, searched their homes and broke up gatherings.

In late 1865 or early 1866, six veterans of the Confederate Army formed a secret organization in Pulaski, Tennessee. They called it the Ku Klux Klan (the name supposedly derives from the Greek word for circle, kuklos, to which they added klan). While claiming to be a social club, they were soon expressing resentment at the changes taking place in Southern society. The Klan began to fight these changes, attempting to restore the old ways of White supremacy.

In the spring of 1867, delegates from Klans throughout Tennessee gathered at the newest hotel in Nashville. They were businessmen, former Confederate officers and leaders of church and state. They chose Nathan Bedford Forrest to be Grand Wizard. A former slave trader, Forrest had served as a Confederate cavalry officer; his activities included the command of troops attacking Fort Pillow (near Memphis), garrisoned by Black soldiers, in April 1864. The Fort Pillow Massacre epitomized the Confederate practice of executing captured Black soldiers. Wholesale slaughter, accompanied by every sort of atrocity, followed the capture of the Fort. Approximately three hundred soldiers, plus women and children dependent, were brutally murdered.

The Klan was to become a night-riding vigilante organization for White supremacy. Under Forrest’s leadership, it quickly expanded throughout the South. The Klan recruited Whites—particularly poor Whites—by appealing to racial prejudice and beliefs in White superiority. The Klan used violence and terror to intimidate Blacks and those Whites who were working to build democracy. The old ruling elite of the South supported the growth of the Klan, seeing an opportunity to regain its political power and keep Black labor (and ultimately that of poor Whites) under its control.

**Terrorist Activities**

Klansmen dressed themselves in white or black robes and wore masks and hoods. By hiding their identity, the masks made it psychologically easier for members to commit atrocities and lessened their chance of getting caught. Victims were sometimes lynched by a mob that dragged them from their beds at night, hung them from trees, beat them and then lit fires under them while they were still alive. Women were raped and children were often beaten or killed. Black homes, churches and schools were burned.

Klan terror was particularly directed at Blacks who had become successful leaders, public officials, teachers and farmers—individuals whose achievement and work clearly undermined the concept of Black inferiority and threatened White supremacy. The Klan assassinated the most competent and daring Black leaders and terrorized and drove out teachers who were helping Black people fulfill their great desire for education. The Klan sought to beat down Blacks who stood up for their rights, to prevent Blacks from gathering to discuss concerns and to keep Black labor under White control. From 1866 to 1875, the Klan killed an estimated 3,500 Blacks in the South and whipped, beat, tarred and feathered many thousands more. Many Whites who were friendly or worked with Blacks, or who supported the Republican party, received the same treatment.

Klan terror was especially great before elections. The Klan used assassination, beatings and intimidation to terrorize Blacks, Republicans and sympathetic poor Whites and keep them from voting, thus enabling the Democratic party to regain control in state after state. North Carolina provides an example of the type
of Klan activities that destroyed democracy across the South. As a result of a campaign of terror, 12,000 fewer Republicans voted in 1870 than in previous elections, and Democrats regained control of the legislature. One writer described events in North Carolina as follows:

District attorneys, jury commissioners, sheriffs many judges, and leading citizens of the community were members or supporters of the Klan. It was a secret, highly organized well-disciplined underground army. And it was determined to take control of the state out of the hands of Blacks, poor Whites, and Republicans.

The 1870 election was the Klan’s target. On the night of February 26 they rode into Alamance and hanged Wyatt Outlaw, leader of a local campaign to get a church and a school for the Black community. They hanged him from an oak tree less than one hundred feet from [the] courthouse.

In Caswell County, the other Republican stronghold, the head of the party was a poor White man named John Stephens. Five men, all wealthy and educated, trapped him, strangled him, stabbed him, and threw his body on a woodpile.

The terror spread throughout the state during 1870... By election day the work of the Klan had been done. Thousands of Republicans stayed away from the polls. The Democrats won the election and took control of the state legislature. One of the first laws they passed granted amnesty to anyone who had committed a crime on behalf of a secret White organization.

Far too few federal troops were stationed in the South to protect the exercise of democratic rights, and Blacks, poor Whites and Republicans became the easy targets of a violent counterrevolution of terror and assassination carried out by White men determined to regain power. Appeals to Washington from state officials and desperate citizens for additional troops were repeatedly turned down. Blacks had few guns to begin with, since they had been forbidden weapons during slavery and most were too poor to purchase them after the war. Sometimes those who did have guns were stripped of them by White sheriffs who either sympathized or belonged to the Klan. Nonetheless, Blacks attempted to resist the return of White supremacy and to defend themselves in whatever ways possible. (Reports about the removal of federal troops from South Carolina, for example, mention Black women carrying axes or hatchets hanging at their sides half-concealed by their aprons and dresses.)

Finally, Washington took some action against the White terrorists. After congressional hearings exposed the severity of Klan violence, Congress passed a series of laws making it a federal crime for individuals to deprive other citizens of their constitutional rights. The Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871 imposed heavy penalties on persons “who shall conspire together, or go in disguise...for the purpose...of depriving any persons of the equal protection under the law.” In areas where the federal government acted, there was a sharp decline in terror. Where no determined force was brought to bear, the terror rapidly spread.

Some Republican officials attempted to prosecute Klansmen in federal court. There were many arrests, but relatively few convictions. Witnesses, juries, judges and sheriffs were all too often members or sympathizers of the Klan. However, by 1873 the Klan began to decline. In part this was due to federal action. In part it was because the need for the Klan diminished once its violence and terror succeeded, enabling White supremacists (sometimes called Redeemers) to regain control of state governments, courts and police. In states like Mississippi, where Republican rule outlived the Klan, mobs of armed, unmasked White men replaced the Klan, openly terrorizing and killing Blacks and reform-minded Whites and preventing free elections. *
Testimonies Leading to the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871

Testimony by General O. O. Howard
Head of the Freedmen’s Bureau

From the numerous cases of murder and outrage perpetrated upon Negroes and those who befriended them during the days of reconstruction, which were reported to my officers…it is now clear that the main object from first to last was somehow to regain and maintain over the Negro that ascendancy which slavery gave, and which was being lost by emancipation, education and suffrage.

The opposition to negro education made itself felt everywhere…In 1865, 1866 and 1867 mobs of the baser classes at intervals and in all parts of the South occasionally burned school buildings and churches used as schools, flogged teachers or drove them away and in a number of instances murdered them…

Our work of establishing schools went steadily on. Early in 1868, however, was the first appearance in my Bureau school reports of an offensive secret organization. It was from Charlestown, W.Va. Our workers received a note from the “Ku-Klux Klan.” Not a White family there after that could be found willing to board the excellent lady teachers. At Frostburg a male teacher was threatened with violence, the Klan having sent him notes, ordering him to depart. Loyal West Virginians, however, stood by him and he did not go. In Maryland, also, one teacher was warned and forced to leave. The Klan signed their rough document which was placed in his hand, “Ku-Klux Klan.” The face of the envelope was covered with scrawls; among these were the words: “Death! Death!” By a similar method a teacher at Hawkinsville, Ga. (a colored man), was dealt with by menace and afterwards seriously wounded. The Georgia superintendent wrote that for the last three months, April, May, and June, 1868, there had been more bitterness exhibited toward all men engaged in the work of education than ever before; and there were few but had received threats, both anonymous and open. Several freedmen had abandoned their fields from fear.

The cry from Alabama was even more alarming…schoolhouses were burned, and those left standing were in danger; teachers were hated and maltreated, two being driven from their work…

But Louisiana exceeded [Alabama’s violence]; Miss Jordan’s school at Gretna was entered by ruffians; the walls of her room were covered with obscene pictures and language, and threats against the teacher posted; she was insulted on the ferry and in the streets, and even annoyed in such a small way as to be required to pay twice as much ferriage as the teachers in the
White schools. In Markville, the Ku-Klux Klan made more open demonstrations, but always by night. They posted their documents around the town, so terrifying the colored people that they did not dare leave their homes after dark. That night schools had to be closed. At Mary and Sabine parish; at Cherryville and Rapides parish; at Washington and Opelousas; at St. Landry parish, and elsewhere in a similar way by visitations and threats the schools were shut up and the teachers driven off…

Mrs. Baldwin, the teacher at Bowling Green, Ky., was a Christian lady of agreeable manners and unusual culture, but not one of the 27 loyal families of the place dared incur the odium of giving her a home. The Regulators had made themselves felt; men, professing to be gentlemen, insulted her upon the streets. Vile books and pictures were sent to her by mail; and, as a last resort, she was threatened with assassination if she was found in the city at the expiration of five days. Many other schools had to be maintained under military guard; five school buildings in Kentucky were burned about that time…

It became evident…that in the early summer of 1868, the former irregular and local hostility to freedmen’s schools had taken on a new strength… Further examples will illustrate the procedure: On May 16th, L.S. Frost, a White teacher in Tennessee, was taken at night from his room by a mob of disguised young men and carried to a field nearby, men choking and beating him all the way; they were flourishing their pistols over his head, and threatening to kill him instantly if he did not cease resisting. They made him promise to leave town the next morning. They then blackened his face and portions of his body with a composition of spirits of turpentine, lampblack and tar, and released him. About a dozen persons were engaged in the outrage, some of whom were recognized by Mr. Frost.

John Dunlap, a teacher educated in Ohio, was in July, 1868, in charge of a colored school at Shelbyville, Tenn. On Independence Day, about ten o’clock at night, a body of Ku-Klux, some fifty strong, masked, armed with pistols and bearing an emblem resembling the bleeding heart of a man, were paraded in front of his house. When he presented himself, they gave him commands which he resisted. They fired through his window, made him surrender his pistol, caused him to mount, and escorted him to the public square. Then they seized and secured a prominent colored man, James Franklin. Proceeding with the regularity of soldiers, a captain commanding, they marched their victims across the Duck River, where, dismounting, with something like a leathern thong or strap they first flogged Franklin, each man giving him five blows. After that, taking Dunlap to another place, with the same parade, they performed the same operation, badly lacerating his body. After directing him to leave the city the next day, they released him. Dunlap not at once complying with their demand, they served upon him a formal notice, sent in the form of an unstamped letter through the post office, ordering him to leave by July 15th, or he would be burned to death. Dunlap thereupon went to Nashville and remained two months. Then he came back. He was visited again after his return, but was now prepared with a guard. While the Ku-Klux were hallooing that they “wanted Dunlap and fried meat” and were approaching his residence, the guard fired upon them. The band retreated and did not appear in Shelbyville again…

The outcropping of cruelties in portions of Louisiana showed by the persons who were chosen as victims that the effort of the secret organization was particularly political.

On July 28, 1868, William Cooper, a White Unionist, came to our agent in the parish of Franklin. He was severely wounded, having been shot in his own house near Girard Station; a freedman named Prince was killed in the same parish, and all the teachers were so terrified by such demonstrations as to stop teaching…

At many points in Louisiana were these “bands of desperados formed in secret organization, styling themselves the Ku-Klux Klan.” …In some places negroes were taken out and whipped (as a rule by night) and there was no clue to the perpetrators. Even United States agents dared not hold a public meeting in that region—a gathering night of negroes at any place would be regarded with suspicion by the Whites and result in outrage and suffering to the Blacks…

The latter part of the year 1868, before the election of General Grant for his first term, these murderous secret societies reached their greatest activity. Even the country hamlets in the neighborhood of Chattanooga, which after the war abounded in Union men and late Union soldiers, were boldly visited by this strange horde. They came upon one commodious schoolhouse in the country and burned it to the ground; but the persistent teacher, a colored youth, though threatened by the Ku-Klux Klan with violence and death if he did not yield to their commands, made himself a brush arbor and there continued his school to the end of the term. Before the November election (the freedmen’s first national suffrage) the Ku-Klux, armed and masked as usual, at night paraded the streets of several cities, and filled the freedmen with terror…
After the election, for a time, the excessive wrath abated... The two months of 1868 that followed the Presidential election and the first six in the next year, 1869, were quite free from the Ku-Klux Klan raids.

During the last half of 1869, however, there was a quickening of the secret pulse... From Kentucky, a teacher who had a remarkably good school about ten miles from Bowling Green wrote: “the Ku Klux Klan came one night and told me if I did not break up my school they would kill me.” The teacher obeyed. He reported that the White people said that this action by the Ku-Klux was...because “the niggers there were getting too smart.”

North Carolina, that had made such good progress in every way under our systematic work, began in some of its counties to be infested during the latter half of 1869. “There was for a time a suspension of schools in a number of districts.” ...Teachers became frightened, and, under the threats of violence printed on placards and put upon doors and fence posts, it was deemed best to obey the dread-inspiring foes that, many or few, were magnified by excited imaginations into multitudes. The marauders went in bands, always masked, usually in small squads, each squad having from five to ten in number...

South Carolina showed some eruptions of the same nature as late as December 24, 1869. A gentleman of good standing was building a large school structure at Newberry, SC, for the education of the children of the freed people. He was visited by armed men and driven from the hotel where he was boarding, and a young lady teacher at the same place, sent by the Methodists from Vermont, was subjected to the meanest sort of insults and persecutions.

Testimony by Charlotte Fowler
Spartanburg, S.C., July 6, 1871

Congressional Officer: I believe all the witnesses have been sworn in. I now call on Mrs. Clarlotte Fowler. Step up. When was your husband, Wallace Fowler, killed?
Charlotte Fowler: It was the first of May.
CO: Tell us what happened.
CF: I was sick, very sick in bed with a fever, all day Wednesday and Thursday. My husband came home Thursday night from the field and he cooked for me and for our granddaughter Sophia, who was staying with us. After he went to bed I heard the dogs barking, then people banging on the door.
CO: Who was it

CF: Well, my husband opened the door and they shot him, with the little girl standing right there. I just saw two of them, but I heard more riding away.
CO: What happened then?
CF: I was screaming and my granddaughter was crying. The men made Sophia light a stick in the fire so they could hold it up and see better. The man who shot my husband had a black mask with horns on it. He took the lighted stick and held it over my old man. The other man came over and dropped a chip of fire on my husband, and burnt his chest right through the shirt.
CO: Was he dead then?
CF: No. He was shot through the head, and every time he breathed, his brains would come out. But he didn’t die until the next day, in the afternoon.
CO: Did the old man, your husband, belong to any party?
CF: Yes, sir. The Radical Republicans, ever since they started the voting for colored people. My husband worked for that party.

Testimony by William Coleman
Macon, Mississippi, Nov. 6, 1871

Congressional Officer: How long have you lived in Macon?
William Coleman: I came here about the last of April.
CO: Where did you come from?
WC: I came from Winston County.
CO: What occasioned your coming here?
WC: I got run by the Ku-Klux.
CO: Give the particulars to the committee.
WC: Well, I don’t know anything that I had said or done that injured any one, further than being a radical in that part of the land, and as for interrupting any one, I didn’t, for I had plenty on my own of anything I wanted for myself. I had done bought my land and paid for it, and I had a great deal of hogs; I had eighteen head of hogs to kill this fall. I had twelve head of sheep, and one good milk-cow, and a yearling, and the cow had a right young calf again, and I had my mule and my filly, and all of it was paid for but my mule…
CO: Did the Ku-Klux come to your house?
WC: They did.
CO: In the night-time?
WC: They came about a half hour or more before day… they were shooting and going on at me through the house, and when they busted the door open, coming in shooting, I was frightened… I grabbed my ax-handle and commence fighting, and then they just took me and cut me with knives. They surrounded me on the floor…some had me by the legs and some by the arms and the neck… They took me out to the big road before my gate and whipped me until I couldn’t move or holler or do nothing… They left me there for dead and what it was done for was because I was a radical, and I didn’t deny my profession anywhere and I never will. I never will vote that conservative ticket if I die.
CO: Did they tell you they whipped you because you were radical?
WC: They told me. “God damn you, when you meet a White man in the road lift your hat; I’ll learn you. God damn you, that you are a nigger, and not to be going about like you thought yourself a White man; you calls yourself like a White man. God damn you.”
CO: Were you working on your own land?
WC: Yes, sir; that I bought and paid $473 for.

Testimony by Hannah Tutson
Jacksonville, Florida, Nov. 10, 1871

Congressional Officer: You are the wife of Samuel Tutson. Were you at home when he was whipped last spring?
Hannah Tutson: I was. Five men pushed the door in. George McRae and Cabell Winn were first to take
hold of me. Winn said to the others, “Come in, True-Klux.” I screamed and they choked me and grabbed my littlest child by the foot, they pulled him away from me and threw him against the wall. Then lots of them dragged me outside. I saw they had more men pulling my husband and stomping on him.

**CO:** What did the True-Klux do?

**HT:** They hit my head with their pistols, tied me to a tree, pulled up all my clothes and said, “God damn you. We will show you. You are living on another man’s land.” I said, “No. I gave $150 for this land and Captain told me to stay here.”

**CO:** What did they say?

**HT:** They cursed me and beat me. Then they went away except McRae, who stayed and treated me terribly; he called, “Come here, True-Klux.” then five men came back and beat me some more. But I still wanted to save our land.

**CO:** Did you know those men?

**HT:** I’ve been working in Winn’s mother’s house for three years. Even though they all painted their faces and hands so they wouldn’t be recognized, I know Winn’s voice and I know lots of those men folks. I recognized most of them.

**CO:** Did you find your children?

**HT:** Well when they finished whipping me and went away I was bleeding from my neck to my feet. The house was broken up and I couldn’t see my husband or children. I took a dress but it hurt too much to put it on, so I carried it and walked 12 miles before sunrise to show Mr. Ashley how they whipped me. He told me to find my children and go out of town. Then I went back and at noon I found my children hiding. The baby they hurt was crying.

**CO:** What happened to the baby and your husband?

**HT:** The baby’s hip hurt and it screamed whenever it tried to stand up. I found my husband later, whipped worse than me. He could not sit or walk.

**CO:** How long had you been living on that land you bought?

**HT:** This would have been the third crop, sir, almost three years. They had been after us for a long time, telling us to get out. They they came and whipped us out.

**Testimony by John B. Gordon**

**Georgia Klan Leader, 1871**

**PREFACE BY THE CONGRESSIONAL OFFICER:**

In 1868, the Ku Klux Klan adopted a formal statement of character and purpose. It said that the Klan “is an institution of Chivalry, Humanity, Mercy and Patriotism; embodying in its genius and its principles all that is chivalric in conduct, noble in sentiment, generous in manhood, and patriotic in purpose.” Its objects were said to be “to protect the weak, the innocent, and the defenseless, from the indignities, wrongs, and outrages of the lawless,
the violent, and the brutal”: to relieve and assist the injured, oppressed, suffering and unfortunate, especially widows and orphans of Confederate soldiers; and to support the United States Constitution and constitutional laws. All Klansmen were sworn to secrecy…

Congressional Officer: What do you know of any combinations in Georgia, known as Ku-Klux, or by any other name, who have been violating the law?

John B. Gordon: I do not know anything about any Ku-Klux organization… I have never heard of anything of that sort except in the papers… but I do know that an organization did exist in Georgia at one time in 1868…I was approached and asked to attach myself to a secret organization… by some of the very best citizens of the State—some of the most peaceable, law-abiding men, men of property, who had large interests in the State…

CO: Tell us about what that organization was.

JBG: The organization was simply…a brotherhood of the property-holders, the peaceable, law-abiding citizens of the State, for self-protection. The instinct of self-protection prompted that organization; the sense of insecurity and danger, particularly in those neighborhoods where the negro population largely predominated. The reasons which led to this organization were three or four. The first and main reason was the organization of the Union League [established by the Republican party to organize Black voters] which we knew nothing more than this: that the negroes would desert the plantations, and go off at night in large numbers; and on being asked they had been, would reply, sometimes, “We have been to the muster”; sometimes, “We have been to the lodge”; sometimes, “We have been to the meeting.” …We knew that the “carpet-baggers,” … these men came from a distance and had no interest at all with us… We knew of certain instances where great crime had been committed; where overseers had been driven from plantations, and the negroes had asserted their right to hold the property for their own benefit. Apprehension took possession of the entire public mind of the State. Men were in many instances afraid to go away from their homes and leave their wives and children, for fear of outrage… There was this general organization of the black race on the one hand and an entire organization of the black race on the other hand. We were afraid to have a public organization; because we supposed it could be construed at once, by authorities in Washington, as an organization antagonistic to the Government of the United States.

CO: Did it have any antagonism toward either the State or the Federal Government?

JBG: None on earth—not a particle. On the contrary, it was purely a peace police organization, and I do know of some instances where it did prevent bloodshed on a large scale…

CO: You had no riding about at nights?

JBG: None on earth. I have no doubt that such things have occurred in Georgia… There is not a good man in Georgia who does not deplore that thing just as much as any radical deplores it. When I use the term “radical,” I do not mean to reflect upon the republican party generally; but in our State a republican is a very different sort of man from a republican generally in the Northern States. In our State republicanism means nothing in the world but creating disturbance, riot, and animosity, and filching and plundering. That is what it means in our State—nothing else… I do not believe that any crime has ever been committed by [the Klan]… I believe it was purely a peace police—a law-abiding concern. That was its whole object, and it never would have existed but for the apprehension in the minds of our people of a conflict in which we would have had no sympathy and no protection. We apprehended that the sympathy of the entire Government would be against us; and nothing in the world but the instinct of self-protection promoted that organization. We felt that we must at any cost protect ourselves, our homes, our wives and children from outrage. We would have preferred death rather than to have submitted to what we supposed was coming upon us…

Why I Quit the Klan

“Why I Quit the Klan” by C. P. Ellis is a fascinating and moving account of C. P. Ellis’s transformation from a Ku Klux Klan member to a civil rights advocate and union leader. This reading shows clearly that given the right experiences, not just arguments, people can change deeply rooted attitudes.

Objectives

- Students will be able to state some of the conditions that make Klan membership attractive to some people, and some of the strategies that the Klan uses to maintain its membership.

- Students will understand how racism divides potential allies.

- Students will understand that racist beliefs can be changed.

Time Required

One or two homework assignments and one class period.

Materials Needed

A copy for each student of “Why I Quit the Klan,” an interview with C. P. Ellis by Studs Terkel.

Teacher Preparation

Read C.P. Ellis interview and consider a time in your own life when you have made a change to share as an example with students as an additional prompt for their own sharing and writing.

Assignment Procedure

Give all students a copy of the Ellis interview and ask that they read it before class the next day. Tell them that Ellis was a member of the Klan, serving for a time


This lesson is from the CIBC/CEA/NEA curriculum. Text and questions have been added from a lesson based on the same reading by C. P. Ellis in Power in Our Hands: A Curriculum on the History of Work and Workers in the United States by Bill Bigelow and Norm Diamond (Monthly Review, 1988).
as Exalted Cyclops (president) of the Durham, North Carolina chapter.

**Classroom Procedure**

1. Initiate a class discussion of the article, giving students an opportunity to share reactions and feelings. Some discussion questions to consider include:
   a. What were some conditions in C.P. Ellis’ life that made him receptive to the racist explanations of the Klan and willing to join?
   b. What did the Klan offer Ellis? Are there other ways to meet these needs that would unite people rather than divide them?
   c. What does Ellis tell us about the background of many Klan members?
   d. Whom does Ellis believe that the Klan benefited? How did those people “behind the scenes” benefit?
   e. Why do you think Ellis’s father—a Klansman—and many other Klan members are working to keep White and Black people from organizing into unions?
   f. What did Ellis think of Blacks, Jews and Catholics?
   g. What caused him to change his views? How did his views change? Which way of thinking was of most benefit to him and why?
   h. While Ellis came to understand that he was being used by people in high places, other Klan members refused to believe this. Why do you think this was the case? Was Ellis simply “smarter,” or could there be other reasons Klan members would resist seeing how they were being used?

2. At this point ask students to write before they share their comments. Point out that some of Ellis’s old White friends accused him of “selling out the White race.” Ask students to imagine that they are Ellis writing a response to some of his old friends. Explain why you have made the changes that you did. Appeal to your old friends to change too, but in a way that addresses their concerns rather than ignoring them. Give students a few minutes to write and then ask a few to share their letters.

3. Ellis changed his attitudes in ways that, earlier, he would not have thought possible. To put students in touch with their own potential to make dramatic changes, ask class members to think of times in their lives when they changed in ways that they would never have anticipated. Ask them to list a number of instances and then have volunteers share from their lists. From these lists, students should write in story form an account of a particular change. (This can be done in class or as a homework assignment.)

**Optional Follow-Up Activity**

Have students read “Let America Be America Again” by Langston Hughes (available in many anthologies). Point out to students that the poem was written many years ago and that the poet used the term “man” in the generic sense to mean all people, female and male. Possible questions for discussion include:

a. C.P. Ellis believes “there’s a tremendous possibility in this country to stop wars, the battles, the struggles, the fights between people… I don’t think it’s an impossible dream.” Compare the dream that Ellis writes about to the one referred to by Langston Hughes below.

   O, let America be America again—
   The land that never has been yet—
   And yet must be—
   the land where every man is free.

b. What lessons did C.P. Ellis learn that support the poet’s phrase, “I am the poor White, fooled and pushed apart?”

c. Which items in the poem represent the principles and creed that make up the dream of the United States?

d. What groups does the poem indicate have been denied realization of the dream?

e. The Ku Klux Klan cloaks itself in patriotism. In what ways might the poet’s phrase “false patriotic wreath” apply to the Klan’s brand of patriotism?

*
C. P. Ellis: Why I Quit the Klan

C. P. Ellis was born in 1927 and was 53 years old at the time of this interview with Studs Terkel. At one time he was president (Exalted Cyclops) of the Durham chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, and lived in Durham, North Carolina.

All my life, I had work, never a day without work, worked all the overtime I could get and still could not survive financially. I began to see there’s something wrong with this country. I worked my butt off and just never seemed to break even. I had some real great ideas about this nation. They say to abide by the law, go to church, do right and live for the Lord, and everything’ll work out. But it didn’t work out. It just kept getting worse and worse…

Tryin to come out of that hole, I just couldn’t do it. I really began to get bitter. I didn’t know who to blame. I tried to find somebody. Hatin America is hard to do because you can’t see it to hate it. You gotta have somethin to look at to hate. The natural person for me to hate would be Black people, because my father before me was a member of the Klan…

So I began to admire the Klan… To be part of somethin… The first night I went with the fellas…I was led into a large meeting room, and this was the time of my life! It was thrilling. Here’s a guy who’s worked all his life and struggled all his life to be something, and here’s the moment to be something. I will never forget it. Four robed Klansmen led me into the hall. The lights were dim and the only thing you could see was an illuminated cross… After I had taken my oath, there was loud applause goin throughout the buildin, musta been at least four hundred people. For this one little ol person. It was a thrilling moment for C.P. Ellis…

The majority of [the Klansmen] are low-income Whites, people who really don’t have a part in somethin. They have been shut out as well as Blacks. Some are not very well educated either. Just like myself. We had a lot of support from doctors and lawyers and police officers.

Maybe they’ve had bitter experiences in this life and they had to hate somebody. So the natural person to hate would be the Black person. He’s beginnin to come up, he’s beginnin to…start votin and run for political office. Here are White people who are supposed to be superior to them, and we’re shut out… Shut out. Deep down inside, we want to be part of this great society. Nobody listens, so we join these groups…

We would go to the city council meetings and the Blacks would be there and we’d be there. It was a confrontation every time… We began to make some inroads with the city councilmen and county commissioners. They began to call us friend. Call us at night on the telephone: “C.P., glad you came to that meeting last night.” They didn’t want integration either, but they did it secretively, in order to get elected. They couldn’t stand up openly and say it, but they were glad somebody was sayin it. We visited some of the city leaders in their homes and talked to em privately. It wasn’t long before councilmen would call me up: “The Blacks are comin up tonight and makin outrageous demands. How about some of you people showin up and have a little balance?”…

We’d load up our cars and we’d fill up half the council chambers, and the Blacks the other half. During these times, I carried weapons to the meetings, outside my belt. We’d go there armed. We would wind up just hollerin and fussin at each other. What happened? As a result of our fightin one another, the city council still had their way. They didn’t want to give up control to the Blacks nor the Klan. They were usin us. I began to realize this later down the road. One day I was walkin downtown and a certain city council member saw me comin. I expected him to shake my hand because he was talkin to me at night on the telephone. I had been in his home and visited with him. He crossed the street [to avoid me]… I began to think, somethin’s wrong here. Most of em are merchants or maybe an attorney, an insurance agent, people like that. As long as they kept low-income Whites and low-income Blacks fightin, they’re gonna maintain control. I began to get that feelin after I was ignored in public. I thought: …you’re not gonna use me any more. That’s when I began to do some real serious thinkin.

The same thing is happening in this country today. People are being used by those in control, those who have all the wealth. I’m not espousing communism. We got the greatest system of government in the world. But those who have it simply don’t want those who don’t have it to have any part of it. Black and White. When it comes to money, the green, the other colors make no difference.

I spent a lot of sleepless nights. I still didn’t like Blacks. I didn’t want to associate with them. Blacks,
One day, Ann and I went back to the school and we sat down. We began to talk and just reflect… I begin to see, here we are, two people from the far ends of the fence, havin identical problems, except hers beiin Black and me beiin White… The amazing thing about it, her and I, up to that point, has cussed each other, bawled each other, we hated each other. Up to that point, we didn’t know each other. We didn’t know we had things in common…

The whole world was openin up, and I was learning new truths that I had never learned before. I was beginning to look at a Black person, shake hands with him, and see him as a human beiin. I hadn’t got rid of all this stuff. I’ve still got a little bit of it. But somethin was happenin to me…

I come to work one morning and some guys says: “We need a union.” At this time I wasn’t pro-union. My daddy was antilabor too. We’re not gettin paid much, we’re havin to work seven days in a row. We’re all starvin to death… I didn’t know nothin about organizin unions, but I knew how to organize people, stir people up. That’s how I got to be business agent for the union.

When I began to organize, I began to see far deeper. I begin to see people again beiin used. Blacks against Whites… There are two things management wants to keep: all the money and all the say-so. They don’t want none of these poor workin folks to have none of that. I begin to see management fightin me with everythin they had. Hire antiunion law firms, badmouth unions. The people were makin $1.95 an hour, barely able to get through weekends…

It makes you feel good to go into a plant and…see Black people and White people join hands and defeat the racist issues [union-busters] use against people…

I tell people there’s a tremendous possibility in this country to stop wars, the battles, the struggles, the fights between people. People say: “That’s an impossible dream. You sound like Martin Luther King.” An ex-Klansman who sounds like Martin Luther King. I don’t think it’s an impossible dream. It’s happened in my life. It’s happened in other people’s lives in America…

When the news came over the radio that Martin Luther King was assassinated, I got on the telephone and begin to call other Klansmen… We just had a real party…really rejoicin cause the son of a bitch was dead. Our troubles are over with. They say the older you get, the harder it is for you to change. That’s not necessarily true. Since I changed, I’ve set down and listened to tapes of Martin Luther King. I listen to it and tears come to my eyes cause I know what he’s sayin now. I know what’s happenin.