

Forgotten history: The Klan vs. Americans of Hellenic heritage in an Era of Hate

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It was 1922. Americans of Hellenic heritage were suffering personal and economic intimidation orchestrated by the revived Ku Klux Klan. It was time for them to unify and organize, to protect and defend life and livelihood.

The widespread and often violent discrimination against immigrants from Greece is an almost forgotten page of American history. This is probably because of their subsequent success and the great accomplishments of their descendants. Very few persons today, Hellenic or not, are even vaguely aware of the massive continental strength of the Klan of the 1920s and its intensive persecution of foreign-born Greeks, including those who had chosen to become American citizens. They do not know how deeply the evil shadows of bigotry, hatred and intolerance cast their malignant darkness over North America. Perhaps it is time to remind them. The newly-reorganized KKK rampaged against frightened immigrants and helpless minorities throughout the United States. It dominated politics in states in both the North and South. In Canada, its dangerous wicked ways were transplanted and flourished, especially in the western provinces.

An estimated three million militant hooded Klansmen stalked across our continent, burning crosses and spawning terror.

During its reign of power, the Klan elected 16 U.S. Senators, 11 Governors and an undetermined large number of Congressmen, both Republican and Democrat. It reportedly exerted considerable influence in the White House.

Klan organizations ruled local politics in the major cities of Dallas, Denver, Indianapolis and Portland, Oregon, as well as in such smaller communities as Anaheim, California; El Paso, Texas; Youngstown, Ohio and Portland, Maine.

In 1922, California and Oregon voters elected Klan-endorsed gubernatorial candidates. Then in 1924, a Klan candidate won the governorship in Kansas. The same year, the Klan endorsed U.S. Senate winners in Alabama, Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Oklahoma and Texas. It also won the gubernatorial contests in five of these six states, barely losing in Texas.

At U.S. election polls, Klansmen passed out cards which crudely and defiantly declared:

When cotton grows on the fig tree
And alfalfa hangs on the rose
When the aliens run the United States
And the Jews grow a straight nose
When the Pope is praised by everyone
In the land of Uncle Sam
And a Greek is elected President
THEN - the Ku Klux won't be worth a dam.

Meanwhile, embattled but visionary Greek immigrant leaders met on July 26, 1922, in Atlanta to form the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association, now better known as the Order of Ahepa. Not by coincidence, Atlanta was the home of the national Imperial Headquarters of the Klan.

The most important goal of the Ahepa founders was to quickly and solidly establish better relations with non-Greeks. They agreed to do this by taking the positive high road of reason, emphasizing assimilation, cooperation, persuasion and, unlike their masked foes, non-violence. Their main discussion was how to best contain the wave of hostility which had almost drowned them. The ominous specters of twisted Americanism and KKK aggression spurred them to create a patriotic fraternal order espousing undivided loyalty to the United States, American citizenship, proficiency in English, active participation in the civic mainstream, economic stability, social unity and the pursuit of education. The latter was considered vital for its obvious gifts of knowledge and as the essential key to upward mobility.

The Ahepa founders were profoundly disturbed and alarmed by their bitter experiences with Klan prejudice and by reports of worse bigotry elsewhere. Even before the Klan reappeared, there had been great senseless attacks on foreign-born Greeks, some fatal. However, the new Klan expertly and abrasively honed intolerance with brutal efficiency to silence and subdue all of its alleged inferiors.

Many Greek-owned confectionaries and restaurants failed financially or were sold at sacrificial prices to non-Greeks because of boycotts instigated by the Klan. Greek establishments doing as much as \$500 to \$1,000 a day business, especially in the South and Midwest, dropped to as little as \$25 a day. The only recourse was to sell or close. The Klan often bolstered its boycotts by openly threatening or attacking customers entering and leaving. A Klan Imperial Lecturer told Klansmen in Spokane that Mexicans and Greeks should be sent back to where they came from so that white supremacy and the purity of Americans be preserved. Meanwhile, in Palatka, Florida, a Greek immigrant was flogged for dating a "white" woman.

The Royal Riders of the Red Robe was a Klan affiliate assembled "as a real patriotic organization" for approved naturalized citizens unluckily born outside the United States. However, in the ultimate snub of exclusion, immigrants from Greece, Italy and the Balkans were not eligible to join. In Indiana, the state most politically controlled by the 1920s Klan, burning crosses were ignited in the yards of outspoken Hellenes. Unprovoked beatings of Greeks were not reported to police lest another beating soon follow. Others were warned of dire consequences if they talked in Greek in public, even in their own business establishments.

Hoosier Democrat and Republican leaders actively discouraged naturalized Hellenes from filing for public office, forcing them to run as Socialist Party candidates. Fearful Greek Orthodox Christians indefinitely postponed impending plans to organize parishes. To avoid constant confrontation, long and difficult to pronounce first and last names of Greek origin were shortened or changed to more acceptable Americanized versions. False rumors spread by the Klan about supposed unsolved murders of Greeks in other NN I by states produced the desired dread.

The Klan Grand Dragon of Oregon said in a spirited speech in Atlanta: "The Klan in the western states has a great mission to perform. The rapid growth of the Japanese population and the great influx of foreign laborers, mostly Greeks, is threatening our American institutions,! and Klans in Washington, Oregon and Idaho are actively at work to combat these foreign and un-American influences."

Probably the most blatant hard-line bullying, almost humorous, occurred in Pensacola, Florida. A Klansman handed a note to a Greek restaurateur which read: "You are an undesirable citizen. You violate the Federal Prohibition Laws and laws of decency and are a running sore on society. Several trains are leaving Pensacola daily. Take your choice, but do not take too much time. Sincerely in earnest, KKK"

Today, according to sociologist Charles C. Moskos, Jr. of Northwestern University, American Hellenes proudly rank first among all ethnic groups in individual educational attainment and second in individual wealth. They have succeeded in every facet of American life. The Order of Ahepa has played the prime historic role in the ascent.

True to its original mission, Ahepa financially supports scholarships, educational chairs, housing for the elderly, medical research, community programs, charitable projects and other worthy endeavors through contributions of more than two million dollars a year from its chapter, district and national levels. Ahepa validated its patriotic roots during World War 11 by selling over five hundred million dollars of U.S. War Bonds, more than any organization in America. Meanwhile, Ahepa officials first visited the White House to meet with President

Calvin Coolidge in 1924 and have conferred with all twelve Presidents since. Presidents Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman and Gerald Ford became Ahepa members.

More recently, Ahepa raised \$400,000 for the restoration of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty and \$775,000 for a sculpture commemorating the Centennial Olympic Games in Atlanta. Ahepa has received Congressional and Presidential recognition for promoting friendship and goodwill among the people of the United States, Canada, Greece, and Cyprus. President George Bush hailed Ahepa as one of "the thousand points of light."

Ahepa moved its headquarters to Washington, DC in 1924 and later expanded its scope by adding three auxiliaries to complete the Ahepa Family: the Daughters of Penelope for women, the Sons of Pericles for young men and the Maids of Athena for young women. Its combined eight hundred chapters, consisting of about 35,000 members, cover the United States and Canada and planted successful units in Australia and Greece. It will hold its 75th annual convention in Atlanta in August.

In 1990, Ahepa filed an amicus curiae (friend of the court) brief in the Georgia Supreme Court. It backed the legal position of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) of B'nai B'rith in support of a state law banning masks in public which was challenged by the KKK. The court ruled 6 to 1 to uphold the constitutionality of the anti-mask statute.

The significance of the favorable decision to a jubilant Ahepa was that it came in the city of its founding and helped seal the doom of another failed Klan revival. Moreover, it enabled Hellenes to join in victorious celebration with fellow black and Jewish Americans whose forbearers also were sadistically harmed physically, mentally and economically by, the KKK of yesteryear.

Along with Roman Catholics, Asians and other immigrants considered unacceptable by the Klan, they all were targeted separately and together then because they did not fit the rigidly narrow KKK concept of what constitutes a good and loyal American.

For Hellenes, it is supremely ironic that the six organizers of the original Klan in 1865 created the words Ku Klux from kuklos, a variation of the Greek kyklos meaning cycle or circle, and applied it to their own little circle.

Today the 1920s version of the KKK is long gone and its flickering reincarnations are virtual nonentities. The Klan deserved to die - and died.

The Order of Ahepa thrives nearly a century after its historic birth amid the fiery heat of hate generated by the toxic Klan cauldron of insane fanaticism. Ahepa deserves to live - and lives.

James S. Scofield is a past Supreme President of the Order of Ahepa and the Sons of Pericles whose Hellenic father and uncles fought the Ku Klux Klan in northwest Indiana in the 1920s. Retired, he was an editor and library director for The St. Petersburg Times in Florida"