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SOFT OPPOSITION: ELITE ACQUIESCENCE AND KLAN-SPONSORED TERRORISM IN ALABAMA, 1946–1950

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ABSTRACT. The traditional division of the Klan phenomenon into three or four separate outbreaks (Reconstruction, 1920s, post-1954, and post-1979) is a useful organizing construct for scholars, but is deceptively simple and not necessarily reflective of reality. Alabama’s KKK is examined immediately following World War II. During this alleged period of dormancy there is, instead, a thriving Klan presence in perhaps the most racist of the deep South states. Postwar Alabama was especially tense as black voting registration aspirations and the growing appeal of biracial economic liberalism challenged the status quo. Klan resurgence was part of a determined white supremacist reaction. The concept of soft opposition is also coined and introduced to describe the efforts of elites to combat the Klan. While waging a vigorous opposition, elites were not so concerned with Klan depredations as abominations in and of themselves; rather, they were worried about the threat of federal intervention into southern race relations in response to violence. They opposed Klan excesses to perpetuate traditional elite, white control over southern blacks. Such opposition, while genuine, was less than effective, altruistic, or hard opposition; the kind needed to eliminate the Klan as an accepted part of southern society, which evolved only after 1979.

Most traditional interpretations concerning the Ku Klux Klan divide the history of the order into three relatively neat packages: Reconstruction, the 1920s, and the post-Brown v. Board Klan.1 While the division of the Klan

phenomenon into three or four distinct outbreaks is a neat and useful organizing construct for the historian, it is deceptively simple and at times even misleading. A strong re-emergence of the Klan phenomenon took place shortly after the end of World War II, for example, an outbreak of the Klan strain that has not been easily explained or classified by scholars. As a result the period 1946–54, a period longer than that dominated by the Reconstruction-era KKK, has been either ignored or lightly passed over by those tied to the organizational constraints of the three or four-Klan schema. Yet this nine-year period saw a Klan grow in Alabama that had much in common with all of the other so-called distinct periods of Klanism: Reconstruction, the 1920s, and post-1954.

The present essay will provide a detailed narrative of Klan activity in Alabama during the immediate post-World War II period, a critically important point in the history of southern race relations. While scholars have done a good deal to elucidate southern racial violence during the war, like Klan studies, the immediate postwar period has had far less attention. World War II was a watershed in southern economic history, but it also had a profound effect on the course of southern race relations. Southern black activism, assertiveness, and agitation for voting rights all accelerated in the wake of America’s experience with war. After the war a cadre of white liberal politicians successfully appealed to a new, biracial alliance of poor and working-class southern whites and a small but growing black electorate. This cadre was so successful in Alabama that soon after the war the state could boast of having a liberal governor, two liberal senators, and the South’s most liberal congressional delegation.

Yet liberal electoral success in postwar Alabama was accompanied by a tense racial atmosphere and increasingly rigid and violent reactions from the forces of white supremacy. The Klan rode again in this climate, targeting not only assertive blacks but also those whites who challenged conventional notions of morality. Opposition to the postwar KKK—while loud, vociferous, and cosmetically impressive—was, at its core, soft. Elites who contested the Klan did so primarily because they feared a renewed federal invasion into southern racial affairs if they did not. The intrinsic ‘softness’ of such an opposition was...
the main reason why Alabama's Klan was not killed off completely and why renewed racial terror could resume after the Brown decision in 1954.

The endemic stresses and strains that accompany any war breathed life into the third incarnation of the Klan. Wartime tensions growing out of economic dislocation, job and housing competition, and insecurities over the economic future of the country strained relations between the races. Women and blacks, asked in 1941 to replace white men in American industries, found that with peace came a change in their patriotic duties. Banished from the factory, resentment grew.4

Relations between the states and federal government were also altered during the war. Southern states received an inordinate share of federal largesse in the war years; in return, they were expected to abide by federal, not regional, norms on such issues as fair employment and discrimination. Ample tension existed on this section of the home front. Historian Bruce Schulman has shown how, what he has called 'Keynesian militarism', led to the rise of a new cohort of southern politician after World War II, motivated more by economic progress than by race. During the war, as in World War I, blacks left the South to pursue economic opportunities in the North. The southern labour force became less rural, more highly skilled, and more male, and the region profited from being the recipient of fifty per cent of the army's land acquisitions for bases and plants. Wages increased forty per cent from 1939 to 1942, and continued to rise during the war. The national wage labour board isolated southern industry by banning wage differentials on race; as a result, southern black wages rose. Southern manufactured employment also rose by fifty per cent. In 1941 President Franklin Roosevelt narrowly averted an embarrassing march on Washington by mortgaging the future of race relations in the defence industry. The result of that promise, the fair employment practices committee (FEPC), while not the boon that had been eagerly anticipated by some, seemed to herald inclement weather ahead for conservative southern whites. Two years later a rash of race riots unseen since the 'red summer' of 1919 erupted around the country.5

The war also affected race relations in other ways. Southern white progressives, such as James E. Chappell of the Birmingham News, nervously tried to play down increasing black calls for racial justice by playing up the contributions of blacks toward the war effort. But increasing economic prosperity and the end of the great depression only highlighted segregation as a problem that had been untouched by economic improvement. Some whites also found it increasingly difficult to reconcile their participation in a war for democracy with their poor treatment of African Americans at home. This


anxiety, what historian Morton Sosna has called the result of a new ‘democratic discourse’, forebode serious repercussions for the postwar period. Organized labour agitation, ‘operation Dixie’ and the political action committee of the congress of industrial organization (CIO) also threatened traditional southern conservatism.⁶

Race relations became even tenser than usual in Alabama during the war. In May 1943, Mobile’s dockyards exploded in riot when twelve of the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company’s 7,000 black workers were promoted to welder in compliance with a six-month old FEPC directive. White workers attacked blacks with pipes, clubs, and tools until nearby U.S. army troops, state and local police, national guardsmen, and the U.S. coast guard arrived to restore order. A year later the scene was nearly replicated at the U.S. army post at nearby Brookley Field. Birmingham’s buses and streetcars became insular, moving theatres where the tensions of race relations were played out in often violent ways. Increasingly assertive blacks, persons that historian Robin D. G. Kelley has termed ‘baaad niggers’, challenged segregation in public transportation long before anyone had heard of Rosa Parks. In 1942 Birmingham witnessed eighty-eight incidents of blacks taking white seats aboard buses and streetcars, as well as one hundred and seventy six total racial incidents and complaints, including eighteen interracial fights between passengers, twenty-two fights between black passengers and white drivers or conductors, and thirteen arguments over short-changing and other indignities afforded to black passengers. Blacks were often, according to Kelley, ‘profane and militant’ in their challenges of transportation segregation, and black women, in particular, showed a surprising predisposition to test the boundaries of Jim Crow, sometimes engaging in fist-fights with white, male passengers and armed drivers. On 15 August 1942 the inevitable happened, ironically in Mobile instead of Birmingham. During a dispute, a white bus driver shot and killed a black army private as he was returning to his barracks.⁷

Postwar Alabama was equally tense. Klan violence was part and parcel of a situation in which black assertiveness, voting registration efforts, and an increasingly liberal political challenge to big mule/black belt hegemony clashed with determined white reaction. This industrialist/planter alliance had

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controlled state and southern politics since the late nineteenth century. While relatively liberal politicians lost gubernatorial races to race-baiters in Mississippi, Georgia, and Texas, Jim Folsom defeated Handy Ellis in Alabama’s 1946 primary. The Folsom victory demonstrated that a more liberal appeal to a biracial coalition of blacks and poor and working-class whites could result in victory in a deep-South state. Electoral success combined with expanding efforts to register black voters, and with other forms of black assertiveness, such as the NAACP’s legal challenge to segregation, spearheaded by Charles Houston and Thurgood Marshall.⁸

But the South’s white supremacists were not about to surrender the region without a fierce struggle. Horace C. Wilkinson, one of the South’s foremost racial demagogues, sounded the trumpet of regional alarm during the war. Speaking to a civic group in Alabama, Wilkinson related atrocity stories about blacks ignoring Jim Crow, stealing the jobs of white steelworkers who had gone off to fight the war, and brazenly throwing kisses to white college girls. ‘If there is room for a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’, he concluded, ‘there is need for a League to Maintain White Supremacy’.⁹

In Alabama concerned whites battened down the hatches of white supremacy by passing the Boswell amendment in 1945. An extraordinary measure, Boswell required the reading and understanding of the constitution as grounds for voting, and furnished white registrars the perfect tool with which to disfranchise blacks. Seldom bashful about such things, they did just that.¹⁰

Violence accompanied the tough talk and legal measures of Alabama’s white reactionaries. Athens, a town in North Alabama, exploded in race riot in May 1946; nearly a hundred persons, mostly black, were injured. Similar episodes occurred around the South as returning American GIs, many of them black and armed with state poll-tax exemptions, threatened to make politics less certain at home.¹¹

After the war President Harry Truman’s proposed civil rights programme lent additional impetus to the rejuvenation of the Klan. Truman’s package—which called for anti-lynching, anti-poll tax, desegregation legislation, and a permanent FEPC—threatened the greatest federal intrusion into southern race relations since Reconstruction. The South, ever jealous of home rule, mobilized

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¹⁰ William D. Barnard, Dixiecrats and democrats: Alabama politics from 1942 to 1950 (Tuscaloosa, 1974).

¹¹ O’Brien, ‘Return to “normalcy”’, pp. 237–50. See also Brooks, ‘Coming home and taking charge: southern veterans, wartime service and the politics of change’; and Burran, ‘Racial violence in the South during World War II’, pp. 277–84. These studies emphasize the massive changes and challenges that World War II wrought in the area of southern race relations and conservative, status quo politics.
to fight the president. By 1948 disgruntled southern democrats had formed a third national party, the states' rights democrats or the 'Dixiecrats', designed to block Truman's programme and his bid for re-election.12

Communism and the emergence of a cold war also buttressed domestic movements like the KKK. After 1945, Soviet Russia and the United States filled the vacuum of global influence left by older imperial powers such as Britain, France and Germany. As the two superpowers hurtled along on a collision course, which seemed to be as ineluctable as it promised to be destructive, cold war rhetoric increasingly became part of a new postwar parlance. Strategic and economic factors shaped the origins and early development of the cold war for the policy-makers involved. But for the average American, the differences between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were reduced to their lowest common denominator. As manufacturers looked to new marketing techniques to reconvert wartime production to match peacetime demand, public policy-makers also adjusted to peace. They found a language that could be easily understood, and, indeed parroted at the popular level: ideology. The postwar world was divided, at least psychologically, in terms of capitalism and communism, democracy and authoritarianism. Almost subconsciously, American patriotism became increasingly defined as loyalty to democracy and to a specific economic creed.13

Of course, in Alabama and the South anti-communism had been a major weapon of conservative forces for a long time. Vigilante violence aimed at black activists, racial liberals, and unionists had sometimes bolstered such red-baiting. Anti-communist rhetoric had been used with effectiveness against southern organized labour during the 1920s, but during the misery of the great depression anti-communism had been used to an even greater extent in the Scottsboro case and against Alabama's sharecroppers union in Camp Hill.14

But the advent of the cold war had a double-edged effect on the emergence of yet another version of the Klan. While Klan leaders did not take long to gauge the potential profits that could be made by posing as America's guardians against fifth-column communist subversion, racist violence would rapidly become a liability in the new war of propaganda between east and west. Propaganda about German fascism left the Klan vulnerable to charges of being a breeding ground for little more than Nazis in sheets.

While the national opposition facing the KKK was tied to America's wartime experience, opposition from within Alabama was not so shorn of

14 For two excellent studies on this subject, see Robin D. G. Kelley, Hammer and hoe: Alabama communists during the great depression (Chapel Hill and London, 1990) and Dan T. Carter, Scottsboro: a tragedy of the American South (Baton Rouge, 1969).
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ulterior motive. Alabamians resisted the Klan of the 1940s with a fervour that at least matched the celebrated anti-Klan campaign of editor Grover C. Hall, Sr and company in the 1920s. But despite the increase in intensity, the essential character of state opposition remained inherently flawed. Most white Alabamians did not oppose the Klan because of what it was — although there was the odd and inspiring exception. Klan excess was generally tolerable in Alabama as long as it did not invite federal encroachment into domestic affairs. Such opposition was designed to curb Klan violence so that the federal government could not find an excuse to tread upon states’ rights. It was not an opposition born of a genuine revulsion for what the Klan was or what it did. It was an intrinsically constrained form of opposition, a determination to oppose the Klan blight, driven by the fear of what the federal government might do again in response to the denial of civil rights in the South. It could trace its roots to a Reconstruction syndrome, a trauma left over from the shock of military defeat and occupation. In fact, it may be more accurately termed soft opposition, an aversion to extralegal Klan activity that risked the sacred altar of white supremacy, before which most southerners still worshipped in 1946. Such opposition failed to address the Klan’s violence, creed, or very existence as reasons enough to oppose it. As before, this immature opposition left the Klan free to ride yet another day.

Formal revival of the Ku Klux Klan took place in Atlanta on 27 March 1946. One night later eight crosses burned in Birmingham to mark the resurgence of the order in Alabama. During the war Alabama’s KKK had shrunk to just four chapters and about a thousand hard-core members; yet it had never entirely disappeared. A Klan group soon sprang up in Alabama under the joint leadership of Dr E. P. Pruitt and William Hugh Morris, a well-known Birmingham roofing contractor. Dr Pruitt took the title of ‘chairman of the board’ for the new Federated Ku Klux Klans, Inc., while Morris settled for the office of ‘director’. The pair filed incorporation papers in July 1946, and advertised the ‘protection of the chastity of white womanhood and white supremacy’ as their raison d’être. ‘All we want to do’, they said, ‘is keep the colored man in his place’.15

The seeds of racial intolerance fell upon fertile soil. Within three years the Federated KKK could make the wild claim of having 30,000 dues-paying members in Alabama, 7,000 of them in Birmingham alone. One elderly Birmingham native, obviously excited about the revival of an organization dedicated to white supremacy, greeted news of the new Klan by saying, ‘This will teach the niggers to stay put in their place. If they don’t we’ll stack ‘em up like cordwood’. At various points around the state Klan leaders combined

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relatively recent cold war paranoia with traditional regional and racial insecurities to curry support for the order. William Morris travelled the state outlining an intricate communist plot in which ‘modern carpetbaggers’ planned to use black ‘puppets’ to set up ‘colored republics’ in Alabama’s black belt.16

Although the 1940s Klan made efforts to recruit in various sections of the state, the order enjoyed its greatest success in urban areas such as Birmingham. This was probably due to the increased residential and economic competition among the races engendered by World War II. Perhaps the largest exception to this rule were rural areas, such as Macon County, home of the Tuskegee Improvement Association, where African Americans made overt attempts to organize and increase their voting rolls.

Many in Alabama realized that the new Klan was closely connected to the Dixiecrat party, and, as such, to its privileged ‘big mule’ industrialist allies. The Alabama Klan stood solidly behind the Dixiecrats. According to its leaders, the KKK backed the states’ rights party ‘wholeheartedly ... 100 per cent’. ‘The Dixiecrat movement is a good thing for the protection of the South’, E. P. Pruitt suggested. William Morris, like his Dixiecrat allies, blamed ‘outside meddlers trying to cram social equality down our throats’ for the South’s current racial woes. Theophilus Eugene ‘Bull’ Connor, never a formal Klan member, but a longtime sympathizer, announced his Dixiecrat candidacy for governor in 1948 by borrowing the Klan notion of an imminent communist plot involving African-American stooges. Former Klansman and Dixiecrat leader Horace Wilkinson declared that he would ‘rather die fighting for states’ rights than live on [Harry] Truman boulevard in a nigger heaven’. Wilkinson’s hate sheets, such as the Southern Outlook, worked overtime to spew bigotry, and Alabama’s ‘big mules’, the state’s leading industrialists, bought up subscriptions. Newsweek identified southern Klansmen as the ‘disappointed crackpot fringe of the States’ Rights party’, and a Chicago Defender editor informed his readers that the ‘fools and hoodlums’ of the KKK had been given a green light by states’ rights leaders in the South. Meanwhile, Klansmen planned a hostile reception for progressive party presidential hopeful, Henry Wallace, when he planned a visit to Alabama.17

Wallace, former New Deal secretary of agriculture and vice-president, had become a pariah in the South due to his liberal racial policies. A Klan-led mob


of steelworkers in Gadsden beat on his car with pipes and bats while police stood by and did nothing. A shaken Wallace, as he sped away from Gadsden, said ‘now I’ve seen the eyes of fascism’. In Birmingham he fared little better. Bull Connor, Birmingham’s infamous police commissioner, greeted news of the presidential candidate’s arrival by saying, in his best Connorese, ‘I ain’t gonna let no darkies and no white folks segregate together in this town’. Connor obviously meant business. He had already jailed Senator Glen Taylor, Wallace’s vice-presidential running mate, for entering a building through a ‘colored’ entrance.¹⁸

Bull Connor’s relationship with the KKK is an intriguing topic. Without question he knew Klansmen, associated with them, sought and accepted their support, and let them have their way with people of colour in Birmingham. But no one has been able to demonstrate that Connor ever actually joined the Klan, unlike another arch-conservative racist, Connor’s mentor, Horace Wilkinson. Some evidence exists that Connor allowed, even aided and abetted, Klan terrorism of blacks and white racial liberals. At the very least he did much to foster a climate of permissiveness that Klan terrorists used to their advantage. He was presiding over the city’s police force in April 1956 when white citizens’ council thugs attacked black balladeer, Nat King Cole, and in May 1961 when Birmingham policemen gave the KKK fifteen minutes of unmolested time to beat the bi-racial freedom riders. Former Birmingham acting police chief Jack Warren admitted in a 1988 interview that there were a few Fairfield Klansmen on the city’s police force in the 1960s and many other sympathizers, but as for ‘Bull, I don’t think he ever joined the Klan or nothing, but he certainly concurred in their efforts’.¹⁹

Klan rhetoric soon led to specific acts of violence, mostly aimed at blacks who dared to challenge white supremacy through the ballot box or housing patterns. One Klan kleagle, speaking at the Jefferson county courthouse in early 1947 termed African–American attempts at educational, residential, occupational, and political equality as direct affronts ‘to every white, Protestant, Gentile, Democrat in Alabama’. Violence often followed in the wake of such remarks. In 1947 black attorney Arthur D. Shores managed to have a twenty-year-old zoning ordinance, restricting Birmingham neighbourhoods on the basis of race, struck down in federal court. A rash of bombings promptly ensued. On one summer night alone three black homes were dynamited. The black community complained to city officials but was told that it had brought the trouble on itself by insisting on living in previously all-white neighbourhoods. Birmingham police commissioner Bull Connor put forward the

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interesting solution of blacks moving immediately. Faced with official
indifference and even hostility, blacks banded together in neighbourhood night
watches to protect themselves from Klan assassins.20

One of the Klansmen who took a lead in Birmingham’s anti-black housing
campaign was a city garage employee named Robert Chambliss. Emblazoned
in Klan infamy as the mad bomber of Birmingham’s sixteen-street baptist
church in 1963, during the 1940s Chambliss, a career Klansman, was busy
serving his apprenticeship as a hooded terrorist. An admitted member of the
Robert E. Lee Klavern #1, Chambliss visited a black insurance agent who had
recently moved into a white neighbourhood on Birmingham’s northside and
threatened to blow up his home if he did not move. Chambliss also gained a
measure of notoriety for earning a flogging indictment, and smashing the
camera of a news reporter at a Klan rally as police officers impassively looked
on. Mayor Cooper Green called Chambliss on the carpet and threatened to fire
him; Chambliss responded with a threat of his own to sue the city.21

The existence of career Klansmen like Chambliss, men who were active
KKK terrorists in the forties, fifties and sixties, does little to further the idea
that there were three or four separate and distinct outbreaks of Klanism.
Chambliss, a true believer in white supremacy, donned a hood in the 1940s and
did basically the same thing for the Klan, intimidate and harm people, through
the 1960s. Clearly, Chambliss and other devout Klan racists do not fit well into
such a rigid trichotomy.

As the 1948 presidential election approached, Klan violence shifted to
address black desires to participate in the election. Tuskegee blacks, frustrated
in their attempts to register, staged a courthouse sit-in and a boycott of white-
owned businesses. A group representing nearly seventy black groups asked the
governor to investigate the Birmingham bombings, attacks on NAACP officials,
and the killing of six black males by the Birmingham police. Bull Connor
dismissed the petition as the obvious work of communists. Meanwhile police
officers provided security at Klan meetings and directed traffic during Klan
parades, staged mostly to intimidate blacks. After one such parade through
Talladega’s black quarter, the city police chief’s only comment was that ‘it was
orderly’.22

20 Constance Baker Motley to Thurgood Marshall, 15 Aug. 1949, 1–4 in the papers of the
NAACP, part 5: The campaign against residential segregation, 1914–55, reel 19, group ii, box B-
121: Racial Tensions, and box B-129: Residential Segregation. Hereafter cited as the NAACP
papers. See also the testimony of Leslie Perry, NAACP representative, p. 147, and Clancy E. Lake,
p. 186, in U.S. house of representatives. 81st congress. Hearings before subcommittee Yo. 3 of the
committee of the judiciary on ‘Beatings and cross-burnings in Alabama towns, investigation, 1949’
(81) H126g-1. Hereafter cited as house hearings, 1949. Also see anti-negro groups file, reel 99,
1947; People’s Voice, 3 Mar. 1947, p. 8; Defender, 1 Feb., 26 Apr. 1947, 4 June 1949; Afro-American,

1949, p. 81; Defender, 4 June 1949; New Orleans (LA) Times-Picayune, 28 Sept. 1949; and Corley,
‘The quest for racial harmony’, p. 37.

22 Sullivan, ‘Southern reformers, the New Deal, and the movement’s foundation’, pp. 81–5. See
also Columbia (SC) Lighthouse and Informer, 26 Dec. 1948; Daily World, 22 May, 25 Dec. 1948;
The most sensational 1948 act of Klan intimidation occurred in June as over a hundred costumed Klansmen raided a girl scout camp near Bessemer. The offence? White scout leaders had been instructing black scouts. County sheriffs failed to make any arrests, but instead publicly endorsed the nocturnal visit as ‘a good’ thing. Klan leaders were similarly unrepentant. William Morris said the two white instructors should not have been sleeping in such close proximity to the blacks. Dr E. P. Pruitt denied the ‘official’ participation of the Federated KKK as a group, yet insisted that the raid had been morally correct: ‘[I]f I saw a mad dog or a snake I would shoot it. And some people act like mad dogs and snakes’.23

The Klan raid on an organization as self-consciously devoted to American-ism and womanhood, allegedly two of the KKK’s most inviolate tenets, evoked swift and widespread opposition. Press, civic, religious, and political condemnation was heard from around the state, but it stopped far short of proposing radical consequences. More serious opposition came from outsiders and minorities, who led a shadowy existence on the periphery of the state. The national director of the girl scouts of America sent shock waves through Alabama, when she raised the spectre of federal involvement by asking the U.S. attorney general to investigate the matter. The national negro council called for the Alabama Klan to be dissolved as a state corporation. Yet by far the most persistent critique came from Abraham Berkowitz, a Jewish attorney in Birmingham. Describing a sheriff’s approbation of the raid ‘almost as offensive as the incident itself’, Berkowitz called for the state attorney general to revoke the charter of the Klan, and made a further nuisance of himself by submitting eight unsolicited anti-Klan city ordinances.24

One of the most unsettling aspects of the raid’s aftermath was the absence of censure from Alabama’s labour organizations. In stark contrast to other groups in the state, organized labour remained silent, despite prodding from a miffed NAACP leadership. William Mitch, president of district 20 of the united mine workers of America, perhaps revealed one of the reasons for labour’s sluggishness, when he informed his rank-and-file that they would have to make a decision between Klan membership and belonging to the miners’ union.25

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24 Daily World, 3 July 1948; Birmingham News, 24 July 1949. For historical Klan–labour enmity, see the Constitution, 17 May, 9 Sept. 1946; ‘the mark of the beast’, Southern Exposure, 8 (No. 2, 1980). There was also some scattered denunciation of the the girl scout raid from residents in Jasper, Anniston, and Akron, Alabama, see the Birmingham News, 24 May, 4, 9 July 1948.
Despite Mitch's urgings, and an historical enmity that existed between the KKK and unions, Alabama labour took a decidedly different posture relative to the third Klan than it ever had before.26

Labour's silence was a complicated issue. Obviously, discussing Alabama 'labour' in monolithic terms is extremely misleading. While the involvement of some miners in hooded violence became an apparent fact by 1949, organized labour as a whole had historically found itself on the receiving, rather than the giving, end of the Klan whip.

Despite the almost certain participation of miners and other workers in Klan depredations, the antipathy between the two groups largely continued through the period after World War II. Of especial odium to the Klan was the relatively new CIO. Founded in 1935 by John L. Lewis, Sidney Hillman, and David Dubinsky, the CIO stood for biracial, inclusive, industrial, and liberal labour policies in contrast to the more staid, exclusive, and craft-oriented American federation of labour. Shortly after the war CIO organizers launched 'Operation Dixie', a campaign to organize twelve southern states. In response a Covington county newspaper practically solicited KKK violence to thwart the organization of several textile mills located close to Andalusia. As authorities reported the outbreak of nearly a score of attacks on southern unionists, a Lanett mob hurled bricks, bearing the inscription 'Vote No for CIO', through the windows of local businesses that had proved sympathetic to workers. At the Avondale Mills, Klansmen kidnapped and flogged a disabled CIO organizer, crippled by service in the war. In Sylacauga, disguised parties savagely beat CIO organizers who had the audacity to pass out leaflets at the Beacon Manufacturing Company. Masked Klansmen in Evergreen ambushed a car carrying two CIO organizers, riddled it with bullets, and burned it. In Montgomery a deputy sheriff joined the Klan war against labour by beating another CIO organizer.27

As 1949 unfolded, violence increasingly targeted poor whites who had offended the Klan's fragile moral sensibilities. By the end of the year a rash of violence unseen in Alabama since the heydays of the 1927 nightriders descended upon the state. The sheer intensity of the June 1949 terror revealed that it was most probably the product of a planned crusade rather than the spasmodic actions of a few independent-minded extremists. Within a two-week period Klansmen burned eighty-nine crosses and attacked over twenty, mostly white, persons around the state.28

Klan leader William Morris practically announced the campaign in advance. At an April rally, held at the Jefferson county courthouse, Morris

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informed the public that his Knights were ready to ‘ride’, a euphemism for hooded terrorism. He later boasted that he had in excess of 200 men patrolling the streets of Jefferson and Walker counties, and that they were on the lookout for ethical offenders – ‘honky-tonk operators, common brier-patch prostitutes, and people of that type’.

Mrs Edna McDanal was one of the first to feel the Klan’s wrath. On 10 June over a hundred armed Knights broke into her Jefferson county home, ripped the shotgun she was trying to load from her hands, hit her over the head with a blackjack, and dragged her outside to witness a crossburning. As she looked on in horror Klansmen took turns alternately threatening her with beating, hanging, and burning at the stake. A wilful woman, Mrs McDanal snatched the hoods off several of her tormentors and later identified them. When she asked why they had chosen her, the men charged her with selling liquor, renting rooms to unmarried couples, and dancing nude on her front porch. She threatened to call the police, but one of her assailants laughed and told her that several of them were the law. While the macabre spectacle went on, strangely illuminated by the fiery cross in the background, one of McDanal’s neighbours looked on with delight. Later he explained that McDanal was an immoral woman, and that the Klansmen’s cross ‘sure was pretty’.

Similar acts soon followed. That same night a band of masked Klansmen visited a cafe close to the McDanal house. They warned the owner, a Greek orthodox, to stop serving blacks at his cafe. Four nights later nightriders abducted a Navy veteran from his home and covered his back with welts. Klansmen charged Billy Stovall with failing to support his family because his wife had taken a part-time job, despite the fact that Stovall himself worked a day job at a pipe company, another part-time job, and attended school three nights a week. Two Sumiton Klansmen assaulted a Birmingham Post reporter who was doing a story on hooded violence. Despite the fact that his partner had taken aim at the reporter’s head with a hammer, one of the Klan assailants later volunteered to buy the victim a fried chicken dinner and forget all about the incident. At Pumpkin Center, Klansmen flogged two men and a woman because she had borne three children out of wedlock. An assembly of God minister removed his hood to pray over the victims before they were beaten. Walker county Klansmen assaulted an elderly miner who had not yet returned to work because he had broken his back in a job-related accident. He suffered a nervous breakdown. In nearby Dora, Klansmen kidnapped a trio of couples as they sat in their living room watching television. The robed men terrorized the six whites for several hours. They beat some, and simulated the hanging of others by throwing nooses over tree limbs, placing them around the victims’ necks, and then pulling them almost off of the ground. One young woman, who

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several times sincerely believed she was about to be hung, was able later to identify her tormentors.31

Clay county was the next area to be afflicted. Despite Klan threats to their person, two Methodist ministers investigated the violence and concluded that Clay’s 800 Klansmen had beaten twenty-five to thirty residents since the year had begun. The colour of victims made little difference. Robed men beat a black war-hero who held five medals from his service in World War II, and whites accused of engaging in premarital sex. Three masked men fired gunshots into the ceiling of a black café, and shot at a black farmer as he ran for his life through a corn patch. Nightriders used hickory sticks, blackjacks, and pistol barrels as well to beat whites who tested the boundaries of area mores.32

The rash of summer violence in 1949 provoked a myriad of responses. U.S. attorney general Tom Clark ordered an FBI probe into the Alabama violence, and placed the Klan on the justice department’s list of subversive groups. Tuskegee’s civic association, a black voting rights group led by attorney Charles Gomillion, petitioned for a congressional inquiry and to their astonishment had their prayers answered. A house subcommittee began its probe into the KKK situation in Alabama, led by the very embodiment of an ‘outside agitator’: liberal, Brooklyn democrat, Emmanuel Cellar. ‘If Alabama is ready to pass and enforce adequate laws, there need be no federal interference’, one national magazine observed. ‘If not, federally enacted civil rights legislation is the alternative [that Alabama] brings on itself.’33

This commentary was especially revealing. For nervous Alabamians, congressional probes and FBI investigations only hinted at the possible repercussions that Klan excess might bring down on the state. But change from within was unlikely. As the house members soon discovered, thirty of Jefferson county’s fifty deputies were either avowed Klansmen or sympathizers.34

Federal involvement in state affairs struck at the very core of Alabama’s being. States’ rights was the nerve-centre of the Alabama body politic, and the cumulative action of the attorney general, the FBI, and the house of representatives rudely awakened what had been a largely slumbering populace. The most immediate concern by far for Alabamians was the federal threat. State elites, now jolted from their lethargy, closed ranks to dissuade the federal


government from pursuing its abominable mission. Fully realizing that the only way to elude disastrous federal intrusion was to combat the Klan themselves, Alabama’s elites bargained for time. Political, religious, legal, press, and civic elites across the state pledged to eradicate Klan violence from within, and pleaded for time to do so. Yet their opposition was a flawed one—geared toward alleviating federal concern about state anarchy rather than truly curing the Klan cancer.

Motivations varied as did the elites who waged war on Alabama’s KKK. Some were metropolitan newspapermen, others were economic liberals of the stripe of ‘Big Jim’ Folsom, and still others were county-seat elites. Many were only tactical opponents of the order; those who were fearful of federal invasiveness in response to a rash of Klan violence. Others, including a number of journalists and clerics, were genuinely repelled by hooded violence, but could not envisage a radical or speedy dissolution of regional race patterns. Some economic liberals feared the negative effect Klan violence would have on state commerce. Others, who may have been more liberal on the race issue, feared the consequence of electoral reprisal if they took too liberal a stand on race. Virtually none of these elites could envisage the end of Jim Crow.

The press corps led the way. The *Birmingham News* argued that local action would be the most effective mode of opposition to the Klan, but stressed that results could not be expected overnight. Birmingham’s *Age-Herald* concurred, while a Tuscaloosa newspaper chastised the sheeted fraternity for attracting unwelcome federal attention to the state. *Montgomery Advertiser* editors reasoned that Alabama could improve its own shortcomings without federal interference, and noted that it was only human nature to resist pressure from outsiders. Realizing the danger federal intervention might have on regional customs such as segregation, other southern journalists echoed Alabama’s plea for time. But perhaps the most far-reaching protest against federal involvement in Alabama’s internal affairs was made by the witnesses who actually appeared in front of the house subcommittee in Washington. Despite the fact that they themselves had been victims of Klan depredations, so deeply ingrained was the impulse to defend states’ rights that three Alabamians asked for federal indulgence in allowing their state to solve its own KKK problem. Alabama congressman Samuel Hobbs, a leading Dixicrat, addressed his fellow house members on the subject. Adopting a classic states’ rights position, Hobbs argued eloquently against federal meddling throughout thirty-seven pages of testimony. Using India’s caste system and the Nazi holocaust as rough analogues for Klanism, Hobbs admitted the barbarity of the systems, but concluded that congress ‘has just as [little] ... power over India as we have over Alabama’.

State opposition came fast and furious but seemed to centre most strongly on Birmingham and Jefferson county, the most populous area of Alabama. Jefferson county’s grand jury demanded that state Klan leader William Morris

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turn over his membership rolls to the court. When he refused to comply, a
circuit judge clapped him in jail. The grand jury also indicted seventeen
suspected Klansmen, including four policemen, on forty-five counts of physical
assault. Walker county chimed in with a dozen indictments. State legislators
proposed and passed an anti-masking statute in record time, but accompanied
it with a resolution against the national congress’s ‘wholly unnecessary,
unwarranted, and unjustifiable’ probe into Alabama terrorism. As it became
more fashionable to speak out against the Klan, politicians jumped on the
bandwagon. Governor James Folsom, an avowed economic liberal, led the way
by denouncing the sheeted Knights as ‘would-be Hitlers, a renegade bunch of
hooded cowards, [and] a disgrace’. The governor also issued a verbal carte
blanche to resist the robed floggers. ‘Your home is your castle’, Folsom told the
people of Alabama, ‘Defend it any way necessary’. State attorney general
A. A. Carmichael and other politicos around the state castigated Klansmen as
‘bums, hoodlums and cutthroats’. Wealthy textile magnate Donald Comer led
a blue-ribbon committee of 500 business and professional men to press for the
dismantling of the KKK. Methodist, episcopal, and baptist leaders, who found
the violence revolting, joined Comer’s committee as did more pragmatic
business and labour leaders. The American legion posted a $3,000 reward for
the conviction of hooded floggers.

As the debate over the anti-masking bill raged, William Morris appeared in
Montgomery to explain to state lawmakers that the KKK was only concerned
with regulating prostitutes, liquor dealers, and other blights on Alabama’s
moral landscape. A Morris lieutenant, Talladega preacher Alvin Horn, said he
would ‘rather be hung from the balcony over the steps where Jeff Davis took
his oath than to have the mask’ stripped away. A Clay county high-school
teacher told state legislators that he was voting against the measure ‘because
the Klan doesn’t want it, and I don’t want to do anything the Klan doesn’t
want’. Speaking on behalf of the bill were Henry Mize, its sponsor,
Montgomery’s mayor, representatives of the veterans of foreign wars, the
Alabama local government league, and the state head of the CIO.

Religious opposition, especially from mainstream denominations, went
hand-in-glove with press and civic discontent. In addition to the prominent
representation of mainstream methodists, baptists, episcopalian, and presby-
terians on Donald Comer’s committee of 500, religious individuals and other
members of the cloth spoke out against the Klan. Most inspiring were the
courageous actions of two methodist preachers and their bishop in leading a
private investigation into a particularly nasty spree of violence in Clay county.

36 Act no. 454, 23 Aug. 1949, Alabama laws (and joint resolutions) of the legislature of Alabama passed
at the regular session of 1949 (Montgomery, 1949), pp. 658–9; House hearings, 1949, testimony of
Clancy E. Lake, pp. 184–5, 192–4, and Paul B. Trawick, pp. 200–8, and congressman Sam Hobbs,
pp. 264–301, see especially p. 274; anti-negro groups, reel 108, 1949; Irving Beirman, ‘Alabama
rips off the hood’, Christian Science Monitor, 2 July 1949, 3; Alfred E. Middlebrooks, ‘Alabama votes
to unmask the Klan’, Christian Century, lxvi (20 July 1949), 871.

37 Washington Post, 23 June 1949; Advertiser, 19, 22 June 1949; Examiner, 23 June 1949; News,
22 June 1949.
Others wondered aloud at how religious Alabamians could subscribe to the Klan and still profess to believe in Christian principles. Noted liberal journalist Ralph McGill bluntly stated that any Alabama preacher who had forsaken Christian doctrine to chase the Klan cross was marching in the steps of Nazi stormtroopers. 'Try to imagine the Nazarene in a Ku Klux robe', McGill challenged his Atlanta Constitution readers, 'going in a mob to terrify helpless persons. The Klan prostitutes the cross by burning it to advertise the threat of violence'. More criticism poured into Alabama from her sister state of Georgia. A speaker for the Atlanta Christian centre criticized Klan visits to Alabama churches, and concluded that a time of confusion and darkness had descended on the state, when churches relied on hooded criminals to supply order and financial support. From Montgomery, liberal editor Charlie Dobbins, a fierce enemy of both the KKK and the Dixiecrats, observed that the involvement of preachers and religious laymen in the Klan was a despicable part of a long tradition that could trace its roots to the European reformed and Islamic holy wars. Dobbins, who was repelled by racial violence, but a firm opponent of hasty and radical racial change, observed that, 'people have committed murder thinking they were doing God's will, people have been burned at the stake by religious fanatics who thought they were serving the Lord'.

Some elites based their opposition to the Klan on drawing parallels between American and Nazi-style fascism. The editors of a Montgomery newspaper understood the connexion well: 'We are too much interested in washing the faces of other nations to be properly aware of the dirt behind our own ears. How a Veteran who risked his life to stop the terror of Hitlerism can come home today to play Hitler himself, we cannot understand'. At one time or another during the internal crusade against the KKK, the Tuscaloosa News, Jasper Mountain Eagle, and the University of Alabama chapter of the American veterans all resorted to comparisons between the Klan and Nazism. Newsmen in Chicago, Atlanta, New York, and West Virginia made the same connexion in writing about Alabama's Klan woes in 1949. A Birmingham newspaper took the analogy one step further by suggesting that Alabama's apathy might lead to an uncontrollable Klan element, just as German indifference had contributed to the rise of Hitler.

While elite opposition remained tied to religious, civic, press, and political mediums, the scarce popular opposition to the Klan that could be found was far less genteel. Some ordinary Alabamians, victim and non-victim alike, favoured fighting fire with fire. After Navy veteran Billy Stovall was flogged, he bought...
guns, taught his wife how to use them, and prepared to kill the next batch of hooded intruders who entered his home. Friends of Stovall egged him on by pledging bounties of $100 per every masked man shot and vowed to create a strike force of military veterans to flog Klan terrorists. Some victims were perhaps encouraged toward violent opposition by the pronouncement of folksy Governor James Folsom, that every man’s home was his castle, and a county sheriff’s advice to ‘shoot to kill’ if necessary. In any case, Billy Rochester, the crippled Walker county miner who had been forced to watch a friend’s lashing, took the advice to heart. Purchasing a shotgun after the incident, Rochester swore to ‘blow as many [Klansmen] as I can into damn small bits’, and invited nightriders to return if they wanted to ‘taste [his] supercharged ammunition’. A twelve-year-old Munford boy did more than just talk. Witnessing a cross-burning in his father’s yard, the lad defied Klansmen and incurred death threats by knocking the cross over and dousing it with a bucket of water.\textsuperscript{40}

The architects of elite, state opposition were not disappointed. Praise soon poured in from around the country. News organs in Louisville, Chattanooga, Atlanta, Nashville, Raleigh, Jackson, Columbus, New Orleans, Dallas, Roanoke, and Little Rock weighed in with editorials praising Alabamians for their brave stand against the Klan. Non-southern papers also responded favourably to the efforts of Alabama’s elites. The Chicago Defender named Jim Folsom to its annual honour roll of the fifteen most outstanding men and women in the United States for his campaign against bigotry. Two New York papers heaped congratulations on Alabama as did newspapers from across the nation. The U.S. attorney general’s office even related its pleasure. But most importantly, the house committee on mob violence decided to cut short its inquiry into Alabama after hearing only four witnesses.\textsuperscript{41}

As Alabamians rejoiced at this obvious signal of federal withdrawal, the voice of the national negro council alone contained any hint of dissent. Feeling the federal retreat to be premature, the council unflatteringly compared the congressional move to Pontius Pilate’s washing of his hands.\textsuperscript{42}

While it should not be argued that elite backlash against the Klan was part of a draconian plot, it is necessary still to evaluate what such opposition failed to do as well as what it accomplished. Its primary goal was to eradicate the ominous spectre of the federal interloper; this was also its most immediate and visible achievement.

The limits of Alabama’s soft opposition were many. Despite all the rhetoric and resolutions, committees and investigations, denouncements and posturing, the Ku Klux Klan was still a thriving concern in Alabama when the decade of the 1940s drew to a close. Almost everywhere one cared to look the disappointing


\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
effects of *soft opposition* could be discerned. The *Tuscaloosa News*, after successfully infiltrating its local Klan, refused to deal a truly lethal blow to the order by publishing a list of its members. Birmingham's city commission turned down Abraham Berkowitz's anti-Klan ordinances flat. Another Berkowitz proposition also caused uneasiness on the part of elites more concerned with smoke and mirrors than substance. In 1948 New York's anti-Nazi league and Abe Berkowitz had independently broached the idea of revoking the Klan's corporate charter in Alabama. In rapid succession Governor Folsom assigned the unenviable task of personally killing the Alabama Klan to his underling, Attorney General A. A. Carmichael. Carmichael dodged responsibility by placing the problem in the state legislature's lap. Of course Carmichael, a politician of some skill, did so with great flourish and ceremony, castigating the secret conclave as made up of people 'as far from decency as east is from west ... [They are] villainous, scoundrelly [and the] ... antithesis of decency'. Not to be outdone, the lawmakers informed Carmichael, upon some consideration, that the proper party to press for charter revocation really was the attorney general. The charter was never revoked.44

Disappointments such as these revealed that fear of electoral reprisal from racial conservatives hamstrung many politicians who might, in other vicinities, have been far more liberal on racial issues. Constantly harnessed by their fear of electoral reprisal, men like Folsom and Carmichael trod more softly on race issues than economic ones.

Only two trials resulted from Jefferson county's seventeen indictments; both were equally disappointing. Coleman A. 'Brownie' Lollar was the first Klansman to undergo trial. Placed by witnesses at fourteen separate floggings, and positively identified by four victims, Lollar should have furnished the perfect target for prosecution. He was the proprietor of a small coal mine, held a commission as a special deputy sheriff for the county, and made extra money by watching the cars of fellow Knights at the Adamsville Klan meetings over which his brother presided. Taking the stand for two hours in his own defence, Lollar committed perjury by denying that he was a Klansman, but later admitted that he belonged to the Robert E. Lee Klavern #1. Despite eyewitness identification by victims such as Mrs Edna McDanal, and the testimony of three former Klansmen who placed Lollar at a number of assaults, the jury found him not guilty, after deliberating for only an hour. For his defence Lollar's attorneys relied on a parade of nineteen character witnesses, a baseball game alibi furnished by several of Lollar's Klan buddies, and nude photos of a woman standing in a cornfield they purported to be Edna McDanal.45

Even a threatening letter sent to the mother of a scourge victim bearing

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44 Ibid.

Brownie Lollar's return address did not seem to make any difference to the jury of the defendant's peers:

We are sending you $10 for damages to your door. Whatever is left out of the money after you fix the door please take it and buy you something for yourself. Don't give this money to Jack [Alexander, the victim] for if you do we will no [sic] it. We are sorry that this had to be done but it has gone on so long till it had to be stopped. He wasn't hurt but if we haft [sic] to come back he will remember it for a long time. Please help us to stop all of this. He will be watched every day. God bless you.46

The trials proved to be a study in Klan misconduct, even under the close official scrutiny of the court. Klansmen roamed the Jefferson county courthouse carrying pistols, threatened newsmen, and intimidated state witnesses. After one holiness minister was named in court as a participant in a Klan flogging, he got up and slapped his female accuser across the face. The presiding judge sentenced him to a day in jail but rescinded the judgement when the preacher sobbed and asked forgiveness.47

The subsequent trial of a second indictee was somewhat anti-climactic. A. Byrd Carradine, an admitted member of Adamsville's Stonewall Jackson Klavern, had been indicted along with two other Knights. Klan attorneys decided not to fix an unbroken wagon, and used the same strategy for Carradine that had proved so successful in Brownie Lollar's case. Carradine too claimed a baseball game as his alibi, and his attorneys paraded virtually the same set of character witnesses to swear that he was a good person. Additional spice was added to the Carradine trial when Ervin Leon Key appeared in court. Key, a Klan brother of Carradine's, had been hiding in Houston, Texas, but decided to testify for the state despite death threats from two of his former hooded associates. Key swore that Carradine, as well as himself, had been present at a number of floggings, and that the assaults had been masterminded at the Adamsville lodge. Despite Key's testimony and Carradine's subsequent identification by three lash victims, he gained a mistrial and went free.48

As the indictments of the spring grand jury coughed and sputtered in actual trials, there was little left for which to hope. Jefferson county's succeeding grand jury declined to return even one indictment against a flogger. To make matters worse, revelations about the summer grand jury's composition were something less than reassuring. Holding the immediate future of Alabama justice in its hands were a Klansman, an ex-convict who had been stripped of

citizenship rights and should have been ineligible to serve, five others with police records, and an illiterate. The county solicitor assigned to present evidence was a 1920s Klansman as was the presiding judge.49

While events in Alabama gave new meaning to the phrase ‘a jury of one’s peers’, disturbing double-standards emerged. Alabama’s anti-Klan indictments were issued only in cases where the victims had been white. Cases in which hooded marauders flailed blacks were largely ignored by Alabama elites. ‘Nobody cared much what the Ku Klux Klan did to Negroes’, a black editor pointed out, ‘until the nightgowned riders started beating up... white men and women. Now... Kissing Jim Folsom... is raising a mighty hubb’. Another black observer thought it only fitting that the KKK, a Frankenstein-like monster, had finally turned on the white race.50

Perhaps more unsettling than the double standard in prosecuting the robed brood was the one that existed in actual law enforcement. County sheriffs around the state had been nothing less than incompetent or unwilling in their pursuit of white Klansmen. The handful of arrests that had resulted did so only at the behest of an empanelled grand jury. But when a group of black teen-age youths dressed up in hoods and sheets, and formed their own ‘Klan’ to keep neighbourhood women from dating white men, Ozark police reacted instantaneously. Suddenly the courts worked too. In an irony fitting for the ages, the only conviction Alabama achieved against the KKK during the 1940s occurred against African-American ‘Klansmen’.51

But, without question, the incident that most dramatically demonstrated the constraints of soft opposition was the case of Klan leader William Morris. Imprisoned for failure to produce Klan membership rolls, Morris enjoyed the first days of his captivity as he received candy, cards, flowers, and visitors from around the state. Morris basked in his new-found celebrity status and spewed bravado: ‘I’d rather see this jail rot down around me than give up the sacred secrets’ of the Klan, he blustered. Morris also claimed he was so comfortable in his cell that he was prepared to stay a hundred years if necessary. But as Birmingham’s hot summer wore on, Morris grew less comfortable, received fewer visits, and rapidly grew tired of playing the martyr. Gaining release in late July by promising to provide the necessary lists, Morris reneged and was quickly thrown back into jail.52

But by late September Morris had gained his permanent release by providing a 'complete' membership list of the KKK in Alabama. Unfortunately, Morris's long-awaited list proved to be little more than chicanery. The grand total of names the director produced was twenty-eight. Of this small number, the vast majority were Klansmen who had already admitted membership in the order, 1920s Knights, or well-known officials of the organization. An assistant attorney general aptly termed Morris's list 'worse than useless', but it was enough for county authorities to release him on 21 September.\(^5\)

While the Morris drama entertained Alabamians, it also painfully revealed the outer limits of soft opposition. Klan leaders were quick to pick up on the ambivalent feelings of their elite opponents—fear of federal encroachment coupled with nostalgia for the Reconstruction and 1920s Klans of their fathers. John Temple Graves, a well-known Birmingham journalist and soft opponent of the 1940s Klan, advised his readers to tread softly in opposing the order. 'We must remember,' Graves wrote in the *Birmingham Age-Herald*, 'that in the 1870s the Klan served us as no other organization could... [and] many good citizens also belonged to the Klan when it was revived in the 1920s.' The *Montgomery Advertiser*, an ardent adversary of the New Era KKK, shared in Temple Graves's fond reminiscence of the Reconstruction order. In fact, by 1949 even the *Advertiser* seemed to have forgotten the intensity of its 1920s war against Klan violence. 'To call a man a fellow Klansman in 1927 might be a salutation of fraternity', its editors wrote with obvious respect, 'whereas today [it] would be an insult'.\(^6\)

Many 1920s Klansmen had reached influential positions in government and society by 1949, including Birmingham's mayor and several members of Governor Folsom's administration. At times Alabama police officials openly tolerated and even cooperated with the KKK. In Lanett, police officers used Klan posses as a matter of course to pursue black fugitives. Tuscaloosa's chapter had at least three city policemen in it. Support for the Klan also came from ordinary Alabamians; like the Gardendale woman who compared hooded violence to parental discipline, and another woman who applauded the Klan attack on Mrs Edna McDanal as being carried out by 'god-fearing and god-loving men'.\(^7\)

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Such physical and mental continuity made legal efforts to quash the 1940s Klan difficult at best. Before 1949 was over only a very few in Alabama had begun to appreciate the extent of this dilemma. The *Montgomery Alabama Journal* obviously did:

It's largely a matter of attitude, of courage, of the bravery of men who have charge of law enforcement. That is the main thing needed today. Our state officials have been trifling with the subject for over a year. The whole present executive administration is studded with Klan leaders of yesterday. They have talked and at the same time secretly condoned. We were told a year ago that the law authorities knew all about a notorious Bessemer raid and would soon make arrests and round up the offenders. It was all bosh because cowardly police officials had no intention of offending men who might later produce votes. Alabama got into its present mess because we had no backbone in law enforcement...from the governor on down... [T]his new anti-masking law...means absolutely nothing if the officials continue to sit and let matters take their own course. A mere law is futile in the hands of officials who are Klan-minded...[E]ven laws would be useless so long as there was a great body of citizenship that was Klan-minded. Klan-mindedness include[d] many of those not-Klan members, those who did not wear masks, but were secretly sympathetic with its covert and cowardly methods. Klan-mindedness meant a man could still be a Klansman with all its evils and not wear a mask.56

By the end of the 1940s the Ku Klux Klan had once again sunk its roots deeply into Alabama’s soil. Despite its indifference to other crops, Alabama’s red clay was particularly well-disposed to nurturing the familiar Klan seed. But the Klan of the late 1940s was a hybrid phenomenon sharing qualities of the Reconstruction Klan, the 1920s order, and the post-1954 KKK. Making its postwar appearance first in Georgia, and soon thereafter in Alabama, the 1940s incarnation of the KKK remained essentially a southern phenomenon. It shared this attribute in common with the Klans of the first and second Reconstructions. Like its Reconstruction and 1960s cousins, the 1940s KKK was mainly southern and anti-black. Unlike the Reconstruction version, though, it was far from a strictly rural phenomenon. Although there were outbreaks of activity in rural areas like Clay county, the Klan took root in Montgomery, Mobile, Tuscaloosa, and, most firmly, in the heart of Alabama’s urban mining district, Walker county and Birmingham. Although the 1940s Klan fed on a diet that included the standard African–American staple, like the 1920s order much of its violence was directed at whites who challenged local notions of acceptable moral conduct. The Klan of the late 1940s exhibited the moral authoritarianism of the 1920s Klan, but notably absent was the mainstream, anti-elitist political agenda that had so distinguished the 1920s society in Alabama.57

The 1940s Klan, a kind of hybrid of the 1920s and 1960s versions of the order, also included the racial component that so distinguished the later anti-civil rights programme of the post-1954 Klan. An examination of the KKK

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phenomenon in the immediate post-World War II period does much to cast light upon a phenomenon that may, indeed, have been much more continuous and consistent than Klan scholars have thus far admitted.

Unchecked violence led to a virtual tidal wave of opposition by 1949. The horrors of fascist authoritarianism had been dramatically introduced to a still somewhat naïve America during World War II. Naturally the experience damaged prospects for right-wing extremism here at home. On more than one occasion individual Klansmen fell prey to charges of being nothing more than the American cousins of Hitler’s stormtroopers and Mussolini’s black shirts.

Alabama’s political, civic, religious, business, and veteran’s groups eventually rallied to the standard of Klan opposition. By 1949 the state’s press corps was virtually of one mind in its hatred of Klan activity. But it was not an opposition that was unanimous or even based on a solid foundation. Alabama’s elite opposition was soft in the middle. It was an opposition that, at its core, was aimed at removing any threat of federal intrusion into the South’s affairs generally – and Alabama’s in particular. Such intrusion in the past had upset the social customs and race relations of southerners. And white elites in 1949 Alabama, as in 1874 and 1928, were not about to have their worst Reconstruction nightmares revisited. Still carrying the scars of Reconstruction within their collective memory, many traumatized southerners reflexively and irrationally defended customs in which they had no intrinsic belief or stake – customs like Ku Kluxism – simply because the tradition found itself under siege from without the region. It was, as would become so common in the post-1954 civil rights parlance, under assault from ‘outside agitators’. Fortunately a hyper-sensitive defence of southern traditions at any cost, regardless of personal distaste for the custom in question, proved temporal. So while elites cherished the memories of their grandfathers’ Klan, and retained a congenial recollection of the Klan of their fathers, they battled the Klan of their own time. They set out to crush the Klan of their brothers, lest it destroy the white supremacy that Dixiecrats and less extreme white southerners still stood for.

As could be expected, there were problems with an opposition that was not grounded in a genuine revulsion for the Klan and its doctrines. White victims of the KKK received more attention than blacks. And when the remotest possible scenario actually transpired, blacks donning Klan hoods to terrorize other blacks, the law catapulted into action. Normally such a response would not have been all that noteworthy, but local law enforcement regarding the 1940s Klan was timid at best, conniving and collaborative at worst. While politicians scrambled to pay colourful lip service to the war against the Klan, the campaign of opposition itself petered out. State legislators passed an anti-masking law, one that had been introduced in the 1920s and passed in various

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58 Ralph McGill quoted in Ader, ‘Why the Dixiecrats failed’, p. 369. For background on the racial component of the civil rights movement, see such fine studies as John Dittmer, Local people: the struggle for civil rights in Mississippi (Urbana and Chicago, 1994); Neil R. McMillen, Dark journey: black Mississippians in the age of Jim Crow (Urbana, 1989); and Herbert Shapiro, White violence and black response: from Reconstruction to Montgomery (Amherst, 1988).
townships at that time. But the legislature steadfastly refused to deal a coup de grâce to the order by revoking its charter. The passing of this political hot potato from the governor to the attorney general to legislature and back to the attorney general would have been comical but for the fate of Alabamians of both colours who were being terrorized as the charade went on. A Birmingham grand jury indicted seventeen men on forty-five counts of brutality. Witnesses placed one Klansman at fourteen different floggings. Still, no convictions were forthcoming. A succeeding grand jury declined to indict any members of the sheeted order. And in the single most sensational episode of the period, Alabama’s chief Klansman thumbed his nose at the state’s executive and judicial branches – and got away with it. The upshot of all this disappointment was that the Klan spirit that had dwelled in Alabama since 1866 was left intact. It was never really ever in serious trouble.

The cancer that the Ku Klux Klan had become was left free to oscillate between future periods of remission and activity. Awakened from the dormancy of the war years, it absorbed the meek blows of soft opposition, and waited patiently for a real crisis to brew. In 1954 it got that chance.

Klan revival in the immediate aftermath of World War II was part of a tense situation in the South that saw growing black aspirations for freedom and equality clash with determined white resistance. Violence between the races marred the home front both during the war and soon thereafter. Growing black assertiveness in the voting registration field coincided with the increasing efforts of progressive white politicians who were determined to challenge the age-old political stranglehold of the big mule/black belt alliance. The threat implied by a liberal black/white alliance resulted in a violent backlash from southern white conservatives. The KKK was the purest expression of such a backlash.