Knights of the Golden Circle

In the mid-1850s, doctor and editor George W.L. Bickley formed a secret society of Southern sympathizers in the North, called the Knights of the Golden Circle (KGC), whose avowed purpose was “strengthening the South” and its way of life. Specifically, the KGC sought to protect Southern slaveholder society by increasing its territory, wealth, influence, and power through the conquest of the “Golden Circle”: the lands stretching from the Mexican Gulf Coast to Central America, the northern rim of South America, and the rich, plantation islands dotting the Caribbean. Hailed throughout the South and condemned in the North, the KGC ultimately did little to advance Southern interests, let alone build an empire, but it did contribute to the subversive forces and sectional mistrust that ultimately led to disunion and the Civil War.

Southern slaveholders in the 1850s increasingly feared that a growing North would soon reduce a complacent South to permanent minority status in the Union, and then proceed to destroy slavery and the society built upon it. Southern thinkers responded to this perceived threat with grandiose dreams of an expansive Southern slave empire. After conquering new lands, establishing new plantations, and founding new states and territories, they contended, the South either would dominate the U.S. government or would create an independent Southern confederacy. In either case, the imperiled Southern plantation culture would not only be saved, it would prosper. The notion of Manifest Destiny added to this distinctly Southern expansionist impulse; so did the well-established antebellum tradition of filibustering: the practice of individuals and private armies conquering or attempting to conquer tropical foreign lands that seemed ripe for Southern expansion.

In 1854, the Virginia-born Bickley seized on Southern expansionist desires and created the first KGC “castle” (local chapter) in Cincinnati. He appointed himself president and commander-in-chief of the KGC American Legion. By conquering the gold-and silver-producing provinces of Mexico, along with the sugar-, cotton-, and coffee-producing lands of the Caribbean, Central America, and South America, he contended, the Knights would make the plantation South so enormous, so wealthy, and so powerful, that the free North could never threaten slavery.

By 1860, Bickley was promoting the Knights of the Golden Circle and its cause throughout the South. He encouraged young men to join local castles, asked Southerners to donate $1 for each slave they owned, and claimed a membership of 40,000, including 16,000 in the KGC “army.” In July 1860, Bickley confidently announced plans for the Knights to conquer Mexico, saying that they would make it “Americanized and Southernized” in the process. Southern newspapers, slaveholders, and politicians voiced support for Bickley and the Knights, exacerbating Northern fears that the South was rife with secret, subversive cabals of slaveholders intent on destroying the Union. A few thousand self-described Knights arrived in Texas in the fall of 1860 to invade Mexico. Upon Abraham Lincoln’s presidential election, however, they abandoned their plans of invasion and instead worked to ensure that Texas would join the new Southern confederacy.

Most Knights served the Confederacy during the Civil War, and Northern fears of the secret organization haunted the Ohio Valley and the Midwest. In 1863 and 1864, Republicans charged that Northern Democrats were secretly working with the Knights to win the 1864 elections, end the war, and recognize Confederate independence. Though the KGC was never as numerous or influential as Bickley or his detractors claimed, the powerful myth of the Knights exemplified the aggressive Southern desire to protect Southern culture through conquest and expansion.

John Craig Hammond
Ku Klux Klan

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) is the best known of a number of white supremacist organizations that emerged in the aftermath of the American Civil War. While its primary political purpose was to prevent newly enfranchised black Southerners from electing Republicans to office in the Southern states, the secret organization opposed the exercise of all African American rights—also including land ownership, work opportunities, educational advancement, and social equality—through violence and terror. Like many secret societies, the Klan was bound by an elaborate system of special rites and rituals, ceremonial titles, costumes, gestures, signals, symbols, and oaths. Later iterations of the organization incorporated anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic, and anti-immigration agitation as central elements of their agenda.

The Original Klan

The original Klan was established on Christmas Eve 1865 in the law office of Judge Thomas Jones, in the town of Pulaski, Tennessee, near the Alabama border, by six former officers of the Confederate Army. They originally called the organization Kuklid, from the Greek word _kuklos_, meaning “circle,” which they then shortened to Ku. The words _Klux_ and _Klan_ were added shortly thereafter.

Klan members were embittered by what they viewed as usurpation of white Southerners’ social and political power by the Republican-controlled U.S. Congress, the Freedmen’s Bureau (established by the federal War Department to supervise relief and educational activities for refugees and freedmen), freed slaves, and white carpetbaggers. They vowed to return control of the South to white Southern Democrats.

By the end of the 1860s, the KKK existed in nearly every Southern state. It was most popular in the Piedmont area and counties where the black and white populations were nearly equal—that is, in areas where the struggles for social and political power were most hotly contested. Between 1868 and 1872, the KKK waged a widespread terror campaign in an effort to keep Southern blacks from exercising their rights to vote, own property, hold a job,