

9-2014

# Review: 'One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s'

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## eCommons Citation

Trollinger, William Vance, "Review: 'One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s'" (2014). *History Faculty Publications*. 42.  
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*One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s.* By Thomas R. Pegram. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2011. xvi, 281 pp. \$27.95, ISBN 978-1-56663-711-4.)

In the early 1920s a reborn Ku Klux Klan exploded upon the American scene. While the first Klan focused its hatred on the newly-freed slaves and their Republican supporters, this second Klan offered white Protestant Americans an expanded list of social scapegoats that included Catholics, Jews, and immigrants. While the original KKK was confined to the South, the new version was truly national, with perhaps four million members at its peak. For a few years America was ablaze with burning crosses from coast to coast.

Given its significance, it is remarkable that we have not had a good general history of the second Ku Klux Klan. Until now. In *One Hundred Percent American* Loyola University Maryland professor Thomas Pegram draws upon both his own primary research as well as the plethora of books, articles, and dissertations that have been written on local and state organizations in the past few decades (given the author's assiduous research, it is unfortunate this book lacks a bibliography) to provide us with a nicely readable account of the Klan's rise and fall in the 1920s. In the process he highlights the organization's emphasis on white Protestant supremacy, its efforts to reform public schools and enforce Prohibition, and its efforts to establish itself as a political force at the state and national levels. The chapter on Prohibition is particularly fascinating, as Pegram details how Klansmen engaged in "extralegal" enforcement efforts in a response "to popular and heartfelt concerns that the requirements of the law, even those as imperfect and strongly resented as were the demands of constitutional prohibition, meet with compliance" (156).

In the afterword to *One Hundred Percent American* Pegram nicely delineates the historiographical division in Klan studies between specialists on local and state Klans who portray the KKK (particularly outside the South) as primarily a conventional civic organization, and scholars in the wider academic community who echo Nancy MacLean's argument (in *Beyond*

*the Mask of Chivalry*) that the Klan was motivated not by reform, but by a desire to enforce racist and patriarchal Protestant supremacy. In his telling of the Klan story Pegram seeks to take into account both sides of this divide. According to Pegram, while it is true that the second Klan “attracted the short-term loyalty of many ordinary Americans” with its “community-based features of hooded fellowship, white Protestant identity, and local activism,” KKK extremism – manifested particularly in its incendiary rhetoric and “persistent violence” – combined with the corruption of Klan officials “drove disaffected knights out of the organization halfway through the 1920s.” That is to say, and as he asserts throughout the book, “while the 1920s Klan interacted with the mainstream,” it most certainly was not “a mainstream organization” (xii-xiii).

Really? Given that racial and religious bigotry and hatred of “the other” are significant (albeit unhappy) features of our national story, it is not persuasive nor necessary to place the 1920s Klan and its four million members outside of the mainstream. In point of fact, the second Ku Klux Klan seems as American as apple pie.

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