Tattered Robes: The State of the Ku Klux Klan in the United States

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Despite a persistent ability to attract media attention, organized Ku Klux Klan groups are actually continuing a long-term trend of decline. They remain a collection of mostly small, disjointed groups that continually change in name and leadership. Down slightly from a year ago, there are currently just over thirty active Klan groups in the United States, most of them very small. However, the association of Klan members with criminal activity has remained consistent.

The long-term decline of Ku Klux Klan groups is due to several factors, including increasing societal rejection of what the Klan stands for; a growing perception by white supremacists that Klan groups are outdated; and competition with other white supremacist movements, from racist skinheads to white supremacist prison gangs, over the small pool of potential recruits. In recent years, one of the clearest signs of the declining state of Ku Klux Klan groups has been in their complete inability to maintain anything resembling stability.

More than half of the currently active Klan groups were formed only in the last five years. This is not, as it may first seem, a sign of growth, but rather illustrates how short-lived today's Ku Klux Klan groups actually tend to be. Just some of the recently disbanded Klan groups include the Aryan Nations Knights of the Ku Klux
Klan, the Eastern White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, and the United Dixie White Knights.

While a few longstanding Klan groups still exist, they continue to fade away. Just a decade ago, Klan groups such as the White Camelia Knights, the Mississippi White Knights, and the Church of the National Knights exhibited consistent activity. Today, all three are mere shadows of their former selves. Despite their diminishing numbers, there are still approximately 3,000 Klan members nationwide, as well an additional but unknown number of associates and supporters. Even with relatively small numbers, groups like the North Carolina-based Loyal White Knights (LWK), perhaps the most active Klan group in the United States today, have a fairly expansive geographical reach. In 2015, with just 150-200 members, they were able to draw attention to themselves in 15 different states (mostly in the south and east), typically through fliering, which requires only a single participant.

Other Klan groups are smaller still—often considerably smaller. For example, the Kentucky-based Elders Blood-NBlood Out Knights (EBBOK) consists of just a handful of members. Formed in 2015 by disgruntled members of the LWK who believe the LWK leader, Christopher Barker, had been a federal informant against another Klansman, EBBOK also serves as an example of the fractious and unstable nature of Ku Klux Klan groups.

Many of the newer Klan groups promote a traditional Klan ideology infused with neo-Nazi beliefs, continuing a trend from the early 2000s. EBBOK itself is one of these, its website explaining, “We are a Christian hate group. We are a group unlike other groups. We accept all Nazis and skin heads (sic) cause we have the same beliefs.” Two such Klan groups have already formed in 2016: the Great Lake Knights, based in Alpena, Michigan, and the Pacific Coast Knights of Spokane, Washington.