

## LESSON PLAN

## Lesson 10: Backlash and the KKK

**Essential Question**

What can we learn from the history of Reconstruction as we work to strengthen democracy today?

**Guiding Question**

How should a democratic society respond to violence and terror? What power do bystanders and upstanders have in the response?

**Learning Objectives**

- Students will recognize that significant political and social change often provokes a backlash when portions of the population do not support the change.
- Students will learn that backlash is often rooted in people's fear of losing power and status, or in their belief that others have received undeserved power.
- Students will acknowledge that acts of violence and terror are corrosive to democracy.

**About This Lesson**

In the previous two lessons, students learned about the transformation of American democracy that occurred as a result of Radical Reconstruction, and they explored some of its limitations. In this lesson, students will learn about the violent response these changes provoked from Americans who were opposed to Radical Reconstruction and shocked by the attempt to overthrow white supremacy in Southern society. By learning about the violence and intimidation perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan in the 1860s and early 1870s, students will reflect on the effects that violence and terror can have on the choices made by individuals in a democracy.

**Additional Context and Background**

Lecturing on Reconstruction, historian David Blight argued: "Every revolution we have causes a counter-revolution." Indeed, the unprecedented period of interracial democracy

that occurred after the passage of Radical Reconstruction policies also touched off a determined, violent backlash in the South.

By exploring the first stages of this backlash against interracial democracy, largely carried out by the secretive organization known as the Ku Klux Klan, this lesson probes the nature of violence, the effects of violence and intimidation on democracy, and what it takes to prevent or overcome such a backlash. The history of the Klan in the 1860s and early 1870s and the federal response to its actions together raise important questions about democracy, change, and violence:

- Is backlash inevitable in a time of great change?
- What motivates people to commit acts of violence? What are the roles of hatred, fear, and the loss of power in inspiring violent acts?
- How do the effects of violence and intimidation highlight the fragility of democracy?
- How can a democratic society respond to violence and overcome the effects of terror? What power do bystanders and upstanders have in the response?

### **The Formation of the Ku Klux Klan**

The Ku Klux Klan was a collection of local extremist groups loosely affiliated (rather than centrally planned) around a unity of purpose: white supremacy. According to historian Eric Foner, “The Klan during Reconstruction offers the most extensive example of homegrown terrorism in American history.”<sup>1</sup> First appearing in Tennessee in 1865, the Klan rose to prominence during the 1868 presidential election. Klansmen killed thousands of freedpeople and Republican supporters across the South, and they injured and threatened scores more. They often visited their victims at night, wearing hoods and robes to preserve anonymity and provoke fear.

In this lesson, students will explore what fueled the spread of the Klan and its acts of violence and intimidation. In one document in the lesson, W. E. B. Du Bois offers some provocative insights into the motivation for violence (from his 1935 book on Reconstruction). For Du Bois, hatred and human depravity are not sufficient explanations; he sees in every Klan group a “nucleus of ordinary men” driven by fear—of being “declassed, degraded, or actually disgraced”—and emboldened by the promise of anonymity. Records such as those kept by the US Army Major Lewis Merrill in South Carolina show that, indeed, many business leaders, doctors, lawyers, and other

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Foner, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 171.

prominent community members participated in the Klan. That Merrill was able to keep such documentation suggests that their hoods did not provide Klansmen with quite the level of anonymity they desired.

## **The Effects of Klan Violence**

Regardless of the factors that fueled Klan violence, such attacks countered the spread of democracy during Radical Reconstruction. In the 1868 presidential election, few if any votes were cast for the Republican candidate, Ulysses S. Grant, in many heavily Republican Southern counties where Klan violence took place. Grant won the election anyway, and those who did vote Republican, as Abram Colby testifies in a document in this lesson, often later became Ku Klux Klan targets. The direct effects of violence on the ballot box are clear, but widespread brutality also chipped away at many citizens' confidence in the legitimacy of Republican-led government. As one victim of the Ku Klux Klan declared, "I consider a government that does not protect its citizens a failure."<sup>2</sup> As students will explore in lessons to come, unfounded doubts about the legitimacy and competence of government run by Republicans helped to undermine support for Reconstruction as the 1870s progressed.

## **Responding to Violence**

Few good options existed for Southern states to respond effectively to Klan violence. Many Southern governors were hamstrung in fighting back against Klan violence because their state militias were largely comprised of African Americans. According to historian Michael Perman, these governors were faced with an impossible dilemma: using their militias against the Klan would exacerbate the perception of "Negro rule" fueling much of the violence, but not responding to the violence at all would signal weakness and fuel the belief that their governments were incompetent and illegitimate.<sup>3</sup> The story of Yorkville, South Carolina, raises important questions about the role of bystanders and upstanders in responding to the Klan. As reports of widespread Klan violence around Yorkville reached Washington, Major Lewis Merrill was assigned to the area to monitor conditions there. Skeptical of the dramatic reports of violence he received before arriving, Merrill was shocked by the frequency and ferocity of the Klan brutality he

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in "Illegitimacy and Insurgency in the Reconstructed South," in Michael Perman and Amy M. Taylor, eds., *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction: Documents and Essays*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2011), 456.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in "Illegitimacy and Insurgency in the Reconstructed South," in Michael Perman and Amy M. Taylor, eds., *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction: Documents and Essays*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2011), 456.

witnessed. Without authority to make arrests or use force to stop the violence, Merrill compiled meticulous documentation of Klan activity and was able to identify many of the leaders and perpetrators in his records. He also tried to marshal public opinion against the violence, and succeeded in persuading community leaders to publish a plea for an end to the violence. But many of those who signed the article were Klan members themselves, and the violence did not stop. Merrill continued to gather evidence that would eventually prove critical after the federal government decided to intervene. First, Congress would have to act.<sup>4</sup>

In 1870 and 1871, Congress passed a series of laws known as the Enforcement Acts. The third of these laws is known as the Ku Klux Klan Act, and it, especially, provided the federal government with the power to respond to Klan violence and intimidation. With the passage of this law, according to Eric Foner, “conspiracies to deprive citizens of the right to vote, hold office, serve on juries, and enjoy the equal protection of the laws could now, if states failed to act effectively against them, be prosecuted by federal district attorneys, and even lead to military intervention and the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus.”<sup>5</sup>

This was the first law that enabled the federal government to put individual citizens on trial for a federal crime. Using the powers provided by the Ku Klux Klan Act, President Grant sent federal troops to South Carolina to arrest more than 500 Klansmen in York County alone, based on Merrill’s evidence. Thousands of Klansmen were prosecuted nationwide. While only a small percentage of prosecutions led to convictions and prison sentences, Klan violence dramatically subsided by 1872. Thousands of Klansmen fled their home states and ceased Klan activities to avoid prosecution.

The federal response to the Klan in South Carolina made many Americans uneasy; they worried that the federal government had gone too far in interfering in the affairs of a state. The Ku Klux Klan trials prompted Frederick Douglass to declare, “The law on the side of freedom is of great advantage only when there is power to make that law respected.” In 1872, it remained an open question whether or not the federal government would be willing to exercise such power again.<sup>6</sup> Because so many Klan members avoided prosecution and prison, conditions were ripe for a second wave of violence and backlash later in the 1870s.

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Budiansky, *The Bloody Shirt: Terror After the Civil War* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 107–46.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, Perennial Classics ed. (HarperCollins, 2002), 454–55.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, Perennial Classics ed. (HarperCollins, 2002), 457–58.

## Notes to the Teacher

### 1. Teaching Emotionally Challenging Content

In this lesson, students will encounter emotionally challenging content, including depictions of violence. Consider briefly reviewing the class contract with students before beginning the lesson. This will help reinforce the norms you have established and reinforce the classroom as a safe space for students to voice concerns, questions, or emotions that may arise.

### 2. Preparing Students for a Big Paper Activity

Activity 2 on Day 2 uses the [Big Paper](#) teaching strategy, which we encourage you to familiarize yourself with before teaching the lesson. Note that for students to have a totally silent conversation with the text and with each other, you must provide very clear and explicit instructions for students prior to the start of the activity and answer any questions in advance. To get a sense of the final product for a Big Paper activity, refer to this [Big Paper example](#) on Facing History's website.

### 3. Teaching Strategies

These teaching strategies are referenced in this lesson's activities. You may wish to familiarize yourself with them before teaching this lesson.

- [Wraparound](#)
- [Big Paper](#)
- [Iceberg Diagrams](#)

## Materials

- **Video:** [Violence and Backlash](#)
- **Reading:** Klansmen Broke My Door Open
- **Reading:** A Nucleus of Ordinary Men
- **Reading:** Collaborators and Bystanders
- **Reading:** Protecting Democracy
- **Handout:** Analyzing the Causes of Klan Violence

## Activities

### Day 1

## 1. Reflect on the Experience of Confronting Violence in Society

Before beginning the lesson, briefly review the class contract with students. This will help to reinforce the norms you have established and reinforce the classroom as a safe space for students to voice concerns, questions, or emotions that may arise. Begin this lesson by prompting students to write a short reflection in response to the following question:

Write about a time when you learned about an incident of violence in your community, in the news, or in history. How did it make you feel? What did you need to do to process it or understand it? What impact did it have on you and those around you?

After students have spent a few minutes recording their thoughts, ask for volunteers to share their thoughts. We suggest that you make sharing optional, in case students have written about experiences they prefer to keep personal.

## 2. Watch the Video “Violence and Backlash”

The clip from the video [Violence and Backlash](#) (0:0–9:40) provides an overview of two different periods of violence during the Reconstruction era, and it helps students distinguish between the vigilante violence of the Ku Klux Klan—which was largely ended by federal law enforcement—and the paramilitary violence that erupted later in the 1870s and played a key role in ending the period of Radical Reconstruction. Before showing the video, share the following questions with students to guide their note taking:

1. According to the scholars in the video, what were the perpetrators of violence reacting to during Reconstruction?
2. What was the Ku Klux Klan? What were the Klan’s goals?
3. What can you infer from the video about the goals of *political violence*? What examples of political violence does the video provide?

## 3. Read and Respond to “The Klansmen Broke My Door Open”

In the reading **Klansmen Broke My Door Open**, Freedman Abram Colby provides firsthand testimony about the violence and terror inflicted on Black Southerners by the Ku Klux Klan in the late 1860s and early 1870s. It is important to give students time, space, and structure to process this story both individually and together.

Distribute **Klansmen Broke My Door Open** and read it aloud once as a whole group. Then give students time to reread the document. As they do so, have them

record the following in their journals:

- One sentence from the document that they find surprising, interesting, or troubling
- One word that describes their experience reading this testimony

Process the document as a whole group using the [Wraparound](#) strategy.

Start with the sentences students recorded. One at a time, have students share their sentences. It often works best to have students simply respond in the order in which they are sitting. This way, you do not have to call on students to respond; once their neighbor has had a turn, students know it is their turn to present. Be sure to tell students not to say anything except the sentence they identified, because otherwise the activity will lose the desired effect. It is okay if the same sentence is read more than one time.

After everyone has shared, you can ask students to report back on common themes that have emerged or on something that surprised them. Repeat the activity a second time, asking students to read the word they wrote down to describe their experience reading the testimony.

#### **4. Allow Students to Process their Learning**

Before ending the period, ask students to briefly complete an exit card. Pass out index cards to each student and ask them to record one comment, question, or connection that they have about what they learned and experienced in class today. Collect the cards as they leave class.

### **Day 2**

#### **1. Acknowledge Exit Cards**

Begin by acknowledging the exit cards that students completed at the end of the previous lesson. Point out any patterns that you noticed in the students' comments, and address any questions you received that might pertain to the experiences of the class as a whole. Unless you have permission from students, it is usually best to keep anonymous the authors of any specific exit card comments you discuss.

#### **2. Explore Sources about Klan Violence**

In this activity, students will examine sources related to Klan violence using the [Big Paper](#) silent discussion strategy. (See Teaching Note 1 to prepare for the Big Paper activity.)

- Divide the class into groups of three or four and prepare a piece of chart paper for each group with one of the following readings taped in the middle:
  - **A Nucleus of Ordinary Men**
  - **Collaborators and Bystanders**
  - **Protecting Democracy**
- Make sure that each student has a pen or marker to write with, and then give them eight minutes to have a written discussion about their assigned handout in complete silence. The following question can help guide their discussion: *How does this document help you understand the factors that made Ku Klux Klan violence possible and acceptable to so many Americans as a reaction to Reconstruction and interracial democracy?*
- The written conversation should start with students' responses to these questions, but it can continue wherever the students take it. Students should feel free to annotate the text. If someone in the group writes a question, another member of the group should answer it. Students can draw lines connecting a comment to a particular question. Make sure students know that more than one of them can write on the Big Paper at the same time.
- After the ten minutes, rotate each group to a different "big paper" and give them two or three minutes to read the document and the written conversation on that paper. They can add new comments and questions if they have them. Then rotate the groups one more time, making sure that each group has seen each of the three handouts at least once.

### 3. Diagram the Causes of Klan Violence

To help students consolidate what they have learned and sharpen their reflections on the causes and nature of Ku Klux Klan violence as a backlash to Reconstruction, use the [Iceberg Diagrams](#) strategy. Draw an iceberg diagram (or project the handout **Analyzing the Causes of Klan Violence**) on the board. Lead the class through the following steps to fill in the diagram:

- Introduce the metaphor:** Ask students what they know about icebergs or show them a picture of an iceberg, focusing on the idea that what you see above the water is only the tip of the iceberg. The larger foundation rests below the surface.
- The tip of the iceberg:** In or around the tip of the iceberg, ask students to list all the facts they know about Ku Klux Klan violence in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Questions they should answer include: What happened? What choices were made in this situation? By whom? Who was affected? When did



it happen? Where did it happen? Write the ideas supplied by the class on the diagram on the board.

- c. **Beneath the surface:** Ask students to think about what factors caused or enabled Klan violence. Answers to the question *What factors made Ku Klux Klan violence possible and acceptable to so many Americans as a reaction to Reconstruction and interracial democracy?* should be written in the bottom part of the iceberg (under the water line). Consider letting students discuss possible answers to this question in pairs or small groups.
- d. **Debrief:** Prompts you might use to guide journal writing and/or class discussion include:
  - Of the causes listed in the bottom part of the iceberg, which were corroborated by more than one document? Were any mentioned in one document and then contradicted in another?
  - Of the causes listed in the bottom part of the iceberg, which one or two do you think were most significant? Why?
  - What more would you need to know to better understand the factors that made Klan violence possible?
  - What could have happened, if anything, to prevent the rise of Ku Klux Klan violence?

You might also pass out copies of **Analyzing the Causes of Klan Violence** to students (or have them draw iceberg diagrams in their notebooks) so that they can fill in their own diagrams as you guide them through the steps. If class time is short, students can complete their iceberg diagrams for homework.