NONFICTION

# The President vs. the Klan

A new history by Fergus M. Bordewich examines Ulysses S. Grant's battle against white supremacist terror.

By Jennifer Szalai
Oct. 11, 2023, 5:01 a.m. ET

As portents go, little could be more ominous than what took place on the evening of March 4, 1873, at the inaugural gala for President Ulysses S. Grant's second term. A cavernous wooden structure had been built for the event. Hundreds of canaries had been brought in to serenade the guests, who were treated to a lavish spread of party food — partridges and oysters, boars' heads and lobsters. But one crucial element had been bizarrely overlooked: The room wasn't heated. The food started to freeze. By the time Grant and his entourage arrived, some of the canaries had keeled over, "falling like little lumps of frozen yellow fruit on the diners and dancers below."

This dramatic image shows up in the last quarter of Fergus M. Bordewich's "Klan War," a vivid and sobering account of Grant's efforts to crush the Klan in the South. The book traces an arc that seemed to bend toward justice before it got twisted again. After his first term, "the president could credibly claim he had broken the back of the Ku Klux Klan," Bordewich writes. But the dead canaries, which punctuate a chapter titled "Grant Triumphant," are a grim clue that the victory will not last. When Grant began his second term, the will and the money to fight white supremacist terror had already started to ebb.

"Klan War" is another addition to a growing shelf of books taking another look at the period after the Civil War known as Reconstruction. For much of the 20th century, W.E.B. Du Bois's "Black Reconstruction in America" and John Hope Franklin's "Reconstruction After the Civil War" were outliers in a historiography dominated by works that cast Reconstruction as a time of corruption and misrule. Historians like Eric Foner have since depicted Reconstruction as an attempt to establish a multiracial democracy before it was overturned by Southern backlash and Northern lassitude. Recent books like Kidada E. Williams's "I Saw Death Coming," longlisted this year for the National Book Award, tells the story of Reconstruction from the perspective of Black Southerners who were terrorized by the Klan.

Bordewich, the author of several histories of the Civil War era, focuses on Grant's antiterror policies, conveying the panoply of factors that led to their initial success and, later, to their tragic demise. In its early days in Pulaski, Tenn., the Ku Klux Klan was a bunch of ex-Confederate buffoons who "mainly practiced a sort of comic street theater," he writes. Klansmen would turn up in preposterous attire, affecting grandiose titles like "Grand Magi" and "Grand Cyclops" and communicate by means of hand signals and what sounded like gibberish. The clowning soon became sinister, however. The Klansmen took pleasure in scaring newly freed Black people, whom they menaced for the "insolence" of exercising their rights. What seemed at first like silliness turned into a sustained campaign of brutality and murder. By 1868, Klan terror had spread throughout the South.

"Racist foolery became floggings and beatings, and then lynchings and shootings, often of savage cruelty, accompanied by systematic torture, burnings, castrations and sexual humiliation," Bordewich writes. The Klansmen themselves habitually brushed off such grotesque violence as the "excesses" of a few "reckless" members, but Bordewich documents how Grant and his administration came to learn that the sadism was orchestrated and deliberate. This was "terror as an instrument of political control."

But Grant's education took some time. Several months after the end of the Civil War, when he was still commander of the armed forces, Grant gave a reassuring report on the South to President Andrew Johnson, who was seeking a "healing policy" and swift return to "affection." A more damning report was written by a former Union general named Carl Schurz, who noted that white Southerners were largely unrepentant after all the bloodshed, clinging to the delusional belief that "their civilization was the highest that could be attained." Bordewich describes how Johnson suppressed Schurz's report in favor of "Grant's whitewash."

Grant and Schurz would later come to switch ideological places, with President Grant pursuing the Klan with the power of the federal government while Schurz — as a Senator from Missouri and one of the "Liberal Republicans" who rejected the more forceful agenda of the Radical Republicans — insisted that federal enforcement of Reconstruction was an intolerable infringement on states' rights. Bordewich suggests that Schurz's about-face had less to do with cynical opportunism than squishy centrism: "Optimism and faith in the basic decency of human beings were his greatest strengths and, perhaps, equally great weaknesses." Schurz, though, wasn't so high-minded that he was above being thin-skinned. The Radical attitude toward Liberals like himself was, he complained, "a sort of terrorism."

For the most part, Bordewich's narrative hews closely to the historical period, showing how federal power was the only way to stamp out local regimes that countenanced the suffering of Black people while allowing white perpetrators to go unpunished. For all their cries about "states' rights," the Klan was unabashedly antidemocratic. Some Black Southerners, especially those who survived attacks or witnessed the violence firsthand, decided that they couldn't bear the extreme risk of simply exercising their franchise. Bordewich includes some heart-rending testimony from freedmen who were too

terrified to go to the ballot box. As one Black man put it, “I had to deny voting to save myself.”

Toward the end of the book, Bordewich gestures toward the fractured political landscape of the present day. Grant’s victory over the Klan is a story that many Americans would like to tell themselves, but the retrenchment that followed is a cautionary tale. A premature push for conciliation and compromise can leave the roots of some very old pathologies untouched, ready to grow again when the conditions are right. “Barbarism,” Bordewich writes, “may lie only a small distance beneath the skin of civilization.”