

Hiram W. Evans, also known as Hiram Wesley Evans, was one of the most important leaders of the second Ku Klux Klan, the version of the Klan that rose in the early 1900s. He served as the Klan's Imperial Wizard, meaning national leader, from the 1920s until 1939. Before becoming a Klan leader, he was a dentist in Dallas, Texas. That detail matters because Evans was not presented as an outlaw hiding in the woods. He represented something more dangerous: the way white supremacy could dress itself up as respectable, educated, patriotic, religious, and middle-class.

To understand Evans, we have to understand the second Klan. The first Ku Klux Klan formed after the Civil War during Reconstruction. That first Klan used violence to terrorize newly freed Black people and destroy Black political power. The second Klan, which began in 1915, still carried white supremacist beliefs, but it expanded its message. It attacked Black people, Catholics, Jews, immigrants, and anyone it claimed was a threat to "true Americanism." Evans helped make this version of the Klan appear less like a secret terrorist group and more like a national social and political movement. That was part of the danger.

Evans rose to power by pushing aside William J. Simmons, the founder of the second Klan. Under Evans, the Klan became more organized, more public, and more ambitious. It held parades, published messages, recruited widely, and tried to influence elections, schools, churches, courts, and local governments. Evans understood that power was not only found in violence. Power was also found in image, membership, money, fear, politics, and public acceptance.

The deeper truth is that Evans tried to make hate look normal. He did not simply say, "We hate." He wrapped Klan beliefs in words like Americanism, Christianity, morality, law and order, and tradition. This is important because destructive movements often do not introduce themselves as evil. They introduce themselves as protectors. They claim they are protecting families, religion, women, children, the nation, or "the old way of life." Evans used that kind of language to make white supremacy sound like patriotism.

That is one of the main lessons of Hiram W. Evans: racism does not always come dressed in obvious cruelty. Sometimes it comes dressed in a suit. Sometimes it speaks politely. Sometimes it quotes religion. Sometimes it waves the flag. Sometimes it uses fear of change to gain followers. Evans showed how hate can become more powerful when it learns how to sound respectable.

The second Klan under Evans was not only anti-Black. It was also strongly anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish, anti-immigrant, and anti-modern in many ways. It appealed especially to many white Protestants who feared that America was changing. Cities were growing. Immigrants were arriving. Women were gaining more public freedom. Black people were still fighting for rights. New music, movies, and cultural changes were spreading. Evans used these fears and turned them into a political weapon.

Evans and the Klan claimed they were defending “real America.” But what they really meant was a country controlled by white, native-born, Protestant power. Their idea of America did not include equal citizenship for everyone. It was an America where Black people were kept beneath white people, immigrants were treated as threats, Catholics and Jews were treated as outsiders, and white Protestant identity was placed at the center of national life.

This is why Evans is important historically. He shows that white supremacy was not only a Southern issue and not only a rural issue. The second Klan grew across the country. It had influence in the Midwest, West, and North as well as the South. Klan members included politicians, police officers, ministers, businessmen, teachers, and ordinary citizens. That means the Klan was not only a fringe group. In the 1920s, it became part of mainstream American life in many places.

Evans helped lead one of the Klan’s most public moments: the large Klan march in Washington, D.C., in 1925. Tens of thousands of Klansmen marched openly through the nation’s capital. That image matters. It showed that the Klan was not always hiding. It wanted to be seen. It wanted to send a message that it had numbers, confidence, and national influence. The Library of Congress identifies a 1926 photograph of Evans leading Klansmen in a Washington parade, showing how publicly the Klan tried to display itself.

Evans also wrote and spoke about the Klan’s beliefs. One of his well-known writings was “The Klan’s Fight for Americanism” in 1926. In it, he presented the Klan as a defender of American identity. But beneath that language was a worldview built on exclusion and racial hierarchy. The American Yawp describes Evans’s message as a combination of Americanism, Protestantism, and white supremacy.

The real understanding is this: Evans was not just leading men in robes. He was trying to build a social order. He wanted the Klan to shape who counted as truly American. He wanted the Klan to influence voting, law enforcement, education, immigration, religion, and culture. He understood that if you can control the definition of “normal,” you can control people without always needing open violence.

This does not mean violence disappeared under Evans. The Klan still carried the legacy and threat of racial terror. Even when leaders tried to present the Klan as respectable, the organization’s power was rooted in intimidation. A robe, a cross burning, a public march, a threat, a boycott, a beating, or a political campaign could all serve the same purpose: to make targeted people feel unsafe and powerless.

Evans also shows us how dangerous propaganda can be. Propaganda means organized messages designed to shape people’s beliefs, often by using fear, pride, anger, and half-truths. Evans used the idea that white Protestant Americans were under attack. That kind of message gave ordinary people permission to see their neighbors as enemies. Once people believe they are defending civilization, they can justify cruelty.

Another important truth is that Evans's Klan depended on people wanting simple answers to complicated problems. Economic change, immigration, racial conflict, urban growth, and cultural change made many people anxious. Instead of telling people the truth about those complex issues, the Klan gave them scapegoats. A scapegoat is a person or group blamed for problems they did not truly cause. Black people, Jews, Catholics, immigrants, and others became targets because blaming them helped the Klan gather power.

Evans also understood money. The Klan was not only an ideology. It was a business-like organization with dues, recruitment, robes, titles, and internal power struggles. Leaders could gain influence and wealth through membership growth. This matters because hateful movements often mix belief with profit. People can make money from fear. They can sell identity. They can sell belonging. They can sell anger.

Eventually, the Klan's power declined. Scandals, internal corruption, public backlash, violence, lawsuits, and political changes weakened the organization. Evans resigned in 1939, and James A. Colescott became the next Imperial Wizard. Evans died in 1966.

The deeper lesson of Hiram W. Evans is that evil systems do not survive by violence alone. They survive when they gain social permission. They survive when people call hatred "tradition." They survive when churches stay quiet. They survive when schools avoid the truth. They survive when politicians benefit from fear. They survive when ordinary people say, "That is just how things are."

Evans matters because he shows how white supremacy adapted after Reconstruction. The first Klan used terror after slavery. The second Klan used terror too, but it also used public relations, patriotism, religion, politics, and mass membership. It tried to become part of normal American life. That made it especially dangerous.

The full nature of Hiram W. Evans is this: he was a man who helped modernize and nationalize organized hatred. He took the Klan's older spirit of racial terror and dressed it in the language of American identity. He helped make exclusion sound patriotic. He helped make bigotry sound moral. He helped make white Protestant domination sound like national protection.

To study Evans honestly is not to honor him. It is to understand the machinery of hate. It is to see how dangerous it is when fear becomes organized, when racism becomes respectable, when religion is used to excuse oppression, and when national identity is used to decide who deserves dignity.

The lesson for us is clear: we must be careful whenever any movement says that only one kind of person is the "real" citizen, the "real" believer, the "real" patriot, or the "real" American. That kind of thinking has been used many times to justify cruelty. Hiram W. Evans teaches us that hate becomes most dangerous when it stops looking like hate and starts looking like virtue.

