

D.W. Griffith's 'The Birth of a Nation,' Hollywood, and the KKK

by Mark Calney

This speech was delivered to a conference of the Schiller Institute and International Caucus of Labor Committees on March 21, in Northern Virginia.

On the evening of March 24, three days from now, PBS television will premiere a documentary entitled "D.W. Griffith: Father of Film." The highlight of this fawning tribute to Griffith is his film "The Birth of a Nation."

This is occurring at the same time that a fight has broken out, led by the NAACP, to prevent the U.S. Library of Congress from placing "The Birth of a Nation" into its prestigious National Film Registry, while citing the film for its "historical, cultural, and aesthetic significance." NAACP Chairman Dr. William Gibson has recently stated the NAACP position:

"We do not believe in censorship, and therefore accept the idea of preserving the film for future scholars, historians, and educators. We feel the film can be preserved, however, without adding it to the National Film Registry or cloaking it in any mantle of distinction or honor. Those who view this D.W. Griffith work must be fully aware of what this film was and what it was meant to be—a distorted, dishonest, propaganda recruiting vehicle for the Ku Klux Klan members and sympathizers."

The release of D.W. Griffith's 1915 motion picture "The Birth of a Nation"—originally titled "The Clansman"—was that vehicle which created two closely related phenomena: 1) the revival of the Ku Klux Klan as a mass-based organization in the United States, and 2) the establishment of Hollywood as the new Babylon of modern culture. Hollywood, as an institution, did not begin as some innocent collection of "artsy" filmmakers which somehow were taken over and corrupted in recent times. It was rotten from its very inception!

"The Birth of a Nation" presented a rewriting of the actual history of Reconstruction by the same Confederate traitors against whom the war had been fought. It portrayed African-Americans in the post-Civil War South as depraved, lascivious beasts whose rampant lawlessness and alleged domination of the South—through military force, and control of the courts and state legislatures—threatened to destroy "Southern civilization" and "mongrelize the races." The film glorifies the lynchings and reign of terror carried out by the new,

secret order of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

These twin evils—Hollywood and the KKK—come from the circle of elite Anglo-Americans who were the direct heirs, philosophically and often physically, of the old Confederacy. And, they are the same treasonous scoundrels who organized the entry of the United States into the First World War on the side of the British Empire, and the establishment of the Versailles System at the end of that war.

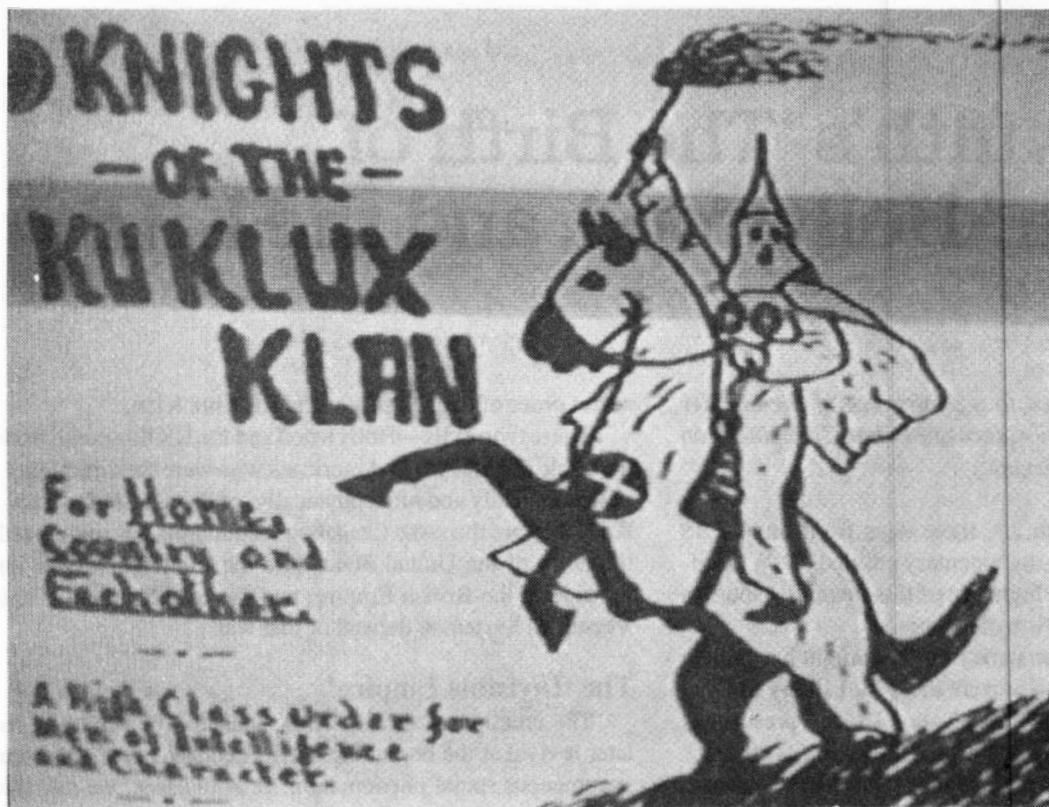
The 'Invisible Empire'

The creation of the Ku Klux Klan in 1865-67, and its later revival at the beginning of this century, were not some spontaneous social phenomenon. In both cases, we find the guiding hand of those individuals and institutions, such as the Scottish Rite Masonic Order, who have always opposed the republican principles upon which the United States of America was founded.

The initiating ceremony reviving the Klan occurred on Thanksgiving Eve of 1915 atop Stone Mountain, just outside Atlanta, Georgia, when a small group of men, which included former members of the original Klan, followed the new Klan leader, Col. William J. Simmons, in a cross-burning ritual. That spectacle coincided with the opening presentation of "The Birth of a Nation" one week later in Atlanta. Announcements of the film debut in the local newspaper were accompanied by Colonel Simmons's proclamation of the establishment of the new Invisible Empire of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.

"The Birth of a Nation" was literally a recruitment film for the KKK, and the target of its revival was not principally the South, but was the old Union strongholds of the North. Griffith's two hour and 45 minute motion picture brazenly promoted the ideas of white race supremacy. This dovetailed with the ongoing British Empire campaign of eugenics, so-called race science, which found its most enthusiastic sponsors among such Anglo-American financiers as John D. Rockefeller and Averell Harriman. The central theme of "Anglo-Saxon Supremacy" was the vehicle used to recruit large numbers of members into the Klan in the North.

By 1923, the highwater mark of Ku Klux Klan recruitment, the Klan's active membership was estimated at 1.5 million. The total number of members enrolled from 1915 to



A clip from D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation." The U.S. Library of Congress has placed the film into its prestigious National Film Registry, citing its "historical, cultural, and aesthetic significance."

1944 has been estimated at over 2 million. The majority of Klan members were in the Northern states, with the largest base of support in any one city being Chicago, with 20 Klan chapters totaling 50,000 members.

'The Clansman'

D.W. Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation" was based on a 1905 book written by Thomas Dixon, Jr. titled *The Clansman—An Historic Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, and which he dedicated to the memory of "A Scottish-Irish leader of the South, My Uncle, Colonel Leroy McTee, Grand Titan of the Ku Klux Klan."

Dixon considered himself the great defender of the Anglo-Saxon race, claiming that "the beginning of Negro equality is the beginning of the end of this nation's life."

Thomas Dixon, Jr. was born in Shelby, North Carolina during the Civil War in 1864. In the 1880s, Dixon attended Johns Hopkins University. While there he became a close friend of another Southerner, a Virginian by the name of Woodrow Wilson, who would play an important role in the future of "The Birth of a Nation."

It was as a Baptist minister that Dixon first achieved national fame. He formed a non-denominational "People's Church" in downtown Manhattan, where he first caught the eye of John D. Rockefeller, who talked of building him a great tabernacle. In 1899, he turned to public lecturing and wrote his racist trilogy of novels. The first, *The Leopard's*

Spots, subtitled *A Romance of the White Man's Burden 1865-1900*, written in 1902, concluded that peace could only be achieved through the separation of the races.

Reverend Dixon submitted his manuscript of *The Leopard's Spots* for publication to an old friend from North Carolina—Walter Hines Page—who had become the co-owner of the New York publishing firm of Doubleday, Page, and Company. A virulent Confederate Anglophile who as a child had witnessed Sherman's army march past his North Carolina home, Page later became U.S. ambassador to Great Britain under President Woodrow Wilson, and played a critical role in organizing the American entry into World War I on the side of the British.

Page eagerly published Dixon's book, which sold more than 100,000 copies in the first three months of its release. The publication of *The Clansman* in 1905 outsold Dixon's first two books, and was produced as a play.

In 1906, Dixon's other racist novel, *The One Woman*, was rewritten by him as a play. He asked a then little-known actor to perform the lead role: D.W. Griffith.

Who was D.W. Griffith?

David Wark Griffith was born on a small farm near Louisville, Kentucky in 1875. His father, Jacob Wark Griffith, at the outbreak of the Civil War, joined the Confederate Army and became a colonel. After the surrender of Robert E. Lee at Appomattox, the Confederate secretary of state, John C.

Breckinridge, assigned Col. Jacob Griffith the ill-fated task of attempting to secretly escort the former President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, to a safehouse in Kentucky, in hopes of continuing the existence of the Confederate government.

During the filming of "The Birth of a Nation," Griffith would brag that his father had ridden with the Ku Klux Klan.

As a young man, D.W. Griffith moved to Louisville, where he began to undertake an acting career and where he joined the Masons.

By 1913, Griffith was the head of production and film director for Mutual Film Production, owned by Harry and Roy Aitken, and had already begun to shoot films during the winter months in Hollywood, California.

In 1914, Griffith and an associate, film critic Frank Woods, obtained the copyright for the motion picture production of Thomas Dixon's book *The Clansman*. Griffith told the story in his autobiography:

"One fortunate day he [Woods] brought a book to me. It was *The Clansman* by Thomas Dixon. I skipped quickly through the book until I got to the part about the Klansmen, who, according to no less than Woodrow Wilson, ran to the rescue of the downtrodden South after the Civil War. I could just see these Klansmen in a movie with their white robes flying."

In addition to hiring the Rev. Thomas Dixon to help draft the script, Griffith drew heavily on Woodrow Wilson's *A History of the American People* for the written dialogue of the movie.

Shooting of "The Clansman" started on July 4, 1914, on Griffith's studio lot on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood.

Griffith also oversaw production of the monumental musical score to accompany the silent picture. He contracted a popular composer, Joseph Carl Breil, to write the score for the film. One of Breil's songs was later published as "The Perfect Song," which became the theme song for the racist radio show "Amos 'n Andy."

The music was written for a 40-piece orchestra with an offstage chorus and sound effects. In addition to the use of popular Civil War songs, the musical accompaniment drew heavily from Richard Wagner. Wagner, a worse anti-Semite than Adolf Hitler and an Anglo-Saxon "race patriot" in his own right, was appropriately used in providing the music of his "Ride of the Valkyries" for the "Klan Ride."

The official premiere of D.W. Griffith's "The Clansman" took place on Feb. 8, 1915 in Los Angeles. The opening, however, was not greeted with open arms by everyone. The small local chapter of the Los Angeles NAACP had gone into court in an attempt to obtain an injunction against the showing of the film. The legal argument employed, which was to be used subsequently by other NAACP chapters around the nation, was based on the grounds that exhibiting the film would be a threat to public safety by heightening racial tensions that could incite violence and possible rioting.



Publicity photo of D.W. Griffith, for WNET's March 24 production of "D.W. Griffith: Father of Film."

The NAACP was only able to obtain a meaningless injunction which just cancelled the first matinee showing.

Mr. Griffith goes to Washington

Less than two weeks after its Los Angeles premiere, "The Clansman" was to open in New York City. After a private showing to a select group in New York, including Thomas Dixon, it was decided that the name of the film ought to be "The Birth of a Nation," a subtitle which had been used in advertising the film. However, simply changing the name on Griffith's cinematic bottle of poison was not deemed adequate by the film's creators and promoters to stave off the expected adverse public reaction to such an explicit display of Confederate treason. Therefore, it was decided that before the film's public opening, it would be wise to garner endorsements for the film by some of America's more "respectable" establishment figures.

Thinking big, Mr. Griffith and his KKK road show headed for Washington, D.C. Reverend Dixon wrote a letter to his old friend from Johns Hopkins University, now President Woodrow Wilson, requesting a half-hour interview, which the President granted. As a result, on Feb. 18, 1915, "The Clansman" became the first motion picture ever to be shown

in the White House. Wilson's comment after viewing the film was: "It is like writing history with Lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." This quote was quickly put into general circulation to promote the picture.

Then it was on to the U.S. Supreme Court, where Reverend Dixon, during a private meeting, discovered that the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Edward White, had been a member of the old Ku Klux Klan. White and other Supreme Court justices, as well as select congressmen and others, attended a private showing of "The Birth of a Nation."

After the New York premiere of "The Birth of a Nation" on March 3, 1915, the newspaper reviews of essentially all the major press side-stepped the racial controversy and only had praise for the film. Typical was the Hearst *Evening Journal*, which wrote: "First of all, children must be sent to see this masterpiece. Any parent who neglects this advice is committing an educational offense, for no film has ever produced more educational points than Griffith's latest achievement."

During the filming of "The Birth of a Nation," someone had mentioned to Griffith that if the film was ever shown in Atlanta, the result would be a race riot. To which Griffith prophetically replied: "I hope to God they do!"

In most of the northern cities where "The Birth of a Nation" was scheduled to be shown, political fights exploded, and some small riots did occur in Philadelphia, Boston, and elsewhere.

The NAACP and others attempted to seek either a banning of the film completely, or to force the editing-out of the most egregious racist scenes. For the most part, those attempts were futile. Endless hearings were held before city mayors, state legislatures, city councils, and state and city censorship boards across the country.

The hearings became public platforms for the pro-Griffith lobby to pronounce the alleged virtues of eugenics. Griffith's lawyer, Martin W. Littleton, told New York City Mayor Mitchell that the film was a "protest against the mongrel mixture of black and white." Griffith would insist until his dying day that "The Birth of a Nation" was the gospel truth.

In self-righteous indignation, Griffith authored a mass pamphlet entitled, "The Rise and Fall of Free Speech," which argued against attempts to censor his film. His letters and articles were printed in newspapers across the country. In one case he prophetically envisioned the future use of film and the creation of today's video culture. He stated that "the next generation will be wedded to the movies. You will not be able to satisfy them with anything else." He envisioned the elimination of libraries of books and historical researchers, to be replaced by a priesthood of cinema "experts," such as himself.

Griffith's next cinema project—"Intolerance"—was his answer to his critics. The film is truly masonic in theme and content. The focus of the film's substance and production costs were devoted to depicting ancient Babylon, which Grif-

fith titles: "The first known court of justice in the world."

Ten acres of Hollywood were literally converted into a mock-up of the most evil citadel of ancient history. Movie sets of the towering walls of Babylon, atop which two chariots could pass, dominated the skyline. Satan worship and the most graphic violence imaginable are what Griffith threw in the faces of the American public. Fortunately, they weren't buying, and the film was a flop.

Today, Griffith's Babylon set is the location of ABC's television studios.

Hollywood: mother of harlots

"The Birth of a Nation," however, was a monumental box office smash, and as one of the actresses, Lillian Gish, later stated in an interview: "They lost track of the money it was making. But it started all the fortunes of Louie B. Mayer—all the people in films." At a time when the average entrance fee to a movie theater was 15¢, the admission cost to "The Birth of a Nation" was \$2. In some cities, like Boston and Chicago, it ran continuously for almost a year. At one point, there were 28 companies touring the film in the U.S., Europe, South Africa, and Australia. Estimates of the total box office take vary anywhere from \$50 million to over \$100 million. The cost of production, advertising, and duplicate prints was less than \$100,000.

It became apparent to all that there were big profits to be made in motion pictures. So, the floodgates of fast-buck artists, common criminals, and Wall Street investors opened and poured into the small town of Hollywood.

Felix Kahn, one of the early investors in "The Birth of a Nation," sold his large New York theater to Paramount, and became a member of its board of directors. It was through Felix that Paramount's owner, Adolph Zukor, met his brother Otto Kahn, a partner in the Warburg financial firm of Kuhn, Loeb and Co. By 1919, Zukor had arranged a \$10 million loan from Kuhn, Loeb through Otto Kahn, and created the Paramount film empire.

Warner Brothers became a major studio with the 1925 investments made by Goldman, Sachs and Co.

The man who became the movie mogul of Columbia Pictures, Harry Cohn, was a notorious lecher and an ardent devotee of the Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. Cohn made a documentary of "Il Duce" and accepted an invitation to visit him in Rome. Upon his return to Hollywood, he decorated his office to match that of Mussolini and kept a photograph of Mussolini on his desk, even through World War II.

Harry Cohn was not the only member of the Hollywood Mussolini fan club. In 1924, upon his return from Italy, D.W. Griffith told the New York press corps:

"Mussolini is a great man. With the allegiance of youth behind him, he could do great things. Who knows but that he may be a Napoleon who'll sweep the world. . . . I believe that anything may happen as a result of this fascism. I should

like to put into a film the remarkable spirit of the *fascisti*.”

I will save the case of Louis B. Mayer until later.

World War I and the royal family

Not long after the re-election of Woodrow Wilson in 1916, Griffith was summoned by the President to the White House to discuss the possibility of Griffith's going to England to make a propaganda film to support the Allied cause against Germany in the Great War.

On March 17, 1917, Griffith set sail for London. Upon arriving, he presided over the London premiere of "Intolerance," and gave a private showing to the royal family at Buckingham Palace.

A meeting was arranged for Griffith at 10 Downing Street with Prime Minister David Lloyd George, at which the prime minister informed Griffith that he had "the greatest power in his hands for the control of men's minds that the world had ever seen," and that he should seriously undertake Winston Churchill's ideas for film scenarios to promote the war effort. "I want you to go to work for France and England and make up America's mind to go to war with us," Lloyd George told the director. Griffith, of course, readily accepted, and with the financial backing of the French and British governments, he was soon in France with his troupe to film "Hearts of the World."

On April 6, the United States joined the British Empire and declared war on Germany.

The film's portrayal of the German "Huns" as beasts, not unlike his portrayal of blacks in "The Birth of a Nation," would have an effect in shaping the postwar climate of the Versailles Treaty.

The high point of Griffith's tour in Great Britain was a formal audience at Buckingham Palace with the Queen and Queen Mother Alexandra. Griffith would later constantly refer to the incident as his greatest hour, and wrote the following about it in his autobiography:

"Now I was going to meet the Queens! Filled with dreams, I was determined to make an impression on these ladies . . . one that they would never forget. In fact, I was mentally already in the bosom of the royal family."

A cultural scourge

Not long after his return to Hollywood, Griffith established United Artists in 1919 with Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford.

The film studio which was to dominate Hollywood began as a result of "The Birth of a Nation." In 1915, Louis B. Mayer ran a distributorship for a small string of theaters out of Haverhill, Massachusetts. As "The Birth of a Nation" was about to start its continuous showing in New York, Mayer arranged a deal to distribute the film in New England, for his payment of \$50,000 and a 50-50 split of the box office receipts. In that single deal, Mayer made at least \$500,000. Harry Aitkin, the film's distributor, later proved that Mayer

had fudged his books and made an extraordinary profit. With that money, Louis Mayer went on to ultimately found the mother of all Hollywood studios—Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

In 1939, shortly after Hitler and Stalin had occupied Poland, MGM associates released its full-length color epic based in the Confederate tradition of Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation." That film, which premiered in Atlanta, Georgia, was "Gone With the Wind"—often called the greatest movie ever made. The film was based on the racist book authored by Margaret Mitchell, who wrote to her mentor Rev. Thomas Dixon after her success to tell him that his writings had been her inspiration since childhood. The movie was produced by Louis Mayer's son-in-law David Selznick, and was financed by the millions of Jock Whitney, owner of the *New York Herald Tribune* and a scion of the Harriman family.

I recently found out from my step-son that "Gone With the Wind" has been used in the Los Angeles public school system to teach students the history of the Civil War.

Ben Hecht, the man who re-wrote the script for the film, later became the chief propagandist and fundraiser in the United States for the terrorist Irgun. During World War II, Hecht organized his first fundraising event for Hollywood's elites in the commissary of Twentieth Century-Fox.

As if Hollywood films weren't bad enough already, Dore Schary was the man who created the idea of the B-grade movie, sold it to Mayer during a jaunt to the Hollywood Park horse track in 1947, and then became vice president in charge of production for MGM. Dore was a lifelong friend of one of Meyer Lansky's top aides, Abner "Longie" Zwillman. In 1963, after Schary quit Hollywood, he became the national director of the Anti-Defamation League.

Beginning in the early 1920s, dozens of Hollywood executives, directors, and actors joined the local Los Angeles B'nai B'rith, including: Carl Laemmle, Harry and Jack Warner, Louis Mayer, Irving Thalberg, and William Fox. A number of them, like the Warner brothers, also joined the Freemasons.

When D.W. Griffith died on June 23, 1948, his funeral service was not held in a church, but at the Hollywood Masonic Temple. His pallbearers included Louis Mayer and Sam Goldwyn. Afterwards he was buried in his hometown in Kentucky.

In conclusion, permit me to say that if we are going to eliminate the cultural scourge of Hollywood, with all its sordid collection of pimps, whores, criminals, and various, assorted scumbags, it will not be done by simply boycotting your local video store, movie theater, or television set. This year marks the 80th anniversary of the founding of two of the most treasonous institutions in the United States—the Federal Reserve Bank and the Anti-Defamation League. Let us work to ensure that 1993 witnesses the demise of those two evils. If we do that, the fall of Hollywood will not be far behind, and we can return the handiwork of D.W. Griffith back to the ground of its Old Kentucky Home.