

ARTICLE

The Klandidate

Senator Earle B. Mayfield and the Ku Klux Klan in Federal Politics

FELIX HARCOURT

Austin College

Abstract: *Analyzing the particulars of Senator Earle B. Mayfield's time in office highlights the limitations of current conceptions of Klan politicians and Ku Klux Klan political power at the federal level in the interwar United States. A "Klandidate" was not necessarily a member of the group, and certainly not an unthinking puppet. By moving beyond a conceptual framework that makes such assumptions, we are empowered to rethink how we might judge the ways and means by which the Invisible Empire exerted political power in the 1920s. This conceptual shift points to the artificial nature of the centrist/extremist binary in our understanding of right-wing politics and politicians. The Klan's political power at the federal level was much more substantial and far reaching, albeit less totalitarian, than we have previously acknowledged, precisely because of the lack of clearly defined boundaries between the far-right organization and mainstream political life.*

Keywords: Ku Klux Klan, nativism, racism, United States federal politics, 1920s

Considerations of the Ku Klux Klan's impact on federal politics in the 1920s have largely focused on the metric of affiliation. In other words, the power of the far-right bigots of the self-proclaimed Invisible Empire has largely been measured through the number of officeholders considered to be Klan politicians. Analyzed through the lens of the Klan as a broad social, cultural, and political movement, however, that question of affiliation is far from simple. If what we might call Klannish political power—that is, the power of the Klan movement, not simply the Klan organization—is to be measured by counting the number of Klan politicians, then we must consider who counts as a Klan politician and why. Moreover, we must interrogate what that definition then means for our understanding not only of the extent of the Klan's political power but also how the movement wielded that power. What we find is that the Klan's significance as a political force on the federal level relied less on the election of Klan members or those under the control of Klan leaders and far more on effective lobbying of sympathetic politicians to leverage the intersection of Klannish political positions and the priorities and politics of the conservative mainstream. Such an understanding underscores the fact, as Leo

Ribuffo noted, that “segregating far-right villainy from the mainstream obscures the sources of indecency.”¹

Just as Ribuffo pointed to the lives of Gerald L. K. Smith, William Dudley Pelley, and Gerald Winrod to highlight such a convergence in the 1930s, the political career of Senator Earle B. Mayfield of Texas offers a useful case study for the 1920s. When he was elected as the junior senator from Texas in 1922, news coverage described him as “the first Klansman [in] the United States Senate.” Studies of the Klan’s power in the interwar period have consistently cited Mayfield as the touchstone of the Klan’s political career, and his election as “one of the most important victories in Klan history.” Yet both at the time of his election and beyond, Mayfield publicly and vehemently rejected characterizations of himself as what some have termed a “Klandidate.” While this was certainly a self-serving denial, particularly after the Klan’s bigotry fell out of popular favor, it was also a denial that complicates our current understanding of the Klan’s influence on federal politics in the 1920s.²

The second Ku Klux Klan emerged in 1915, peaked in national membership in late 1924 with its appeals to popular nativist (particularly anti-Catholic) and white supremacist sentiments, and was largely moribund as an organization by 1929. In Texas, that lifecycle was even more accelerated. The first Texan branch of the Klan was formally organized in 1920. Within a year, there were chapters across the state, even as the Texas Klan became particularly notorious for its violent vigilantism. Despite this association, the organization’s power arguably reached its apex in the state in 1922. The Texas Klan also made itself felt on the national stage as Dallas Klan leader Hiram Evans seized the office of Imperial Wizard. By 1923, though, an effective anti-Klan front had emerged in Texas, and by 1924, the group was already in decline, suffering what the *Dallas Morning News* called a “decisive defeat” in state elections that year. While Klan officials denied the organization had lost any of its popularity, the “empire” was increasingly “invisible.” Notwithstanding a brief resurgence in opposition to Al Smith’s run for president in 1928, the Klan had largely become an afterthought in Texas by 1925.³

1 Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Temple University Press, 1983), xiii.

2 “Choice of Ku Klux Has Big Texas Lead,” *New York Times*, August 27, 1922; L. C. Speers, “Klan Shadow Falls on Nation’s Politics,” *New York Times*, November 18, 1923; “Moody Victorious in Texas Run-Off,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1926; “Earle Mayfield Dies in Texas,” *New York Times*, June 24, 1964; “Tom Connally of Texas is Dead,” *New York Times*, October 29, 1963; “Charles Leddy [sic] Discusses Earle Mayfield’s Record,” *Denton (TX) Record-Chronicle*, August 21, 1922; US Congress, Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from Texas, Hearings Before a Subcommittee on Privileges and Elections*, 68th Congress, 1st and 2nd Sessions (1924), 1,213; Charles C. Alexander, *Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 122; Norman Brown, *Hood, Bonnet, and Little Brown Jug: Texas Politics, 1921–1928* (Texas A&M University Press, 1984), 99, 107.

3 Patricia Bernstein, *Ten Dollars to Hate: The Texas Man Who Fought the Klan* (Texas A&M University Press, 2017), 50, 224, 226; David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism* (Quadrangle, 1968), 39, 43–45, 48.

The organization's rapid rise and fall in both Texas and beyond led to a popular narrative that the Klan was little more than a rearguard action in the inexorable march of the United States toward modernity—an idea long comprehensively discredited. Working to overcome what Kathleen Blee called the assumption of marginality, scholars arrived at a new academic consensus in the 1990s. A wealth of scholarship in recent years, from local area studies to broad thematic considerations, has left us with an understanding of the second Klan as an important participant in the social, cultural, religious, and economic life of the nation, surrounded by controversy but also deeply rooted in the white Protestant norms of the time. The same was true of many of the Klan's political positions, which often differed but little from many mainstream right-wing policy proposals.⁴

Yet studies of the Klan have often remained focused on the question of how and why the membership of the group rose and fell. This is not an inconsiderable question, and its answer has significant implications. Too narrow a focus on organizational affiliation, however, threatens to undermine our ability to recognize the wider power of the Invisible Empire. A core/periphery model that prioritizes the question of formal membership and misses the depth and breadth of the larger informal movement, to use Michael Denning's framing in his critique of studies of the Popular Front, leaves us with too narrow a conception of the Klan's influence.⁵ Nowhere is this clearer than in considerations of the Ku Klux Klan in national politics, one of the most understudied facets of the Klan of the 1920s, especially when compared to the rich literature on Klannish political activity at the town, county, and state level.⁶

4 Two surveys of the Klan's rise and fall from Thomas Pegram and Linda Gordon encapsulate this new consensus: Thomas R. Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s* (Ivan R. Dee, 2011); and Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (Liveright, 2017). A sample of recent works that have helped to extend and deepen the scope of our understanding includes Tom Rice, *White Robes, Silver Screens: Movies and the Making of the Ku Klux Klan* (Indiana University Press, 2015); Felix Harcourt, *Ku Klux Culture: America and the Klan in the 1920s* (Chicago University Press, 2017); Kelly J. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America, 1915–1930* (University Press of Kansas, 2011); and Katherine J. Lennard, "Uniform Threat: Manufacturing the Ku Klux Klan's Visible Empire, 1866–1931" (PhD diss., University of Michigan–Ann Arbor, 2017).

5 Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Verso, 1996), xvii, xx, 26, 63, 67, 202.

6 Arnold S. Rice's *The Ku Klux Klan in American Politics* (Public Affairs Press, 1962) was the first comprehensive study of the political Klan. It did not face a serious reconsideration until Rory McVeigh's *The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan: Right-Wing Movements and National Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), which positioned the history of the political Klan within a broader concept of social movement action and offered a "power-devaluation model" of right-wing mobilization. Within this theoretical framework, the Klan's rapid growth is best understood as a response to a real or perceived "devaluation in the economic, political, and status-based 'purchasing power'" of white Protestant native-born US citizens (39–40).

Within that literature, the Klan of the 1920s has primarily been understood as a political machine of sorts, whose power lay chiefly in the ability to mobilize voters and to elect favored candidates. As such, the Klan's political success or failure could be measured by electoral results. How these individuals then acted in office or how they wielded power has often been of secondary concern. The centrality of affiliation has frequently led to the assumption that if politicians were members, they were effectively Klan puppets, whether true believers or cowed into submission.⁷ Such an assumption also reinforces the conception of a neat centrist/extremist divide, with Klan politicians on one side and respectable conservatives on the other.

While Rory McVeigh and Linda Gordon have recently offered a more nuanced accounting of the ways the Klan's political posturing impacted organizational success, they have not entirely escaped this issue. For example, even as Gordon attempts to distinguish between *Klan* politicians and *Klan-friendly* politicians, defining these categories once again depends on paying membership and places the core/periphery model at the center of our understanding of the political Klan. The major exception to this trend is Thomas Pegram's *One Hundred Percent American*, which offers a portrait of politically calculating federal officeholders who transitioned from early electoral successes won behind the scenes to more ham-fisted public politicking in the 1924 election and after. For Pegram, political success for the Klan could be measured not just by their ability to elect allies to office but more importantly by whether the Klan's grand political schemes came to fruition. As he points out, most did not.⁸ Following Pegram's cue, we benefit from moving beyond the electoral mode to also examine the behavior of legislators in office. Rather than simply counting the number of legislators, we must consider the relationship of those legislators to the Klan, both as organization and as movement, and to Klannish political goals. In doing so, we better recognize how little separated the violent bigotries of the Klan and the accepted prejudices of mainstream politics.

Mayfield's Election

For Earle B. Mayfield, the junior senator from Texas from 1922 to 1928, there was a significant difference between receiving support from Klan members and being defined as a Klandidate. When, for example, a *Dallas Morning News* editorial on the 1948 campaign for Mayfield's onetime seat described him simply as "the Ku Klux Klan Nominee," he denied that he was ever the "Klan Nominee" for the Senate. He complained that "this false and untruthful label" unfairly singled him out as though he

7 Rice, *Klan in American Politics*, 30.

8 Gordon, *Second Coming*, 6, 163–65; McVeigh, *Rise of the Klan*, 7–8, 188, 193; Pegram, *One Hundred Percent*, 188, 193, 196.

was “the only candidate for office in Texas that ever received votes from the members of the Ku Klux Klan,” rather than just one of many such political figures.⁹

There is no denying that this was a self-serving argument, made well after the Klan’s power in Texas had faded, but it was one that Mayfield repeated throughout his lifetime, both in public and in private.¹⁰ Some of Mayfield’s complaints were clearly facile. He argued that because he was not a dues-paying member of the Ku Klux Klan at the time of his campaign, it was inaccurate to label him as the “Klan Nominee.” As Mayfield explained, he had previously joined the Klan on the basis that the organization purportedly stood for law enforcement and tighter immigration restrictions. It was only after he had joined, he claimed, that he was shocked to find that there were strong anti-Catholic and antisemitic elements within the Texas Klan and that members had engaged in “repulsive” acts of violence. Because he purportedly “had many friends who were Catholics and Jews,” he resigned his membership after having only attended two meetings, and made sure to clarify that he had never worn a hood or marched in a Klan parade. His claimed date of withdrawal from the organization just happened to be one month before he declared his candidacy for the United States Senate.¹¹

If a Klan politician is strictly defined by membership, then Mayfield would technically evade such categorization. This points to the limits of centering on issues of affiliation, especially since Mayfield was not alone in his strategy. The timely resignation from dues-paying membership became a tactic copied by a number of other contenders for high office. Perhaps most notable in this was future US Supreme Court justice Hugo Black, who resigned his Klan membership in 1925 shortly before his successful run to become the senator from Alabama in 1926.

Publisher Ted Dealey and the *Dallas Morning News* were rightly unconvinced by Mayfield’s flimsy defense and noted Mayfield’s narrow definition of Kandidate: “You were supported by the Klan in 1922 and you know it, so why beat around the bush?”¹² If we remain wedded to a core/periphery model, we are taking an extremely narrow view

9 “Editorial,” *Dallas Morning News*, May 22, 1948; Earle Mayfield to Ted Dealey, May 26, 1948, Folder 12, Box 5, Earle B. Mayfield Papers, Georgetown University Manuscripts Collection (hereafter EBMP); Ted Dealey to Earle Mayfield, May 31, 1948, Folder 12, Box 5, EBMP; Earle Mayfield, “Incidents of My Life, Volume 3,” 221, Folder 16, Box 15, EBMP.

10 Charles C. Alexander, *Crusade for Conformity: The Ku Klux Klan in Texas, 1920–1930* (Texas Gulf Coast Historical Association, 1962), 47; Earle Mayfield, “Affidavit on *Crusade for Conformity*,” April 25, 1963, Folder 13, Box 15, EBMP; Earle Mayfield, “Incidents of My Life, Volume 1,” 1, Folder 14, Box 15, EBMP.

11 “Texans to Put Klan Before the Senate,” *New York Times*, October 27, 1923; Mayfield, “Affidavit”; Earle Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 166–68, 198–99, 297; Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from Texas*, 316; Rice, *Klan in American Politics*, 97.

12 Bill Ruggles, Untitled Memorandum, undated, Folder 12, Box 5, EBMP; Ted Dealey to Earle Mayfield, May 31, 1948, Folder 12, Box 5, EBMP.

of how the Klan wielded power—a view narrow enough that it would even technically exempt Mayfield, assuming we take him at his word. If we accept Dealey’s rebuke of Mayfield, on the other hand, we must then consider Dealey’s contention that evidence of support from Klan officials and members is sufficient even in the absence of formal affiliation.

Mayfield disagreed. Even if he had received Klan votes, he contended in his later years, it did not mean he was their politician. It meant that they were his voters. Both in 1922 and long after, he vehemently asserted that he had not explicitly courted Ku Klux Klan support on the campaign trail. In fact, he bent over backward to avoid mentioning the Klan at all. After all, why alienate one bloc of voters by declaring support for the organization, or alienate Klan voters by declaring opposition? In this, Mayfield’s actions fell in line with other political figures in the 1920s seeking to maximize their vote share. Congressman Tom Connally, who would go on to defeat Mayfield in the Democratic primary in 1928, was cautioned by friends in 1922 that any campaign stop could draw him into the Klan issue. Thus, as an incumbent Connally simply attempted to avoid campaigning, first remaining out of state for “urgent, pending public matters” in Washington, DC, and then claiming his son’s illness kept him from public appearances. Even those who privately detested the Klan’s bigotry, as with Michigan congressman Earl Michener, often felt that the best political tactic was “saying nothing and in no way fighting the organization.” After all, as Mayfield described it in his memoir, the Klan issue was a red-hot poker at both ends. Anyone who touched it would be burned.¹³

Given that the Klan was arguably at the apogee of its power in Texas in 1922, Mayfield’s refusal to speak about it on the campaign trail was so unyielding that it became one of the most remarked upon elements of his election. When a rival candidate challenged Mayfield to deny that he was a “Klan candidate,” Mayfield refused to respond. When the *Dallas Morning News* asked Mayfield’s opinion on the Invisible Empire, he refused to respond. When voters asked him his position and worried that, in declining to make his stand known, he was failing “to say anything in condemnation of the mob spirit,” Mayfield did respond. All he would say was that he stood “for law and order enforced through established channels” and that this was not a federal issue. The standard reply from Mayfield’s office refused to even name the Klan as the issue at hand.¹⁴

13 Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 298; Mayfield, “Affidavit”; Earl C. Michener to Harry Michener, February 23, 1923, Folder February 1924, Box 7, Earl C. Michener Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan; H. F. Connally to Tom Connally, June 17, 1922, Folder 4-8-22, Box 61, Tom Connally Papers, Library of Congress (hereafter TCP); Nick Goodrich to Tom Connally, July 4, 1922, Folder 4-8-22, Box 61, TCP; Tom Connally to L. R. Talley, July 6, 1922, Folder 4-8-22, Box 61, TCP; Tom Connally to Waller S. Baker, July 17, 1922, Folder 7-17-22, Box 61, TCP.

14 Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 164, 298; “Protest Against Seating Mayfield,” *Fiery Cross* (KKK weekly newspaper, Indianapolis, IN), December 21, 1923; E. A. Berry to Earle Mayfield, April 18, 1922,

How did Mayfield explain winning the votes of Klan members from across Texas? Both during the controversy over his seating in 1923–1924 and in his later memoir, Mayfield held firm to the contention that his positions on immigration, prohibition, public schooling, and public morality were simply “in harmony” with the beliefs of Klan members in the state. Certainly, his speeches would have resonated with Klan ideologues. On the stump, he warned of the “great mass of foreign-thinking peoples in our midst,” who knew “little of American institutions.” The national policy, the Texan declared, must be “America for Americans.” These were unexceptional sentiments, solidly rooted in mainstream political nativism. Even if they were wildly applauded by Klan publications, were such views sufficient to label Mayfield a Klan politician rather than simply a conservative immigration restrictionist?¹⁵

Mayfield argued that he was “undoubtedly the strongest candidate in the Senatorial race” holding these positions, citing his record in the Texas State Senate and his position on the state railroad commission. As such, he was not the Klan’s man: “They were forced to come to me.” Nor was Mayfield the only political figure who offered such a convenient view of events. When William B. Pine of Oklahoma was criticized as a Klan candidate during his US Senate run in 1924, he argued, “I have been endorsed by the WCTU’s [Women’s Christian Temperance Union] organizations and several Lions clubs. Yet I am never referred to as the Lion’s [*sic*] candidate. I am no more a Klan candidate than a WCTU candidate.” Did a Klan endorsement represent a controlling interest? Both Pine and Mayfield argued not.¹⁶

But this contention found little support among the Texan’s peers. As far as most were concerned, Mayfield was indisputably a Klan nominee. After unstinting support for his 1922 campaign from newly installed Imperial Wizard Hiram Evans, a fellow Texan, no one was more convinced of this than Klan members and leaders themselves. If their backing was responsible for his election, as they believed, then why should they

Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; Mayfield Campaign to E.A. Berry, April 25, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; Earle Mayfield to George Armstrong, January 25, 1922, George W. Armstrong Papers, AR335-31-2, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington Libraries [hereafter GWAP]; Notes on the Corsicana Trial, undated, Folder 28, Box 4, EBMP; *Dallas Morning News* to Earle Mayfield, April 1, 1922, Folder 1, Box 10, EBMP; Earle Mayfield to *Dallas Morning News*, April 14, 1922, Folder 1, Box 10, EBMP; “Mayfield Responds,” *Houston Chronicle*, April 16, 1922; “Candidates Questioned,” *Beeville (TX) Picayune*, April 20, 1922; “Address by Cullen Thomas,” *Houston Press*, July 19, 1922; Mayfield, “Affidavit.”

15 Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 298; Earle Mayfield, Speech at Dallas, August 15, 1922, Folder 18, Box 6, EBMP; “Protest Against Seating Mayfield,” *Fiery Cross*, December 21, 1923; “Condemns Ferguson,” *Texas Searchlight* (Fort Worth, TX), July 28, 1922; “Mayfield’s Speech Talk of Town,” *Tyler (TX) American*, June 16, 1922.

16 Mayfield, “Affidavit”; “Drys and Ku Klux Combine in Texas,” *New York Times*, August 5, 1922; “Victories by Klan Feature Election,” *New York Times*, November 6, 1924; Maynard Hanson, “Senator William B. Pine and His Times” (PhD diss., Oklahoma State University, 1983), 58.

not expect him to be beholden to their political goals? He owed them, so they owned him.

After all, Mayfield was not the only Klansman (or, technically, ex-Klansman) to throw his hat in the ring in 1922. The Democratic primary had seen fierce jockeying for position between Robert L. Henry and Sterling Strong as to which of them was the most forceful advocate for the Invisible Empire. Both were overt and proud Klan candidates. Yet neither attracted backing from Evans, who had vaulted from leadership of the powerful and prosperous Dallas Klan to become one of the group's national officials, and was in the process of attempting to take control of the entire organization. If we focus on questions of affiliation and disaffiliation, then it would seem that it was the nonmember who bested the members. Yet Mayfield did so with the support of the organization's leaders.¹⁷

Those involved in the 1922 election offered a number of different arguments as to why Evans favored Mayfield. Some simply thought that Evans was forced to back Mayfield as the other two candidates were unlikely to win. Unsurprisingly, this was Mayfield's preferred explanation of events. Others at the time argued that Henry and Strong were politically damaged by their overt support for the Klan, making it the organization's most strategic move to back a closemouthed sympathizer rather than a voluble champion. The Klan's leaders were certainly aware of the negative impact that its support could have, going so far as to endorse candidates they opposed in order to sink their campaigns, as in Oregon and Oklahoma.¹⁸

Other explanations suggest less an ideological convergence and more a relationship of convenience. Some alleged that Evans supported Mayfield in the hope that he would prove not only politically valuable but also provide profitable links to wealthy sympathizers, particularly among the oil and railroad interests. There is also the possibility that the decision had nothing to do with the candidates themselves. In approaching the Klan for backing in his campaign, Henry had been granted the favor of Imperial Wizard William J. Simmons. With Evans looking to push Simmons out and supplant him as Imperial Wizard, it would have behooved the Texan to see Simmons's candidate knocked out of the race and replaced with his own man.¹⁹

17 "Ferguson Objects," *Dallas Morning News*, April 5, 1922; "Henry Accuses Mayfield," *Dallas Morning News*, July 2, 1922; "Address by Cullen Thomas," *Houston Press*, July 19, 1922; Sterling P. Strong to Unknown Correspondent, June 29, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; "Strong May Withdraw," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, June 12, 1922; "Henry Accuses Mayfield," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 3, 1922; "Strong Makes Charge," *Dallas Dispatch*, July 11, 1922.

18 David Chalmers, "The Ku Klux Klan in Politics in the 1920's," *Mississippi Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (1965): 234-47, esp. 237.

19 "Henry Accuses Mayfield," *Dallas Morning News*, July 2, 1922; "Henry Accuses Mayfield," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 3, 1922; S. L. Ricketts to R. L. Henry, June 17, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; Erwin Clark to Hiram Evans, July 17, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; Committee on Privileges and

Whatever the reason, Evans threw his support behind Mayfield and pushed the Texas Klans to follow his lead. This was a divisive tactic. Henry resigned from the Invisible Empire after bitter recriminations, later offering damaging testimony against Mayfield. Others followed Henry's lead, including high-ranking state officer Erwin J. Clark, who charged Evans with tearing apart the "glorious" Klan with his political machinations.²⁰

Evans's support for Mayfield divided not only the Texas Klan but the state's Democrats more generally. It is in that split that we might see how Mayfield achieved the kind of notoriety as a Klandidate that others supported by the Klan at the time evaded. The results of the first Democratic primary left Mayfield in a runoff for the nomination against former governor James Ferguson. Freightened with his own baggage after having been impeached and removed from office in 1917 for various financial "irregularities," Ferguson saw the Klan issue as an effective campaign tool against Mayfield. From his opening runoff speech onward, Ferguson relied on explicitly attacking Mayfield as a member of the Ku Klux Klan. The charges stuck, and the national press began to refer to Mayfield as "openly the candidate of the Ku Klux Klan." In these attacks, we start to see the shaping of the mythos of the Klandidate, grounded in the largely discredited characterization of Klan members as marginalized fanatics. While the academic consensus has moved away from this idea, it too often continues to warp popular understanding of the Klan's political machinations, with the assumption that Klan politicians must surely have been of one mind with the organization.²¹

Mayfield's actions in the campaign certainly did not help dispel such an idea. At one campaign event, described by the *Dallas Morning News* as "resembling an open meeting of the Ku Klux Klan," a crowd of some six thousand saw Mayfield seated alongside the leader of the Dallas Klan. With Mayfield on the stage, another speaker praised

Elections, *Senator from Texas*, 47–48, 68–69, 376–77; Erwin Clark to Z. E. Marvin, July 3, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; "Say Klan Ordered Mayfield Election," *New York Times*, May 10, 1924; Arnold Rice, "The Southern Wing of the Ku Klux Klan in American Politics, 1915–1928" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1959), 129.

20 George Armstrong to Brown Harwood, February 15, 1924, AR335-48-2, GWAP; Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from Texas*, 49–50, 52, 55, 68–69, 110, 425; R. L. Henry to Dudley Kent, June 15, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; R. L. Henry to J. H. Muse, June 18, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; R. L. Henry to C. A. Shock, July 10, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; Erwin Clark to Z. E. Marvin, July 3, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; Erwin Clark to Hiram Evans, July 17, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; "Supervisors for Klan Candidates," *Dallas Morning News*, July 20, 1922.

21 Alexander, *Crusade for Conformity*, 44; Brown, *Hood*, 95–97; "Ferguson Charges Mayfield Klansman," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, August 2, 1922; "Expect Light Texas Vote," *New York Times*, August 26, 1922; "Ferguson Objects," *Dallas Morning News*, April 5, 1922; "Gov. Ferguson's Platform," *Ferguson Forum* (Ferguson's newsletter), April 6, 1922; "Will the People Stand For It?," *Ferguson Forum*, July 6, 1922; "Charles Leddy [sic] Discusses Earle Mayfield's Record," *Denton (TX) Record-Chronicle*, August 21, 1922.

the bigoted organization as “a most glorious agency for the enforcement of law and order.” At actual Klan rallies, speakers urged members to back Mayfield and reminded them not only of Ferguson’s impeachment but also of his opposition to prohibition. After Mayfield defeated Ferguson, Klansmen paraded and lit fiery crosses in triumph. A widely circulated missive from Klan official A. D. Ellis noted that “the spirit of 100 percent Americanism will be enhanced with Klansman Mayfield representing us in Washington.” Texas Klan leader Brown Harwood echoed this language in a letter urging Klan voters to turn out in support of “red-blooded 100 per cent Americans.” If they could only defeat Ferguson, he wrote, “Klansman Earle B. Mayfield should carry our banner to Washington and plant it in the Senate.”²²

This was an association further encouraged by Texas Republicans, who scented an opportunity to challenge the Democratic stranglehold on state offices. After Mayfield won the primary, Republican state chair R. B. Creager threw the support of the state committee behind a Democratic splinter candidate, George E. B. Peddy, in the general election. Drawing anti-Klan Democrats to the ticket, Creager hoped, would mean a “great and permanent strengthening of [the] Republican Party in Texas.” Texas Democrats, meanwhile, warned that to “divide politically on the Ku Klux Klan question” would be to make the Republicans “the dominant power in the State.” On the national stage, Democratic leaders fretted that if Mayfield won, it would be “a nightmare to the national democracy,” as the attention lavished on his candidacy would divide the party over the Klan and religious intolerance—a prophetic vision of the infamously contentious 1924 Democratic National Convention.²³

Mayfield’s denials of his bigoted past and complaints about being defined as a Klan nominee were not solely later inventions. In his correspondence following the 1922

22 Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 197–98; “Mayfield Appears at Fair Park,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 16, 1922; “Rev. Monk Speaks,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 24, 1922; “Klan Victory at Polls,” *Dallas Morning News*, August 28, 1922; “Mayfield’s Speech Talk of Town,” *Tyler American*, June 16, 1922; “Klan’s Role Described,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, August 16, 1922; “Corpus Christi Klan Meets,” *Houston Chronicle*, August 26, 1922; “Klux Celebrate Victory,” *Ranger Times* (Eastland, TX), August 27, 1922; A. D. Ellis to Texas Klans, March 22, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from Texas*, 79.

23 “Republican Convention Gathers,” *San Antonio Express*, August 9, 1922; “Texas Republicans Attack Ku Klux,” *Austin (TX) American*, August 9, 1922; “Peddy Says Klan Caused Bolt,” *Austin American*, August 15, 1922; “State Leader for GOP Hits Klan,” *Austin American*, August 29, 1922; E. C. Bramblitt, “Editorial,” *Wichita Falls (TX) News*, August 15, 1922; “Peddy Blames Klan Influences,” *Houston Chronicle*, August 21, 1922; “Peddy Address,” *Dallas Morning News*, September 17, 1922; “Peddy’s Political Pedigree,” *Texas 100% American* (Dallas, TX), October 20, 1922; “Keep Peddy’s Name Off Ballot,” *New York Times*, October 24, 1922; Russell Porter, “Fergusons Stand Back to the Wall,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1925; “Washington Post’s Attack on Mayfield,” *American Forum* (San Antonio, TX), April 21, 1923; Brown Harwood to Texas Klans, October 21, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; R. B. Creager to George Armstrong, September 2, 1922, AR335-28-6, GWAP; George Armstrong to E. G. Senter, September 4, 1922, AR335-28-6, GWAP; Brown, *Hood*, 111, 122; Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from Texas*, 651.

election, both he and his supporters agreed that if anyone could rightfully be dubbed a Ku Klux Kandidate, it had been his rival in the primary, Robert Henry. Moreover, while Klan leaders and members undoubtedly supported him, Mayfield fundamentally did not believe that he owed his election to the Klan's support. By the time he came to write his self-serving memoir, he even went so far as to allege that the "injection of the Ku Klux Klan question" into the runoff primary against Ferguson was actually an electoral drag. If "there had never been such a thing as the Ku Klux Klan in Texas," Mayfield contended, his margin of victory would have been almost twice as large.²⁴

The sore winner may have had a point. His association with the Klan made him a lightning rod for criticism from groups like the Dallas County Citizens League, which had amassed significant support by the time of the 1922 election. As historians of Texas have noted, though, the DCCL's "overconfidence and lack of strategic creativity" made the organization a less than effective political foe. Ultimately, Mayfield won Dallas County by a far higher margin than his statewide tally—a disconnect that is traceable largely to the Klan issue. As one contemporary noted, "the Klan took charge of the district and issues and politics cut no figure."²⁵

In areas less favorable to the Klannish movement, however, the organization's active backing of Mayfield may well have hurt the candidate. Some at the time noted that it was Ferguson's earlier impeachment and his stances on prohibition that had led voters to hold their nose and vote for Mayfield "in spite of his membership in the Klan." Others were so disgusted by both candidates in the Democratic runoff primary that they simply did not vote. Most telling was the question posed by the *Marlin Democrat* at the time: If "the Knights of the Mask and Bed Sheet want to claim Mayfield's election," why was it that none of the other Klan candidates won their primary races that year?²⁶

This was one of Mayfield's favorite data points in his argument—that the Klan in Texas was "never as strong as the Klan leaders made it appear." If, as Imperial Wizard Evans contended, Mayfield owed his election entirely to the Klan, how could you explain the failed candidacy of Klansmen Billie Mayfield (no relation) for lieutenant governor and Ed Bentley for superintendent of public instruction? For Mayfield, the explanation was simple. He did not owe his victory to the Klan. Rather, it was his "air-

24 Jno. B. Littler to Earle Mayfield, February 2, 1924, Folder 1, Box 5, EBMP; Mayfield, "Incidents, Volume 3," 194.

25 "Ferguson Objects," *Dallas Morning News*, April 5, 1922; Mark N. Morris, "Saving Society Through Politics: The Ku Klux Klan in Dallas, Texas, in the 1920s" (PhD diss., University of North Texas, 1997), 169; Kevin G. Portz, "Political Turmoil in Dallas: The Electoral Whipping of the Dallas County Citizens League by the Ku Klux Klan, 1922," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 119, no. 2 (2015): 150, 153; Shelley Sallee, "The Woman of It: Governor Miriam Ferguson's 1924 Election," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 100, no. 1 (1996): 5; E. G. Senter to George Armstrong, May 24, 1922, AR335-32-7, GWAP.

26 "Editorial," *Marlin (TX) Democrat*, August 29, 1922.

tight organization,” built during his years on the railroad commission, that had allowed him to overcome the headwind of a Klan endorsement.²⁷

Mayfield in Office

The struggle over the nature of Mayfield’s Klandidacy did not end with his election. Indeed, the divisive nature of Mayfield’s campaign was such that even before he defeated Peddy in the general election, a series of bitterly contested lawsuits were launched protesting the involvement of the Klan in the campaign. While the courts did not find sufficient ground to prevent Mayfield from taking his seat in the Senate in 1923, a special subcommittee of the Senate Privileges and Elections Committee was tasked with determining whether or not the Texan would remain there. Ironically, this process seemingly deepened the Klan’s involvement in Mayfield’s candidacy. Even as he began his tenure as a senator, the three-man legal team representing his campaign included two Klansmen, William A. Hanger and William F. Zumbrunn. Both men would be crucial in defending Mayfield, as well as the Klan more broadly.²⁸

Officially, the Senate committee was convened to look into “charges of excessive and illegal expenditures of money and of unlawful practices” in the Texas general election. It quickly became clear, however, that the hearings would function as a ruling on the operations of the Klan itself. This was certainly the argument made by Peddy’s lawyers. Mayfield’s election, they claimed, meant the “subversion of visible government into a mendacious invisibility where corrupt and unpatriotic men and women (unrestrained by law or morals) may possess and exert brutal power over the lives and liberties of the people.”²⁹

These hearings again illustrate the underlying assumptions that continue to shape both popular and much academic understanding of what it meant to be a Klan politician. In the picture Peddy’s lawyers painted for the committee, Mayfield was a loyal and dedicated Klansman who would act as nothing more than a puppet for the Invisible Empire. His election had been bought through the Klan’s largesse, vastly exceeding electoral spending limits. Those who could not be bought were reportedly bullied and threatened. Ballots had been tampered with. Multiple witnesses testified that the Klan’s “political machines” had won the election and were designed to “control our candidates when placed in office.” As such, Peddy’s team argued, Mayfield could not be judged as

27 “Editorial,” *Marlin Democrat*, August 29, 1922; Mayfield, “Affidavit”; Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 198–99.

28 *State of Texas v. S. L. Staples*, District Court of Navarro County, Texas, Case 12,210, October 1922, Folder 2, Box 5, EBMP; Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from Texas*, 610, 614; Mayfield, “Affidavit.”

29 Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from Texas*, 1, 667.

an individual but had to be considered as an extension of the organization—the perfect Klandidate.³⁰

The hearings into whether Mayfield's election should be considered illegitimate dragged on month after month. Outside of the hearing room, Klan supporters and opponents alike mobilized to put political pressure on the committee's members. At least one member of the committee, Republican senator James Watson of Indiana, was later accused of negotiating a pact with the Imperial Wizard: Watson would allegedly work for Mayfield's seating in return for the Klan's support for Watson's reelection, and possibly for his bid for the 1924 Republican vice-presidential nomination. The Senate committee's final report in early 1924 stated that there was sufficient evidence of neither campaign finance violations nor of collusion between the Klan and the Mayfield campaign.³¹

While the question of Mayfield's legitimacy was ultimately settled in his favor (thanks to the Klan's lawyers and, most likely, the political pressure they could bring to bear), Mayfield was also acutely aware that if it were not for the Klan's public backing, his first two years in the Senate would not have been dogged by lengthy and embarrassing hearings. Similar to the election itself, the Senate hearings both tied Mayfield ever more closely to the Klan and led Mayfield to publicly and privately distance himself from the organization. Mayfield unequivocally blamed the Klan for the various legal challenges to his election. It was the Klan's fault, he grouched, that he had been "hounded as no man holding office in Texas was ever hounded before."³²

30 Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from Texas*, 127, 1,166.

31 "Outside Meddlers with Texas Affairs," *Houston Post*, November 12, 1922; "Newspaper Attack on Mayfield Answered," *American Forum*, April 14, 1923; "Time to Quit Hounding Mayfield," *American Forum*, April 28, 1923; "Editorial," *Lockhart (TX) Post-Register*, August 10, 1923; "Shall a Klansman Go To The Senate," *Tolerance* (Chicago, IL), November 26, 1922; "Mayfield to Face Bitter Contest," *Tolerance*, December 30, 1923; "Watson Forced to Wear Klux Collar," *Tolerance*, June 15, 1924; "Klan Attacks Underwood," *New York World*, January 18, 1924; "Pope's Presidential Possibilities," *Texas American* (Dallas, TX), May 4, 1923; "Tell Your Senator," *Texas American*, December 28, 1923; "Why We Are Supporting Felix D. Robertson," *Texas American*, February 29, 1924; "Washington Post Opens on Mayfield Case," *Fiery Cross*, April 6, 1923; "Committee to Hear Mayfield's Case Appointed," *Fiery Cross*, December 14, 1923; "Can Oust Mayfield," *Washington Post*, March 29, 1923; "Texans to Put Klan Before the Senate," *New York Times*, October 27, 1923; L. C. Speers, "Shadow Falls on Nation's Politics," *New York Times*, November 18, 1923; "Watson Had Klan Card," *New York Times*, October 29, 1926; "Finds Mayfield Case Slow," *New York Times*, May 28, 1924; "Editorial," *American Standard* (New York, NY), July 1, 1924; "Mayfield Backing Won Watson Klan Aid," *Washington (DC) Evening Star*, October 28, 1926; Committee on Privileges and Elections, *Senator from Texas*, 50, 69, 411, 512, 584; George Armstrong to Earle Mayfield, November 23, 1923, Folder 19, Box 40, GWAP; Harry Tom King to Earle Mayfield, February 6, 1925, Folder 14, Box 5, EBMP; Pegram, *One Hundred Percent*, 213; Marion Monteval, *The Klan Inside Out* (Monarch Publishing Company, 1924), 140, 149.

32 Earle Mayfield to C. L. Tanner, February 3, 1928, Folder 8, Box 6, EBMP; Earle Mayfield to Ben C. Richards, January 13, 1926, Folder 8, Box 6, EBMP; Earle Mayfield to Henry Wills, April 28, 1927, Folder 8, Box 6, EBMP.

Even worse than ensnaring him in a political “bed of thorns,” though, was the question of attorneys’ fees. Mayfield repeatedly complained in later years that “the Klan should have borne the expense” but “did not pay a thin dime.” Instead, Mayfield noted, he was forced to borrow money from a local banker, who was not coincidentally also a leader in the Texas Klan. When his credit ran out, Imperial Wizard Hiram Evans personally loaned Mayfield a very precise \$13,235.83 to help cover legal expenses, albeit at a rate of six percent interest. As such, the senator from Texas complained, Evans “was on the receiving end of the line and not on the paying end as far as money was concerned.”³³

Scholars of the Klan have generally lost interest in Mayfield following his election and the contested hearings. But beyond elections, the means by which the Klan movement exerted political power in influencing legislative decisions and policymaking is crucial. In this regard Mayfield is particularly useful in helping deepen our understanding of Klannish political power.

Whether or not Mayfield was actually a dues-paying member of the Klan at the time of his election, he had drawn active support from the organization. Even as he publicly kept them at arm’s length, he forged ongoing relationships with Klan leaders. Frequent correspondence with Texas Klan official Z. E. “Zeke” Marvin grew into recurring meetings between Mayfield and Imperial Wizard Evans to discuss state and national politics, including efforts to shape the 1924 presidential election.³⁴ Mayfield pushed for the candidacy of Klan-backed William McAdoo on the convention floor, and as it became clear that neither McAdoo nor the hated Catholic governor of New York Al Smith could muster the necessary votes to capture the nomination, Mayfield and the Texans worked assiduously to drive the convention away from the overtly anti-Klan Oscar Underwood and toward the eventual victor, John W. Davis. All the while, Mayfield reportedly sat as a member of Imperial Wizard Evans’s “board of strategy” in the nearby Hotel McAlpin, alongside Klan leaders from around the country.³⁵

33 Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 223, 233; Mayfield, “Affidavit.”

34 Z. E. Marvin to Earle Mayfield, November 8, 1922, Folder 25, Box 4, EBMP; Z. E. Marvin to Earle Mayfield, May 13, 1924, Folder 14, Box 5, EBMP; Z. E. Marvin to Earle Mayfield, February 7, 1925, Folder 14, Box 5, EBMP; Z. E. Marvin to Earle Mayfield, December 24, 1925, Folder 7a, Box 6, EBMP; Earle Mayfield to Z. E. Marvin, December 29, 1925, Folder 7a, Box 6, EBMP; “Klan Scored as Elaborate Spy System,” *Fort Worth Record*, May 14, 1924; “Machine Coalition with Klan Reported,” *El Paso Times*, May 18, 1924; “Texas’ Greatest Political Convention,” *Waco (TX) News-Tribune*, May 28, 1924; “Editorial,” *Dallas Morning News*, May 29, 1924; Mayfield, “Affidavit”; Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 195–96, 264; Brown, *Hood*, 170, 174–75; Lee N. Allen, “The Democratic Presidential Primary Election of 1924 in Texas,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (1958): 476, 485–89.

35 Allen, “Democratic Presidential Primary,” 492; Alexander, *Klan in the Southwest*, 165–67; Brown, *Hood*, 207; Rice, *Klan in American Politics*, 81; “Wizard Evans at NY,” *Baltimore Sun*, June 26, 1924.

In office, Mayfield built a voting record that seemingly reflected this ongoing alliance with Klan leaders. Shortly after defeating Peddy, officials of the Invisible Empire urged the Texas senator to back Joseph Robinson of Arkansas for senate minority leader. Though Robinson would later parlay a widely lauded attack on religious bigotry into becoming Al Smith's 1928 running mate, the Grand Dragon of Georgia proclaimed in 1922 that he was a longtime friend of Robinson. Mayfield not only backed Robinson for the leadership position but boasted that his was a decisive vote in Robinson's victory over Furnifold Simmons of North Carolina.³⁶ Similarly, Mayfield voted in 1926 to seat Daniel Steck of Iowa in his contested Senate election against Smith Brookhart and to dismiss impeachment proceedings against Judge George English of Illinois. Both Steck and English were represented in their hearings before the Senate by William F. Zumbunn—the same man who had represented Mayfield in his seating dispute, and the chief legal counsel for the Ku Klux Klan.³⁷

In ongoing wrangling over questions of congressional procedure, Mayfield also hewed closely to the Klannish position. In a remarkable example of political dysfunction in the 1920s, Congress—for the only time in its history—failed to agree on a plan for reapportionment following the 1920 census. Difficult negotiations almost broke down completely over Kansas Republican Homer Hoch's proposal that alien residents be excluded from census calculations to determine political representation. In outrage, Fiorello LaGuardia dubbed the idea "the Evans plan" after the Klan's Imperial Wizard. While Mayfield had left the Senate before the final vote on the reapportionment bill, he—along with other Klan-affiliated political figures—had expressed vocal support for the nativist proposal. In a less fraught vote, and in a reflection of the Klan's intersection with the political mainstream, Mayfield sided with both Klan leaders and every other Senate Democrat (with the exception of Oscar Underwood) to vote down a proposal to revise Senate rules on cloture.³⁸

36 Nathan Bedford Forrest to Earle Mayfield, December 21, 1922, Folder 29, Box 4, EBMP; Mayfield, "Incidents, Volume 3," 226; "Close Fight in Senate," *New York Times*, January 20, 1923; "Robinson Will Lead Senate Democrats," *New York Times*, February 9, 1923.

37 "Yea and Nay Votes of Senator Earle B. Mayfield of Texas in the Senate of the United States, December 3, 1923, to July 3, 1926," Folder 28, Box 6, EBMP; "Complete Voting Record of Senator Earle B. Mayfield, 69th Congress, 2nd Session," Folder 2, Box 7, EBMP; William F. Zumbunn to Hanford MacNider, April 14, 1926, Box 72, Folder 13, Hanford MacNider Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library; "Evans Calls Klan to Fight," *Washington Evening Star*, September 21, 1926; "Zumbunn Resigns from English Case," *Washington Evening Star*, October 27, 1926; "Steck Resents Charge," *Washington Evening Star*, October 30, 1926; "Seating Contested," *New York Herald Tribune*, November 5, 1926; "Watson Carried Klan Card," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 29, 1926.

38 "Senate Poll Points to Defeat," *New York Times*, May 31, 1925; "Problems that Confront the New Congress," *New York Times*, April 7, 1929; "Senate Sends Apportionment Bill," *New York Times*, June 4, 1929; "Amendment Proposed to Exclude Aliens," *Fellowship Forum* (Klan journal, Washington, DC), January 12, 1929; "Immigration's Loophole," *Wisconsin Kourier* (Washington, DC), March 13, 1925; Charles W. Eagles, *Democracy Delayed: Congressional Reapportionment and*

As his support for Hoch's census proposal might suggest, Mayfield was happy to vote in line with the Klan's hardline position on foreign relations. Throughout his term in office, Mayfield consistently stood against measures to settle international war debt. Given the organization's anti-Catholic bigotry, Klan members were particularly concerned over the vote on whether to settle Italian debt, and Klan publications approvingly noted Mayfield's voting record on the question. Of particular note was Mayfield's support of the Klan's key political issue, immigration restriction. Historians have often portrayed the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act enshrining national quotas in American immigration law as the lone great political victory of the Ku Klux Klan. The restrictions did not go as far as many wanted—the Grand Dragon of South Carolina, for example, echoed the Imperial Wizard in suggesting that all immigration to the United States should be suspended for at least ten years. Nonetheless, Klan members launched a strenuous effort in support of the proposed bill. As *The New York Times* noted on the eve of the House vote, “the Ku Klux Klan has made its influence felt.” Once passed into law, Klan leaders were happy to take credit.³⁹

Historians have also, however, argued that the Klan's lobbying on this issue was almost incidental to the passage of the legislation and that “Klan backing made no material difference in the outcome.” If anything, Pegram argues, Klan support for the bill may actually have hurt its chances at passage. At the very least, an endorsement from the Invisible Empire provided a useful angle of attack for opponents of the legislation. With or without the Klan, this view holds, the nation was set on a course of immigration restriction.⁴⁰

Certainly, Klan policy positions on immigration restriction were largely mainstream. What is overlooked in this formulation, though, is the series of political battles that followed passage of the law. Where the Johnson-Reed Act sailed through the House by a vote of 308 to 58 and passed the Senate 69 to 9, the vote margins of the post-passage battles over finer details of the legislation were far narrower. Hence even Mayfield's single vote in the Senate took on outside importance. Here, rather than in passage of

Urban-Rural Conflict in the 1920s (University of Georgia Press, 1990), 21, 58, 70, 78–80.

39 Ku Klux Klan, *Papers Read at the Meeting of Grand Dragons, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, at Their First Annual Meeting Held at Asheville, North Carolina, July 1923* (Arno Press, 1977), 70, 74; Hiram Evans, *The Menace of Modern Immigration* (Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, 1924), <https://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC/AmRad/menacemodernimmigration.pdf> (accessed December 7, 2025); “Bill to Register Aliens,” *Fiery Cross*, July 20, 1923; “A Klansman for President,” *Colonel Mayfield's Weekly* (Houston, TX), July 28, 1923; “American Civilization Endangered,” *Badger American* (Milwaukee, WI), March 1, 1924; “Vote on Alien Bill This Week,” *New York Times*, April 6, 1924; Peter J. Sletterdahl, *The Nightshirt in Politics* (Ajax Publishing Company, 1926), 39.

40 Gordon, *Second Coming*, 195; Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915–1930* (Oxford University Press, 1967), 254; Kristofer Allerfeldt, “And We Got Here First: Albert Johnson, National Origins, and Self-Interest in the Immigration Debate of the 1920s,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 45, no. 1 (2010): 8; McVeigh, *Rise of the Klan*, 110; Pegram, *One Hundred Percent*, 210–11.

the bill itself, could the Klan realistically claim to use its lobbying power to make a political difference? Again it is difficult to definitively conclude that Mayfield voted at the Klan's behest rather than from his own restrictionist sentiments.⁴¹

Klan publications and leaders certainly lobbied Mayfield to continue to take a hardline position in the battles over the details of the Johnson-Reed Act. With the majority, the Texas senator voted for the exclusion of Japanese immigrants, for determining national origins quotas based on the census of 1890 rather than 1910, and for the reduction of those quotas. While an amendment that would have provided for the total exclusion of all immigration for five years went down to defeat, Mayfield's vote helped stave off an effort to increase quota percentages in the bill. In a reflection of his dual interests in immigration restriction and Texas agricultural profits, he voted to institute quota restrictions on immigration from the Western hemisphere but also to limit restrictions on the migration of unskilled agricultural laborers.⁴²

One of the most significant of these fights was sparked by a 1926 proposal from Senator James W. Wadsworth of New York, who advocated for an amendment exempting family members of immigrants already in the United States from the new quotas.⁴³ Though it quickly became clear that Wadsworth would not be able to garner the necessary votes, even the failed proposal was sufficient to make the New York senator a political target in his reelection campaign that year. The Klan's publication *Fellowship Forum* led a successful charge to unseat Wadsworth. His defeat was a shocking loss for one of the more powerful Republicans in the Senate and a man who had been seen by some as a strong contender for the 1928 presidential nomination.⁴⁴

In the Senate session following the election, Wadsworth made a lame-duck effort to revive his proposal, offering a more narrowly conceived amendment that would allow for the entry of the wives and children under the age of eighteen of those immigrants

41 Mae Ngai, "The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (1999): 70; "Strict Immigration Bill Easily Passes," *New York Times*, April 13, 1924; "Huge Votes for Exclusion," *New York Times*, May 16, 1924.

42 "Yea and Nay Votes," Folder 28, Box 6, EBMP; "National Origins," *Kourier Magazine* (Atlanta, GA), September 1925; W. A. Hamlett to Earle Mayfield, September 1925, Folder 13, Box 5, EBMP; William Griffith, "Open Letter on Immigration Restriction," 1927, Folder 4, Box 6, EBMP; "Alien Wall Holds," *Fellowship Forum*, February 12, 1927; "Patriots Defeat Drive of Foreign Bloc," *Fellowship Forum*, December 17, 1927; "Preservation of Nation," *Fellowship Forum*, April 21, 1928.

43 "Amending Immigration Bill," *New York Times*, February 28, 1926; "Wadsworth Calls Alien Law Inhuman," *New York Times*, March 5, 1926; "Plan Urged by Davis," *New York Times*, March 19, 1926.

44 "Politics and Politicians," *Fellowship Forum*, September 25, 1926; "Romanists Open Fight," *Fellowship Forum*, October 2, 1926; "Opening of Congress Brings Bill," *Fellowship Forum*, December 11, 1926; "Klan Active in Monroe County," *New York Times*, August 30, 1926; "Klan Organ Opens War on Wadsworth," *New York Times*, September 26, 1926; "Klan Posters Conspicuous," *New York Times*, October 15, 1926; L. C. Speers, "Control of Senate is Prize of Election," *New York Times*, October 24, 1926; "See Dry Law Reaction," *New York Times*, November 4, 1926.

already in the United States. Rather than upward of half a million nonquota arrivals, this new amendment would allow only for some thirty-five thousand exemptions. This reduction in numbers, unsurprisingly, did not mollify the Klan, which attacked Wadsworth's plan as a "conspiracy to break down America's immigration barriers."⁴⁵

Here, as on other issues, Earle Mayfield seemingly followed the Klan line. While his vote was insufficient to defeat the proposal in the Senate, it did help ensure that Wadsworth's amendment only narrowly passed by a vote of 39 to 37. In an article considering the significance of Mayfield's vote, the *Dallas Farm News* presciently mused that "the scant majority of two votes the amendment received will readily permit its defeat" in the House. In fact, the amendment never made it out of the House Immigration Committee—a committee chaired by the newly reelected and Klan-backed Albert Johnson.⁴⁶

Given this record in office, it is no great surprise that Mayfield has been viewed by many as little more than a puppet politician. The Klan nominee had simply become a Klan senator, his vote under the control of the Invisible Empire. Even the Imperial Wizard, Hiram Evans, purportedly saw Mayfield as nothing more than a tool to be used at will. Almost forty years later, in his unpublished memoir, Mayfield bemoaned the idea that Evans "labored under the impression that he owned me like a man owns a bird dog."⁴⁷

Yet this image of Mayfield as an owned man is belied by several key issues. First and foremost is the fact that while the Texan's voting record on issues important to the Klan shows a clear affinity, such issues were seemingly not his priority. Consideration of Mayfield's time in office suggests a portrait not of a committed ideologue but of a fairly mundane politico, balancing the competing demands of his constituents. The junior senator's key legislative concern was not nativist restrictions but rather the one topic that Mayfield had discussed in virtually every one of his campaign speeches: transportation policy. His primary goal in office, he contended, would be to repeal "the unreasonable rates saddled upon the commerce of our State by the Interstate Commerce Commission." Mayfield's almost single-minded dedication to talking about freight rates allowed him to deflect from the thorny question of his Klan affiliations. Mayfield became an outspoken member of the Progressive-Democrat railroad bloc. Beyond the issue of transportation, Mayfield was at least as much a member of the powerful farm bloc as he was a Kandidate, praised by Klan and non-Klan publications alike for his

45 "Senate Adopts Wadsworth Amendment," *New York Times*, December 15, 1926; "House Will Block Move by Senate," *Fellowship Forum*, December 25, 1926; "Patriotic American Legislative Program," *Fellowship Forum*, February 19, 1927.

46 "Senate Adopts Wadsworth Amendment," *New York Times*, December 15, 1926; "Wadsworth Amendment Passes," *Dallas Farm News*, December 17, 1926; "Alien Wall Holds," *Fellowship Forum*, February 12, 1927; "Complete Voting Record," Folder 2, Box 7, EBMP.

47 Mayfield, "Incidents, Volume 3," 242.

speeches “standing firmly for the American farmers.”⁴⁸ This was a legislative record Mayfield could—and did—tout to support his contention that, while the Klan may have supported his candidacy, he could not properly be labeled a Kandidate.⁴⁹

Lending further credence to such ideas were the areas in which he actively broke with the Klan’s leadership. According to Mayfield, Evans tried to “deliver my vote to the Republicans on several occasions.” Perhaps most notably, Evans reportedly pushed Mayfield to vote against a 1924 resolution calling for an investigation of the attorney general, Harry Daugherty, over his involvement in the Teapot Dome scandal. A loyal southern Democrat, Mayfield refused and joined his party in calling for Daugherty’s head, though he sat out a subsequent vote on whether to hold the attorney general in contempt. In Mayfield’s self-aggrandizing retelling of events, he told the Imperial Wizard that he had to vote for his “honest convictions,” while a furious Evans accused Mayfield of ingratitude. More likely, Mayfield saw a lost cause that would hurt him more politically than crossing the Imperial Wizard would, even with the Klan at the height of its national power that year.⁵⁰

A more substantive break came in 1926 over the Permanent Court of International Justice, or World Court. Klan publications railed against the international agreement as a “masked attack upon America’s nationalism.” Mayfield, on the other hand, had repeatedly backed the idea of an international tribunal during his 1922 campaign, and he refused to contradict himself now. Instead, he followed the lead of Claude Swanson of Virginia. The ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Swanson led the charge for US membership in the World Court with the caveat of the “Harding-Hughes-Coolidge” reservations, designed to allay fears about undue international influence on domestic affairs. As with the Daugherty affair, Mayfield recognized a winning cause and voted with an overwhelming majority, first to adopt

48 Undated Biographical Sketch, Folder 21, Box 4, EBMP; Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 161; Earle Mayfield, Speech at Fort Worth, 1922, Folder 24, Box 4, EBMP; Earle Mayfield to George Armstrong, January 25, 1922, AR335-31-2, GWAP; “Assails Klan,” *New York Times*, August 23, 1922; “Mayfield Speech,” *Houston Press*, July 19, 1922; Brown, *Hood*, 106.

49 HR 9833, Public Law 436, 69th Congress, 1st Session (June 28, 1926), Folder 3, Box 6, Mayfield Papers; S 3889, Public Law 805, 69th Congress, 2nd Session (March 4, 1927), Folder 3, Box 6, EBMP; HR 15008, Public Law 552, 69th Congress, 2nd Session (January 18, 1927), Folder 3, Box 6, EBMP; S 4746, Public Law 740 (March 3, 1927), 69th Congress, 2nd Session, Folder 3, Box 6, EBMP; S 5082, Public Law 651, 69th Congress, 2nd Session (February 25, 1927), Folder 3, Box 6, EBMP; “Senator Earle Mayfield,” *Texas Heritage* (Austin, TX), November 1961; Mayfield, “Affidavit”; “Another Petition in Mayfield Case,” *Fiery Cross*, December 28, 1923; “The Senatorship and the Issues,” *Houston Post*, July 30, 1922; “Politics and Politicians,” *Fellowship Forum*, January 2, 1927; “Politics and Politicians,” *Fellowship Forum*, January 29, 1927; “Preservation of Nation Depends on Restriction,” *Fellowship Forum*, April 21, 1928.

50 “Yea and Nay Votes,” Folder 28, Box 6, EBMP; Mayfield, “Incidents, Volume 3,” 242–43; “Committee to Conduct Inquiry is Chosen,” *New York Times*, March 2, 1924.

the Swanson resolutions, then to end debate on the question. Klan leaders, meanwhile, furiously lobbied against the move.⁵¹

In his memoir, Mayfield once again characterized his stance on the World Court as one of principled defiance. Imperial Wizard Evans, according to Mayfield's egocentric account, was so frustrated by the senator's intransigence that he wept with fury. This unlikely claim is rendered even more implausible by the broader context of Mayfield's refusal. By the time of the vote in 1926, the Klan's national membership was already in decline and the influence of its leadership was waning. There was no real consensus among the group's rank and file on the issue of the World Court, and the Imperial hierarchy seemed ineffective in its efforts to create one. As Pegram has noted, Mayfield was not the only Klan-associated senator who voted to endorse the court despite the objections of Evans and the Imperial leadership. Rice Means of Colorado, arguably the sitting senator most associated with the Klan after Mayfield, did the same. This was less a matter of principle and more a matter of political calculation. Yet even though he was not the only apostate, Mayfield's vote did seemingly contribute to a growing chill in the relationship between the Texan and the Imperial Wizard. As Mayfield's 1928 reelection campaign loomed, Evans made a decisive break. Not only would the Klan not back Mayfield for reelection, it would actively work against him.⁵²

It is easy to dismiss Mayfield's defeat in the 1928 Democratic primary at the hands of Congressman Tom Connally as yet another example of the Klan's decline in the latter half of the decade. Certainly, the Klan's political power in Texas seemed to quickly fade after 1922. Where Mayfield had successfully defeated James Ferguson in the Democratic runoff, it was Ferguson who claimed victory in 1924 when his wife, Miriam "Ma" Ferguson, defeated the Klan's candidate, Felix Robertson, in a bitter struggle for the Democratic nomination for governor. The election, the *Dallas Morning News* declared, was "a judgment against the Klan as a political organization." In 1926, Miriam Ferguson's reelection was stymied not by a Klan candidate but by the campaign of Dan Moody, who had come to prominence in his role as the district attorney of

51 The effort to join the World Court would founder on European rejection of the fifth Swanson reservation, which effectively declared the Court could not take or rule on a case involving the United States or US interests without US approval. "The Papacy a Breeder of Wars," *Badger American*, September 1, 1923; "Alleged Klan Tickets Win," *American Citizen* (Fort Worth, TX), April 13, 1923; "Papal Plotting for the World Court," *American Standard*, May 1, 1924; Earle Mayfield to E. Mittendorf, January 25, 1926, Folder 12, Box 6, EBMP; "Swanson Fires First Gun," *New York Times*, December 18, 1925; "World Court Wins First Senate Test," *New York Times*, January 7, 1926; "Victory for World Court Assured," *New York Times*, January 26, 1926; "Court Protocol Will Be Ratified," *New York Times*, January 27, 1926; "Swanson Stresses Fifth Reservation," *New York Times*, August 4, 1926; "Coolidge Defers World Court Move," *New York Times*, October 2, 1926; "Yea and Nay Votes," Folder 28, Box 6, EBMP.

52 Mayfield, "Affidavit"; Mayfield, "Incidents, Volume 3," 271-72; Pegram, *One Hundred Percent*, 211-12.

Williamson County for successfully prosecuting four Klan members for assault in 1923. The political power of the second Klan had seemingly been routed.⁵³

Yet Mayfield's memoir, self-interested though it is, suggests a more complex narrative. Mayfield had opposed the nomination of Felix Robertson in 1924. In 1926, despite Moody's prosecutorial past, the Texas Klan's hatred of the Fergusons was so great that Imperial Wizard Evans and other Klan leaders endorsed Moody and celebrated his victory. And in 1928, Mayfield's reelection campaign was certainly hurt by his association with the Klan—but it was also damaged by not associating himself closely enough with it. While the Klan's influence in Texas in 1928 was far from what it had been, it was not insignificant, and it was now turned against Mayfield. In the senator's own melodramatic words, "Hiram W. Evans, head of the Ku Klux Klan, cut my throat politically."⁵⁴

Mayfield's loss in 1928 can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that he was a thoroughly dislikable egotist who complained that custom dictated an incumbent be allowed a second term in office. He was especially aggrieved that the "unfair and unholy" effort to contest his seating had undermined his time in the Senate, and suggested that he should be allowed to serve another full term as recompense. If that was not enough, he also complained that Al Smith's candidacy for president depressed the Democratic primary vote in Texas, rendering him little more than a "victim of circumstance."⁵⁵

This series of narcissistic rationalizations should certainly be kept in mind when assessing Mayfield's final accusatory grievance: that the Klan had backed Tom Connally against him in the primary. Yet this charge is not entirely unreasonable. It is certainly true, as Mayfield and his supporters pointed out, that Connally's attacks on Mayfield were political rather than principled. The congressman had not spoken out against the Klan in the elections of 1922 or 1924 or 1926, even as the organization's political fortunes waned in his state. It was only once he entered the Democratic primary race in 1928 that Connally began to lambast the incumbent for his Klan ties. Even then, Connally astutely tried to play both sides against Mayfield. In speech after speech, he not only attacked Mayfield for his association with the Klan but also denounced Mayfield for not having remained sufficiently loyal to the organization. "He rode the Ku Klux Klan into office," Connally declared, "and after using it tossed it aside and renounced it." The major issue for the Connally campaign was not that Mayfield had

53 Bernstein, *Ten Dollars*, 223–24; Brown, *Hood*, 211, 232–33, 304, 320; "Ferguson Defeats Robertson," *Dallas Morning News*, August 25, 1924.

54 Bernstein, *Ten Dollars*, 274–75; Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America* (Simon and Schuster, 1987), 253–54; Brown, *Hood*, 212, 313, 321, 408; "Calendar of Senatorial Primaries," *Fellowship Forum*, July 31, 1926.

55 Earle Mayfield to Mrs. Tom Pitner, September 7, 1928, Folder 8, Box 6, EBMP; Earle Mayfield, Untitled Speech, May 27, 1928, Folder 2, Box 7, EBMP; Mayfield, "Incidents, Volume 3," 251–52, 275.

been a Klandidate. It was that he had been deceptive about his Klandidacy and had *not* served as a Klan senator.⁵⁶

Mayfield later alleged that the Klan poured money into the state to finance Connally. Ironically, this financing was purportedly directed by Mayfield's savior in the seating contest, William Zumbunn. In the flurry of charges and countercharges, the truth of the matter is unclear. The final vote tally, however, lends credence to Mayfield's larger claim. The Texan's 1922 victory had been propelled particularly by four counties where the Klan was strong—Dallas, Tarrant, Harris, and McLennan. In 1928, those four counties went heavily for Connally, making up much of his margin of victory. Connally and his campaign may or may not have been actively courting them, but Klan voters (or at least voters who had at one time been Klan members) seemingly abandoned Mayfield in droves.⁵⁷

Conclusion

After a run for governor in 1930 ended in an ignominious sixth-place finish in the Democratic primary, Mayfield's political career was effectively over. *The New York Times* exulted that the result proved the Klan's political power a thing of the past, a minor aberrance in the path of American progress. Mayfield became a popular example of a troubled period, while his status as a Klandidate became the epitaph on Mayfield's political gravestone.⁵⁸ Yet this quick dismissal of Mayfield as a puppet of the Klan obscures the reality of the Klan movement's impact on the political landscape of the 1920s.

First, it ignores the way in which Klan influence on legislators actually functioned. Mayfield was not a puppet or a stooge. Undoubtedly a white supremacist, a nativist, and a staunch supporter of prohibition, Mayfield's interests frequently converged with the second Klan's, particularly in the fight for immigration restriction. Yet these were also all mainstream political positions outside the Klan, and he and others broke with the organization's leadership on the issue of the World Court. He sympathized with Klan goals but was seemingly not particularly committed to the organization. Rather, he

56 "How the Fight Ought to Be Made in the Forum," Undated Campaign Memo, Folder 5, Box 7, EBMP; "Connally Attacks Mayfield," *Dallas Times Herald*, May 27, 1928; "Connally Speaks Here," *Granbury (TX) News*, July 13, 1928; Mayfield, "Affidavit"; Mayfield, "Incidents, Volume 3," 246–47, 275.

57 "How the Fight," Folder 5, Box 7, EBMP; Brown, *Hood*, 406–7; Mayfield, "Incidents, Volume 3," 253–54, 271–73; "Smith Man Leads in Texas," *New York Times*, July 30, 1928; "Connally Wins Over Mayfield," *New York Times*, August 27, 1928.

58 "Eleven Seek to Be Governor of Texas," *New York Times*, July 20, 1930; "Ma Ferguson Wins Texas Run-Off," *New York Times*, July 28, 1930.

was much like many other politicians, navigating the often contradictory passions and demands of constituents, supporters, and donors.

Second, examining Mayfield only through the lens of his bitterly contested election and his quick defeat defines the Klan's political power solely by its ability to elect its members and overt allies. To do so overlooks the ways in which Klannish political power exerted itself on those *in office*. How many Klan members were elected to federal office is less important than how many of those in federal office were willing to shape legislation in response to Klan priorities. Mayfield, at least, reveals more about Klannish political power as a legislator than he does as a candidate.

Based on Mayfield's record in office, it would seem less useful to understand the Klan as puppet masters so much as a bigoted lobbying group. This was an analogy the Klan's officers themselves welcomed, not least as a means of further normalizing the group. Imperial Wizard Evans, for example, frequently compared the Klan's efforts in politics to the work of the Anti-Saloon League. By 1926, one Washington correspondent noted, there was a distinct and recognizable Klan "bloc" operating in the Senate, which influenced "every legislative matter of importance." This did not equate to a Klan steamroller compelling pliant politicians to end parochial schools and ban all immigration. It did mean, though, that the Klan had a significant indirect influence on the legislative agenda of the 1920s. This was a lobby influential enough "to demand recognition behind the scenes," especially on close votes when "party leaders . . . found it necessary to inquire into the position of the Klan before they could make an accurate poll."⁵⁹

So, was Mayfield a Klan politician? If we remain wedded to a definition based on formal affiliation, then technically, no. He was not a dues-paying member during his election or his time in office, but this is clearly a misleading categorization. If we use Klan electoral support as our metric, Mayfield certainly received the Klan's enthusiastic backing in 1922, although it is unclear whether that backing was help or hindrance. Yet he was also the target of the Klan's enthusiastic opposition in 1928. He refused to publicly disavow the Invisible Empire but also refused to publicly endorse the group. He worked privately with Klan officials but also bridled at the idea that they could direct or control him. If we judge him on his voting record, we can certainly see that his own political interests converged with those of the Klan on some issues, as with immigration restriction. On other issues, the two diverged. His predominant focus on transportation and agriculture in crafting legislation marks him more as a conservative southern Democrat than as a Klandidate. The ambiguous status key to Mayfield's

59 Hiram Evans, "The Ballots Behind the Ku Klux Klan," *World's Work* (Garden City, NY), January 1928; Stanley Frost, "When the Klan Rules," *Outlook* (New York, NY), February 20, 1924; Robert B. Smith, "Klan Spooks in Congress," *The Independent* (Boston, MA), June 19, 1926.

political ambitions challenges not only any kind of neat delineation between Klan and not Klan but also between center and fringe.

The fact that Mayfield does not fit neatly into any of these frameworks does not mean that we should not understand him as a Klandidate. It means that we need to expand our understanding of what we mean by a Klandidate, recognizing that formal affiliation is not a determinative factor. That recognition must also extend to the fact that there was no single type of Klandidate. Differing local pressures, changing chronological context, and individual personalities, powerbases, and policy goals all mean that we cannot simply generalize from the case study of Mayfield's political career to create a one-size-fits-all model of Klandidacy. Mayfield differs from fellow senators Hugo Black and Rice W. Means, who in turn differ from congressional representatives like William D. Upshaw and James P. Buchanan. Yet all could—and should—be rightly dubbed as Klandidates.

When we abandon the core/periphery model, we are forced to rethink how we might judge the ways and means by which the Klan movement exerted political power in the 1920s. Instead of simply assuming these individuals were puppets to be used by the Klan's leadership, we must carefully consider what kind of control the Klan did or could exert over these politicians. Similarly, we must investigate to what extent these politicians followed mandates from the organization and to what degree they displayed political independence. Fundamentally, we must ask whether a reliance on categorizing some individuals as "Klan politicians" and others as "not Klan politicians" artificially constricts our understanding of the ways the Invisible Empire wielded political power, and thereby reinforces an imagined centrist/extremist dichotomy.

After all, if someone acts to further the Klan's political interests, does it matter whether or not they are a member or openly avow sympathy? There were many federal politicians in the 1920s who received backing from the Ku Klux Klan in their election, both overtly and covertly. If we look at politicians who received the backing of the Klan without explicitly disavowing that support, then Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover would certainly fall into such a category. We could consider, then, whether the distinction between some US presidents and a "Klan politician" is one of category or simply one of gradation. The lack of clear boundaries in such a case is indicative of a broader issue with the conceptualization of right-wing politics. Rather than considering these questions within an analytical framework that encourages us to draw a boundary between the far right and the political mainstream, we are better served by a conceptual spectrum. With Mayfield as an example of one form of Klandidate, the Klan's political power base seemingly becomes more substantial and far reaching, albeit less centralized and totalitarian, than we have previously acknowledged. When we reconceive of Klan power in that way, it becomes clear that we must reconsider the organization's enduring impact on the legislative priorities of the 1920s and the lessons it might offer for our understanding of the influence of the far right on the broader political landscape.