ESSAYS

The collapse of Reconstruction had enormous costs for the African-American population of the South. Arguably, its failure also postponed the economic and social recovery of the entire region until well into the twentieth century. Historians have long debated the meaning of Reconstruction and particularly the reasons for its abandonment. In the first essay, Steven Hahn of the University of Pennsylvania shows that former slaves and Confederates were both prepared to mount an armed defense of their goals, reflecting a long tradition of Southern violence that had previously undergirded slavery. He argues that Reconstruction came to an end when freedmen lost the military support of the North, which had tired of the sixteen-year conflict (1861–1877). Essentially, the freedmen were outgunned. David W. Blight of Yale University takes a somewhat different tack. He depicts Reconstruction as a process in which two important but incompatible goals vied for attention: reconciliation and emancipation. The nation needed to heal the sectional divide in order to function as one country, yet it had also fought the war, at least in part, to bring justice to the former slaves. As it turned out, Southern resistance narrowed the terms on which reconciliation was possible. The emancipationist promise of the war was stunted as a result, and eventually forgotten in the attempt to minimize the differences between “the Blue and the Gray.” Reconstruction became a contest over the memory and meaning of the war. Black southerners lost.

Continuing the War: White and Black Violence During Reconstruction

STEVEN HAHN

In March 1867, nearly two years after the Confederate armies had begun to surrender and more than a year after Congress had refused to seat representatives from the former Confederate states, the mark of Radicalism was indelibly inscribed into the cornerstone of the reconstructed American republic. It did not herald the draconian policies—imprisonments and executions, massive disfranchisement, or confiscation of landed estates—that some Republicans had advocated and many Rebels had initially feared. And it required a combination of white southern arrogance and vindictiveness, presidential intransigence, and mounting African American agitation before it could be set. But with the Military Reconstruction Acts, Congress gave the federal government unprecedented power to reorganize the ex-Confederate South politically, imposed political disabilities on leaders of the rebellion, and, most stunning of all, extended the elective franchise to southern black males, the great majority of whom had been slaves. Never be so large a group

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slaves. Never before in history, and nowhere during the Age of Revolution, had so large a group of legally dependent people been enfranchised....

By the summer of 1867, complaints of "armed organizations among the freedmen," of late-hour drilling, and of threatening "assemblages" had grown both in volume and geographical scope. The entire plantation South appeared to pulse with militant and quasi-military activity. But now, in the months after the passage of the Reconstruction Acts, investigation revealed a more formal process of politicization, and one tied directly to the extension of the elective franchise and the organizational initiatives of the Republican party. From Virginia to Georgia, from the Carolinas to the Mississippi Valley and Texas, the freed people showed "a remarkable interest in all political information," were "fast becoming thoroughly informed upon their civil and political rights," and, most consequentially, were avidly "organizing clubs and leagues throughout the counties." Of these, none was more important to the former slaves or more emblematic of the developing character of local politics in the postemancipation South than the often vilified and widely misunderstood body known as the Union League.

Emerging out of a network of organizations formed in the northern states in 1862 and 1863 to rally public support for the Lincoln administration and the war effort, the Union League embraced early the practices of both popular and patrician politics. Bound by secrecy, requiring oaths and rituals much in the manner of the Masons, and winning a mass base through local councils across the Midwest and Northeast, the league also took hold among loyalist elites meeting in stately clubs and townhomes in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. In May 1863, a national convention defined goals, drew up a constitution, and elected officers, and councils were soon being established in Union-occupied areas of the Confederate South to advance the cause. Once the war ended, the league continued its educational and agitational projects and spread most rapidly among white Unionists in southern hill and mountain districts, where membership could climb into the thousands. But committed as the league was "to protect, strengthen, and defend all loyal men without regard to sect, condition, or race," it began as well to sponsor political events and open a few councils for the still disfranchised African Americans—chiefly in larger cities like Richmond, Norfolk, Petersburg, Wilmington, Raleigh, Savannah, Tallahassee, Macon, and Nashville.

With the provision for a black franchise and voter registration encoded in the Reconstruction Acts, league organizers quickly fanned out from these urban areas into the smaller towns and surrounding countryside, and particularly into the plantation belt....

It was arduous and extremely dangerous work, for as organizers trekked out where the mass of freed people resided, they fell vulnerable to swift and deadly retaliation at the hands of white landowners and vigilantes. Having organized the Mount Olive Union League Council in Nottoway County, Virginia, in July of 1867, the Reverend John Givens reported that a "colored speaker was killed three weeks ago" in neighboring Lunenburg County. But Givens determined to "go there and speak where they have cowed the black man," hoping "by
the help of God" to "give them a dose of my radical Republican pills and neutralize the corrosive acidity of their negro hate."...

The formation of a Union League council officially required the presence of at least nine loyal men, each twenty-one years of age or older, who were, upon initiation, to elect a president and other officers from among those regarded as "prudent, vigilant, energetic, and loyal," and as "possess[ing] the confidence of their fellow citizens." They were expected to hold meetings weekly, to follow the ceremony, and to "enlist all loyal talent in their neighborhood."...

The experience and operations of local councils depended to some extent on the training and ability of the organizer, but perhaps even more on the social and political conditions in the specific counties and precincts. In hilly Rutherford County, North Carolina, where only one in five inhabitants was black and where the Whig party had been dominant before the Civil War, the Union League seemed to function—at least initially—in an unusually open and relaxed manner. One Saturday a month at noon, the courthouse bell in the village of Rutherfordton would be rung to announce a meeting and summon "every citizen who wished to come." Membership in the league was not concealed and some men who had served in the Confederate army belonged....

Yet where blacks made up between one-third and two-thirds of the population—and where, not incidentally, the great majority of Union League councils was to be found—the situation was rather different. Here, most league members were black and they encountered a substantial and largely antagonistic population of whites. Whether they met weekly, biweekly, or monthly (and there was considerable variation), they relied on word of mouth rather than bells, horns, or posters; they usually assembled at night; and they generally favored sites that would attract as little adverse attention as possible, often posting armed sentinels outside. Some league councils either organized their own drilling companies or linked with companies that already existed. One observer in the South Carolina piedmont district of Abbeville fretfully reported that local leagues with "their Captains, and other Officers," were meeting "with their Guns ... in secret places, but do not meet twice in the same place." Recognizing the dangers, the freedman Caleb, who worked for a particularly hostile landowner in Maury County, Tennessee, where blacks formed just under half of the population, chose another course: he went to his employe in April 1867 "and wholl[l]y den[i]ed having any thing to do with the Un[j]ion League," insisting that he "has not joined it nor never will."

The Union League sprang to life through the plantation districts because its goal of mobilizing black support for the national government and the Republican party fed on and nourished the sensibilities and customs that organizers found in many African American communities. League councils served as crucial political schools, educating newly enfranchised blacks in the ways of the official political culture. New members not only were instructed in the league's history, in the "duties of American citizenship," and in the role of the Republican party in advancing their freedom, but also learned about "parliamentary law and debating," about courts, juries, and militia service, about the conduct of elections and of various meetings often and government most could need.

Indeed, the Union League was often a processi" of "any color from County, Miss. other product "the whole "County, Ala. schools so that League."...

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and of various political offices, and about important events near and far. With meetings often devoted, in part, to the reading aloud of newspapers, pamphlets, and government decrees, freedmen gained a growing political literacy even if most could neither read nor write....

Indeed, league councils quickly constituted themselves as vehicles not only of Republican electoral mobilization, but also of community development, defense, and self-determination. In Harnett County, North Carolina, they formed a procession “with fife and drum and flag and banner” and demanded the return of “any colored children in the county bound to white men.” In Oktibbeha County, Mississippi, they organized a cooperative store, accepting “corn and other products ... in lieu of money,” and, when a local black man suffered arrest, “the whole League” armed and marched to the county seat. In Randolph County, Alabama, and San Jacinto County, Texas, they worked to establish local schools so that, as one activist put it, “every colored man [now] beleaves in the Leage.”

Among the diverse activities that Union League councils across the former Confederate South pursued in 1867, few commanded more immediate attention than those required to implement the provisions and goals of the Reconstruction Acts. Within months, the Republican party had to be organized in the states and counties, delegates had to be nominated and elected to serve in state constitutional conventions, new state constitutions enfranchising black men and investing state governments with new structures and responsibilities had to be written and ratified, and the general congressional expectations for readmission to the Union had to be fulfilled. First and foremost, the outlines of a new body politic had to be drawn and legitimated through a process of voter registration....

During Reconstruction, black men held political office in every state of the former Confederacy. More than one hundred won election or appointment to posts having jurisdiction over entire states, ranging from superintendent of education, assistant commissioner of agriculture, superintendent of the deaf and dumb asylum, and member of the state land commission to treasurer, secretary of state, state supreme court justice, and lieutenant governor. One African American even sat briefly as the governor of Louisiana. A great many more—almost eight hundred—served in the state legislatures. But by far the largest number of black officeholders were to be found at the local level: in counties, cities, smaller municipalities, and militia districts. Although a precise figure is almost impossible to obtain, blacks clearly filled over 11,100 elective or appointive local offices, and they may well have filled as many as 1,400 or 1,500, about 80 percent of which were in rural and small-town settings....

Union League and Republican party activists therefore had to prepare carefully for election day lest their other efforts be nullified. They had to petition military commanders and Republican governors to appoint favorable (and dismiss hostile) election officials and to designate suitable polling sites, particularly if Democrats still controlled county governing boards. They had to get their voters to the polls, at times over a distance of many miles, and make sure that those voters received the correct tickets. They had to minimize the opportunities for bribery, manipulation, and intimidation. And they had to oversee the counting
of ballots. Voting required, in essence, a military operation. Activists often called a meeting of fellow leaguers or club members the night before an election to provide instructions and materials. The chairman of the Tunica County, Mississippi, Republican executive committee had men come to the town of Hernando from all over the county on the day before the election and distribute tickets to those political clubs meeting that night. At times groups of black voters might spend the night before an election on a safe plantation or in the woods, perhaps sending a small party ahead to check for possible traps or ambushes, and then move out at first light to arrive at the polls well before their opponents or “rebel spies” could gather. Henry Frazer, who organized for the Republican party in Barbour County, Alabama, claimed that he went out with as many as “450 men and camped at the side of the road” before going into the town of Eufaula at eight in the morning where they would “stand in a body until they got a chance to vote.”…

Protecting black Republican voters from white intimidation was only the most obvious goal of such martial organization and display, however. There was also the need to prod the timid and punish the apathetic or disloyal within their own communities. Activists learned early that elections could only be carried by securing overwhelming allegiance to the Republican party and then by ensuring that the eligible voters overcame fear or inertia to cast ballots. Political parades and torchlight processions during election campaigns and on the eve of polling—often with black men dressed in their club uniforms, beating drums, “hallooing, hooping,” and, on occasion, riding full gallop through the streets—thereby served several purposes: to inspire enthusiasm, advertise numbers and resolve, and coax the participation of those who might otherwise abstain. Where coaxing proved insufficient, more coercive tactics could be deployed. Union League members in a North Carolina county, upon learning of three or four black men who “didn’t mean to vote,” threatened to “whip them” and “made them go.” In another county, “some few colored men who declined voting” were, in the words of a white conservative, “bitterly persecuted.” One suffered insults, the destruction of his fences and crops, and “other outrages.”

Especially harsh reprisals could be brought against blacks who aligned with conservatives and Democrats, for they were generally regarded not merely as opponents but as “traitors.” As black Mississippian Robert Gleed put it, “[W]e don’t believe they have a right to acquiesce with a party who refuse to recognize their right to participate in public affairs.” In the rural hinterlands of Portsmouth, Virginia, black Republicans attacked “colored conservatives” at a prayer meeting and beat two of them badly. In southside Virginia’s Campbell County, a black man who betrayed the Union League was tied up by his heels and suspended from a tree for several hours until he agreed to take an oath of loyalty.…

When the U.S. Congress conducted an investigation of the Ku Klux Klan in the early 1870s, more than a few of the reputed leaders testified that the organization was a necessary response to the alarming activities and tactics of the Union League. They complained of secret oaths, clandestine meetings, accumulations of arms, nocturnal drilling, threatening mobilizations, and a general flaunting of civilities among former slaves across the plantation South. In so doing, they helped construct a new labor force, and the militia formalized the capabilities as enunciated by the statutes of the state. The Republican party, which was the only legal party in the South, was replaced by a society of men, both black and white, who were dedicated to the preservation of white supremacy, to protection of the Klan’s construction of a new state constitution, and to the enforcement of a new order in the South that was dependent on the exercise of a new form of political power. The Ku Klux Klan was a force that was focused on the enforcement of racial supremacy and the maintenance of white rule in the South. The organization was a reflection of the deep-seated prejudices and fears of the white South, as well as the desire to maintain control over the black population. The Klan was able to exercise power and influence through its ability to intimidate, suppress, and control the black population, as well as to influence the political process and to provide a sense of security and protection to its members. The Klan's activities were often characterized by violence and intimidation, and it used a variety of tactics to achieve its goals. The organization was able to exert considerable influence in the South, and its activities had a significant impact on the course of events in the region.
helped construct a discourse, later embraced by apologists for slavery and white supremacy, that not only justified vigilantism but also demonized Radical Reconstruction for its political illegitimacies. The enfranchisement of ignorant and dependent freedmen by vengeful outsiders, the Klansmen insisted, marked a basic corruption of the body politic and a challenge to order as it was widely understood....

Ku Klux Klan leaders and sympathizers who blamed the Union League for their resort to vigilantism were at least right about the chronology. Union League mobilizations generally preceded the appearance of the Klan. But the character and activities of the league itself reflected a well-established climate of paramilitarism that assumed both official and unofficial forms. Already during the summer and fall of 1865, despite the presence of a Union army of occupation, bands of white “regulators,” “scouts,” and cavalrmen rode the countryside disciplining and disarming freedpeople who looked to harvest their crops, make new labor and family arrangements, and perhaps await a federally sponsored land redistribution....

From the first, the Klan proved particularly attractive to young, white men who had served in the Confederate army. All of the founders in Pulaski, Tennessee, were youthful Confederate veterans, and most everywhere former Confederate officers, cavalrmen, and privates sparked organization and composed the bulk of membership. Klan dens and other vigilante outfits often became magnets for returning soldiers and, at times, they virtually mirrored the remnants of specific Confederate companies. Powell Clayton, the Republican governor of Arkansas who effectively combated the Klan, complained in retrospect about the Confederates being paroled or allowed to desert without surrendering their arms, ammunition, and horses. To this extent, the Klan not only came to embody the anger and displacement of a defeated soldiery and to capitalize on the intensely shared experiences of battlefields and prison camps; it also may be regarded as a guerilla movement bent on continuing the struggle or avenging the consequences of the official surrender.

But the very associations between the Klan and the Confederate army suggest a deeper historical and political context, for Confederate mobilization itself was enabled by longstanding and locally based paramilitary institutions. militias were perhaps most important because state governments required the enrollment of all able-bodied white men while leaving much of the organizational initiative to counties and neighborhoods, where volunteer companies could elect their own officers, make their own by-laws, and then secure recognition by the legislature. The militias, in turn, were closely connected with slave patrols—for a time through formal control, and more generally by way of personnel and jurisdiction—which policed the African American population, instructed all white men in their responsibilities as citizens in a slave society, and could be enlisted as something of a posse by the state in the event of emergency. A martial spirit and military presence thus suffused the community life of the antebellum South....

The geography of Klan activity was, in essence, a map of political struggle in the Reconstruction South. Klan-style vigilantism surfaced at some point almost anywhere that a substantial Republican constituency—and especially a black
Republican constituency—was to be found: from Virginia to Florida, South Carolina to Texas, Arkansas to Kentucky. Reports of “outrages” and “depradations” emanated from areas that were heavily black (eastern North Carolina, west-central Alabama), heavily white (east Tennessee, northwest Georgia), and racially mixed (eastern Mississippi, northwest South Carolina, east-central Texas). But whether the eruptions were brief or prolonged and whether they achieved their objectives depended on the nature and effectiveness of black resistance and, by extension, the readiness of the state Republican governments to respond with necessary force....

Union Leagues and Republican party clubs had, in some places, already begun to mount a response to Klan violence, at times bringing pressure against suspected Klan leaders. Black members of a Pickens County, Alabama, Union League boycotted a white landowner thought to be “head of the Ku Klux.” They were so effective that, in his words, he “could not hire a darkey at any price.” In a number of locales scattered across the plantation districts, they appear to have taken even more direct and destructive action by torching the mills, barns, and houses of former slaveholders. But the leagues and clubs more likely moved to put themselves on a paramilitary footing, if they had not embraced rituals of armed self-defense from the outset. Black Union Leaguers in Darlington County, South Carolina, fearing Klan violence, gathered weapons, took control of a town, and threatened to burn it down in the event of attack. Near Macon, Mississippi, the combination of local outrages and the very bloody Meridian riot led blacks to organize “secretly” and ready themselves to “meet the mob.” “There will be no more ‘Meridians’ in Mississippi,” a white ally of theirs declared. “Next time an effort of this kind is made there will be killing on both sides.” The tenor of conflict and mobilization in Granville County, North Carolina, in the fall of 1868 was such that a prominent Democrat offered Union League members a bargain: “If we would stop the leagues he would stop the Ku Klux.”...

Like Tennessee, neighboring Arkansas had a white population majority, a solid base of Unionist sentiment in the mountains of the northwest, and a Republican party that looked to punish former Confederates. But Arkansas had been remanded to military rule by the Reconstruction Acts of 1867, and in the spring of 1868 eligible voters put Republicans in command of the general assembly and the carpetbagger Powell Clayton in the governor’s chair. A native of Pennsylvania and a civil engineer by training, Clayton had been out in Kansas during the 1850s and commanded a Union cavalry regiment in Arkansas during the war, where he saw a good deal of action against Confederate guerrillas. After the surrender, he settled in Arkansas and bought a plantation, but run-ins with ex-Confederate neighbors led him into politics; he first helped to organize the state Republican party and then accepted the party’s nomination for governor. By the time of Clayton’s inauguration in July, Klan activity was sufficiently pronounced in the southern and eastern sections of the state that he wasted no time in responding; with the approval of the legislature, he began mobilizing a state militia and, as intimidation of Republican voters and local officials intensified and a Republican congressman fell victim to a Klan ambush, he declared martial law...
in ten counties. Armed skirmishes between militiamen and Klansmen, together with arrests, trials, and a few executions, followed. By early 1869, the Klan had pretty well "ceased to exist" in Arkansas....

The accession of Republican Ulysses S. Grant to the presidency in March of 1869 offered some welcome possibilities to those governors who stood ready to deploy state militia units. Previously, the Johnson administration had refused requests for arms, and governors were left scrambling to equip their troops. Arkansas's Powell Clayton first tried to borrow guns from various northern states and then, when this failed, sent an emissary to New York to purchase rifles and ammunition. Unfortunately, a contingent of well-prepared Klansmen intercepted the shipment between Memphis and Little Rock. Florida's carpetbag governor Harrison Reed chose to go personally to New York to procure arms soon after the legislature passed a militia law in August 1868, but the result was even more embarrassing. Under the nose of a federal detachment, Klansmen boarded the train carrying the armaments to Tallahassee and destroyed them. Grant, on the other hand, proved more receptive than Johnson and made substantial supplies of weapons available to Governors Holden and Scott in the Carolinas....

The Klan's effectiveness depended on a wider political climate that gave latitude to local vigilantes and allowed for explosions of very public violence. Louisiana and Georgia, which alone among the reconstructed states supported Democrat Horatio Seymour for the presidency in 1868, had at least seven bloody riots together with Klan raiding that summer and fall. The term "riot," which came into wide use at this time, quite accurately captures the course and ferocity of these eruptions, claiming as they did numerous lives, often over several days, in an expanding perimeter of activity. But "riot" suggests, as well, a disturbance that falls outside the ordinary course of political conduct, and so by invoking or embracing it we may miss what such disturbances can reveal about the changing dynamics and choreography of what was indeed ordinary politics in the postemancipation South....

Consider the Camilla riot in southwest Georgia, which captured the greatest attention but shared many features of the others. In late August 1868, Republicans in the state's Second Congressional District, most of whom were black, met in the town of Albany and nominated William P. Pierce, a former Union army officer, failed planter, and Freedmen's Bureau agent, for Congress. It would not be an easy campaign.... A "speaking" in the town of Americus on September 15 brought menacing harassment from local whites and Pierce barely escaped violence. But he did not interrupt plans for a similar event in Camilla on Saturday, September 19.

News of the rally—which would feature Pierce, several other white Republicans, and Philip Joiner, a former slave, local Loyal League president, and recently expelled state legislator—circulated through the neighboring counties. So, too, did rumors of a possible attack by armed whites who, it was said, proclaimed that "this is our country and we intend to protect it or die." Freedpeople did have ample cause for alarm. Camilla, the seat of relatively poor, white-majority Mitchell County in an otherwise black majority section of the state, crackled with tension. Gunfire had broken out there during the April 1868 elections, and
many of the blacks had resolved that they would “not dare ... go to town entirely unarmed as they did at that time.” The white Republican leaders tried to quell these fears when the Dougherty County contingent gathered on their plantations on Friday night the 18th; and as the group moved out on Saturday morning for the twenty-odd mile trek to Camilla, most heeded the advice to leave their weapons behind and avoid a provocation.

But to the whites of Camilla, such a procession could only constitute a “mob,” with no civil or political standing, and mean “war, revolution, insurrection, or riot of some sort.” Once spotted on Saturday morning, it thereby sparked another round of rumors, these warning of an “armed body of negroes” heading toward the town. Although evidence suggests that local Democrats had been busy for at least two days accumulating weapons and preparing to respond with force, the rumors clearly sped the mobilization of the town’s “citizens,” who appointed a committee to ride out with the sheriff and “meet the approaching crowd.” A tense exchange followed, with the Republican leaders explaining that they only wished “to go peaceably into Camilla and hold a political meeting,” and the sheriff warning them not to enter the town with arms.

Suddenly, a local drunkard, waving a double-barreled shotgun, ran out to the wagon and, significantly, demanded that the drumming (associated both with a citizens’ militia and slave communication) cease. A moment later he fired, and the “squad” of white townsmen immediately joined in. Freedmen who had guns briefly returned the volleys and then, with the others, commenced a desperate flight for safety. The sheriff and his “deputies” followed them into the woods and swamps with deadly purpose, some looking for “that d——d Phil Joiner.” Joiner escaped, but eleven days later he reported that “the mobbing crowd is still going through Baker County and every Colored man that is farming to his self or supporting the nominee of Grant and Colfax he either have to leave his home or be killed.”

Prospers for black retaliation briefly ran very high. As word of the shooting spread through Dougherty County that Saturday evening, agitated freedmen in Albany sought out the local Freedmen’s Bureau agent. Some talked of going immediately to Camilla to rescue and protect those who remained at risk. A few hours later, African Methodist minister Robert Crumley heatedly reminded his congregation that he had advised those bound for Camilla the night before not to go with fewer than 150 well-armed men, and then suggested traveling there en masse the next day to “burn the earthy about the place.” The Freedmen’s Bureau agent managed to discourage such a course by promising a full investigation and urging his superiors in Atlanta to send federal troops. The investigation showed Camilla to be a massacre that had left at least nine African Americans dead and many more wounded. But all that came out of Atlanta was a proclamation by Republican governor Rufus Bullock urging civil authorities to keep the peace and safeguard the rights of the people. Election day proved to be remarkably quiet in southwest Georgia because the contest was over well before. Only two Republicans bothered to cast ballots in Camilla, and the turnout was so low elsewhere in the district that the Democrats, despite being greatly outnumbered among eligible voters, registered an official victory. There would be resurgences of local black power in the future, but this was the beginning of the end for Republican rule in Georgia.
And yet we must not underestimate the extent and tenacity of black resistance. White toughs did, to their misfortune, in the village of Cainhoy, a short distance from Charleston. Attempting to intimidate a Republican speaker at a "joint discussion" in mid-October, they found themselves outgunned as well as outnumbered by a black crowd that included several militia companies. When the smoke cleared, five whites lay dead and as many as fifty had been wounded. Most in evidence among the coast, such militance was nonetheless to be found at various points in the interior. As rifle club activity intensified in Barnwell County, a "company of negroes," acting on their own authority, appropriated arms issued during Governor Scott's administration and threaten[ed] to destroy the town" of Blackville. In Darlington County, a "negro militia company consisting," according to a local Democrat, "of the worst elements in this section," continued to drill and cause "a great deal of trouble," coming in one instance to the aid of a favored trial justice. Sporadically, there were acts of arson and sabotage, ambushes and assaults....

The paramilitary politics of the Reconstruction South had previously produced dual state governments in Louisiana (1872), Texas (1873), and Arkansas (1874), but in 1876-1877 they also provoked a national crisis of governance. Not only were the state returns contested in both South Carolina and Louisiana, but there, as well as in Florida, the electoral college returns were contested too, leaving the outcome of the Presidential race—and control of the executive branch—in doubt. As Republicans and Democrats struggled to reach an accord before Grant's term expired in early March, tensions and threats that harked back to the winter of 1860-1861 seemed to abound. Yet through all of this, what appeared to be taking shape was less a "compromise" than a shared political sensibility in northern ruling circles that questioned the legimities of popular democracy. That sensibility had always been in evidence among conservatives and had spread during the 1850s, only to be pressed to the margins by the revolutionary mobilizations of the 1860s. It now expressed itself as weariness with the issues of Reconstruction, as skepticism about the capabilities of freedpeople, as concerns about the expansion of federal powers, as revulsion over political corruption, and, especially, as exasperation with the "annual autumnal outbreaks" in the Deep South and the consequent use of federal troops to maintain Republican regimes there.

It required elaborate fictions and willful ignorance for critics to argue, as some did, that the military had no business rejecting the popular will in the South. For if detachments of federal troops at the statehouses in Columbia, South Carolina, and New Orleans, Louisiana, alone enabled Republicans to stand onto the last threads of power, their Democratic rivals made no effort to conceal their own dependence on superior force of arms. In Louisiana, Democratic gubernatorial claimant and former Confederate brigadier general Francis T. Nicholls quickly demonstrated his understanding of political necessities. He designated local White League units as the legal state militia, commandeered the state arsenal, and took control of the New Orleans police. In South Carolina, Wade Hampton's allies succeeded in garrisoning the state capitol with as many as six thousand Red Shirts, while rifle clubs drove out Republican officeholders in upcountry counties....

The withdrawal of federal troops from the statehouses of South Carolina and Louisiana in April of 1877 did not therefore mark the end of their role in
protecting the rights and property of American citizens; it only marked the end of their role, at least for nearly another century, in protecting the rights and property of African Americans and other working people.

Ending the War: The Push for National Reconciliation

DAVID W. BLIGHT

Americans faced an overwhelming task after the Civil War and emancipation: how to understand the tangled relationship between two profound ideas—

healing and justice. On some level, both had to occur; but given the potency of racial assumptions and power in nineteenth-century America, these two aims never developed in historical balance. One might conclude that this imbalance between outcomes of sectional healing and racial justice was simply America’s inevitable historical condition, and celebrate the remarkable swiftness of the reunion, as Paul Buck did in his influential book, The Road to Reunion (1937). But theories of inevitability—of irrepressible conflicts or irrepressible reconciliations—and rarely satisfying. Human reconciliations—when tragically divided people unify again around aspirations, ideas, and the positive bonds of nationalism—are to be cherished. But sometimes reconciliations have terrible costs, both intentional and unseen. The sectional reunion after so horrible a civil war was a political triumph by the late nineteenth century, but it could not have been achieved without the subjugation of many of those people whom the war had freed from centuries of bondage. This is the tragedy lingering on the margins and infesting the heart of American history from Appomattox to World War I.

Reconstruction was one long referendum on the meaning and memory of the verdict at Appomattox. The great challenge of Reconstruction was to determine how a national blood feud could be reconciled at the same time a new nation emerged out of war and social revolution. The survivors on both sides, winners and losers in the fullest sense, would still inhabit the same land and eventually the same government. The task was harrowing: how to make the logic of sectional reconciliation compatible with the logic of emancipation, how to square black freedom and the stirrings of racial equality with a cause (the South’s) that had lost almost everything except its unbroken belief in white supremacy. Such an effort required both remembering and forgetting. During Reconstruction, many Americans increasingly realized that remembering the war, even the hatreds and deaths on a hundred battlefields—facing all those graves on Memorial Day—became, with time, easier than struggling over the enduring ideas for which those battles had been fought.

In the immediate aftermath, many thought the war was over, and they were wrong. The Union would not be restored until Reconstruction was completed, and the freed people had to be reassimilated into society. The freed people, however, had a different view. They knew that they had been fought for, not against, and would insist on that narrative.