

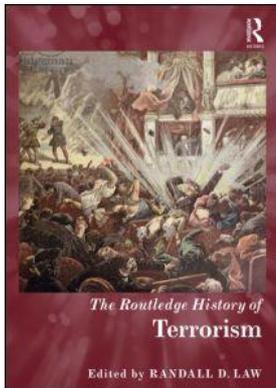
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AMERICAN RACIAL TERRORISM FROM BROWN TO BOOTH TO BIRMINGHAM

R. Blakeslee Gilpin

Although terrorism of the late antebellum era is best characterized by violence in the cause of racial liberation, terrorism in the century that followed most often took the opposite tack: violence designed to preserve white supremacy. This chapter chronicles the character of those acts of suppression. American racial terrorism from John Wilkes Booth to the Birmingham 16th Street Church bombing in 1963 encompasses diverse acts but some common themes. So while that century saw terrorist acts in the service of many causes – from attempts by Puerto Rican nationalists to gain independence for their island to the dawn of the airplane hijacking age, the bombing of Wall Street to the assassination of Medgar Evers – racial violence in the United States established common patterns and responses.

Brown, Lincoln, and Booth

When John Brown led his ragtag interracial army into Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in October 1859, he was well aware of the symbolic importance of his actions. Brown hoped to eradicate slavery by initiating an abolitionist guerrilla war (which he plotted as the first step towards a new abolitionist state), but he also knew from his murderous time in Kansas that his deeds, successful or not, could inspire more than immediate earthly rewards. Brown would never have called himself a terrorist, but in his willingness to use violence to further the anti-slavery cause and his embrace of propaganda by deed, Brown would certainly fit any modern definition of the term.¹

With a similar understanding of the propaganda of his deeds, Brown sits comfortably alongside the suicide bombers and airplane hijackers of recent decades. Brown's efforts did not immediately produce his desired results, as he himself perhaps expected. What made Brown a terrorist was not simply his use of violence as a tool of public relations, although he certainly saw such acts as a way of separating true abolitionists from milquetoast men like the journalist William Lloyd Garrison. Brown also understood that his actions could attract more zealous converts and set in motion a national reckoning with the evil of slavery. In his dramatic capture and trial, the abolitionist demonstrated that even an attempt to violently effect political change can produce devastating repercussions. Brown's trial ended with his conviction by the state of Virginia on charges of treason, murder, and attempting to incite a slave insurrection.

When Brown was convicted, knowing he was to hang, he delivered a speech in the courtroom that spoke to his intuitive understanding of terrorist violence. The Bible "teaches me," Brown explained:

to “remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them.” I endeavored to act up to that instruction. . . . I believe that to have interfered as I have done as I have always freely admitted I have done in behalf of His despised poor, was not wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I submit; so let it be done!²

As if working from a twenty-first-century handbook, Brown spent the month before his execution propagandizing from his jail cell. He entertained visitors and produced reams of commentary about his beliefs, American slavery, and the future course of the nation. His final words speak powerfully to his claim as the first American terrorist. On his way to the gallows, Brown passed a note to his jailer that read: “I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land: will never be purged away; but with Blood. I had as I now think: vainly flattered myself that without very much bloodshed; it might be done.”³

With those ideas in mind, Brown supporter E. C. Stedman printed and scattered a poem around Charlestown before Brown’s execution: “each drop from Old Brown’s life veins, like the red gore of the dragon, May spring up a vengeful Fury, hissing through your slave-worn lands!”⁴ In such a context, it should not be surprising that contemporaries and modern writers alike have called Brown “the spark” that began America’s bloodiest conflict, a righteous achievement for any terrorist.

Brown’s execution took place in a heavily guarded field outside of Charlestown, West Virginia. Among those in attendance was a Maryland man who had purchased a counterfeit Virginia militia uniform in order to watch the old man hang. At the time still an actor in a famous family troupe, John Wilkes Booth lied when he claimed to have “aided in the capture and execution of John Brown.” He “was proud of my little share in that transaction,” Booth falsely recalled, “for I deemed it my duty [to help] our common country to perform an act of justice.” Brown’s life and death had a profound influence on Booth and the course of the nation. Booth’s letters to his sister revealed both his “unlimited, undeniable contempt” for Brown as well as his grudging admiration for that “brave old man” and “rugged old hero.” In short, Booth learned from Brown that a symbolic death could reach thousands of Americans. As Booth explained, “John Brown was a man inspired, the grandest character of this century!”⁵

However, Booth’s sense of justice and his notion of a “common country” was deeply upset when shots were fired on Fort Sumter in 1861. Identifying (somewhat dubiously) as a native Southerner, Booth was outraged by President Abraham Lincoln’s suspension of habeas corpus in his home state of Maryland and the steady drift by the Union towards an emancipationist war. In turn, the president would quickly replace John Brown “as the hated symbol of abolition.”⁶ For all of Booth’s respect for Brown’s bravery and willingness to die, he abhorred Brown’s specific cause and thus considered Lincoln not only a coward but the perpetrator of ever more outrageous acts upon the South.⁷ After the dizzying changes of fortunes that the war produced – from the Confederacy’s victories at Bull Run to the Emancipation Proclamation to the Union victory at Gettysburg – Lincoln’s re-election in 1864 and the fearful possibilities of Reconstruction turned Booth to more deadly thoughts and more direct mimicking of Brown’s violent effort to change the course of history. While Lincoln might have been “walking in the footprints of old John Brown” in moving against slavery, the president, according to Booth, was not “fit to stand with that great hero.”⁸

For Booth, one glaring example of Lincoln's offenses was the president's final public speech, delivered in Washington, DC, just two days after Robert E. Lee's surrender. What scared Southern sympathizers like Booth were the clues Lincoln gave about his plans for postwar Reconstruction. Explaining Louisiana's early decision to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment, Lincoln celebrated "the colored man [who] in seeing all united for him, is inspired with vigilance, and energy, and daring" for the cause of freedom. Unlike his earlier statements about Reconstruction, Lincoln expressed a clear desire for black enfranchisement. In the crowd, John Wilkes Booth remarked to a friend, "that is the last speech he will make."⁹

When Booth shot Lincoln in the back of the head with a .44 Derringer on April 14, 1865, he initiated a new age and character of American violence. Lincoln's assassination was "the last terrorist act of the Civil War," historian Michael Fellman argues, and

the first act of terrorist resistance to Reconstruction [which] demonstrated the continuity of systematic political violence used to enforce white domination of African Americans during two hundred years of slavery in the past and a hundred years of segregation to come. White hegemony would once again demand terrorist means.¹⁰

In one capacity, like Brown, Booth did inspire other would-be assassins, those hungry for change or fame, to imitate him. On the other hand, Booth also inaugurated a broader kind of terror, a unique American terrorism that served a formal political party; underwrote the social, economic, and political hierarchies of the South; and virulently fought to forestall change. With his cry of "sic semper tyrannis," Booth fired the opening shot in a century-long campaign of terrorism. That violence had a simple goal: keep black Americans as a permanent social and economic underclass.

Terrorism during Reconstruction

A rare and brief notice appeared in *The New York Times* on November 5, 1872, reporting on political terrorism in the state of Kentucky. "For the purpose of intimidating Republican voters," a black, Republican, voter-registration leader named Samuel Hawkins, along with his wife and his daughter, were lynched in Fayette County. "The Kuklux," the paper reported, "hung all three to the same limb of a tree. Hawkins leaves a family of helpless children." As if by necessity, the paper also pointed out that "he was a quiet, inoffensive man, and his only crime was being a Republican."¹¹

For most of the past 150 years, the violence that was invented, practiced, and perfected in the two decades following the end of the Civil War hardly warranted mention, particularly in mainstream American histories. Only in recent decades has sustained scholarly attention been paid to the systematic and systemic violence directed against emancipated slaves. By necessity, those studies have explored the terrorist clout of the Ku Klux Klan, the horrific extent of lynching, and the racial mythology that underpinned white supremacy. In this context, it is especially important to underscore that several states (most notably South Carolina) still ignore the period of Reconstruction in high school curricula altogether because it is considered too controversial to teach. Recounting incidents of violence, these bowdlerized accounts of American history skip neatly from Booth to the anarchist bombing of Chicago's Haymarket in May 1886.

Historian James Green has accordingly called Haymarket “the biggest news story since Lincoln’s assassination.”¹²

Of course, those headlines reveal the awful tendency of Americans to avert their eyes from the more terrible story: the savage acts that dominated the years between Lincoln’s assassination and the Civil Rights Movement. The story of 1865–1963 is the story of racial terrorism by (mostly Southern) whites against (mostly Southern) blacks and the national complicity that allowed this violence to continue and eventually spread beyond the former Confederacy’s borders. As Grace Hale explains, “southern whites constructed their racial identities on two interlocking planes: within a regional dynamic of ex-Confederates versus ex-slaves and within a national dynamic of the South, understood as white, versus the nation.”¹³

In this sense, to understand racial terrorism is to explore the kind of loss that the South endured during the Civil War. In May 1861, the Confederate States of America (CSA) was one of the wealthiest nations on Earth. But the CSA made a “gamble of world historical proportions” on the “reactionary dream” of a society based on human chattel. “Their vision of the future” was tried and did not merely fail but brought unprecedented destruction. Southerners experienced defeat on such a devastating scale that it still remains singular in the country’s experience. Two-thirds of the entire assessed wealth of Southern society was simply gone. Three hundred thousand men had been killed, and nearly as many wounded, a massive toll in human terms. Much of the Southern landscape, from forests to farms to cities, was in ruins. Nearly half the livestock in the South was killed, and two-thirds of all farm machinery destroyed. During this same time, the North was virtually untouched. Moreover, the wealth of the Union increased by more than half from 1861 to 1865. Industry and population would continue to grow at an unprecedented pace for the next decade.¹⁴

After Lincoln’s assassination, former Confederates, despite being shaken at home by black emancipation, sensed that Northern will to protect black freedom was shaky at best. Thus began a process Americans soon dubbed “Redemption,” which literally meant the return of states of the former Confederacy to Southern Democratic control. The term also came to encompass the return to something as socially, economically, and politically close to the antebellum slave South as possible. After the end of the “peculiar institution,” the possibilities of black freedom (citizenship, suffrage, and equality) were too much for ex-Confederates to bear. As one Texan revealingly (and with exceptional self-awareness) explained to a Congressional committee in 1866: “I have some ethnological theories that may perhaps warp my judgment; but my judgment is that the highest condition the black race has ever reached or can reach, is one where he is provided for by a master race.”¹⁵ Such deeply held beliefs in black inferiority helped steer Southerners amidst the roiling seas of military and economic devastation along with the added humiliation of federal occupation and black political participation.

The South’s answer, at once highly organized and deeply political as well as disturbingly widespread and organic, was the Ku Klux Klan. With its origins somewhere between a “social fraternity dedicated to playing pranks” and “a terrorist organization aiming at the preservation of white supremacy,” the Klan began in Pulaski, Tennessee, immediately following the Civil War. Though the organization was new, it had deep roots in Southern soil. “The precedent of the ante-bellum slave patrol” informed every aspect of the Klan and its imitators, borrowing its methods meant to keep first slaves, then freed blacks in whatever whites defined as “order.” “Thus duty and inclination combined,”

describes Allen Trelease, “to produce bands of postwar regulators and vigilantes throughout the South.”¹⁶

The Klan subsequently enjoyed three distinct eras. The initial Klan spread like a disease across the former Confederacy (and beyond its borders) in the 1860s and 1870s before being threatened, mostly ineffectively, by the federal government in the 1870s and made obsolete by Southern Democratic Redemption in 1877. The second Klan re-emerged in the 1920s and petered out in the 1940s. The third (and current) incarnation reformed in response to the Civil Rights struggle and has soldiered on through the present day.

The Klan organized across many states and eventually similar groups were founded under many different names: the White Line, the Knights of the White Camellia, the White Caps, and others. What these groups shared, beyond a penchant for violence, was a common goal: the rollback of any postbellum black advancements and the restoration of some semblance of the antebellum racial order. The advance of Lincoln’s party in the former Confederacy became the target and its characterization as illegitimate became the lever by which Southerners would reclaim their region. Outrages during election times got so terrible – murders, riots, and blatant political fraud – that the federal government was eventually forced, despite great reluctance, to get involved. In 1871, Republicans began a joint House–Senate committee to investigate the Klan. South Carolina’s ongoing and brutal repression of black political activity in 1871 convinced President Ulysses S. Grant and Congress to respond with the Ku Klux Klan Act. The Act allowed Grant to suspend the writ of habeas corpus, which allowed federal troops to arrest Klansmen when local police were unwilling to do so. Of course, such a federal response was truly very rare, but Grant’s actions were enough to drive the Klan underground or cause members to reorganize in other paramilitary terrorist groups.

The story of Georgian Scipio Eager is emblematic of the treatment of freedpeople in the South after 1865. One hundred hooded Klan members came to his house

where he lived with his parents, brothers, and children. The Klansmen announced that they were going to kill everyone who hadn’t voted the Democratic ticket. . . . One of Eager’s brothers, moreover, was accused of being “too big a man” because he could read and write and talked of starting a Negro school. When this brother now tried to escape from them he was riddled with bullets and buckshot, and he died the next day.¹⁷

Eager himself was beaten and threatened. Klansmen returned to his house on several occasions. He recalled that on one occasion, his terrorizers “had dogs with them, ‘what they call “nigger-hounds” such as they had in old slavery times.’” Even though Eager eventually could positively identify his assailants, what difference did it make? “I did not know what to do. I was just like the rabbit when the dogs are after him; I had to do anything that I could to try and save my life.” Eager fled to Atlanta, “leaving behind a blind father, a helpless mother and house full of children with no means of support.”¹⁸

Abram Colby was another victim of Klan violence. Colby was dragged from his bed and whipped “three hours or more and left . . . for dead.” Colby explained that his torturers asked him just one question: “Do you think you will ever vote another damned radical ticket?” When Colby defied his captors, “they set in and whipped me a thousand licks more, with sticks and straps that had buckles on the ends of them.” Colby’s testimony to the House–Senate investigative committee revealed one of the most distressing aspects of

the Ku Klux Klan and its intractability. Some of the men who broke Colby's door down were "first class men in our town. One is a lawyer, one a doctor, and some are farmers."¹⁹

Those first class men, the leaders of business and politics across the South, made any governmental remedies incredibly difficult. Thus, despite briefly defeating the Ku Klux Klan as an individual organization, its imitators fought on, and the beliefs that underpinned this terrorist violence became ever further entrenched. The White Line was particularly intent on "forbidding blacks to beat drums and cutting the drums up" at political rallies or election times. "This is a white man's country, and we don't allow that," black Republicans were informed before they were beaten with sticks and pistols. "On election day . . . White Liners dragged a [twenty-four-pound cannon] to the polling place and then began beating potential black voters." The votes told the story of racial terrorism in the South: in one district in Mississippi, Republican votes plummeted from 1,400 in 1873 to 90 in 1875.²⁰ The story was the same across the former Confederacy.

Frequently cited as a relatively clearheaded observer of the horrors of Redemption, Adelbert Ames, the carpetbagger governor of Mississippi, captured the flavor of these efforts quite well at the time. "Through the terror caused by murders and threats, the colored people are thoroughly intimidated," he explained. They "are disenfranchised [and] are to be returned to a condition of serfdom – an era of second slavery."²¹ Ames was witnessing the Klan's successors, organizations like the White League as well as the White Line that wrote an even bloodier chapter in terms of violence against blacks and the attendant political rollback.

In his narrative of the horrific violence of early 1870s Mississippi, author Nicholas Lemann highlights that while the White League "drew emotional sustenance" from the same cluster of racist boilerplate and fears of miscegenation, they were, in fact, a far scarier and more open affront to the aftermath of the war than even the Klan had been. The White League was "less secret, better organized, and more explicitly political in its aims," he writes, and "its purpose was to use extralegal violence to remove the Republican Party from power, and then to disenfranchise black people . . . – all aims that were to be accomplished by any means necessary."²² One Mississippi White Liner unapologetically explained, "It is no secret that there has not been a full vote and a fair count in Mississippi since 1875. We have been preserving the ascendancy of white people by revolutionary methods. In other words we have been stuffing ballot boxes, committing perjury, and here and there in the state carrying the elections by fraud and violence."²³ The role these white supremacist groups played was always more than merely political; this violence was also profoundly psychological, as Lemann notes. This resistance to the federal government and to local Republican political power helped rehabilitate whites still wounded from the experience of Civil War defeat. Restoring white supremacy through terrorist violence proved both cathartic and deeply advantageous for the economic and political futures of white Southerners.²⁴

In Louisiana, where some of the most brutal terrorist violence in American history took place, one white planter defended the violent tactics of white citizens. For B. W. Marston, white Republicans, particularly carpetbaggers, were simply trying "to organize the freedmen element against the interests of the white people." With such "incendiary purposes" in mind, Marston explained to Congress that blacks and whites who supported the Republican Party would be dealt with "promptly." Marston was referring, however obliquely, to the Coushatta Massacre, where the local White League assassinated six white Republicans and as many as twenty blacks who witnessed the killings.²⁵

The legacy of Reconstruction terrorism

Despite the audacity and extent of racial violence and political fraud, it is especially outrageous that popular understandings of Reconstruction still most closely resemble the heroic narrative popularized by turn-of-the-century North Carolinian novelist, Thomas Dixon. Dixon's bestselling trilogy celebrating the Klan represents the depraved and ahistorical interpretation of Reconstruction at its finest. Dixon depicted a period of Northern vengeance "where evil outside forces attempted to destroy southern white civilization and mongrelize the population." The books are nearly pure stereotype, complete with venal carpetbaggers and scalawags, beastly blacks and innocent white women. Southern whites fight to save not just themselves but civilization. While these exaggerated caricatures, factual manipulations, and racist interpretations may seem absurd to us now, they distilled the core beliefs and felt truth of many Americans.²⁶

Dixon's work was immensely popular, especially in the South, and was adapted for the stage and eventually the screen. D. W. Griffith's 1915 film, *The Birth of a Nation*, took Dixon's Klan trilogy and embedded a white supremacist vision of the past, present, and future in America's consciousness. Indeed, the film remains a signature achievement in American film making as well as American racism. "Ku Klux Fever" gripped the South, where the film was treated as a "sacred epic," but beyond the region as well. The rest of the United States showed "overwhelming enthusiasm" for Griffith's film and one New Englander remarked that the film made him "want to go out and kill the first Negro I see."²⁷

Griffith's film recounts the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction through the eyes and experiences of Southern whites. Thus, the film represented history retold by those who vehemently opposed any political and social progress by African Americans. Both book and film show Southern blacks lusting after white women and brutally exercising their newfound freedom. White Southerners are rescued by the heroic Klan. With *The Birth of a Nation*, Griffith created the first blockbuster – a film that grossed over \$60 million, single-handedly established the American film industry, and made Hollywood, where the film was shot, the motion picture capital of the world. Of course, *The Birth of a Nation* would eventually trigger race riots and revive the Ku Klux Klan for the twentieth century.²⁸

Because widespread black protests greeted the dramatic staging of Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* nine years earlier (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP] would boycott the film as well), both Griffith and Dixon knew it would be important to drum up support among prominent Americans for their historical vision. Dixon called up his old friend, native Virginian and the twenty-eighth president of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, asking him to endorse the film. Dixon called the movie "the birth of a new art – the launching of the mightiest engine for molding public opinion in the history of the world." Dixon's gambit worked and *The Birth of a Nation* became the first movie ever screened in the White House. Wilson embraced both Dixon and Griffith when the film ended. "It is like writing history with lightning," the President famously remarked. "My only regret is that it is all so terribly true."²⁹

After this dramatic imprimatur, Dixon sought an audience with the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Louisianan Edward White. White, 70 years old, thought the idea of moving pictures "absurd" and remarked that he did not have "the slightest curiosity to see one." But Dixon did not give up, telling White that *Birth* "told the true story of Reconstruction and the redemption of the South by the Ku Klux Klan." White softened. "I was a member of the Klan, sir," he replied. "Through many a dark night, I walked my sentinel's beat through

the ugliest streets of New Orleans with a rifle on my shoulder.” The chief justice, along with several senators and congressmen, gave the film a rousing standing ovation.³⁰

World War I served only to “intensify the racist climate and sparked another deadly new wave of mob violence in America.”³¹ In 1919 alone, the country witnessed twenty-five “race riots” – events that usually involved rampaging white mobs killing individuals before burning down the black sections of cities North and South. In the midst of this terrible racial terrorism, the black intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois exposed the entrenched racism and ignorance that fed such violent acts. His masterful *Black Reconstruction*, first published in 1935, revisited the birthing ground of America’s terrorist crimes. Far from the typical critiques of the folly of Reconstruction, Du Bois celebrated 1865–77 as an unprecedented experiment in progressive government while revealing the ways the government failed its people. More relevantly, Du Bois exposed how generation upon generation of American historians had, in the words of his biographer Daniel Levering Lewis, “congealed racist interpretations of Reconstruction in the popular mind as solidly as had D. W. Griffith’s film.”³²

Du Bois himself lamented that Reconstruction was “a field devastated by passion and belief” and that “sheer necessity” required his work to serve as “an arraignment of American historians and an indictment of their ideals.” Why had the historical profession systematically ignored the many black triumphs and countless white outrages and wholly misunderstood the American tragedies of the postbellum years? Du Bois explained:

With a determination unparalleled in science, the mass of American writers have started out so to distort the facts of the greatest critical period of American history as to prove right wrong and wrong right. . . . It simply shows that with sufficient general agreement and determination among the dominant classes, the truth of history may be utterly distorted and contradicted and changed to any convenient fairy tale that the masters of men wish.³³

Lynching

The earlier discussion of Scipio Eager sets Du Bois’s concerns about the historiography of Reconstruction in great relief. Statistics – that is, the act of measuring the number of blacks lynched or the decline in Republican voting rolls – are woefully inadequate to described racial terror in the United States. In Eager’s case, this blatantly political terrorism directly eliminated at least two Republican voters in Washington County, Georgia. But when lynching statistics simply add Eager’s brother to the tally of April 1871, historians miss the forest for the trees. To be sure, death counts are certainly a useful historical measure, but historians deploy and debate them with special vigor. In the history of racial violence in the United States, this practice is especially important because early race reformers fought against white supremacist terrorism initially by publicizing statistics and incidents in black-owned newspapers and magazines.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, those statistics indicated that two blacks were being lynched every week in the South. Based on the pioneering reporting of anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett, even by the 1890s as many as 10,000 “black Americans [had been] put to death in the South.” And Wells-Barnett’s staggering estimate is likely conservative. Moreover, no one in 1900 could report even a fraction of the terrorist violence being committed in the name of white supremacy. This horrific catalog of whippings, shootings, hangings, robbery, and rape that preceded and pervaded the Civil War and saturated the

century that followed is particularly problematic. We want to know the scope of such violence in order to understand it. However, even if underreported violence like lynching provides some hard statistics, it is futile to try and count the innumerable threats and small acts of violence – the matrix of daily terror – that helped maintain the political, social, and economic basis of white supremacy. Instead of numbers, Philip Dray’s landmark study of American lynching relies on prose; racial terrorism was simply an American “holocaust.”³⁴

That holocaust was a direct result of the cultural identity as well as the very real social and political chaos of the 1860s South. Few Southerners, even the former plantation aristocracy, knew the shape their society was in or would take. In the absence of a functioning government and an almost complete judicial vacuum, the Klan was born. According to one historian, the Ku Klux Klan “wrapped itself in the Stars and Bars, recited the racist litanies which had been devised to justify Negro slavery, threatened death to unbelievers, and thereby rendered itself unassailable by orthodox Southerners.”³⁵

Upending the sexual and racial proclivities of the antebellum era – a time of relentless sexual violence by white males against black women – groups like the Ku Klux Klan reversed the script with the active encouragement and complicity of white political leaders. Stoking “white anxiety about the political, economic, and social meanings of emancipation,” the ominous specter of the black rapist emerged. The turn-of-the-century race-baiting Southern activist Rebecca Felton tried to make the case that this fear was also historical and thus legitimate. In the antebellum years, all feared for “the rape of their wives and daughters,” and this fear was “born in the blood and bred in the bone.” Thus, the black rapist had “deep roots in both the slaveholding south and the white southern imagination.” Conveniently, this logic encouraged increasingly harsher repression and psychological terrorizing. The postbellum script of whites defending the barricades of civilization took on new potency and encouraged violent reprisals when some vague crime against order had been committed, even if there was no pretext. During Reconstruction, in service of social and political repression, the portrayal of “black men as beastly and unable to control their sexual desire served to justify the practice of lynching, segregation laws, and disenfranchisement of black men.”³⁶

For the next century (and beyond), *The Birth of a Nation* provided the cultural tropes and schema for white supremacy. Lynchings and further terrorist violence were justified by the belief, however unconscious or cynical, that white women needed to be protected.³⁷ This process only worsened over time. As the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, all blacks and whites sympathetic to the cause were potential victims.³⁸ Mob actions were neither aberrations nor the acts of rogue individuals but the backbone and lifeblood of an entire region. The public ritual murder, the midnight tortures, and the constant terrorizing of the black population consumed the societies where they took place. The ubiquity of this violence and the explosive possibility of it erupting at any time for any perceived offense became essential to the maintenance of white supremacy and – conveniently for the white males in power – patriarchy as well. One particularly corrosive aspect of this disturbing creation was the notion of anonymity. According to Philip Dray, “The coroner’s inevitable verdict, ‘Death at the hands of persons unknown,’ affirmed the public’s tacit complicity: no *persons* had committed a crime, because the lynching had been an expression of the community’s will.”³⁹ But of course, someone had committed these crimes.

The Scottsboro case, which began in March 1931 in northeastern Alabama, was so commonplace in the details of its injustice, it is surprising that historians know so much about it. Countless innocent black youths had been arrested, tried, and lynched or executed

by kangaroo courts since 1865. In this case, an interracial fight on a train led to rape charges, an attempted lynching, and nine guilty convictions for nine innocent men. What made the Scottsboro case notable was that it was suddenly deemed outrageous enough to generate a public outcry.

Indeed, the most dramatic change in the interwar years was the emergence of lynching in particular as a national public issue. As activism to combat lynching moved from reformers like Wells-Barnett and Du Bois to mainstream left-wing circles, lynching became a cultural phenomenon, a symbol of the racism and brutality of the South to self-righteous if genuinely concerned Americans. A good example of that cultural shift can be found in “Strange Fruit,” originally a poem published in *The New Masses* in 1937. New York schoolteacher Abel Meeropol, an amateur writer and composer, penned the words in response to the increasingly commonplace but no less horrific imagery of a Southern lynching, and his song eventually found its way to Billie Holiday. Holiday immortalized the words and captured growing outrage against extra-legal white supremacist Southern violence with the song’s powerful metaphors. The opening stanza underscores both the shocking brutality of lynching as well as its long history in the American landscape.

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.⁴⁰

The cultural phenomenon of lynching and the cultural products that white Southerners in particular created has led to new understanding of the spectacle of lynching and the way these very public acts “rather than the violence itself . . . wrought psychological damage, that enforced black acquiescence to white domination.”⁴¹ For historians like Amy Louise Wood and Kristina DuRocher, “the cultural power of white supremacy itself” lies in its existence as “spectacle” and is found in the ritualistic aspect of lynching: “the crowds, the rituals and performances, and their sensational representations in narratives, photographs, and films.”⁴²

The African American Civil Rights Movement

With the character of racial terrorism so firmly established, the intensification of the campaign for black civil rights in the 1950s spurred whites to respond. The murder of Emmett Till, the assassination of Medgar Evers, and the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham all fit the pattern of violence and terror created during Reconstruction. There was one important difference: 100 years after the Civil War, the nation could no longer ignore what was happening. Television and newspaper coverage and public attention meant that the 1950s and 1960s were dominated by images of sit-ins and school integrations accompanied by the kind of vicious racism and brutal everyday violence that defined the white supremacist campaign in the South.

Like Samuel Hawkins in 1872, Medgar Evers committed the “crime” of advocating black political involvement, especially by organizing local chapters of the NAACP. When President John F. Kennedy gave a speech on national television in support of civil rights on June 12, 1963, Evers was targeted and killed, shot in the back with a high-powered rifle. Within weeks of Evers’s murder, Bob Dylan had written a song. “The laws are with [his assassin],” Dylan described, “to protect his white skin, to keep up his hate, so he never thinks straight.”

Dylan's song, "Only a Pawn in Their Game," used Evers's murderer to underscore that poor Southern whites were merely tools in the hands of a white supremacist culture.⁴³ However, where John Brown's terrorism – violence in the service of slave liberation – was briefly used by the US government before being prematurely discarded, white supremacist practice and ideology became deeply embedded in the culture, society, and politics of the American South. Such threads are deeply deserving of future scholarship.⁴⁴

Notes

- 1 For a longer discussion of Brown as terrorist, see Chapter 6 by Matthew Jennings in this volume, which explains that Brown understood the institution of slavery itself as terrorism. Jennings also makes the compelling point that Brown's actions in 1859 seemingly opened the door for the federal government to endorse similar acts once the Civil War was underway. For further discussions of Brown as a terrorist, see Tony Horwitz, "The 9/11 of 1859," *The New York Times*, December 1, 2009. See also David W. Blight, "He Knew How To Die," History News Network, December 2009: <http://hnn.us/article/120730> (accessed September 4, 2014). For more on the origins of the term "propaganda of the deed," see Chapter 8 by Richard Bach Jensen on European and world anarcho-terrorism in this volume.
- 2 Zoe Trodd and John Stauffer, eds., *Meteor of War: The John Brown Story* (Maplecrest, NY: Brandywine, 2004), 132.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 159. Punctuation reproduced from the original.
- 4 E. C. Stedman, "Raid of John Brown," also known as "John Brown's Invasion," reprinted in *New York Tribune* and *The Liberator*, November 28, 1859.
- 5 Thomas Goodrich, *The Darkest Dawn: Lincoln, Booth, and the Great American Tragedy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 60–1.
- 6 Edward Steers, Jr., *Blood on the Moon: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2001), 36.
- 7 The connections between Brown and Lincoln were hard to avoid. Lincoln himself denied any similarity repeatedly, most notably in his famous Cooper Union speech. Derogatory political cartoons from the era depict Lincoln removing his face to reveal either John Brown's face or the devil's.
- 8 Michael Fellman, *In the Name of God and Country: Reconsidering Terrorism in American History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 95. Fellman also connects the two men directly, explaining, "As Booth was himself aware, his desire to enact an anarchy of the deed in order to change the course of American history made [him] the direct descendant of John Brown."
- 9 "Lincoln's Last Speech," www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/last.htm (accessed September 4, 2014).
- 10 Fellman, 96.
- 11 *The New York Times*, November 5, 1872.
- 12 Like Brown unleashing a Civil War or Booth unleashing a tide of conservative terrorism, the Haymarket bombing christened the age of anarchist violence in the United States. Caleb Crain, in reviewing a popular historical work on the Haymarket in *The New Yorker*, explained that "for the generation that came of age during the Civil War, ideas and violence were closely entangled." One of the most tantalizing aspects of these pioneers of anarchist terrorism is that the actual bomb maker might have melted down metal type to make the bomb itself – "the literal transformation of their words into deeds." It is also worth noting that all the accused mentioned John Brown, abolitionism, Abraham Lincoln, and Fort Sumter in their defense. See Caleb Crain, "The Terror Last Time: What Happened at Haymarket," *The New Yorker*, May 13, 2006. For more on the Haymarket bombing and anarchist violence in the US, see Chapter 9 by Thai Jones in this volume.
- 13 Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 9.
- 14 Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 1–2.

- 15 *The Report of the Committees of the House of Representatives Made during the First Session, Thirty-Ninth Congress, 1865–1866* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1866), 2:129–32.
- 16 Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), xi, 11.
- 17 Trelease, 321–2.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 *Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States* (Washington, 1872), reprinted in *Trouble They Seen: The Story of Reconstruction in the Words of African Americans*, ed. Dorothy Sterling (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 374–5.
- 20 Fellman, 125.
- 21 Stephen Budiansky, *The Bloody Shirt: Terror after Appomattox* (New York: Viking, 2008), 207.
- 22 Nicholas Lemann, *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 25.
- 23 Judge Chrisman, quoted in James G. Hollandsworth, *Portrait of a Scientific Racist: Alfred Holt Stone of Mississippi* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 57.
- 24 Fellman, 131.
- 25 *Testimony of B.W. Marston Re: The Coushatta Affair*. House Reports, 44th Congress, 1st Session, No. 816, 645–727.
- 26 John Boles, *The South through Time: A History of an American Region*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2004), 2:469.
- 27 Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 138.
- 28 “The Birth of a Nation and Black Protest,” Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/episodes/the-birth-of-a-nation-and-black-protest/> (accessed September 4, 2014).
- 29 Jennifer D. Keene, “Wilson and Race Relations,” in *A Companion to Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Ross A. Kennedy (London: John Wiley, 2013), 144.
- 30 Wade, 126–7. Over the next twenty years, *The Birth of a Nation* went on to become one of the most admired and profitable films ever produced by Hollywood, replaced finally in 1940 by another piece of Redemptive propaganda, *Gone with the Wind*, another film about the Civil War and Reconstruction era based on a novel by a Southerner that told the story of gallant Southern cavaliers and their ladies and the “Lost Cause” of the Confederate South.
- 31 Crystal Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 220.
- 32 Daniel Levering Lewis, introduction to *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*, by W. E. B. Du Bois (New York: Free Press, 1992), vii.
- 33 Ibid., xvi. If the attentions and arguments of contemporary American historians are any indication, we are still distracted by the flash and bang of an anarchist bomb. Rather than cordon one kind of violence off from the other, we might be inclined to view the driving dynamics of American terrorism during this era as closely related phenomena. On the one hand, white Americans fought for a century after the abolition of slavery to preserve the economic and social hierarchy that had kept blacks subservient since the seventeenth century. On the other hand, anarchists (most of whom would be considered ethnically white within a half-century) fought to upend the tools of economic oppression that kept people like themselves marginalized. Racial violence during these hundred years only underscores the continuities and characteristics that have defined Americans’ relationship with violence in the name of change.
- 34 Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), vii, xi.
- 35 Trelease, xi.
- 36 Feimster, 7, 4–5.
- 37 Kristina DuRocher, *Raising Racists: The Socialization of White Children in the Jim Crow South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 5.
- 38 Ibid., 164.
- 39 Dray, ix.
- 40 Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit,” Commodore Records, 1939; lyrics by Abel Meeropol, published originally under the pseudonym Lewis Allan, “Bitter Fruit,” *The New York Teacher* (January 1937).

Meeropol and Holiday were not alone in their interest. Like many of the left-leaning artists of 1930s, the regionalist painter John Steuart Curry was drawn to lynching. The murder of department store scion Brooke Hart in San Francisco and the lynching of his killers inspired Curry to paint images of mob justice. The Hart lynching came in the midst of a series of legal fiascos like the Scottsboro case in Alabama and increasingly brazen lynchings across the South. Because Hart was a white victim, the lynching provided the NAACP with a pretext to reinvigorate their longstanding campaign for federal anti-lynching legislation.

- 41 Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 2.
- 42 Wood also manages to inscribe an inspirational story in her catalog of inhumanity, brutality, and injustice. By the mid-1930s, anti-lynching activists, through their relentless attention to making national the local phenomena of lynchings, transformed lynching imagery into “icons of oppression.” However, Wood notes that such progress came at a cost, since it “unwittingly succeeded in detaching them from history itself.” Wood, 3, 269.
- 43 Bob Dylan, “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” from *The Times They Are a-Changin’*, Columbia Records, 1964.
- 44 Ashraf Rushdy, *American Lynching* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), xii. Rushdy explains that the memory of slavery as well as its legal apparatus “directly produce[d] the very cultural values that inspired and gave [racial terrorism] its impetus in America.” This violence is thus “distinctively American” because of the “fundamental contradictions” of the founding moment. The founders “solved a set of intractable problems by . . . promot[ing] an act of collective violence, directed in certain ways at specific groups of people” that was “meant to exhibit a particular kind of social power and exercise a particular kind of social control.”

Further reading

- Budiansky, Stephen. *The Bloody Shirt: Terror after Appomattox*. New York: Viking, 2008.
- DuRocher, Kristina. *Raising Racists: The Socialization of White Children in the Jim Crow South*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011.
- Feinster, Crystal. *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.
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