

The ‘Lost Cause’ That Built Jim Crow

Southern “Redeemers” snuffed out the first black power movement.

By Henry Louis Gates Jr.

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The Daughters of the Confederacy unveiling the Confederate monument at Arlington National Cemetery in 1917. Credit...Bettmann Archive/Getty Images

Joe Biden launched his presidential bid in April with a bold defense of the principle that “all men are created equal,” a principle he rightly argued that, from Thomas Jefferson on, “we haven’t always lived up to.” But, Mr. Biden added, this is something “we have never before walked away from,” and that’s where he went wrong. Like most Americans, the former vice president forgets the period ironically known as Redemption, the movement that followed the abolition of slavery and ended 12 years of America’s first experiment in interracial democracy — Reconstruction — with a systematic, multitiered, terrorist-backed rollback, when the defeated Confederate South, as the saying went, “rose again.”

The Redeemer base consisted primarily of white Southern Democrats whose most urgent intention was to neutralize the black vote, which under the protection of United States troops during Reconstruction had shown astonishing power in sending Republican majorities to Southern statehouses. (It is worth remembering that Democrats and Republicans occupied positions opposite to those of today’s parties with regard to “states’ rights” until around 1964.) In what we might think of as the first “Freedom Summer,” in 1867, some 80 percent of the black men eligible to vote in 10 of the 11 former Confederate states registered, and soon they were sending delegates to new state constitutional conventions on the basis of equal citizenship. Almost no one had anticipated the passion of the freedmen for the franchise (women didn’t get the vote until 1920), and in the 1868 presidential election, the ballots marked by these black men provided the margin of victory in the popular vote for Ulysses S. Grant. Black power had reared its head, and with it came more muscular state governments embracing investments in infrastructure and the region’s first statewide public school systems.



Black and white “Radical Republicans” in South Carolina’s first Reconstruction legislature in 1870. Credit...Getty Images

In our post-Great Migration America, it’s easy to forget that 90 percent of all African-American people lived in the South as late as 1910, and their presence represented a formidable threat to the former Confederates. This was especially so in South Carolina, Mississippi and Louisiana, which had majority-black populations, as well as in nearby Florida, Alabama and Georgia. During Reconstruction, South Carolinians made black officeholders a majority in the lower house of the state’s General Assembly and celebrated the service of black lieutenant governors, a secretary of state, a treasurer, a state Supreme Court justice and a speaker of the House. Overall, more than 2,000 black officeholders would be elected during Reconstruction throughout the South, including, by 1901, a total of 20 black congressmen and two United States

senators, both from Mississippi. The year 1901 denoted a mournful milestone in black history. By that year, Southern efforts to disenfranchise black men had been brutally effective, and no African-American would represent a Southern state in Congress again for more than 70 years.

White supremacists feared black Republican domination; they viewed it as the gravest threat to white supremacy since the nation's founding (besides "brute" black masculinity and miscegenation, that is). There was nothing they wouldn't do to overthrow it, constitutional amendments and proclamations of the federal government be damned. "So determined were most white Southerners to maintain their own way of life that they resorted to fraud, intimidation and murder in order to re-establish their own control of the state governments," the historian Rayford W. Logan wrote in his classic work, "The Betrayal of the Negro." In essence, he said, "the new civil war within the Southern states stemmed from an adamant determination to restore white supremacy."

The first step in the Redeemers' plan was to win back Southern statehouses by any means necessary. "Nothing but bloodshed and a good deal of it could answer the purpose of redeeming the state from Negro and carpetbag rule," said the notoriously racist South Carolina governor and United States senator Ben Tillman in 1909, pondering the causes of a massacre of black people more than a quarter-century before, in 1876, in Hamburg, S.C. The outcome of that massacre: The Democrats took back the state in that year's elections through intimidation, and one of their first actions was to close the integrated state university and reopen it for white students only.

Though Reconstruction's end is often identified as the Hayes-Tilden Compromise of 1877, the final blow would be the Supreme Court's decision in 1883 to strike down the Civil Rights Act of 1875, to which black leaders responded immediately with grave dismay. At what we might think of as the race's funeral for freedom, at a gathering held at Washington's First Congregational Church on Oct. 19, 1883, the minister resident to Haiti and future congressman John Mercer Langston spoke. Backed onstage by other leaders of the race, including Frederick Douglass, the former senator Blanche K. Bruce and Richard T. Greener, Harvard's first black graduate, Langston intoned, "The Supreme Court would seem desirous of remanding us back to that old passed condition" of slavery. "This is incomprehensible."



In 1870, Alonzo Ransier defeated an ex-Confederate general to become South Carolina's first black lieutenant governor. Credit...Library of Congress



Joseph Hayne Rainey became the first black state representative in Congress. He was elected to fill a vacant South Carolina seat in 1870 and became the longest-serving African-American during Reconstruction. Credit...Library of Congress

The next step in the rollback was to suppress the black vote itself. With the federal government in full retreat from its responsibilities to protect African-American voters, coupled with a complicit Supreme Court in Washington, white Southern Democrats, beginning with the "Mississippi Plan" in 1890, called for new state constitutions that would impose a variety of voting restrictions to subvert the 15th Amendment's ban on racial discrimination. Among them were poll taxes, literacy tests and residency requirements. As Mississippi's future governor James Vardaman succinctly admitted in 1900: "There is no use to equivocate or lie about the matter. Mississippi's constitutional convention was held for no other purpose than to eliminate the nigger from politics. Not the 'ignorant and vicious' ... but the nigger." Other Southern states followed this blueprint, culminating with Georgia in 1908.

Whatever the terms of Gen. Robert E. Lee's surrender to General Grant at Appomattox, the Confederacy didn't die in April 1865; it simply morphed. Frederick Douglass put it this way in 1894 in "Lessons of the Hour," his last major speech: "The cause lost in the war is the cause regained in peace, and the cause gained in peace is the cause lost in war." Redemption was "the defeat of emancipation," he continued, "the determination of slavery to perpetuate itself, if not under one form, then under another," and, he added, "the folly of endeavoring to retain the new wine of liberty in the old bottles of slavery."

Those "old bottles" of the dawning Jim Crow era included the development of sharecropping and the nefarious convict lease system, to which we can trace the roots of mass black incarceration; the lynching of more than 4,000 black people by 1950, according to Bryan Stevenson's Equal Justice Initiative; segregation in public places and in every field of opportunity; and a brilliantly executed propaganda campaign that successfully changed the narrative of the cause of the Civil War from freeing the slaves to preserving states' rights and a people's noble way of life, the so-called Lost Cause. Central to that propaganda campaign was the proliferation of an ocean of images of black people as subhuman, as well as what was in effect our country's first culture war. It was masterfully executed by Mildred Lewis Rutherford, the "historian general" of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, who published a textbook "measuring rod" to verify that any account

of the Civil War or Reconstruction fell within the “proper” guidelines. Not only were black achievements of Reconstruction to be undone; even their memory was so dangerous that it, too, had to be edited and erased.

So urgent was the rollback of Reconstruction that it became the subject of Hollywood’s first blockbuster movie, D.W. Griffith’s “The Birth of a Nation,” a silent film that silenced the truth. We tend to think of it as a defense of slavery, but it was actually a radically racist critique of black achievement during Reconstruction, especially of black lawmakers, who were the living embodiment of the Reconstruction amendments — in particular the 14th, with its promise of birthright citizenship, which President Trump dreams of undoing. Rutherford on her front and Griffith on his sought to fulfill the mission of Redemption, and succeeded: to memorialize the Old South in the new mythology of the Lost Cause — indeed, to make America great again. Out of this movement to take control of the narrative came the Confederate monuments that have been generating such heated debate in recent years, particularly since President Trump took office, barking out a narrative frighteningly similar to that of Redemption.

Just over a month before Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968, in a speech at New York’s Carnegie Hall commemorating the centenary of the birth of W.E.B. Du Bois and the significance of Du Bois’s own defiant defense of what he called “Black Reconstruction,” he paused to reflect on the lasting impact of the Redemptionist narrative about “the Negro’s role in the Reconstruction years.” Where Du Bois had implored the freedmen to “fight against ridicule and monstrous caricature, against every refinement of cruelty and gross insult,” King, too, sought to make his audience see that “it was a conscious and deliberate manipulation of history and the stakes were high.” If “Negroes wallowed in corruption, opportunism, displayed spectacular stupidity, were wanton, evil and ignorant, their case was made. They would have proved that freedom was dangerous in the hands of inferior beings.” The hideous, lingering result was that “the collective mind of America became poisoned with racism and stunted with myths.”

The story of the Redemptionist overthrow of Reconstruction shatters all notions that history is a straight line drawn inexorably toward progress, and in that shattering there is a lesson for us all: vigilance. Perhaps the most surprising fact about Reconstruction is that its rollback has lasted far longer than Reconstruction itself, and it continues to this day. President Barack Obama’s eight years in office unleashed tremendous racial resentment and fear, capitalized upon shamelessly first by Mr. Trump’s 2016 campaign and then, mercilessly and unendingly, in his presidency. We can count on Mr. Trump to outdo himself in his campaign for a second term. As we look to resist this Neo-Redemption era, we owe it to ourselves and our children to study again and again the history of the rise and fall of Reconstruction, because the problems that emerged after the Civil War have never been adequately resolved. And the South’s Redemption teaches us that achievements thought to be permanent and lasting — including the Reconstruction amendments themselves — can be diminished and even demolished.

“Strange things have happened of late and are still happening,” Douglass himself worried aloud in that last major speech of his. More than 200 years after his birth, I can’t help wondering what he’d say about the current state of affairs in our democracy. Horrified by the scourge of lynching a generation on from what was supposed to have been a “new birth of freedom” for black and white Americans, Douglass, in surveying the devastating shadows cast over the final years of his life, said that “some of these” developments “tend to dim the luster of the American name, and chill the hopes once entertained for the cause of American liberty.” He continued: “When the moral sense of a nation begins to decline and the wheel of progress to roll backward, there is no telling how low the one will fall or where the other may stop. The downward tendency already manifest has swept away some of the most important safeguards.”

And then he posed a question still haunting us today: “What’s next?”

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