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The Colfax Massacre

The years of Reconstruction after the Civil War were filled with unrelenting domestic terrorism as white Southerners turned to violence to accomplish their dream of restoring white supremacy throughout the land. Lest anyone think that the label “domestic terrorism” overstates the issue, consider the event known as The Colfax Massacre.

It’s confusing to us in 2022, but after the Civil War the Democrats were the pro-slavery, anti-Reconstruction party, and the Republicans were, for the most part, the party of those committed to emancipation of the slaves and later to the equal treatment and enfranchisement of the freed blacks. The party membership included freed blacks, in fact. Keep that in mind as you read the following summary.

Start with journalist Danny Lewis, writing in The Smithsonian Magazine of April 13th 2016:

“Immediately after the end of the Civil War, different factions began fighting over power. Bitter over the Confederacy’s loss, many white Southern Democrats tried their best to continue disenfranchising and restricting the rights of former slaves. At the same time, insurgent, white supremacist groups terrorized African-Americans throughout the South. In Louisiana, the fight over the postwar government was particularly bloody... Simmering resentments between Southern Democrats, most former slave owners, and the Republican-dominated federal government exploded in the 1872 election for Louisiana’s governor.”

Picking up from there, here is historian David Ballantyne, writing in the August 2021 edition of the Journal of Southern History:

“The crisis began as both Republicans and Fusionists (a combination of Democrats and others opposed to the state’s regular Republican Party) claimed the parish offices at Colfax, in Grant Parish, a local jurisdiction with a slight Black majority created by state Republicans in 1869. In late March 1873, Republican office claimants, most of whom were white, occupied the parish courthouse under the protection of Black militiamen.

Lewis adds some detail: “The ballot [for governor] resulted in a hotly contested split between the Republican and Democratic candidates, and when President Ulysses S. Grant sent federal troops to support the Republican candidate, white southerners rebelled and formed a heavily armed insurgent army called the ‘White League.’ Similar to the Ku Klux Klan, the White League was a paramilitary group that intimidated and attacked blacks and white Republicans across the state...”

Ballantyne: “As tensions rose the African Americans, facing assault from white paramilitaries, started digging defenses around the courthouse. On April 13, after all the white Republicans had fled, the Fusionist sheriff claimant Christopher Columbus Nash led an attack on the building. With the help of a steamboat cannon, the white paramilitaries burned the courthouse forcing the Black militiamen to surrender.”

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Greetings,

Thinking about the upcoming 2022 election (November 8: Don't fail to vote!) has got me thinking about an election of exactly 150 years ago that I fear may have some difficult lessons to teach us about what to expect after the votes are counted after the mid-term elections next month.

That's why this issue of the Notes starts out by traveling back to Louisiana 1872, when a disputed election led to an event that's been called "the bloodiest single instance of racial carnage in the Reconstruction era." I start out this week discussing that carnage, as it "taught many lessons, including the lengths to which some opponents of Reconstruction would go to regain their accustomed authority."

The Reconstruction referred to there is the one that occurred after the first U.S. Civil War, the one 160 years ago. But some people think there may be a new Reconstruction underway today, in 2022, which is creating the conditions for what some people are predicting will be a new civil war coming in the United States in the near future. Some people think it's already started! What are they talking about? Is that a real thing?

I realized that I couldn't really answer that question without knowing a little history. So that's what this current Nygaard Notes series—The New Reconstruction Series—is all about.

You'll notice that this issue is "Part II." I didn't call the last issue Part I, because I didn't really know when I published it what we were in for. I thought it was going to be about the Civil War, but the more I researched the issue, the more I came to believe that the war itself was less interesting than the way the nation attempted to put itself back together after the war. The Civil War was about whether the U.S. would be a slaveholding nation or not. But the period after—the period called Reconstruction—was about whether the U.S. would be a true multiracial democracy or not.

That struggle continues, and how it continues—or might continue—is what I hope to illuminate in this series. At least a little bit.

OK then! Let's continue with The New Reconstruction Series, Part II. It should be quite a ride.

Historically yours,

Nygaard

Colfax *from page 1*

Lewis: "But when they surrendered, the white mob murdered many of the black men, shooting at them and hanging some. Historians aren't sure how many people died in the end, but while records show that the massacre resulted in the deaths of three white men, it's estimated that anywhere from 60 to 150 African-Americans were killed."

Typically, not only are the non-white victims more numerous, but we don't know the precise number. We count what we value, so we do know the precise number of white casualties.

Whatever the exact numbers, historian Eric Foner calls the event "The bloodiest single instance of racial carnage in the Reconstruction era," noting

that "the Colfax massacre taught many lessons, including the lengths to which some opponents of Reconstruction would go to regain their accustomed authority."

Writing in 2016, Lewis concludes by saying, "The Colfax Massacre was more or less ignored until the 1920s, when local officials raised a monument honoring the three white men who died in the attack on the courthouse, which called the battle a 'riot.' In 1951, officials marked the site of the massacre with a plaque, once again calling it a riot that 'marked the end of carpetbag misrule in the South.' The plaque still stands to this day."

"Carpetbag misrule"? What's that? ♦

Carpetbaggers and Scalawags

This essay is a re-writing of an essay that appeared in Nygaard Notes # 97, 'way back in the year 2000. It seems even more relevant now than it was then. So here we go...

The period after the U.S. Civil War known as Reconstruction had no specific beginning and ending, but many say it ran from 1863 to 1877. Historian Eric Foner says that Reconstruction was the period during which there was an “effort to construct a democratic, interracial political order from the ashes of slavery.” I want to explain here two words from that period that you may have heard before, but don’t really know what they mean. They’re important words.

The first word is “Carpetbagger,” which was the name applied by anti-Reconstruction (i.e. pro-slavery) Southerners to a Northerner who supposedly could pack “all of his earthly belongings” into his carpetbag [like a duffel bag] and come to the South in order to stick his nose in where it didn’t belong. In fact, carpetbaggers migrated to the post-war South for a variety of reasons, but it is true that many of them eventually rose to political prominence during Reconstruction, due in part to the votes of the newly-enfranchised former slaves.

In the eyes of the white plantation owners and Southern aristocrats, a “carpetbagger” thus came to symbolize opposition to what they called “home rule,” which was (and is) a euphemism for white supremacy. The legitimacy of various elected governments was called into question by referring to them as carpetbag governments who imposed “carpetbag misrule” on the defeated South. As we just saw in the case of the plaque commemorating the Colfax Massacre.

Scalawags

Even more reprehensible than the hated carpetbagger, in the eyes of Southern Democrats in the post-Civil War period, was the “scalawag.”

“Scalawag” originally referred to a white Southern Republican, and more generally any white Southerner who supported Reconstruction, or black civil rights in general. Sometimes called “white Negroes,” scalawags were considered the “local lepers of the community” by members of the former Confederate power structure.

I grew up in the rural North about 80 years later, and I learned to understand the term “scalawag” as an epithet, hearing it often applied to a public figure who was “shady” or somehow involved in underhanded schemes. I’ll bet that many of you reading this learned to understand this word the same way. Though seemingly far removed from the social struggles of the post-Civil War South, this racially-defined connotation somehow made its way into the brain of little Jeffie in Waseca, Minnesota—a town that, at the time, had no African American residents at all! (At least as far as I knew.)

I now see that this was one of the innumerable ways that I was trained to identify myself as a “white” person. That is, as one of the beneficiaries of the myriad advantages of white supremacy. All of this was communicated to me without any overt teaching about slavery, or the Civil War, or Reconstruction, or even any reference to race. Amazing, isn’t it?

As with many words in the language, the values and connotations associated with a word are rooted in a context of race and class, of winners and losers, of the powerful and the powerless. Had Reconstruction not been

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Scalawags *from page 3*

destroyed and replaced with the nearly-100-year reign of Jim Crow and black disenfranchisement, perhaps the word “scalawag” would have come to have a positive connotation in the mainstream vocabulary. I’m guessing that the word has always had a positive connotation in anti-racist households, at least the ones with long memories. It may even have heroic connotations, representing as it does the choice of a “white” Southerner to be a “race traitor,” that is to embrace the idea of racial justice at a time when to do so was very isolating and even dangerous.

But all of that scalawag and carpetbagger stuff was so long ago! (You say.) Well, yes it is, but if you think about the hatred and disdain that many MAGA Republicans feel toward modern political figures like Hilary Clinton and Joe Biden, maybe these long-dead ideas will come to life. Never mind that the modern-day party of the “left” is hardly “left” at all. The dynamic here is that people of color have “left” the Republican Party in droves, their votes for Democrats threatening to slow the rise of today’s white supremacist right. Hilary Clinton as carpetbagger. Joe Biden as scalawag. It’s all about race, still. ♦

Who Qualifies as a Full Member of Society?

Three years ago in these pages I quoted scholar and activist John A. Powell, who says that “When societies experience big and rapid change, a frequent response is for people to narrowly define who qualifies as a full member of society.”

Now jump forward two-and-a-half years from when Powell wrote those words, and listen to political scientist Barbara F. Walter, author of the book “How Civil Wars Start and How to Stop Them.” She was speaking earlier this year to *The New Yorker* magazine, and she echoed Powell when she said, “Here in the United States, we are in the midst of a massive transformation of our country, from being a country that’s white majority to being a country that’s non-white majority. By about 2045, the United States will be a minority white country, that’s a fact. What we are witnessing is *a subset of the white population, which is unwilling to accept this*. That also fits what we’ve seen historically.”

[Those italics were not in the original. I added the italics—here and throughout this essay—so you would be sure to notice the various ways that people go about the process of “narrowly defining who qualifies as a full member of society.”]

Remember here that we need to view racism as a *grouping and ranking process* rather than as a matter of individual emotional reactions. (As I explained back in 2019 in Nygaard Notes #646.) This is why the coming change of the U.S. from a majority white country to a minority white country that Walter references is so terrifying to so many white people: It’s seen as a harbinger of a re-working of the social hierarchy. What if black lives really DO matter?

“Real Americans”

In the last issue of *The Notes* I quoted Rachel Kleinfeld, senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, talking about the rise in political violence in the U.S. Here she is again, ↗↗↗

→→writing last October in The Journal of Democracy:

“A 2016 Pew Research Center poll found that 32 percent of U.S. citizens believed that *to be a ‘real American,’* one must be a U.S.-born Christian. Among Trump’s primary voters, according to a 2017 Voter Study Group analysis, 86 percent thought it was ‘very important’ to have been born in the United States; 77 percent believed that one must be Christian; and 47 percent thought one must also be ‘of European descent.’”

This makes sense in light of Powell’s observation about societies that are experiencing big and rapid change. And the Pew Center, reputable as it is, is not the only source of evidence that the process of “narrowly defining who qualifies as a full member of society” is well underway.

The Democracy Fund Voter Study Group is (their website says), “a research collaboration of analysts and scholars from across the political spectrum examining and delivering insights on the evolving views of American voters.” In 2017 they published a study called “Race, Religion, and Immigration in 2016; How the Debate over American Identity Shaped the Election and What It Means for a Trump Presidency.” Toward the end of their report—which is based on a survey that they call the Views of the Electorate Research (VOTER) Survey—there is a subhead that reads “What is Important to Being American.” It starts out like this:

“The debate about immigration is not just about specific groups of immigrants. It is a debate about *how and whether those immigrants can fully be a part of American society and culture* — and, indeed, what constitutes the very category ‘American.’ The VOTER Survey includes a battery of questions that have been part of the General Social Survey for many years. The battery asks about *the importance of various factors to ‘being truly American.’* These factors speak to two conceptions of American citizenship — a ‘civic’ conception based on American ideals and institutions and a more “ethnic” conception based on blood and soil.”

Later in this series on the Civil War we’ll return to this idea of “blood and soil” both in the context of the first U.S. Civil War of the 1860s and the threat of a New Civil War of the 2020s.

For now, note this comment by the VOTER Survey folks, who said that “Ultimately, the 2016 campaign helped make attitudes related to immigration, religion, and race more salient to voter decision-making in a way that many other attitudes were not.” And that’s because these three characteristics (to the extent that they can be known or believed) are key tools that can be used by people who consider themselves “real Americans” to mark and target the Others whose very presence challenges the dominant narrative.

When large segments of the population come to be seen as the “other,” and thus as a threat to the power and status of the dominant group, then anything goes. Seen in this light, Trump’s incitement to his supporters on January 6th 2021—“if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore”—makes perfect sense: A United States social order without White People at the top would not be a country at all. At least, not one that “we” would want to live in.

When the President tells already-terrified white people to “fight like hell,” what can be expected to happen?

The Rise of Political Violence

Here’s Rachel Kleinfeld again, from her Journal of Democracy article; she begins by noting that “From death threats against previously anonymous bureaucrats and public-health officials to a plot to kidnap Michigan’s

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→→ governor and the 6 January 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol, acts of political violence in the United States have skyrocketed in the last five years.” She goes on to say this:

“Ideas that were once confined to fringe groups now appear in the mainstream media. White-supremacist ideas, militia fashion, and conspiracy theories spread via gaming websites, YouTube channels, and blogs, while a slippery language of memes, slang, and jokes blurs the line between posturing and provoking violence, normalizing radical ideologies and activities. These shifts have created a new reality: millions of Americans willing to undertake, support, or excuse political violence, defined here as physical harm or intimidation that affects *who benefits from or can participate fully in political, economic, or sociocultural life*.

In this period of big and rapid change, we will be forced to make very difficult decisions about who gets what, who gets to go where, who gets to live where, who gives orders and who takes them. We’re already making those decisions! As we struggle to decide who gets to make those decisions there will be much disagreement and conflict.

In the conclusion of their study, the VOTER Survey people state that “To most Americans, there will be benefits to a country that is ultimately more nonwhite than white.” I think they are right, but it’s clear that this vision is not shared by all.

Can we transition from a white supremacy culture to a genuine multiracial democracy? A democracy in which full membership is guaranteed to all, regardless of race, religion, or immigration status? No one knows the future, but it’s a vision worth fighting for. Don’t you think?

Right now let’s travel back in time and try to understand the first real society-wide struggle to pursue that vision by looking at the period known as Reconstruction. We start with a brief look at the Civil War of 1860 to 1865. ◆

The (First) Civil War

I don’t want to spend a lot of time on the U.S. civil war, as this series is about Reconstruction. But since Reconstruction was inextricably linked to the Civil War, it’s worth spending just a few minutes trying to understand the basics of that war. We begin with a few paragraphs from a summary published by the Associated Press in 2017.

It was entitled “AP Explains: What was behind the American Civil War?” And it began by asking *Why Did the Civil War Start?*

“The issues leading up to the Civil War,” answered the AP, “were complex, and many people in the North and South in 1861 viewed the conflict as inevitable.

“In the South, slave labor was the foundation of an economy based on the cotton produced by plantations and farms. The free labor also was key to profiting from the production of such cash crops as tobacco, corn and other staples of the South. In the North, farms were generally smaller because of the soil and climate. ↗↗↗

→→ With their more industrialized economy, the Northern states didn't require large numbers of slaves.

“By the 1850s, the North vs. South divide was widening as free states and slave states debated over allowing slavery in new territories as the nation expanded westward. Southerners viewed the North's opposition to slavery's expansion as a threat to the economies — and thus the political power and rights — of slave-holding states. Abraham Lincoln, opposed to slavery's expansion, was elected president in 1860 and the path to the South's seceding from the Union was set.

“‘Slavery was the root cause of the Civil War,’ said Eric Foner, professor of history at Columbia University. ‘It was not the only cause, but it was the underlying cause. There was a fundamental difference between the North and the South as the South feared for the future of slavery.’”

That's grossly oversimplified, but good enough for our purposes.

After the War

After the war ended in 1865 the nation began to put itself back together. This period has come to be known as “Reconstruction.”

As I've said, the anti-slavery, pro-Reconstruction party at that time was the Republican Party, and the pro-slavery, anti-Reconstruction party was the Democratic Party. But it wasn't that simple. There were also those—inside and outside of the Republican Party—who were known as “Radical Republicans.” They were called “radicals” because they didn't simply want to abolish slavery, they believed blacks were entitled to the same political rights and opportunities as whites.

“When the Civil War began, [the Radicals] proclaimed that the Union would not emerge victorious without emancipating and arming the slaves. By the time it ended, they helped put equal civil and political rights for black Americans on the national agenda and then took the lead in enshrining them in laws and the Constitution during Reconstruction.” That's how historian Eric Foner put it in 2020 in *The Nation Magazine*, where he added a note to those who still today seek to “redeem the promise” of Radical Republicanism:

“For those engaged in that ongoing struggle, the Radicals offer compelling lessons on how to operate simultaneously inside and outside a political system, how to function as a wing of a party without being beholden to it, and how to achieve success as an ideological vanguard, putting forward a coherent plan for radical change and compromising when necessary, though without ever losing sight of one's principles and long-term goals.”

So, what was “Reconstruction,” actually? I'll explain in the next Nygaard Notes. ♦

“Quote” of the Week Winning “*The War over Memory*”

In 2001, Historian Eric Foner wrote a review in the New York Times of a book called “Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory,” by David W. Blight. Here is an excerpt from that review:

Two understandings of how the Civil War should be remembered collided in post-bellum America. One was the ‘emancipationist’ vision hinted at by Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address when he spoke of the war as bringing a rebirth of the republic in the name of freedom and equality. The other was a ‘reconciliationist’ memory that emphasized what the two sides shared in common, particularly the valor of individual soldiers, and suppressed thoughts of the war’s causes and the unfinished legacy of emancipation. By the end of the century, in a segregated society where blacks’ subordination was taken for granted North and South, ‘the forces of reconciliation’ had ‘overwhelmed the emancipationist vision.’ Another way of putting it is that the Confederacy lost the war on the battlefield but won the war over memory.

Today, nearly all historians view slavery as the war’s fundamental cause, emancipation as central to its meaning and consequences, and Reconstruction as a praiseworthy effort to establish the principle of racial justice in America. As current controversies reveal, however, the reconciliationist vision of the war retains a powerful hold on many Americans’ imaginations.

Foner ends by telling us that “In the year 2001, it still matters very much how we remember the Civil War.” This is still true—maybe even more true—in the deeply-polarized United States of 2022. This series on Reconstruction that you are reading now is all about memory, and imagination.

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