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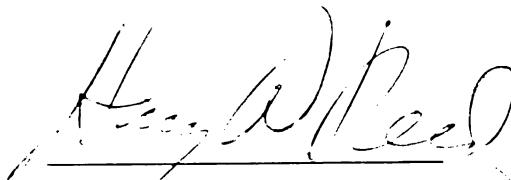
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**THE RHETORIC OF REDEMPTION:
A STUDY OF THE INSURRECTION MYTH
IN THE ATLANTA CONSTITUTION, 1868-1872**

presented by

James F. Sleight

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**THE RHETORIC OF REDEMPTION:
A STUDY OF THE INSURRECTION MYTH
IN THE ATLANTA CONSTITUTION, 1868-1872**

**By
James F. Sleight**

A THESIS

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Department of History

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ABSTRACT

THE RHETORIC OF REDEMPTION:
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By

James F. Sleight

What specific forms did Southern Democratic newspaper propaganda assume during Reconstruction? This thesis contends that the Democratic press appealed to Southerner's fear of negro insurrection in an effort to unite voters behind the Democratic party banner. It tests this thesis through a survey of the Atlanta Constitution from the date of its first publication in June of 1868 until shortly after the 1872 national election. The structure of the insurrection fear appeal used by the Constitution strongly resembles that of a social myth.

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Dedicated with thanks to my father,
who worked as hard on this thesis as I did

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PART I
INTRODUCTION

Historians have frequently commented upon the ante-bellum Southerner's shadowy dread of negro insurrection and race war. Analyses of diaries, journals, newspapers, letters and other public and private sources suggest that this fear may be traceable to the bloody slave revolt on the island of Santo Domingo. With this event the myth that outside agitators, in this case foreign agents, could instigate an insurrection became firmly entrenched in the ideology of the American planter class. Indeed conservatives in many countries immediately attributed the revolution in Santo Domingo to the work of saboteurs employed by Great Britain. Closer to home, the aborted conspiracies of Gabriel Prosser in 1800 and Denmark Vessey in 1822, and the Nat Turner insurrection in 1831 helped Southerners focus their suspicions of outside agitators upon Northern Abolitionists instead of foreign nationals. For the remainder of the ante-bellum period, even in the dearth of bona fide insurrection scares, the unceasing tendency of the planter class to accuse Abolitionists of acting as "incendiary emissaries" offers strong testimony to the chronic nature of this paranoia. At last, John Brown's raid became the perfect fulfillment of

the prophecy that Abolitionists were not pacifists after all, but were actually bent upon inciting the slaves to armed rebellion. Thus generation after generation of white Southerners looked to these examples and reinforced their fears, predisposing them to interpret most any incident of racial violence as the product of an insurrection conspiracy.¹

It would be presumptuous to assume that white Southerner's insurrection fear was quelled by the Emancipation Proclamation. Indeed, December 1865 saw a widespread insurrection panic sweep throughout the South. Additionally, for at least several years after emancipation many of the South's leading citizens dreaded not only its social and economic consequences, but the advent of outright war between the races.² This study contends that the

¹See for example, David Byron Davis, The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 34-36; Stanley F. Horn, Invisible Empire: The Story of the Ku Klux Klan 1866-1871, (New York: Haskell House, 1973) 27-28; Leon F. Litwack, Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery, (New York: Alfred A. Knoph, 1979), 59-63; Dan T. Carter, "The Anatomy of Fear: The Christmas Day Insurrection Scare of 1865," Journal of Southern History 42 (August 1976): 345-364; George C. Rable, But there Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction, (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 17-34.

²C. Vann Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 23; Dan T. Carter, 345-364; James L. Roark, Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 111-155; Rable, 28.

Democratic newspaper Atlanta Constitution appealed to this deep rooted fear in an effort to unite Southern white voters behind their party's banner. It test this thesis through a survey of Atlanta's "official Democratic newspaper" from the date of its first publication in June 1868 until shortly after the 1872 national election.

The structure of those fear appeals used by the Constitution, and from those newspapers which the Constitution quoted, strongly resemble the structure of a social myth; a widely held cultural belief that explains a particular aspect of society. In this case conservative Democratic rhetoric placed the "insurrection myth" within the context of racial violence which took place in the South during Reconstruction. This new twist on an old ante-bellum Southern white fear helped justify the partisan allegations of a Radical Republican conspiracy. The Democratic press routinely suggested that the Radicals³ were responsible for instigating racial violence as a ruse to justify further use of Union occupation troops, and thereby guarantee Radical ascendancy in the South. The call to action of these appeals asked that white voters unite behind the Democratic party both in order to avert war between the races, and overthrow the "tyrannical Radical-Negro rule".

³The Atlanta Constitution rarely distinguished between Moderate, Liberal, or Radical Republicans. All shades of the Republican party were simply dubbed "Radical."

Part II of this study will explore some specific editorial practices and rhetorical techniques that were used to perpetuate the insurrection myth to the advantage of the Democrat party. Part III is a review essay of the Constitution's coverage of the Ku Klux Klan. Part IV examines the coverage of four notable race riots that took place during Georgia Reconstruction. Parts III and IV will both discuss the stylistic uses of insurrection imagery in news stories of racial violence as a means of unifying the white Democratic constituency.

As a general rule, the Constitution and other Democratic papers embellished reports of racial violence with imagery borrowed from the insurrection myth. Was there an organized plan of rhetorical attack on the part of Democratic editors? It is impossible to say for certain given the resources of this humble study, although I would suggest that a conspiracy theory is not needed here. Political mud-slinging was simply an accepted newspaper practice in the days of the party presses. Either consciously or unconsciously, when it came time to lob the next handful of mud, conservative editors discovered that such a widely held and deeply ingrained cultural fear as the insurrection myth provided an abundant reservoir of partisan slime.

Standing Guard in the Gate City

At the time of Georgia's secession in 1861, Atlanta boasted three leading newspapers; the Intelligencer, the Southern Confederacy, and the National American. Naturally though, the Southern press suffered tremendously during the Civil War. Although several other papers began publication during the war, they quickly failed under the harsh economic conditions or "departed for safer climes" as Union forces approached the city. By the Summer of 1864 as Sherman's army closed in upon the city, war-time journalism virtually ended in Atlanta.⁴

The recovery of the Southern newspaper industry during Reconstruction was slow. Shortages of materials, equipment, and finances hampered operations for years to come. Newspapers that were able to go to press would resort to a relatively simple format, often printing an entire edition on a single sheet that was simply folded in half.⁵

During Presidential Reconstruction the Southern press took a relatively conciliatory tone that won high praise from federal leaders and Northern editors. However, the

⁴Henry T. Malone, "Atlanta Journalism During the Confederacy," Georgia Historical Quarterly, 37 (September 1953): 219.

⁵Louis T. Griffith, and John E. Talmadge, Georgia Journalism 1763-1950, (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1951), 91; Hodding Carter, Their Words were bullets: The Southern Press in War, Reconstruction, and Peace, (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1969), 45.

passage of the Fourteenth Amendment and the onset of Congressionally mandated military Reconstruction stirred the ire of the Southern press. In Georgia, editorial reinforcements soon entered the fight against the hated Congressional Reconstruction.⁶ Commenting upon this juncture, historian Hodding Carter observed that:

Dispassionate and honest journalism died on the vine in much of the South.⁷ It would be a very long time in budding again.

In the rapidly growing city of Atlanta, the Intelligencer was the sole standard bearer of the Democratic banner by 1868. However, its lackluster opposition to "Radical rule" helped inspire Colonel Carey Styles to establish a paper that would battle more zealously for Democratic principles.⁸ Since the state capital had just been moved to Atlanta, it seemed even more vital that the city should have a worthy party organ. The Constitution began publication on June 16, and by Summer's end was winning high praise from other Democratic newspaper editors. By 1870, with a circulation which it claimed "defied refutation" (about 4,000), the Constitution regularly bragged of its status as the "official" Democratic journal of the city and state. Through the 1870s the Constitution

⁶Griffith, Talmadge, 93.

⁷Hodding Carter, Their Words Were Bullets, 45.

⁸Ibid; see also "The Press of Georgia," Atlanta Constitution, 14 August 1869.

rapidly became one of the South's important newspapers, and boasted the largest circulation of any newspaper in the state of Georgia.⁹

The Constitution reveled in its self-appointed role as the sentry for the public welfare. It nobly described its function as "standing upon the public watchtower, ready to do battle against the diabolical misrule of [Governor] Bullock and company".¹⁰ Its editors during Georgia's Reconstruction, Styles (1868-1869) and Isaac W. Avery (1869-1874), sought to undermine the credibility of the Radical regime by associating Radical Republicans with imagery typical of a large scale black insurrection. Scholars far more capable than myself have used Reconstruction newspaper sources as a key to understanding the Southern mind. Largely absent from the historiographical literature, however, are the detailed discussions of the conservative Southern press' orchestration of abstract articles of cultural faith into concrete political ideologies and strategies. Specifically, this thesis will focus on the manipulation of the insurrection myth by the Atlanta Constitution as a tactic to reinforce white voter support of the Democratic party.

⁹Griffith, Talmadge, 96, 339.

¹⁰Atlanta Constitution, 23 July 1871; see also 27 August 1871 as an example of similar language.

PART II
THE RHETORIC OF REDEMPTION

Part II of this study will attempt to operationalize the concept of the insurrection myth as it manifests itself in the Atlanta Constitution from 1868 to 1872. Undoubtedly many white Southerners, even politicians and newspapermen, were sincere in their dread of a black uprising.¹¹ To a culture with a historic fear of a negro insurrection, the alarming rumors and even first hand experiences of racial violence must have seemed the nightmarish fulfillment of a prophecy. Indeed, newspaper accounts of the day seemed to betray a general paranoia of an impending freedmen's revolt. Pre-revisionist Historians of the Reconstruction tended to swallow whole these reports and rumors published in Democratic newspaper which depicted Radicals and their "minions"--carpetbaggers, scalawags, but most frequently negroes--as pitted against the decent white South. These "ignorant negro dupes," so the story goes, were egged on by the meanest white men to instigate insurrections, riots, and

¹¹Davis, 36.

barn-burnings, but most importantly take over the electoral process.¹²

Historiographical revisions have more readily acknowledged the Southern press' tendencies towards hyperbola when editorializing upon the political and social ramifications of Reconstruction.¹³ Still, recent works often use press accounts of lawless bands of blacks in collusion with the meanest of white Radicals as some kind of socio-historical yardstick of insurrection paranoia. To what extent, however, was this sense of panic found in the conservative press a genuine measure of public concern, and to what extent was this genuine public fear of a black uprising exploited for its political potential? Unfortunately, a detailed exploration of the tactical use of

¹²See the following for examples of pre-revisionist historiographical treatments of incidents or topics mentioned in this study: C. Mildred Thompson, Reconstruction in Georgia: Economic Social and Political, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1915); Cason, Roberta F., "The Loyal League in Georgia," Georgia Historical Quarterly 20 (June 1936) 125-153; Theodore B. Fitz Simmons, Jr., "The Camilla Riot," Georgia Historical Quarterly 35 (June 1951), 116-125; and, E. Merton Coulter, The South During Reconstruction, 1865-1877, (Baton Rouge; Louisiana State University Press, 1947), 113-138.

¹³Lee W. Formwalt, "The Camilla Massacre of 1868: Racial Violence as Political Propaganda," Georgia Historical Quarterly 71 (September 1987): 399-426; Rable, 26; Richard Nelson Current, Those Terrible Carpetbaggers: A Reinterpretation, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 423; Melinda Meek Hennessey, "To Live and Die in Dixie: Reconstruction Race Riots in the South" (Ph.D. diss, Kent State University, 1978), 420-421.

insurrection fear for political gain seems to be missing from Reconstruction historiography.

Two specific images associated with the insurrection myth will be discussed in this study. The first image is that of bands of armed blacks organizing against whites. As Dan T. Carter points out, during the initial stages of an insurrection scare wild rumors would circulate amongst the white community. In the midst of this confusion, and in the dearth of any tangible facts, newspapers would graphically describe the potential threat posed by the rampaging negroes; sometimes going as far as detailing alleged atrocities committed. The press would also speculate upon the degree of organization and sophistication behind reported insurrection threats; again, often based upon little factual information.¹⁴

The second predominate image to be discussed will be the utter fascination conservative editors displayed with national conspiracies involving outside agitators. Not surprisingly, these "troublemakers" were readily known as carpetbaggers, scalawags, or Radical Republicans who supposedly encouraged "ignorant and gullible negroes" to commit acts of violence.¹⁵

¹⁴Dan T. Carter, 350.

¹⁵Dan T. Carter, 357; Rable, 10, 83.

Taken as a whole these two components of the Insurrection Myth are inlaid with a strong inductive appeal that the white voters of Georgia support a unified Democratic party. The Constitution consistently paraded stories of "negro outrages" and "insurrection" before its readers. It then explained the danger to white society posed by the Radicals who allegedly incited negroes to commit these outrages. If one were to follow the logic of this appeal, one would have no choice but to conclude that a unified Democratic party was the only way to insure the safety of decent society. The rhetoric of redemption then, blatantly painted the issues of the day in such a fashion as to divide voters along either side of the color line.

The Social Dichotomy of the Insurrection Myth

According to social psychologist Sam Keen, a central concern of social mythology

is the dramatic conflict between good and evil. In an attempt to clarify, myth oversimplifies, polarizes and divides the world into us and them, light and dark, right and wrong, good and bad, a way of life and a way of death. It personifies the conflict as a cosmic struggle between God and the Devil. Myth justifies all conflict and warfare, ancient and modern, by casting it as a moral struggle righteous heroes and demonic villains.¹⁶

¹⁶Sam Keen, "The Stories We Live By," Psychology Today, (December 1988) 42-47.

This definition of social myth is especially apropos where the insurrection myth is concerned. Conservative discourse pitted the struggle between Democrats and Radicals as tantamount to the struggle between good and evil, and often speak of Democrats and Radicals in either divine or diabolical terms. The rhetoric of redemption seized upon the insurrection myth and politicized it. Simply put, Radicals were portrayed as instigators of nothing short of social, racial, and civil upheaval.

Besides the majestic orchestration of the insurrection imagery, various species of inflammatory language were used to divide voters along racial lines, including liberal use of racial slurs. One method bears mention here because it was central to the successful manipulation of insurrection imagery. There was a clear tendency to blend the concepts of "Radical" and "negro" to the point where the two words became practically synonymous in journalistic usage. Both terms were lumped together on the same side of Keen's aforementioned "us-against-them" societal model. On the "us" side of the line stood the decent white southerners and the Democratic party. On the other side of the line stood carpetbaggers, scalawags, radicals, and negroes. This rhetorical method was quite logical, for with the subtleties removed from the public debate it must have become easier to identify the "diabolical" Radicals with the racial violence that seemed to threaten decent society. Judging from tone

of Reconstruction historiography through the 1950s, one could make a strong circumstantial case for the lasting impact left by the Democratic press' simplified portrayal of Radical Reconstruction.

The Constitution often made sarcastic references to the Radical's "pet policy of negrophilism". With some justification, Democrats suspiciously accused Radicals of using civil rights as a transparent attempt to win the favor of the new black constituency. In retaliation, Democratic party rhetoric seized upon the Radical support of political equality as proof that complete social equality was just around the corner. This extreme was, of course, completely unacceptable to the vast majority of nineteenth century Americans. It was one thing to accept the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, as moderates by this time were willing to do. Yet it was quite another issue to argue in favor of social equality for blacks. Consequently conservative editors wasted no words in forcing the Radicals to own the entire spectrum of social implications of what conservatives perceived to be a reckless and hypocritical coziness between the Radicals and their "beloved negroes".¹⁷

¹⁷ Atlanta Constitution, 15 June 1870; "Good Point," 23 April 1871; "The Georgia Matter," 15 March 1870; see also, Eric Foner, Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877, (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), chapters 3 and 6 for discussions of the evolving concepts of civil rights.

The Constitution rather enjoyed suggesting that there might be a fraternal relationship between the Radical and the Negro. In the contemporary vernacular this was perhaps the ultimate character assassination. An unsigned Constitution editorial titled, "Not Our 'Brother,'" outlined the "savage" nature of the black race, noting the lack of law or government in the Negro's "state of nature". The author theorized that indeed, "he is farther from our ideas of brotherhood than the Indian of the Chinaman; he added that, "the Negro may be the 'brother' of the Radical," but not of the Democrat.¹⁸ A similar association was made when Governor Bullock appointed "a negro named Baird" to read the proclamation convening the Georgia state legislature. The Constitution asked if whites of his own party were "not good enough" for this distinction. The report concluded that the Governor honored "his brothers".¹⁹

There were also some interesting tendencies to blend strong racial stereotypes with anti-Radical rhetoric. One of the most frequent cultural stereotypes found in the Constitution is that of the "thieving negro". This convenient punch line was a ready source of "humorous" tales for readers as well as political lampoons.²⁰ With this in

¹⁸23 June 1868.

¹⁹"White Radicals not good enough for the Governor," 11 January 1870, p.2.

²⁰2 August 1871, p.2; 29 August 1871, p.2.

mind, it could hardly be a coincidence that "Radical thieves" were sometimes accused of perpetrating "Ku-Klux outrages" (as opposed to Klan members taking part in Ku-Klux outrages).²¹

Curiously enough, there were even suggestions of Radical laziness--another powerful cultural stereotype often pinned upon blacks. A Constitution rendition of a Klan incident had Radicals giving one of their own a thorough beating. The story claimed that this mob of Radicals was jealous of their comrade's industry and material success which he attained while operating a distillery.²²

Such consistent cross-talk between stereotypes associated with the terms radical and negro make the two practically synonymous. The rhetorical usefulness of such associations became clearer as reports surfaced that ostensibly blamed Radicals for Southern racial violence. According to the Constitution a "Radical conspiracy" was supposed to have been responsible for the reported outrages that were building towards a race war. If one accepted the everyday word usage that categorized carpetbaggers, radicals, scalawags, and blacks all in the same semantic

²¹Atlanta Constitution, "Those Ku-Klux," 16 March 1871, p.2.

²²Atlanta Constitution, 24 March 1870; see also, C. Mildred Thompson, Reconstruction in Georgia: Economic Social, Political, 1865-1872, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1915) 364; see also, Foner, 133, for a discussion on the laziness stereotype.

lump; perhaps then it became easier to accept the idea that all these groups were acting in consort to instigate outrages against decent society.

Images of an Impending Race War

Insurrection fever intermittently seized the pages of the Constitution during a period stretching from August of 1868 to January of 1869. Although panic was not as widespread or as passionate as it was during the celebrated Christmas insurrection scare of 1865, these fears were certainly symptomatic of the bristling tension between the two races. 1868 was a landmark in US electoral history, being the first year the blacks were allowed to vote in a Presidential election. Not surprisingly then, 1868 also saw more major race riots than in any other year during Reconstruction.²³

To the dismay of many white Southerners, the Summer of 1868 saw a number of reports of "armed negroes" secretly drilling in secluded locations throughout the South. These reports probably originated from the presence of the Union Leagues, in the South often called the Loyal Leagues, amongst freedmen. Undoubtedly a good many of these reports

²³"More Insurrectionary Demonstrations," Atlanta Constitution, 19 August 1868; Michael W. Fitzgerald, The Union League Movement in the Deep South: Politics and Agricultural Change During Reconstruction, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989) 66-67; Hennesey, 76.

were exaggerations. Yet some sightings of "negro pickets" may have actually been armed Leaguers walking to or from meetings. Other reports could have been founded in the League's tactic of arriving at political rallies or polling places en masse, thereby avoiding intimidation by white ruffians.²⁴ In any case it is clear that under the leadership of the Loyal Leagues, blacks organized in their own defense.

The defensive nature of these "black militias," as the press referred to them, has been stressed by revisionist historians. One must remember as well, the ubiquitous southern custom of carrying guns. After the war this was common practice among both races, doubtless though many whites found it alarming. As a general rule, if the freedmen were armed they usually carried light weapons such as pistols, or shotguns loaded with birdshot. Pistols were so common that they were often not discussed when town leaders asked that political rallies be attended unarmed. By and large, when violence erupted and the shooting started, black casualties far out numbered those of the whites. At the very least, this would indicate that the offensive capabilities of these "black militias" as reported in the Democratic press were greatly exaggerated.²⁵

²⁴Fitzgerald, 66.

²⁵Hennessey, 124.

Also contrary to the suggestions of the Democratic press, the white leadership of the Union Leagues as well as the Republican party actually discouraged the local chapters from arming themselves. As tensions mounted towards the approaching 1868 national election, Governor Bullock issued a proclamation forbidding the "drilling or exercising in military tactics any armed body except by the army of the United States".²⁶ Many black leaders too viewed armed Loyal Leaguers as provocative and counterproductive. Ironically then, Loyal League parading or drilling (depending upon one's point of view) was a symptom of the growing political autonomy being asserted by blacks at the local levels, and not proof of a grand Radical conspiracy.²⁷

An ominous report from Americus Georgia told of a clandestine militia force of 150 to 200 negroes armed with loaded muskets. The Constitution warned against such "lawless demonstrations," but boldly asserted that "if they mean war against the white race they can have it to their hearts content, and woe be to him who strikes the first blow". A report out of Charleston, South Carolina quoted the Missionary Record (a black newspaper in that city) in saying that negroes and white people seemed "bent on a collision, and that the blacks were prepared for them".

²⁶ Augusta Constitutionalist, 25 September 1868, quoted in Hennessey, p. 123.

²⁷ Fitzgerald, 66-71.

Every plantation in the area was said to have a captain, and that a total of 50,000 negroes were "prepared to defend their rights and liberties at a moments notice". This report was said to have been "confirmed" by delegates to the state's Democratic convention.²⁸

Conservative newspapermen also employed certain stylistic techniques that heightened the crisis tone of their reporting. Labeling a race riot as an "insurrection," terming political defeat for the democrats as "revolution," and depicting the Loyal Leagues as underground armies all added to the "race war" imagery which appeared consistently in the Constitution. Frequent use of military terminology to describe racial incidents only added fuel to the fire.

Indeed, negro Republican organizations such as the Loyal League were often depicted as a kind of secret paramilitary organization. A report from the Macon (GA) Journal and Messenger stated that a notorious negro leader, "Captain" Jones, had incited a riot by "calling out" the Loyal League shortly after a black man was killed "in a fight". The report gave the impression that the ensuing riot was almost inevitable since the "negroes" all said that

²⁸First reference, "Military Negro Demonstration in Americus," Atlanta Constitution, 13 August 1868; second reference, Charleston (S.C.) Mercury, 10 August 1868, reprinted in the Atlanta Constitution, 14 August 1868.

they regularly acted under the "orders" of Jefferson Long,²⁹ a prominent black Republican; who incidently was the only black man to represent Georgia in Congress during Reconstruction.³⁰

Using Dan Carter's observations of typical insurrection scares as a rough model, such unsubstantiated rumors of organized agitation are similar to what one might expect in the initial phases of an insurrection panic. One alarming report that warned of "more insurrectionary demonstrations," suggested that a relationship existed between the appearance of negro military drilling earlier that summer and the formation of "Grant Clubs".³¹

Clearly the purpose of these reports was to rouse the white population to action, although exactly what kind of action was not always made expressly clear by the Constitution. Amidst rumors of negro military demonstration, a panicky appeal quoted from the Sumpter Republican urged every man to his "post" in order to see that "the enemy [did] not take possession of the citadel,"

²⁹The Constitution usually referred to him by the juvenile form of the name, simply calling him "Jeff." Long.

³⁰"The Hardin Smith Riot in Smith County," Atlanta Constitution, 27 August 1868, from a report by the Macon (GA) Journal and Messenger.

³¹"More Insurrectionary Demonstrations," Atlanta Constitution, 19 August 1868, p.1; Atlanta Constitution, 13 August 1868.

it then forebodingly cautioned that, "forewarned is forearmed". This inflammatory report may have been a veiled attempt to rally white vigilantism, however, during Isaac Avery's tenure as managing editor this same sentry-for-the-Democracy imagery was frequently used simply to unite voters behind the Democratic party. Readers were typically urged to "take dead aim at the enemy" by learning the Republican's "plan of campaign".³²

Southern editors took their self-appointed positions as Democratic party sentry rather seriously. A particular incident during the Governor Bullock's beleaguered administration serves as an example. Bullock never enjoyed a harmonious relationship with the legislature, which was fairly evenly divided between Radical and Conservative coalitions. In 1870 as the Republicans were rapidly losing support due in no small part to Klan activity, state law required Bullock to call for state elections by year's end. The results could only strengthen the position of Georgia Democrats. Politically astute enough to read the writing on the state house wall, Bullock proposed that elections be postponed until Georgia was formally readmitted to the Union. Needless to say, this let forth a howl of Democratic opposition to what was dubbed, the "prolongation

³²"Take Dead Aim at the Enemy," Atlanta Constitution, 11 August 1871; 13 August 1868; 20 August 1871.

resolution".³³ The Constitution responded by urgently rallying Democratic legislators to their "post" in order to work towards the defeat of the prolongationists. As the vote in the state house loomed closer, the Constitution pleaded that "none should be absent for a moment from their seats. . . for usurpers are bold, active, and vigilant".³⁴ In fact, the Constitution would frequently chide Democratic legislators for deserting their post--i.e., absenteeism--during crucial party showdowns. Such word play could only have been intended to peak public interest, and create an atmosphere of civic crisis.

The Constitution carried on as if great military secrets were being uncovered by its news reports of Republican political gatherings. These so-called Grant Clubs were supposedly formed under orders from "head-quarters," and the proceedings were guarded by "pickets".³⁵ Should a public gathering spark confrontation and deteriorate into a riot, newspaper accounts would describe

³³Alan Conway, The Reconstruction of Georgia, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966) 190.

³⁴"Democrats to Your Posts," Atlanta Constitution, 22 July 1870; see also, "A Warning," *ibid.*

³⁵Atlanta Constitution, 19 August 1868.

the "colored troops," as either "rallying" in the face of white opposition or being "routed" by white resistance.³⁶

Reports from areas troubled by racial violence were headlined as if they were reports from war correspondents. A follow up story concerning a streetcar fight in Savannah, allegedly instigated by black Radicals, began, "All is quiet," as if this scuffle were directly located on the front line of Georgia's race war. Relatively insignificant skirmishes were presented as "negro insurrections" or "rebellions". Indeed, editors developed a pronounced talent for drawing allusions to Civil War era memories with headlines such as, "All Quiet on the Ogeechee," or "Bleeding Arkansas".³⁷

Using headlines to draw upon the common war memories of white southerners was perhaps an attempt towards cementing a unified political front in the face of a perceived black Radical enemy. Frequently these appeals even courted old-line Whigs, traditional opponents of the conservative Democrats. In October of 1868, the Constitution quoted a "conservative whig statesman from the old whig school, and

³⁶ Atlanta Constitution, 19 October 1868; also see the Fitz Simmons treatment of the Camilla massacre for an example of a pre-revisionist historian who incorporates this loaded imagery into his writing.

³⁷ June 1870; 30 August 1870; 5 May 1871; 1 August 1872, The Ogeechee River, near Savannah saw some Civil War fighting, it was also the site of prolonged racial disturbances in January 1869; 20 October 1872.

an original opposer of slavery," warning of the "danger of another Civil War" due to the "revolutionary acts of radicals".⁴² On that same day the Constitution printed an article which carried the point even further. There was, stated the article, not only a "danger of a war between the races," but that war was already upon them. Accordingly, this rising tide of violence which swept north as well as south, was the "inevitable result of Radical policy".⁴³

Thus, in a very real rhetorical sense conservative editors during Reconstruction attempted to keep the passions of war alive with military jargon, battlefield imagery, and hawkish prose. Long known for battling their foes with printer's ink, it has been said of Southern newspapermen that "their words were bullets".⁴⁴ If this sense, insurrectionary imagery was a most potent weapon. The Democratic press merely affixed the "outside agitator" label firmly across the back of their Radical enemy, then paraded this highly visible target before its readers in an effort to arouse the white South.

⁴²30 October 1868.

⁴³"Murder North and South," New York Herald, 26 October 1868, reprinted by the Atlanta Constitution, 30 October 1868.

⁴⁴Hodding Carter, 1969.

Of Conspiracies and Agitators

It was painfully clear who readers were to blame for all these reports of civil unrest. An editorial entitled "Radical Revolution" stated that the Radical party had "no existence outside of discord and military oppression which it [had] forced upon the country".⁴⁵ An August 1868 article clipped from the Charleston News, exposed a Republican campaign document which supposedly proved that "Radical rascality" was responsible for recent riots in that city, and the "war between the races" with which they were "threatened". As one might guess, blacks were not held entirely to blame for their alleged roles in the racial unrest.⁴⁶ They were simply, according to the report, "credulously misled" by "white Radical villains in their midst inciting them by diabolical means".

At some points the text of the reprinted Republican circular itself seemed quite moderate. Black voters were urged not to be "cajoled or driven" into the Democratic fold, and then promised that if they were "quiet and peaceful", Grant and Colfax would "protect them" after the election. Obviously, Radical agitation was in the eye of the beholder. It would thus appear that the editorial packaging of the information, more so than the bare facts

⁴⁵Atlanta Constitution, 7 August 1868.

⁴⁶"Radical Rascality," Atlanta Constitution, 27 August 1868, quoting the Charleston (S.C.) News.

themselves, formed the strongest evidence for the Radical conspiracy theory.

In a similar fashion, the Constitution detailed the particulars of a late night fight in downtown Atlanta. One of the few discernable facts contained in the report was that a "boisterous negro" was arrested for allegedly instigating the lion's share of the disturbance. Interestingly enough though, an incident as seemingly a-political as a street brawl was linked by innuendo to Radical trouble makers; "designing knaves," as it were, bent upon inflaming passions and thus conducting "the vilest political warfare ever waged for power or plunder".⁴⁷

The political violence of 1868, especially the Camilla and Savannah riots, were billed as the peaks of the brewing insurrection crisis. And to a degree the Constitution's concern must have been a genuine reflection of white society. Yet the endless blame heaped upon the Radicals and like vindication of the Conservatives peels away at least some of the veneer of journalistic objectivity.

In the aftermath of the Savannah riot of November 3, 1868, the Constitution published a "startling announcement" that was put forth as proof positive of Radical collusion during the fall rioting in Georgia. The proof was contained in yet another Radical campaign document, this one

⁴⁷"The Way the Fight was Brought About," Atlanta Constitution, 19 August 1868.

supposedly a Union League circular sent from national headquarters in Washington. Fortunately for the Democrats, and for the Constitution's readers, the circular had been intercepted. This alleged circular cynically outlined the finer points of inciting negro riots for the local Union League Leadership, and conveniently explained how to manipulate the incidents for national press afterwards. Surely the Democratic press feared the political reprisals of the brutal Camilla riot to September 19th, and now the Election Day riot in Savannah. The former had received much national attention, and was already cited as evidence that Georgia was not fully reconstructed. In an attempt to turn the tables on such partisan critics, the editor gave the circular a brief preface incorporating one of the more inflammatory portions of the pamphlet:

Let the reader turn to this secret circular and look at the cool, calculating infamy of the suggestion that these tools of the League should provoke a riot, "such as was inaugurated in New Orleans and Memphis," because such an event could be used to the advantage of the party in the North. A more infamous suggestion never emanated from the brain of devils.⁴⁸

Of course the Loyal Leagues presented a natural target for conspiratorial rhetoric, yet even by 1869 or 1870, after the influence of the League had dwindled, the same conspiratorial models remained. In fact, accusations of Radical conspiracies seemed even more prevalent. No Radical

⁴⁸Atlanta Constitution, 10 November 1868.

official, least of all Governor Bullock, could escape press accusations of inciting "gullible negroes" to riot and mayhem.⁴⁹ Along this same vein, a brief but provocative Constitutional editorial in 1870 warned against any "factious conspirators" who worked towards the prevention of a fall election by "provoking the people to madness" and encouraging them to "get up a few outrages" in order to justify military rule. This dual barb was launched at the "prolongationists," who wished to suspend state elections until the Georgia Congressional delegation was seated; as well as the Congressional Radicals behind the Ku-Klux Klan investigations. Political journalism of this sort tried to explain away racially motivated violence as an elaborate Radical hoax in order to justify continued military occupation, and prolong Radical "tyranny".⁵⁰ According to this manner of thinking, Radicals were supposed to have encouraged blacks to get up a few phoney Ku-Klux outrages in order to embarrass the Democrats. This particular school of conspiratorial thought presents a case study of sorts in the application of insurrection imagery to Democratic rhetoric which will be explored more fully in Part III of this study.

⁴⁹Atlanta Constitution, 27 August 1869; 15 December 1870.

⁵⁰"A Warning," Atlanta Constitution, 22 July 1870.

Summary

Even after emancipation, the insurrection myth offered white Southerners a simplified view of the social turmoil of Reconstruction. Democratic organs like the Constitution conveniently divided their word between us and them, good and evil, Radical and Democrat. There was never any room for doubt when identifying Constitution's political villains. Typical page one summaries of "Ku-Klux outrages" blamed Radical rule for the acts of "lawless Radical negroes who burn and ravage every night". Editorial remarks like these physically placed Radicals and negroes on the side of lawlessness and social upheaval within the dichotomous structure of the insurrection myth.

PART III

THE ATLANTA CONSTITUTION AND THE KU KLUX KLAN

Isaac W. Avery, editor of the Atlanta Constitution from 1869-1874 freely acknowledged his participation in the Klan's "legitimate work". In 1881 he recalled that the Klan was a "veritable body, founded in holy object and often prostituted to violence under great provocation". The Klan, he continued,

combined the best men of the state, old virtuous, settled, cautious citizens. Its object was the preservation of order and the protection of society. It used mystery as a weapon. It was intended to aid law and prevent crime. In the license of the era it was a matter of self defense against plunder, assassination, and rape.⁵¹

Yet this highly romantic rationalization of the Klan never was presented to Constitution's readers, either before or during Avery's tenure as managing editor. In 1868 and 1869, during the peak of Ku-klux activity in Georgia, the Constitution gave relatively scarce coverage of the Klan. Yet by 1870, as the political ramifications of the Klan's guerrilla activities became clear--the state remanded to second military reconstruction, martial law, Congressional

⁵¹Isaac W. Avery, The History of the State at Georgia from 1850-1881. 1881.

investigations, the backlash of the national press--the Constitution actively strove to reverse the public perception of the Klan. This refurbished image of the Klan was presented as part and parcel of a larger conspiracy to embarrass the Democratic party by instigating racial unrest. With the Southern Democracy so weakened Radical political ascendancy would be assured by default, complete with the perceived threat of remaking the South in the image of Thaddeus Stevens.

As a general rule, Democratic rhetoric found in the Constitution simplified the social and political intricacies of the "negro question" by suggesting that whomever was not fighting on the side of decent society must be fighting on the side of negro-carpetbagger tyranny. If one were to use the pages of the Constitution to identify the mythical components of Southern society and place each of them facing its polar opposite (us against them, good against evil, Democrat against Republican), one would find that "decent society" was pitted against something called a "Radical Ku-klux".

In short, the conservative Southern Press attempted to turn the Ku Klux Klan issue on its head. On the surface, the claim that the Klan was part of a Radical conspiracy seems a preposterous insult to the reading public. Yet these counter-accusations put forth by the Democratic press took place within a historical, and most importantly a

rhetorical context. Upon closer examination of the Constitution's coverage of the Klan, it is clear that its response to Republican criticisms of Klan intimidation were closely, and at times quite logically, patterned after ante-bellum thought. The remainder of this Part III devote itself to placing the Constitution's coverage of the Ku Klux Klan within the rhetorical context of the insurrection myth. First, however, a brief summary of the Klan's role in Georgia Reconstruction may prove useful.

The Historical Context

The Klan was innocently founded in 1866 as a "hilarious social club" by six Tennessee Confederate army veterans. As the Klan spread to new "Dens," however, its new members began to adopt a more serious purpose. Almost before its organizers realized what was happening the, Klan developed into an undisciplined force of vigilante regulators. With no standardized rules or regulations individual Dens were free to commit excesses without fear of rebuke from the original "parent Den". With the help of abundant newspaper publicity the amorphous Ku Klux Klan soon spread to nearly every southern state, becoming a de facto military arm of the Democratic party in the South.⁵² The Atlanta

⁵²Horn, 9-21.

Constitution itself, however, did not generate much favorable publicity for the Klan.

Klan violence in Georgia began in earnest during the summer of 1868, in the aftermath of the April elections which swept the Georgia Radicals into power.⁵³ That summer the Klan went to work. Although the death toll was lower than in some Southern states, the incidents of threats and beatings were higher. The efficiency of the Klan's reign of terror and intimidation was so complete that a Republican majority of 7000 in the April state election became a Democratic majority of 45,000 in the November presidential election. In twenty-two Georgia black belt counties with a black registration totaling some 9,300 voters, only 87 votes were cast for Grant.⁵⁴ Such a thoroughly dismal Republican turn-out could hardly have been blamed on bad weather. Indeed, Klan subversion of the Georgia political process attained a sophistication that other Southern states strove to emulate.

By 1869 the political sabotage was so complete that Governor Bullock begged Washington for a presidential order restoring military supremacy until Congress could take further action. Local authorities, Bullock maintained, were

⁵³Thompson, 377.

⁵⁴James M. McPherson, Ordeal By Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction, (New York: Alfred Knoph, 1982), 543-544; Congressional Ku-Klux Klan Report, VI: 456-459, cited by Conway, 176.

powerless, and he himself lacked the authority to replace incompetent officials, organize a militia, or declare martial law. Compounding Bullock's helplessness, the state legislature was neither willing nor able to appeal to Washington for more federal muscle. The state assembly, having expelled its negro members in 1868, was no longer recognized by Congress, and was consequently powerless to petition the President to exercise his military authority. To complete the Governor's sense of helplessness, the absence of the negro legislators left the Georgia state assembly in the hands of a conservative coalition. Desperate, Bullock even offered reward money for the apprehension of klansmen, but this too proved unsuccessful. Understanding the lack of local support for any kind of action against the Klan, the army attempted to quell Klan activity by moving troops to key areas, but to no avail. Eventually Congress sympathized with Bullock's pleas, and by the beginning of 1870 Georgia was remanded to military control; the only state to endure two separate military reconstructions.⁵⁵

⁵⁵Allen W. Trelease, White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction, (New York: Harper & Row 1978) pp. 235-236.

The Rhetorical Context

It is my contention that the Constitution's coverage of the Ku Klux Klan can be grouped into three general phases. The first phase, most prevalent during the Constitution's first year of publication, attempted to minimize the significance of the Klan through the use of denial and ridicule. The second phase is more theoretical than tangible, and involves the shifting colloquial use of the word, "ku-klux". It provided the rhetorical mechanism for the third phase, which linked the KKK with Radical conspiracy theories put forth by the Democratic press.⁵⁶

Granted, any attempt at periodization, even categorization, quickly becomes a multilayered intellectual maze. From the start, I should point out that the timing or frequency of particular journalistic styles do not lend themselves to clean periodization. It would be more fitting to suggest, for example, that the category of reports and editorials that simply deny the Klan's existence tend to gravitate towards 1868 or 1869; but never entirely disappear. Instead of neatly moving on to the next phase of some schematic, these relatively simple denials were blended with other rhetorical tactics such as reports of Radical

⁵⁶For example: Trelease, p.318, quotes Abram Colby, a black legislator and victim of frequent Klan attacks, as saying, "They ku-klux my house every time I go home." Thus the term "ku-klux" becomes a verb. More on this point shortly.

mischievous. Clearly though, different styles of Klan reports did exist in the Constitution, and the timing of some of these methods seemed to coincide with Congressional pressure on the Ku Klux Klan during 1870 and 1871.

Minimizing the Significance of the Klan

In the wake of Radical charges of a Ku-Klux conspiracy, the simplest method of defusing the Klan issue involved minimizing stories of Klan violence, perhaps even denying the Klan's existence outright. Indeed, the earliest whispers of the Klan by the Constitution off-handedly dismissed the entire topic as "the Ku-Klux myth".⁵⁷ Such coverage simply attempted to defend the reputation of the Democratic party without launching counter charges of their own against the Radicals.

One rhetorical method of dealing with the issue was to cushion accounts of Klan incidents with thick layers of euphemisms. A highly benevolent portrayal of a lynching gave credit to the Klan for "forever relieving" the town jail of a notorious murderer, as the klansmen present promised "not to molest any other prisoner, or any other civil person".⁵⁸ Another story detailed an obvious Klan

⁵⁷"Emigration Southward," New York Democrat, reprinted in the Atlanta Constitution, 5 January 1869.

⁵⁸"The Ku-Klux---Rescue of Oxford," Hancock (GA) Journal, reprinted in the Atlanta Constitution, 21 October 1869, The accused, James Oxford, allegedly murdered Capt. John Taylor. The account is suspiciously devoid of any references to race

lynching of an Irish-born Alabama teacher from an all black school. Four freedmen were also lynched. The incident was labeled a "riot" by the Constitution and failed to even mention the Klan by name.⁵⁹

Early on the Constitution would often simply challenge the seriousness of the Klan whole issue. This purely defensive technique varied widely in sophistication and wit. An 1868 headline simply inserted a parenthetical question mark after the word "Ku-Klux".⁶⁰ A more literary approach appeared in a letter to the editor, which the Constitution headlined in part, "Federal Soldiers--Don Quixote Imitated". The letter reported that one hundred Federal soldiers seized the courthouse in Rome, Georgia, and camped there overnight on their way to nearby Chattanooga County where they planned "to float the old flag and destroy Ku-Kluxes". The report then compared Federal troops with the absurd image of the Old Knight himself dressed in full battle armor, charging a dilapidated windmill, all the while believing he was doing battle with giants.

That was a brilliant and witty whimsy of Cervantes, wasn't it?...How the old satirist would

or politics.

⁵⁹"Riot at Cross Plains, Alabama," Atlanta Constitution, 15 July 1870. In contrast, other such reports involving negro perpetrators in 1871 would probably have been credited to a "negro Ku-Klux." See also Foner, p. 428, for an account of this incident.

⁶⁰"Ku-Klux (?) Outrages in Warren," Atlanta Constitution, 21 November 1868.

chuckle with glee if he could see those hundred soldiers, who, with firm set faces, are about to re-enact the mock-heroic sallies of the Don of the days of chivalry.⁶¹

In keeping with this mocking style, one finds the ridiculous as well as the literary. In a supposed letter to the Constitution, Farmer Foggy, a semi-literate bumpkin hailing from DeKalb County, related a conversation he had with a Yankee while up north perusing farm implements. As is often the case with points of view that the Constitution wished to lampoon, the text was written in a tortured, phonetic representation of the narrator's dialect. The Yankee asks Foggy:

"You didn't fetch any Ku-Klux up there, did yer?"

"There aint nary such a man in DeKalb," sez I.

"Well, I hearn there wus."

"Yes, I did too. I know all about how that tale started," sez I. "My old nigger Jim started that tale. He cum tarin home wun nigh into a duck fit; sed he'd seed a Ku-Klux, had heerd him holler, had seen his pistol, and his horns, and smelt brimstone. Well, me and my nabor..., and some more men went with Jim, all uv us with guns and sticks; to find and kill the Ku-klux, and what do you reckon it wuz?"

"Do tell me," the feller sed, sorter skeered.

"Why it wuz Mr. Pate's old jackass, who had stuck his head oyer the fence and hollered, as Jim wuz goin by."⁶²

⁶¹"News From Rome. Federal Soldiers---Don Quixote Imitated--The Party that Released Akridge were Alabamians--Judge Kirby---His Conduct Explained.," Atlanta Constitution, 26 January 1870.

⁶²"A Letter from Farmer Foggy--He Treats on Big Plows--Ku-Klux and Other Matters," Atlanta Constitution, 12 November 1869.

Though the styles may differ, each story attempts to leave its readers with the image of a phantom Ku-Klux threat, and toss their Radical foes a few relatively light-hearted insults as well.

However, lingering wartime bitterness compounded with the emotional frenzy which always seemed to accompany the "negro question", could quickly turn political gags into the most mean-spirited of racial slurs. A curt news blurb sarcastically reported that a "terrible Ku-Klux outrage" had "escaped the Radical newspapers". A "colored preacher" from North Carolina was alleged to have received the following note:

Reverend and Dear Sir: You must either quit preaching or quit stealing hogs.⁶³

Yet, vulgar as the treatment could be, the portrayal of a phantom Klan eventually developed some small measure of intellectual sophistication. In the Fall of 1871, during the height of the Congressional investigative activity of the Klan, a small but interesting group of editorial analyses appeared in the Constitution and other Southern Democratic Newspapers. Using cultural stereotypes in lieu

⁶³ Atlanta Constitution, 29 August 1871. The image of the negro thief was pervasive in Southern culture, it was also rampant in pre-revisionist Reconstruction works such as Thompson's. Not surprisingly it was frequently used as a punch line in political lampoons. It is also significant that this "incident" was said to have taken place in North Carolina. The North Carolina Ku-Klux were the target of an aggressive crackdown by that state's Republican Governor, William M. Holden.

of hard demographic evidence, Democratic organs attempted to spring a rhetorical trap that would catch their political foes in the jaws of cold steel logic. After citing the nearly thirty percent increase in Southern cotton production in 1870 compared to an average crop year during the 1850's, the press asked this calculated question:

If the entire white population of these States devoted their whole time...in murdering poor negroes, and carrying out a "new rebellion," and that the few darkies left unmurdered, have spent their whole time in caves, and others in holes in the ground, trying to keep out of the hands of the murderous Ku-Klux, we would like to know where in the--the--Halifax all the is coming from?...

We pause for a reply!⁶⁴

Despite the creative reasoning displayed in these editorial remarks, they offer little more than political damage control. The above quotation suggest the potential damage inherent in charges of a "new rebellion". The Radicals had already used the bloody shirt appeal to great political advantage in 1866. Conservatives needed only to look to the bitter arrival of Congressional Reconstruction and the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment in order to grasp the ramifications of further Radical scrutiny. Therefore, in order to counter the forthcoming political damage of the Congressional Ku Klux Klan Investigation, the Democratic press sought to tarnish the credibility of their

⁶⁴"Answerthis!," Memphis (Tenn.) Ledger, reprinted in the Atlanta Constitution, 2 September 1871; "Ku-Klux--How is It?," Atlanta Constitution, 7 April 1871.

nemeses by challenging both the public perception of the Klan, and the sincerity of Radical efforts to eliminate it.

"Ku-Kluxing" the Klan Issue: The Rhetorical Context of the
"Radical Ku-Klux Conspiracy"

Coupled with the vehement and increasingly sophisticated denials of the existence of an "organized Ku-Klux," the Democratic press made a dramatic effort to redefine the word "ku-klux" by taking advantage of its shifting grammatical usage. It was as if conservative editors realized that they could not make the Klan disappear from the headlines, so liberties were taken with the changing idiomatic uses of the word "ku-klux" in order to mold the Klan into an image that was more to their liking. As the definition of the word "ku-klux" expanded through everyday usage, the Southern Democratic press construed the term "ku-klux outrage" to mean almost any kind of mob violence which took place anywhere in the country. In this manner the verb form of the word "ku-klux" began to work its way into the press accounts of Klan activity. In a more than symbolic way this syntactic function shift enabled the press to find a more favorable definition for the term ku-klux.

The apparent intention was to dilute the concept of a Ku-Klux Klan, and soften the reader to two important arguments. First by showing that there were many species of

"ku-kluckery," it could be argued that blacks and Republicans weren't the only ones being "ku-kluxed". A second aspect of creative ku-klux lexicology, to be discussed in more detail shortly, permitted conservative editors to argue that the KKK was part of a Radical plot to bring violence and social mayhem to the South. In light of these arguments readers must have had great cause to wonder why white conservative Southerners were saddled with the blame for the Ku-Klux problem. The editorial universe created by the Constitution endeavored to convince its readers that power politics, driven by vindictive Radical schemes, provided the only explanation for the apparently disproportionate amount of ku-klux accusations which were heaped upon "decent" Southerners.

Throughout 1870 and 1871 the Constitution took advantage of those newly fashioned idiomatic loopholes and printed numerous accounts of what the press termed "ku-klux violence" throughout the country. Take for example a story of polygamous preacher headlined, "A Minister Ku-Kluxed in Connecticut: A Fanatical Preacher Tarred and Feathered".⁶⁵ It is interesting to note that although this particular headline projects ku-klux-like activities deep into Yankee country, the story has absolutely nothing to do with

⁶⁵Atlanta Constitution, 3 May 1871.

politics or racial violence. Yet, by way of its newly expanded definition which included nearly any form of mob activity, one could say that ku-kluxing had indeed extended throughout the country, not just the South.

As a matter of fact by 1871, the Constitution had published several reports of exotic ku-kluxes, such as this curious reference:

The Northern Ku-Klux.

THE KU-KLUX NOT A POLITICAL ORGANIZATION--ITS MEMBERS
INDEPENDENT IN POLITICS AND FAVOR GREELEY FOR THE
PRESIDENCY.⁶⁶

Apparently the irony, or even the paradox, of an a-political organization whose members favored one of the most controversial political figures of the day escaped Colonel Avery. The oddest members of the Constitution's Ku-Klux collection included a "Pennsylvania Ku-Klux," and a "Western Literary Ku-Klux". It was even reported that Ireland had a Ku-Klux.⁶⁷

⁶⁶Juan Bruno, "Letter to the Editor" of The Kansas Sun, reprinted in the Atlanta Constitution, 12 April 1871. The Constitution would eventually, though reluctantly, support Greeley for the Presidency in 1872 in the interest of Democratic party unity. Until the 1972 campaign Greeley was often the butt of anti-radical jokes in the Democratic press.

⁶⁷1st reference "Pennsylvania Ku-Klux," quoted from the New York Globe by the Atlanta Constitution, 27 May 1871; 2nd reference, "Literary, Musical, Dramatic and Art Jumble," Atlanta Constitution, 13 August 1869; 3rd reference, Atlanta Constitution, 3 March 1871. I won't hazard a guess as to what the latter two references could be alluding. The point is that they release the reader of Ku-Klux imagery that might normally confine itself to the Old Confederacy.

From all this one could easily argue that in the days of the party presses, creativity was not only a journalistic asset, but a necessity. A reader armed with only the barest of knowledge of the Klan would surely be impressed by the cheerful disregard for the facts displayed by these news reports. Yet creativity rarely emerges from an intellectual vacuum. Historian David Bryon Davis has noted comprehensive similarities between the various "paranoid conspiracy" theories that have appeared throughout American history. George C. Rable has indeed suggested the structural similarity between certain aspects of the Southern pro-slavery argument and the Conservative rhetoric during Reconstruction.⁶⁸ The Atlanta Constitution offers many such parallels. Releasing the image of the Klan from geographical constraints is curiously similar to the old ante-bellum pro-slavery argument which pointed to the miserable conditions of workers in the North in an effort to expose the hypocrisy of Northern abolitionists. In ante-bellum days the abolitionist played the role of the outside agitator, filling slaves with dangerous ideas, and poisoning the minds of Northern voters. Just as pro-slavery advocates accused abolitionists of hypocrisy, so it was with the Democratic press and the Radicals. Such was clearly the intent of the Pennsylvania Ku-Klux story which pointed an

⁶⁸Rable, 82-85.

accusing finger at labor violence in the Appalachian coal fields and asks:

If this is not Ku-Klucky, as bad as any we hear of in North Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama or any Southern State, we do not know what is. If news had come to us from the South of the murder of three men, it would not have been modestly printed under the title of the "Coal Troubles".⁶⁹

The Southern Conservative press, including the Constitution, used several other refurbished components of the pro-slavery argument to make their case against the Radicals. Some of the bogeymen even remained the same. Federal crackdowns on Klan violence, for example, were protested not because Southerners condone violence, but because such Federal usurpations of power violated state's rights.⁷⁰ And just as before the war, some Northern Christian denominations were scorned as agitators, subversives, hypocrites and fanatics.⁷¹ So it would seem that conservative editors did not need a master plan to direct the insurrection myth towards a political advantage. Perhaps it was simply a type of rhetorical reflex that made

⁶⁹"Pennsylvania Ku-Klux," quoted from the New York Globe, Atlanta Constitution, 27 May 1871.

⁷⁰"Ku-Kluxism", Atlanta Constitution, 25 October 1871.

⁷¹Merton Coulter, The South During Reconstruction, 1865-1877, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1947) 331-334; Rev. J. H. Knowels, "Letter from Georgia" Atlanta Constitution, 30 July, 1871, reprinted from the Christian Advocate.

one reach for old argument structures even when combating new political foes.

With previous connotative expectations of the term ku-klux so loosened, conservative Southern editors attempted to use Southerner's insurrection fear as a lever to turn the Klan issue on its head. Readers of the Constitution were presented with a kind of paradoxical simplicity. Once de-politicized by the constant assurances that the KKK was not a political organization; and once de-regionalized with headlines of Northern Ku-Kluxes, the newly liberated definition of the Klan suggested a Northern Radical conspiracy was responsible for the reported ku-kluxings. This line of reasoning was part of an overall attempt to question the Radicals sincerity and indict their sense of justice. Just as clear though, is the fact that these inflammatory headlines were intended to suggest that Radicals were responsible for any racial unrest.

Aggressively Linking the Klan to the "Radical Conspiracy"

Previously discussed rhetorical tactics of dealing with the Klan issue--clever rebuttals, vulgar political jokes, and semantic shell games--simply could not make the Ku-Klux stories disappear from the political forum. Accusations were too loud, too numerous, and too influential. As one of Avery's editorials put it:

The positive falsehood of one scrap to a Ku-Klux outrage carries the weight of a thousand influential and valuable denials.⁷²

As the 1872 national election loomed closer, lessons of previous defeats were studied anew on the editorial pages. Readers were reminded that Northern accusations of Southern disloyalty and "the persecution of loyalists, black and white," led to Radical victory in the 1868 presidential election. Likewise, the Ku-Klux Klan would be "the hobby on which the Radicals [hoped] to ride into office in 1872".⁷³ Indeed, the Constitution observed, the Radicals were simply "living on the [Ku-Klux] question," and would "play the card" for just as long as they could.⁷⁴

Not able to beat the Klan issue, conservative editors saw fit to join in the finger pointing. Avery and his editorial colleagues claimed to provide their readership with "convincing proof that there never was any Ku-Klux, except in the interest of Radicalism".⁷⁵ As long as the Klan issue stayed vital, Democratic newspaper editors strove to incorporate the Klan into their party's own political

⁷²I.W. Avery, "Editorial Correspondence," Atlanta Constitution 2 August 1871.

⁷³²¹ "The Enemy's Plan of Campaign," Atlanta Constitution, 20 August 1871.

⁷⁴²² "The New Departure," Atlanta Constitution, 6 August 1871.

⁷⁵²³ The Huntington (Tenn.) Courier, quoted in "those Ku-Klux," Atlanta Constitution, 1 February 1871.

rhetoric. The products of their news writing and editorial skills argued in no uncertain terms that the Radicals were responsible for Southern racial and political strife.

At the very least Southern editors must have expected to confuse the issue so greatly that it would never be clear just who was responsible for the Klan violence. In this swirling cloud of charges and counter-charges, accusations of a "Radical Ku-Klux" flashed through the headlines of the Democratic organs. These ironic portrayals of the Klan revelled in vivid conspiratorial imagery which pervades the Insurrection Myth. News reports of those convicted of Klan related activities would predictably conclude that the guilty had Radical ties, or were perhaps "Radical thieves;" thus "confirming" that the "Ku-Klux" was after all a "Radical organization".⁷⁶

As was previously mentioned, editors used semantic tricks to expand the geographical relevance of the Klan. This same model was applied to expand its political definition as well. In march 1870, for example, the Constitution flashed this headline in the center of page one:

Radical Ku-Klux. The Bullockites in Forsyth County Practice Ku-Kluxism and Try to Take Prisoner from Jail--Foiled by Sheriff

⁷⁶"Those Ku-Klux," Atlanta Constitution, 16 March 1871.

⁷⁷Atlanta Constitution, 24 March 1870.

Accounts of prisoners being forcibly freed from jail by armed mobs, either for the dispensation of vigilante justice or to or secure the release of a comrade, were not unusual. The political spin on this particular account must, however, raise eyebrows and render at least parts of the account suspect. This alleged incident was sparked when a Radical violated the revenue laws by running a distillery. Jealous of this man's industry and business acumen (Radicals you will recall are notoriously lazy) his fellow Radicals (who else?) had him arrested. Apparently impatient with the working of the judicial process, a dozen men (According to the Constitution report, "all Radicals, Bullock supporters; not one Democrat or rebel had anything to do with it!") forcibly attempted to take the prisoner from the sheriff's custody for the administration of some unspecified mode of extra-legal punishment.⁷⁸

Besides the attempts to broaden the geographical and political scope of the Klan, Southern editors presented a third and potentially more frightening bogeyman to its readers--that of a "Negro Ku-Klux", as expressed in this startling headline:

**NEGRO KU-KLUX. THEY MAKE MIDNIGHT RAIDS AND WHIP
AN OLD NEGRO FOR VOTING THE DEMOCRATIC TICKET.**⁷⁹

⁷⁸Ibid, emphasis added.

⁷⁹Goldsboro (N.C.) Messenger, 14 March 1871, quoted in the Atlanta Constitution, 24 March 1871.

Whether this represents a thin attempt to explain away Klan night-riding, or an editorially doctored, but essentially true report is not clear. What is important, however, is the image created by juxtaposing "negro" with "ku-klux". If swallowed whole by the readers, it could not have helped but stir the imaginations of a society with a historical dread of black uprisings.

Explicit references to "Negro Ku-Kluxes" appeared occasionally throughout 1871. A news flash from Arkansas stated that the

Negroes of Chicot County [were] in open rebellion against Radical State authorities, driving⁸⁰ [them] out in the most approved Ku-Klux fashion.

A "Georgia News Item" note from November of 1871 mentioned without fanfare that the "Negro Ku-Klux" was on the rampage again" near Savannah, as if a negro Ku-Klux was nothing unusual.⁸¹

Implicit references of a "Negro Ku-Klux usually encouraged by their Radical, Carpetbagger, or Scalawag mentors were much more common. A February 1871 report claimed to reveal the "true mechanism, origin and operations" of the mysterious Klan organization; by showing that the North Carolina Ku-Klux was composed of "Radicals

⁸⁰"Negro Ku-Klux," Atlanta Constitution, 5 May 1871, quoted from the Nashville Union and American. Note here a typical portrayal, that the Radicals are both the rood cause and the instigators of the civil unrest.

⁸¹Atlanta Constitution, 2 November 1871, emphasis added.

and Loyal Leaguers," a Republican organization whose rank and file southern membership consisted almost entirely of freedmen.⁸² Displayed under the headline "Ku-Klux," a report from the Charleston (S.C.) Courier informed the Constitution's readers that "deeds of rowdyism, thieving and persecution [were] carried on by Negroes".⁸³ There was even printed testimony of

colored people banding together, wearing disguises, calling themselves Ku-Klux--members of the Union League as they [were] later proved to be--[who were] jailed for whipping persons of their own race.⁸⁴

If readers were to believe the reports of Radical shenanigans printed in the Constitution, they would have no choice to conclude that a "dark"⁸⁵ conspiracy was afoot to manufacture "material for the continued suppression of the Southern people on the grounds of the southern rebellious spirit and that the Ku-Klux had been secretly worked by the Radicals to make the facts for the case"⁸⁶

⁸²"The Ku-Klux," Atlanta Constitution, 1 February 1871.

⁸³Atlanta Constitution, 10 August 1871.

⁸⁴"North Carolina Ku-Klux," Atlanta Constitution, 28 March 1871.

⁸⁵ Such degrading "off-color" puns were frequently used by the Democratic press to accentuate a political point. For example, one could easily see the possibilities for derogatory wordplay when former Georgia governor Joseph E "Brown" joined the Republican party.

⁸⁶"The Ku-Klux," Atlanta Constitution, 1 February 1871.

According to the Constitution the very highest levels of national government were involved in the gathering of these alleged bogus facts. Typically witnesses who appeared before the Congressional KKK Investigative Committee with personal stories of Ku-Klux outrages were reputed to be of questionable character and motive. Newspaper accounts of their testimony concluded that one could quite literally trade an "eloquent bruise" for high political office. According to one story, President Grant appointed a Klan witness as Minister to Peru shortly after he delivered his testimony. Another story which also accused a Radical witness of trading his testimony for a diplomatic appointment, purportedly involved an important figure in Gov. Holden's hated crackdown of the North Carolina Ku-Klux. According to the report, the fore mentioned Radical thug arrested "three respectable citizens (as opposed to klansmen) without warrant or any "evidence whatever". The story further alleged that the future Grant appointee tortured and hung the three men by the neck until they confessed and "implicated others in the same crime".⁸⁷ Thus, careful editorial engineering portrayed the Congressional investigation of the Klan as a typical vehicle

⁸⁷ "How a Texas Radical got Office from Grant," Atlanta Constitution, 5 October 1871, based on a story from the Baltimore Gazette; "The Ku-Klux Witnesses; How Grant is Rewarding Them," Louisville Ledger Dispatch, quoted by the Atlanta Constitution, 24 March 1871.

of Grant Administration corruption and sleazy Radical patronage, and an integral part of the Radical plan to dominate the South.

Bizarre and downright paranoid accusations of Radical conspiracies radiating from the highest levels of Georgia state government were found as well. In June of 1871 the Constitution quoted the Richmond Enquirer which accused Bullock of abusing his pardoning power by releasing dangerous felons from the state prisons for the purpose of "raising his own private Ku-Klux". Such a organization, the report warned, would provide "an indispensable supply of outrages," and justified "the suspicion that Radicalism [sought] to manufacture the lawlessness which it [charged] upon Southern communities". The report concluded with the supposition that the aforementioned outrages would provide Congress the opportunity to stretch its authority

to the most questionable limits, and confer upon irresponsible agents powers liable to most dangerous abuse, on the grounds that state authorities are powerless or unwilling to protect its citizens.⁸⁸

The Democratic press' frequently accused the Radicals of using the "ku-klux dodge" as an excuse to loose partisan thugs upon Southern whites. When the politically besieged Governor Bullock lobbied his powerful friends in Washington for permission him to raise a state militia to help revive

⁸⁸Richmond Enquirer, quoted in "Georgia as a Ku-Klux Factory," Atlanta Constitution, 15 July 1871.

his wilting Radical regime, the Constitution let its readers know in no uncertain terms how it could be misused against Georgian citizens:

Such a militia force may be used in several ways [by the Radical faction] . . . , first, if it is determined (desirous) by the present [Georgia State] Assembly to usurp power by resolving to prolong their term of service, a militia force of mean whites and corrupted negroes may be used to intimidate the people from holding an election; second, if they consent to an election, as the constitution plainly requires, the force may be used to deter peaceful citizens from going to the polls; to manipulate the colored voters, and compel them to support the governors's faction; third, such a force, billeted upon a community, may be so manipulated as to provoke resistance and bloodshed, thus affording the⁸⁹ opportunity to cry Kuk-Lux! Rebellion! etc . . .

Indeed, from approximately mid-1869 through 1871, images of "mean whites" provoking "negroes into resistance and bloodshed" had become regular fare for the Constitution's readers. It was simply standard practice to blame such "outrages" on the "Radical" or "Negro Ku-Kluxes".

Among the most absurd of this species of political tabloid journalism involved a satirical piece from the summer of 1869. In this report the Constitution proudly confided intelligence to its readers which insinuated that the Grand Army of the Republic was the "genuine veritable Ku-Klux".⁹⁰ Satirical though as this particular insinuation

⁸⁹"The Militia," Atlanta Constitution, 2 July 1870, emphasis added.

⁹⁰"The Ku-Klux Discovered," Atlanta Constitution, 12 August 1869.

may have been, when juxtaposed with the above reference to a corrupt Georgia Militia, and the many articles which claimed that the "true" Ku-Kluxes were composed of Radicals and Carpetbaggers; the message contained within such satire turns deadly serious.

Over and over the Ku-Klux Klan issue was aggressively manipulated from a Democratic embarrassment to images of a vindictive Radical conspiracy that would assure Republican party ascendancy, justify continued military occupation, and endanger the well being of white Southerners. The following editorial excerpt speaking of "Ku-Klux outrages" allegedly "committed by negroes," offers a strong summation of the manner in which the public image of the Klan was carefully shaped by conservative editors, then fitted neatly into standard Democratic propaganda:

The truth is the Negroes can be made to do anything and say anything by the miserable carpetbaggers and scalawags who control them, and all these tales are got up for Northern consumption and give the Administration at Washington and excuse to declare martial law throughout the South, and thereby keep us under Military control of the party in power, and also fan the hate of the Norther people against us.⁹¹

Finally, the following correspondence from a Sparta native details the personal costs of submitting to a society turned up-side down by alleged Radical instigators and their Negro minions:

⁹¹"Ku-Klux Once More," Atlanta Constitution, 27 October 1871.

The negroes in this section, especially in upon my place, are so demoralized they will not work. I do not expect to save one-half of my cotton, and may have to get that which I do save burned. The negroes here say that the Yankees and home Radicals tell them to organize, kill and burn to suppress supposed Ku-Klux... Nearly all the negroes on my place are opposed to this deviltry, because they have ⁹²nothing, and of their guilt I have some evidence.

Summary

Taken individually, many of the rhetorical techniques discussed here are logically inconsistent, both internally and when examined along side other techniques. Some reports called the Klan a myth, the product of imaginative Radical editors. Others denied only that a "regular organization of Ku-Klan existed". (Would this mean that an irregular Ku-Klux did exist?)⁹³ Some reports deny the political nature of the Klan, while in the same breath charging that the Klan was the product of Radical conspiracy. Other editorials and reports clearly acknowledge that a Ku-Klux problem existed, but that it was the product of a Radical Republican conspiracy to remake Southern society from the ground up; duping freed slaves to vote against their masters, and encouraging them to carry on ku-kluxings. Finally, there were a few rare editorial comments such as "a Ku-Klux bud yields radical fruit," which seemed to call upon its readers

⁹²"Negro Demoralization in Middle Georgia," Atlanta Constitution, 4 August 1870, emphasis added.

⁹³"North Carolina Ku-Klux," Atlanta Constitution, 29 March 1871.

to stop the Klan violence.⁹⁴ Such inconsistency may in part be due to the scissors and paste format of the Constitution. Besides work of their own correspondents, the Constitution picked up stories from the Associated Press as well as from papers throughout the country. Such a plethora of different organs would span the full width of the Democratic spectrum, from the New Departure to the fire-eaters. Under such circumstances perfect stylistic consistency may not have been possible.

Taken as a whole, however, one discovers a mind numbing logic. If could accept that there was no organized Democratic Ku-Klux, then one had to wonder who was behind all of those Ku-Kluxings. The Constitution would have had its readers believe that the Radicals, those notorious agitators and trouble makers, were at the bottom of it all. Of course, headline stories of lawless bands of freed slaves instructed by their Radical mentors to "kill and burn" would surely anchor such a circular, perhaps even paranoid, line of reasoning.

Thus the various categories of klan stories--the denials, the conspiratorial imagery, the political-racial bogeymen--logically meshed together and created a propaganda vehicle that exonerated the Democrats and indicted the Radicals. Yet the Constitution was no means a Klan organ.

⁹⁴"Something to be Remembered," Atlanta Constution, 5 Ocotober 1871.

Avery neither glorified nor defended the Klan in the way that film maker D. W. Griffith would in his 1915 epic The Birth of a Nation. The Constitution and other Democratic papers from which it quoted merely attempted to reverse the politically embarrassing image of the Klan presented by the Republican "slander mills". Ironically the Democratic press even presented Klan reports as evidence of the growing Radical conspiracy. Surely the Insurrection Myth fueled the great propaganda machine which attempted to reverse the direction of the Ku-Klux issue, and whose ultimate purpose was to divide the Southern electorate along racial lines.

PART IV
TEST CASES

As we have seen, the Atlanta Constitution used the insurrection myth as a way of defining the social and political dislocation of Reconstruction. Racial violence was depicted as symptom of a supposed Radical conspiracy. Republican ascendancy was seen as a "Radical revolution." The insurrection myth, and the many fear appeals which it inspired, was incorporated into Democratic party rhetoric in hopes of attracting white voters. And like any social myth, it enabled Southern whites to rationalize their political and social circumstance in the purest terms of good verses evil. Outsiders, such as Radicals, carpetbaggers, or scalawags who questioned any previous assumptions upon which the master-slave relationship was based were quickly branded as diabolical revolutionaries. Any adjustments of previous political norms were seen as a threat to decent society.

Surely though, the insurrection myth would have quickly lost its ability to explain the era's social and political dislocation had there been no real life lessons to apply. The exploding racial tensions of Reconstruction must have seemed the very incarnation of the dreaded specter of a

negro revolt. Oftentimes, however, this heartfelt fear was steered towards Democratic political gain, as the socially dichotomous structure of the insurrection myth was easily transferable to the political rhetoric of a two-party political system.

The next portion of this study will explore four major outbreaks of Reconstruction racial violence in Georgia; the Election Day riot in Savannah, 3 November 1868, the Ogeechee disturbances of January 1869, the Macon riot of 2 October 1872, and finally the Camilla massacre of 19 September 1868. Elements of the insurrection myth were woven into Constitution accounts of all of these events. One finds urgent descriptions of the dangers which mobs of rampaging blacks posed to defenseless whites, along with a tendency to link such descriptions with conspiracies instigated by Radical incendiaries. The discussions of these events will first examine the facts of these incidents in an effort to judge the extent to which they reconcile with the Constitution's accounts. From there the discussions will assess the degree to which each of these incidents were molded into so much party rhetoric through the use of insurrection imagery.

Savannah, November 3, 1868

In Savannah tension between the two races had been present throughout Reconstruction. With blacks comprising

nearly half of Savannah's 28,000 residents, the Republican party and the Union Leagues were quite active. Friction between blacks and Savannah city authorities was especially common during the early days of Reconstruction, owing to the fact that municipal government remained under Democratic control. Election Day 1868, the first time that blacks were allowed to cast their ballots for an American President, marked a high point for that city's racial tension.⁹⁵

On the morning of the election black voters had been forming a line outside the courthouse since 4:30. As was often the case during Reconstruction, black voters descended upon the polling places in large numbers in hopes of preempting any attempts to intimidate them from voting. Doubtless though, many whites found this practice unnerving. When the polls opened voters found only three ballot boxes to service the entire city of Savannah. Paths to the three ballot boxes were roped off in such a way as to corral voters into time consuming, bottle-necked, single file lines. The voting proceeded very slowly. Eight of the nine election officials present were Democrats, who meticulously challenged the voting qualifications of each and every black voter in hopes that those blacks toward the rear of the line would grow discouraged and go home.⁹⁶ At the very least the

⁹⁵Hennessey, 130-132.

⁹⁶Hennessey, 132; Conway, 175.

proceedings would have slowed to such an extent that the polls would close before all the blacks had a chance to vote. Colonel S. W. Stone of the Freedman's Bureau would later testify that the positioning of the ballots were a contributing factor to the riot.⁹⁷

The clash occurred at about 8:15 AM when white employees of the Central Railroad arrived at the polls and tried to force their way to the front of the line with the help of Savannah police. Someone, it was not clear who, fired a gun. Both sides returned fire. The duration of the riot was brief, but at such close range the gunfire proved deadly. Two blacks were killed, another lay mortally wounded. At least seventeen other blacks suffered gunshot wounds. Four white policeman lay wounded, two of them fatally. One other white man was also hurt in the shooting.⁹⁸

During the melee the blacks fled to a nearby church. James M. Simms, one of the blacks expelled from the legislature, testified that he urged the blacks to leave the polls after the shootings.⁹⁹ Those in the church agreed.

⁹⁷Congress, House, Misc. Doc. no. 52, 40th Cong., 3rd sess., 55; quoted in Conway, 176.

⁹⁸Savannah Republican, 4 November 1868, reprinted in the Atlanta Constitution, 7 November 1868; Perdue, 17; Conway, 175-176; Hennessey, 132-133.

⁹⁹Congress, House, Misc. Doc. no. 52, 40th Cong., 3rd sess., 7-8; quoted in Conway, 175.

Unwilling to risk further bloodshed, and well aware of the growing crowd of armed whites gathering at the courthouse, the remainder of the black voters decided to return to their homes without voting. Needless to say the Democrats handily carried Savannah on that election day.¹⁰⁰

The Democratic press wasted no time in tainting the facts in order to push their version of the story. Even though witnesses stated that the ballot boxes were too few and poorly positioned, the Savannah Republican made a special point to suggest that "every arrangement was made to afford sufficient facilities to enable every legal voter in the city to exercise the elective franchise". Newspaper reports blamed the inaccessibility of the ballot boxes on the "negro mobs" who were said to be blocking the polls.¹⁰¹

Obviously tensions were high on both sides. Amidst the spirited jostling, heated shouting, impassioned arguing, and the apparent abundance of firearms; one hardly needs a complicated conspiracy theory to explain why the shooting started. Yet even though the facts of the incident seemed fairly straight forward, newspaper accounts embellished the incident with components of the insurrection myth. Once the conservative press had ostensibly established that the "mob" blocking the polls was responsible for the riot, as opposed

¹⁰⁰Hennessey, 135.

¹⁰¹Savannah Republican, 4 November 1868, reprinted in the Atlanta Constitution, 7 November 1868, emphasis added.

to the poorly planned and ill-advised harassment of the negro voters, it was little trouble to heap even more blame on the blacks who were present. True to form, the published report claimed that:

City authorities [had] incontrovertible evidence in their possession to show that there was a preconceived plan on the part of the negroes and their leaders to take possession of the polls in the city and prevent every white from voting.¹⁰²

This tragic riot was thus depicted as the natural, perhaps inevitable, outcome of a supposed "plan". But of course, the negroes were never completely to blame. Although not as blatant as some, the story makes its obligatory inference to outside agitation by appearing to distinguish between the "leaders" of the negroes and the negroes themselves.

Perhaps because of the brevity of the riot, or perhaps because of the large number of official witnesses the tone of the reports concerning the riot itself seem rather measured. When compared to other incidents or rumors of parties of armed blacks, the Savannah pieces show remarkable restraint. Perhaps since many of the details of the incident were so well documented there was comparatively little room for hysterical rumors.

Even though the details of the riot itself were undisputed, there was plenty of room for wild speculation as to the events outside the court house on that day. The most

¹⁰²ibid, emphasis added.

alarming rumors were no doubt based upon reports of a brief skirmish which took place in the Ogeechee precinct between a party of whites and a group of blacks supposedly led by A. A. Bradley. One white man was killed in this incident. Almost as if following a script, the initial news reports featured not only rumors of a larger conspiracy afoot, but also rumors that blacks were taking up arms and preparing to storm the city. On the day after the riot the Savannah Republican frantically reported that

negroes along the Ogeechee river were arming and gathering in large numbers with the desire of entering the city under the leadership of A. A. Bradley.¹⁰³

When Bradley, a black state representative from Savannah, heard that he had been implicated in the riot, he left town until the excitement died down. By the time the police arrived at his home to arrest him, Bradley had already crossed the state line into North Carolina.¹⁰⁴ Despite the screaming headlines that warned of negroes gathering force along the Ogeechee and Louisville Roads outside the city and that parties of armed whites were patrolling the city in preparation to resist them, the excitement quickly quieted down.

¹⁰³Atlanta Constitution, 5 November 1868; Savannah Republican, 4 November 1868, reprinted by the Constitution, 8 November 1868.

¹⁰⁴Hennessey, 34.

Although historians who have studied the riot have not been able to agree as to the extent of Bradley's involvement, clearly any links to a larger conspiracy evaporates under critical scrutiny.¹⁰⁵ Perhaps the fact that racial tensions had been present in Savannah for some time before the riot, made the subsequent allegations of Radical conspiracies a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Whites expected trouble with the city's negroes. Republican organizations were up to that point rather active in Savannah. Surely it would have been most surprising had the Democratic press not drawn a connection between the two.

Ogeechee, January 1869

The "Ogeechee Insurrection," as the papers called it, might not meet with everyone's criteria of a major race riot. No one was reported to have been killed during this rash of lawlessness. Consequently, the incident receives relatively little attention in treatments of Reconstruction racial violence.¹⁰⁶ However, the incident is included here because the Constitution gave the story as much or more coverage than the three major Reconstruction riots in Georgia; Savannah, Macon, and Camilla. Judging from the nature and extent of the Constitution's coverage, the

¹⁰⁵Robert E. Perdue, The Negro in Savannah 1865-1900, (New York: Exposition Press, 1973), 17-18; Hennessey, 134.

¹⁰⁶Thompson, 383; Perdue, 18; Hennessey, 134.

Ogeechee episode embodied many key elements of white Southerner's insurrection fear.

In late December, 1868, and in the early part of January, 1869, armed bands of blacks plundered and looted rice plantations in the swamps along the Ogeechee river, seizing loads of rice just ready for market. Details of the incident are sketchy, and doubtless newspaper accounts exaggerated the actual danger to whites living in the area. The fear itself, however, was quite real, as this "reign of terror" lasted for several days. A posse of citizens was organized to aid the local sheriff in quelling the disturbance, but order was not restored until General Sibley sent a detachment of federal troops. Soldiers arrested fourteen of the insurgents and turned them over to the civil authorities.¹⁰⁷

The group's "leaders," however, were said to have escaped. Savannah officials later attributed the entire incident to a Plot devised by Bradley, Simms, and other prominent black Georgia political figures.¹⁰⁸ Once again, in the face of conspiratorial rumors, no evidence was found linking this riot to the Loyal Leagues, Bradley, Simms or any other "Radical incendiaries".

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸Thompson, 383.

As one might guess the story drew sensational headlines. By providing its readers images of armed gangs of blacks plundering and pillaging isolated rural plantations, the Constitution evoked images of every white Southerner's worst nightmare. Consequently news reports seemed to follow the typical pattern of insurrection paranoia. Unsubstantiated, wild, and often inconsistent reports were printed, then quietly retracted. And of course, rumors and innuendos linked the violence to carefully calculated Radical agitation.

Ogeechee stayed in the headlines for most of January. The first few reports depicted a city under siege. The New Year's Day headline warned that negroes were "armed and prepared to resist authorities," and that all roads into Savannah were "picketed by negroes".¹⁰⁹ In another report "large bodies of negroes" were said to be "driving whites out of their homes and plundering everything valuable".¹¹⁰

The first and most frantic reports from Savannah confused rumor and fact. The January 3rd update reprinted from the Savannah Republican assured readers that the majority of sensational stories circulated thus far were "entirely destitute of any foundation of truth whatever," The update continued by retracting a reported incident where

¹⁰⁹Atlanta Constitution, 1 January 1869.

¹¹⁰Atlanta Constitution, 3 January 1869; 5 January 1869.

a band of negroes supposedly burned a local residence to the ground. But then further down the column the reader learns that:

All the facts which have come to our knowledge go to prove that the negroes are using every means in their power to concentrate a strong force in the vicinity for the purpose of resisting laws and enabling themselves to live by plundering the plantations of those who are endeavoring to live by honest labor.¹¹¹

After reading this report, is one to be reassured or alarmed?

By the second week of the crisis the urgency seemed to have died down somewhat. Perhaps though in the relative calm, the editor of the Savannah Republican had time to reflect upon the origin of the disturbance, and its significance. Without providing the reader with the slightest bit of evidence with which to buttress its sweeping accusations, the Republican charged that the insurrection was "gotten up" by the political followers of Bullock for the purposes of "remanding the state to military and negro government".¹¹² As conspiracy theories tend to abhor spontaneous or random violence, the Republican suggested that the negroes and their "black and white

¹¹¹Savannah Republican, 3 January 1869, reprinted in the Atlanta Constitution, 5 January 1869.

¹¹²Savannah Republican, 6 January 1869, reprinted by the Atlanta Constitution, 8 January 1869; see also Thompson, 354.

Radical leaders had in fact been in active training for a year or two past".¹¹³

The patterns of the insurrection myth are quite strong in the newspaper coverage of the Ogeechee episode. Although specific details of the "insurgents" provided by the accounts scarcely suggest more than a prolonged and spirited looting spree, the event was variously called a "rebellion," or an "insurrection". Such nomenclature lends an organized military air to the affair. When Federal troops had at last restored order, the Constitution reassuringly declared that all was "quiet at the front".¹¹⁴

The insurrection myth gave a political charge to the Ogeechee press accounts. Besides the depiction of the episode as a sustained, organized, para-military effort, there were the usual complaints of outside agitation as well. Finally, the terrifying suggestion that the Governor somehow condoned or encouraged a black insurrection was certainly an attempt to racially polarize Georgia party politics.

The Macon Riot, October 2, 1872

The Macon riot occurred on the day of the Georgia state elections, and uncannily paralleled the Savannah riot in

¹¹³ Ibid. This was probably a reference to reports of negro militias drilling around Savannah in August of 1868.

¹¹⁴ 17 January 1869.

almost every way. Both frays began as angry black and white voters jostled in line while waiting to vote. And after both riots were over, blacks in both cities went home without voting; thus assuring overwhelming Democratic victories.

The lay-out of the Macon polling place resembled Savannah as well. On that day one single location was to serve a city of 11,000 people, thereby assuring tense bottlenecks if voters didn't proceed through the line quickly. It was not as if the city fathers were not forewarned of the potential for confrontation. Scuffles had broken out at the polls in the 1868 and 1870 elections. Sensing the tension, the city swore in extra policemen for the occasion.¹¹⁵

In typical fashion, black voters arrived at the polls early and in impressive numbers.¹¹⁶ They had already been in line for forty-five minutes when the polls opened at 7:00 AM. Arriving not long after the black voters, however, was a crowd of whites escorted by the newly expanded Macon police department. Both sides were determined to vote first, and predictably a rather lively shoving match ensued. After an hour hostilities had escalated to the point where mere jostling could no longer fulfill the crowd's passions.

¹¹⁵Hennessey, 182.

¹¹⁶Hennessey, 183.

First one brick flew, the several, shortly followed by a pistol shot. Gunfire was returned by both sides. The entire skirmish lasted but three minutes. In the brief flurry, however, one white man and four black men were killed. Several on both sides received gunshot and brickbat wounds.¹¹⁷

By the early 1870's one wonders if the Democratic newspapers had not developed race riot reporting into a literary genre of its own, complete with its own set of rules and expectations. True to this new literary form, the Constitution's account of the Macon riot included Radical conspiracies, Radical incendiaries, and descriptions of negro military drilling. The Constitution headline of October 6 boldly proclaimed that the incident in Macon was part of a "Radical conspiracy" to carry the state election by "fraud and violence". Predictably, the paper accused the Radicals of using their "failed plot" as a "pretext for charges of violence against the Democrats". As the Constitution's coverage of the Ku-Klux Klan will further attest, turning the tables on charges of Democratic terrorism and intimidation of black voters had indeed become a literary art form in its own rite.

The artistry of this type of political reporting lay in the blending of facts and assertions, with a wholesale

¹¹⁷Macon Telegraph, 3 October 1872, reprinted in the Atlanta Constitution, 6 October 1872; Hennessey, 182-183.

reliance upon circular logic. For the most part newspaper accounts of these incidents were faithful to the facts. Names of those killed were given, as well as the time of the event, and other verifiable details. The editorial manipulation of an incident, however, could be carried to extreme interpretative ends. The election day skirmish in Macon was the only "proof" of a state-wide Radical conspiracy provided by the Constitution. Assumedly the reader was supposed to generalize this single incident into a state-wide trend. The proof of the conspiracy rested in events in Macon, and if there was no conspiracy why did the Macon riot occur in the first place? Those who would refute the logic of this argument would likely make themselves dizzy.¹¹⁸

No account of Reconstruction racial violence by a conservative newspaper would be complete without the mention of at least one Radical incendiary. In this instance the villain is a familiar one, Jefferson Long. Oftentimes white carpetbaggers or scalawags were blamed for inciting the violence. But whomever was blamed, their function was always the same. The cowardly incendiary would rouse the passions of the ignorant negro dupes, then coldly step back as his minions kill or were themselves killed; all to satisfy his lust for power.

¹¹⁸Atlanta Constitution, 6 October 1872.

Long was said to have held a secret meeting the night before the election where his plan to steal the election was supposed to have been revealed. It was he, the Telegraph charged, who watched the demonstration from an upper window and gave the order to "take the polls at all hazards". After the bloodbath it was Long who was "skulking away in the post office, out of harms way after he had brought on the trouble".¹¹⁹

To complete the image of an organized threat against white civility, the black voters were described as moving on the polls in close military drill, acting under the orders of their leaders. Oftentimes black political rallies were characterized as a calling out of the "black militia". Such was true of the Democratic press' rendition of the circumstances that led to riot, which claimed that:

The whole negro voting force had been, long before, organized into beats and companies--meeting once a week for drill and instructions, and under orders to rendezvous at the City Hall before dawn.

Finally when the true test came in the heat of battle, it was according to the Telegraph,

plainly seen that they did not mean to yield an inch.¹²⁰ They had been drilled too well to back down.

¹¹⁹ Macon Telegraph, 3 October 1872, reprinted in the Atlanta Constitution, 6 October 1872.

¹²⁰ Macon Telegraph, 3 October 1872, reprinted in the Atlanta Constitution, 6 October 1872.

The incorporation of elements from the insurrection myth was so complete that the Constitution's coverage of the Macon riot became almost a parody of this style of reporting. The reports contained all the pieces; a conspiracy, an organized black militia, and slathers of self-righteousness. Absolutely no gray areas existed in the allocation of blame. According to reports, the negroes and their Radical leaders were said to have been planning the "take-over" of the polls for weeks. The negroes, the reader was assured, threw the first brick and fired the first shot. The white police acted only in self defense. Finally, after it was all over the black voters decided not to return to the polls. According to the press, however, this decision was made not out of concern for their own safety, but as a ruse to accuse Georgia Democrats of running an unfair election.

Camilla, September 19, 1868

By far the bloodiest and most infamous of Georgia's Reconstruction race riots took place in Camilla, a rural hamlet in Mitchell County located in the southwest part of the state. Estimates of casualties vary, but at least nine blacks were killed and scores more wounded when white

townsmen cut loose a barrage of deadly gunfire on a Republican campaign rally.¹²¹

The Camilla riot explores the outer frontiers of the insurrection myth's utility as political propaganda. The Constitution did not embellish the Camilla reports with its typical enthusiasm for insurrection imagery. It may have been that this particular journalistic trend had not fully matured by September of 1868, as it obviously had by the time of the Macon riot. Or it may have simply been that the Radical organs had stolen The Constitution's propaganda initiative. Accounts which made their way to Northern papers and Radical organs generated a great deal of damaging publicity at a time when Georgia's status as a reconstructed member of the Union was uncertain. Traditional Southern historians have even cynically suggested that the casualty figures worsened as reports traveled further north.¹²²

The Constitution's first inklings of a "disturbance in the southwest part of the state" contain the usual mythical qualities. These initial reports told of "a mere handful" of citizens armed in defense of their homes and families against a force of "several hundred armed negroes". There were also brief complaints of "Radical incendiaries" in the

¹²¹Hennessey, 123-130; Formwalt, 399-425.

¹²²Thompson, 385; Theodore B. Fitz Simmons, 123.

Constitution, but far fewer than usual.¹²³ Within a matter of days, however, the tone of the Camilla updates backedpeddled in the face of disturbing revelations in the Republican newspapers that a white ambush squashed a peaceful political rally, and of armed patrols on horseback mercilessly hunting down unarmed blacks during the riot's aftermath.¹²⁴

The remainder of the Camilla updates in the Constitution took on the flavor of an editorial feud with the Atlanta New Era, the Radical organ of the city, over the Era's "misrepresentation" of the "Camilla Affair". The truth lies somewhere between the two extremes, but close enough to the later end to present a significant propaganda liability for Georgia Democrats. The political aftermath of the Camilla riot was seen by some as part of the mounting evidence which convinced Congress that Georgia was not fit for readmission to the Union after all.¹²⁵

From newspaper accounts and from sworn depositions of those present, historians have been able to reconstruct a fairly complete picture of the events in Camilla on September 19, 1868. On that Saturday afternoon Republican supporters were to join in a parade and march into Camilla

¹²³Atlanta Constitution, 22 September 1868.

¹²⁴Conway, 169-170; Hennessey, 127.

¹²⁵Theodore B. Fitz Simmons, 116-125; Conway, 170.

from the main road leading into town. Participants would then gather in the town square and listen to campaign speeches. Earlier that week rumors circulated that whites were preparing to use armed force to stop the rally. However, such rumors were not unusual and blacks simply dismissed the stories as attempts to scare them off.¹²⁶

Leading the parade into Camilla that day was William P. Pierce, a Kentucky born ex-Union officer and Congressional candidate from the Second District; John Murphy, a candidate for Republican Presidential elector; Francis Flagg Putney, a successful carpetbagger planter; and Philip Joiner, a state representative from Dougherty County, who was recently expelled from the Georgia legislature during its celebrated purge of its black members. Around noon, with a bandwagon of musicians attracting more and more followers, the parade began on its way towards town.¹²⁷

The Democratic press as well as some sympathetic historians made much of the fact that about half of the blacks in the parade were armed. More recent treatments of the riot heavily qualify that particular point by arguing that blacks wore arms more out of custom than out of fear. For the most part, those who were armed carried shotguns loaded with birdshot in case they sighted any game along the

¹²⁶Formwalt, 405-407.

¹²⁷Conway, 168-169.

way. Most brought no extra ammunition. Such is hardly a description of a well prepared fighting force. Undoubtedly though, many of the Camilla townsmen were genuinely fearful of the parader's display.¹²⁸

While still well outside of town, the parade encountered Sheriff Munford J. Poore and a concerned committee of six citizens. Sheriff Poore asked the paraders to put down their arms and disperse. He reminded the paraders of Governor Bullock's recent proclamation banning armed political demonstrations of any kind. Murphy argued that the paraders hardly constituted an armed demonstration, then proceeded to discuss matters of constitutional rights. Depending upon which version of the story one believes, either out of defiance or out of principle, the paraders told Poore that they would keep their guns as was their right. In historical hindsight, Pierce, Murphy, Putney, and Joiner probably displayed rather poor judgement at this point. However, it seems clear that they did not expect the greeting they were to receive. At this time Sheriff Poore expressed doubts to Pierce as to his ability to keep the peace once the paraders reached town. As things turned out, Poore's flash of insight was one of the few moments of sound judgement shown all day.¹²⁹

¹²⁸Hennessey, 124-125; Formwalt, 407-408.

¹²⁹Hennessey, 127; Formwalt, 410.

By the time the procession arrived in Camilla it was mid-afternoon. In the meantime Sheriff Poore had apparently deputized the entire white male population of the town as a posse comitatus. Upon their arrival Pierce and Murphy noted that about fifty heavily armed white townsmen had positioned themselves in such a way around the town square as to catch the paraders in a cross-fire.¹³⁰

All the witnesses agree that a drunken townsman by the name of James John fired the first shot. As he approached the bandwagon he pointed a loaded shotgun at the band, cursed at them, and ordered them to stop playing. He then fired in the general direction of the wagon, although some say that he fired directly into the band. In any event all six of the unarmed band members were wounded in the riot. As the shooting began those blacks with guns attempted to fire back, but with little ammunition they were no match for the well prepared whites. Eyewitnesses say whites on the sidewalks actually reached inside the storefronts and pulled out freshly loaded guns. Joiner, Murphy, Pierce, and Putney attempted to rally those blacks who did have guns to try and fend off the mob, but to no avail. Men, women, and children fled into the woods outside of town.¹³¹

¹³⁰Fromwalt, 410-411.

¹³¹Conway, 168; Hennessey, 126; Formwalt, 412-414.

The situation worsened when whites mounted their horses and began to chase and shoot down the fleeing blacks. This last point is disputed. Accounts in the Democratic papers deny any shooting by whites other than in self defense, excepting the action of John. However, recent scholarship includes these last grisly details and cites sworn depositions in the Freedmen Bureau's records.¹³²

It's significant that the Constitution attempted to downplay the seriousness of the riot. The Constitution's headlines referred to it as a "disturbance", or simply as the "Camilla affair". These labels in themselves were unusual. In most cases the Constitution called such violent altercations "riots", "insurrections" or "outrages"; and would waste little column space before the reader was made to believe that the violence was perpetrated by "negro dupes" under the direction of Radical incendiaries.

The Camilla riot received a good deal of attention in the national press, and naturally the Democratic papers gave a more sympathetic account of the Camilla townsmen. Yet only the very first reports drew upon classical insurrection mythology; printing rumors of a well armed, well organized

¹³²Conway, 169; Formwalt, 413; See Formwalt, footnote no. 1 for discussion of the sources.

negro militia marching in close order upon a defenseless town.¹³³

Historians have noted that Georgia Democrats did their best to turn the Camilla affair into a propaganda victory.¹³⁴ It appears, however, that this was a propaganda battle the Constitution lost. It is significant to note that the ensuing editorial feud between the Constitution and the Era, focused not the nature violence itself, but rather that the Era was using the riot to the political benefit of the Radicals.¹³⁵

The fact that the Constitution spent so much column space dwelling on this point may provide a clue as to the limitations of the insurrection myth as a propaganda tool. Insurrection paranoia was a uniquely Southern experience. Yet, the Camilla riot was so one-sided that it became a national embarrassment to Georgia Democrats at a time when her status in the Union was tenuous at best. The Georgia press fell back on the old standby defence of "Radical hypocrisy" as they sensed the damage from the publicity over the Camilla affair.¹³⁶ Perhaps the editorial feuds with the

¹³³Atlanta Constitution 23 September 1868; 24 September 1868.

¹³⁴Most notably, Formwalt, 417-125, and Hennessey, 127-128.

¹³⁵Atlanta Constitution, 25 September 1868; 29 September 1868.

¹³⁶Atlanta Constitution, 10 November 1868.

Radical press were meant for Northern, even Congressional consumption. Thus to appeal to a wider national audience, the focus of the debate naturally moved away from the racial component which helped galvanized the solid white South.

CONCLUSION

It is not surprising that the editors of the Atlanta Constitution attempted to lure white support away from the Republican party, or that they sought to reinforce the necessity of a unified Democratic party. The leadership of both parties understood the difficulties that the Republicans would encounter when trying to build a permanent constituency base in the South. When the war for Union was won, the party principally responsible for its prosecution would have to acknowledge that the Southern states would once again become part of the Union and vote in national elections, in all likelihood by 1868. As early as 1864 Moderate Republicans had drawn up plans for their Southern strategy. Knowing that Southern Unionists were by now few and far between, the Republicans needed a way to avoid electoral disaster in the South, which would virtually assure Democratic domination of Congress and a permanent Democratic resident in the White House. Eminent historian David Donald describes three courses of action that the Moderate Republicans considered in order to block rapid

Democratic ascendancy in the South.¹³⁷ In retrospect it seems hardly surprising that Democratic mud-slinging tactics mirrored what he describes as the only viable courses of action available to the Republicans.

According to Donald, the first and most obvious Republican strategy was a stringent program of disfranchising ex-Confederates. This was of course achieved to a limited extent as one of the provisions of the Fourteenth Amendment. Logistically, however, mass disfranchisement was not a viable long term, large scale alternative. There were simply not enough competent loyalists to keep Southern governments running. Eventually ex-Confederates would be needed for sheriffs, tax collectors, postmasters, clerks, and the literally thousands of state, local, and federal positions doled out through party patronage.¹³⁸

A second and more realistic possibility was enfranchising the Negro. On a simple, mathematical basis this would add hundreds of thousands of dedicated Republican voters to the rolls. In many parts of the South the Democratic power structure could be circumvented entirely. During the war, however, party alignments were extremely

¹³⁷DavidDonald, The Politics of Reconstruction 1863-1867, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984), 17-21; see also Foner, 35-50.

¹³⁸Donald, 17, 18.

delicate. In 1864 Moderate Republicans feared that negro suffrage would exact a high cost in lost white support. Their greatest fear was that negro suffrage would drive the War Democratic faction, tenuous allies of the Moderates, back into the waiting arms of the Peace Democrats. Professor Donald's cynical assessment goes a long way towards explaining President Lincoln's slowness to accept universal manhood suffrage.¹³⁹ It is ironic that at the time Republicans most feared the loss of support in the North, but in the end the issue of race was to prove their undoing in the South.

Ultimately it was the Memphis and New Orleans riots in 1866 that helped move Northern public opinion towards support of negro suffrage. Radicals as well as the Northern press latched onto these two incidents as further proof that the South had not accepted the results of the late war. Radicals argued that the only way to safeguard the results of the Union victory, purchased at such a high cost in blood, was to give blacks the vote. On the strength of this "bloody shirt" appeal the Radicals swept the Congressional elections that Fall. The bitterness of Radical Reconstruction followed. Under the circumstances though, most historians recognize that Congressional Reconstruction

¹³⁹Ibid.

was a wound that the South inflicted upon itself, however inadvertently.¹⁴⁰

In subsequent Reconstruction era elections the Democratic press would decry the Radical bloody shirt techniques used in 1866. But the momentary urgency created by fears of a new civil war united Northern voters behind the Radical Republicans as never before, or since. This was to be, however, a short-lived party re-alignment. For just as Moderates had suspected years earlier, the Democrats would never let white voters forget the demographic realities of the new Republican power base.

Surely Democratic newspaper editors were well aware of Republican vulnerability on the "negro question". Somewhere around 90% of Southern Republican support came from black voters.¹⁴¹ Obviously if black voters could be attracted to the Democratic party in large numbers, or if blacks could be prevented from voting outright, then the Republican movement in the South would collapse.¹⁴² As early

¹⁴⁰Hodding Carter, The Angry Scar: The Story of Reconstruction (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 118; Rable, 59-60.

¹⁴¹Drago, 35.

¹⁴²Of course, after any Democratic election victory the conservative press usually attributed the lack of Republican support to poor negro turnout, or overwhelming negro support for the Democrats. I frankly assume that these claims were to downplay the role of the Ku Klux Klan in election outcomes. During the years 1868-1872 I found scant evidence to suggest the Atlanta Constitution ever made a serious effort to court negro voters.

as 1868 political observers sensed the growing instability of the Southern Republican coalition. After impressive Democratic victories in Mississippi earlier that year, the Baltimore Sun Speculated that:

The large accessions from the colored population, and the similar demonstrations, though not yet on as large a scale, in other Southern States are calculated to suggest ominous forebodings to the party which has been so long reconstructing political quicksands upon which to build its future.¹⁴³

Indeed, moderate Georgia Republicans, many of them former Whigs, either sensed the political need to appeal to white voters, or never tried very hard to win black votes in the first place. At best Georgia Republicans gave lukewarm support to negro suffrage, interpreting the state's 1867 deliberately vague constitution as allowing blacks to vote, but not to hold office. Throughout Bullock's troubled administration, moderates in the state legislature would side with the Democrats on many showdown civil rights votes such as the expulsion of blacks from the state legislature.¹⁴⁴

The final, and according to David Donald, the most practical political strategy at the close of the war was to entrust the former Confederacy to those same whites who fought for secession. This would mean that political bridges

¹⁴³"The Voting Tendency in the South," Atlanta Constitution, 26 July 1868, quoting the Baltimore Sun.

¹⁴⁴Drago, 35-65; Foner, 137.

needed to be built if the Republican party was to have any future in the South. Lincoln's ten percent plan was no doubt a conciliatory gesture to reach out to those newly reconciled Southern brethren.¹⁴⁵

For a brief time at least, it seemed as if the Republicans would have a chance to build a political foundation in the South. Several highly visible ex-Confederates not only advocated cooperation with the Reconstruction government, but actually joined the Republican party. Besides Georgia's Civil War Governor Brown, South Carolina's Governor James Orr, James Alcorn of Mississippi and former Confederate general James Longstreet of Louisiana also "turned traitor" and joined the ranks of the Republicans. Seemingly the Democratic solid South was no foregone conclusion. Yet even these high profile defections did not attract large numbers of Southern ex-whigs to the Republican party.¹⁴⁶ Perhaps the smear campaigns directed against them in the Democratic press undercut potential white support.

Elizabeth Nathans, in her political analysis of Georgia Reconstruction politics, hypothesized that party leaders squandered an opportunity to build support among

¹⁴⁵Kenneth M. Stampp, The Era of Reconstruction, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1965), 24-49; Donald, 17-18.

¹⁴⁶Hodding Carter, 40, 41.

old-line Whigs.¹⁴⁷ However, the irrelevance of this conciliatory approach was lost on Moderate Republicans and as well as some revisionist historians. Freeing the slaves had set off a social and political revolution that most white Southerners were not ready to accept. Moderate political strategies were thus fatally flawed and therefore infinitely exploitable by the Southern Democratic's racially centered smear campaigns.¹⁴⁸ Yet as optimistic Nathans' appraisal may have been, she did isolate an important political wild card. The old-line Whigs were indeed a constituency courted by the Constitution. An 1868 editorial signed simply, "Old Line Whig," points to some heretofore unidentified ideological links between "modern Democrats or Conservatives," and the old Federalists. The editorial, a philosophical commentary on negro suffrage, claimed that just as the Federalist did, Conservatives believed in the order of "Heaven's first law" which stated that all men were created "naturally unequal". Therefore, it followed that suffrage was a political privilege and theoretically revocable. Most interestingly though, the editorial

¹⁴⁷Elizabeth Studley Nathans, Losing the Peace: Georgia Republicans and Reconstruction, 1865-1867, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 225.

¹⁴⁸Michael Perman, Reunion Without Compromise: The South and Reconstruction, 1865-1868, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 336-347.

elaborately built a consensus that could span any conceivable intellectual middle ground:

Men of all former political opinions are burying minor differences, and taking positions on one side or the other. There is no middle ground. The issue is clear and unmistakable. The decision is not far off. It will be had [let us hope peaceably] at the ensuing Presidential election.¹⁴⁹

Can there be any doubt as to which party best captured and held the "middle ground?"

Usually though, the Constitution's efforts to attract the politically dislocated centered less around intellect and more around raw fear and race-hatred. Republicans were generically referred to as "Radicals," as if the Southern Democrats were forcing all factions of the Republican party to own all political and social aspects of the Radical agenda. Furthermore the Constitution made abundantly clear that not only was the Radical party the negro party, but that Radicals would not hesitate to instigate racial violence to further their own diabolical ends. We may never know for certain exactly how persuasive this fear appeal was to the average white voter. One could, however, make a fair circumstantial argument in support of its overall success. Maybe though, the associations between the Radical threat and the insurrection myth were already clear in the minds of the Atlanta Constitution's readers, and these appeals to the

¹⁴⁹"The issue of the Day--Negro Suffrage and Negro Office Holding--Shall We Have 'Have Peace'," Atlanta Constitution, 1 September 1868.

insurrection myth were nothing more than sermons to the already converted. Either way, it remains a noteworthy social and cultural commentary that the press so clearly linked this powerful social myth to such blatantly partisan politics.

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