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VIOLENCE: AN INSTRUMENT OF POLICY IN RECONSTRUCTION ALABAMA

By

Ray Granade

The idea of violence during Reconstruction by now conjures up a stereotyped mental picture. Invariably, the time is midnight. Scattered clouds allow the moon only brief glimpses of the earthbound scene. But the light from even this hidden source is sufficient to reveal the silent band of draped figures riding through the night. The group surrounds a tiny cabin and the muffled voice of the leader calls a Negro to the porch. Almost invisible in the shadows, the victim emerges from the deeper gloom of the door. Perhaps merely a lashing awaits him, though he may face an impromptu lynching, a load of 00 buckshot, a pistol ball, or a mutilating Bowie knife. After the deed is done, two blasts of the leader's whistle signal a general remounting of the hooded figures. Then, in a stillness broken only by horses' hoofs or possibly the sounds of agony from the mass of raw flesh which had once been a human being, the still-silent band departs.

Yet such Ku Klux Klan visitations formed only a small part of the turbulence in Reconstruction Alabama. Federal soldiers, white and black individuals, and secret Klan-like organizations of blacks and whites shared a taste for violence to which Alabama played host. Though life undeniably continued (farmers worried about poor crops, politicians about elections, and nearly everybody about the hunger and destitution brought on by the war), turmoil formed the backdrop against which the play was held.

There were many reasons for the violence. The frontier tradition and the Old South left a legacy of ferocity. Specific problems called for a solution, with force seemingly the only instrument available. Political supremacy called for power to maintain or overthrow it, giving both sides an excuse to utilize extremities. While most of the violence came from political rivalry, the most basic reason was the elemental emotion of

fear, regardless of the perpetrators. A combination of these and other factors produced lawlessness on a large scale in certain areas of Alabama. To understand the extreme conditions which permeated life in Alabama during this era, this fabric of interwoven reasons must be investigated.

Alabama was no stranger to violence when Reconstruction arrived. The state was essentially a frontier area when Ft. Sumter was fired on, despite her forty years of statehood. All the unrest associated with a newly-opened region marked the area's development. And the Civil War had done nothing to decrease the legacy of roughness willed by the frontier. There were two main evidences of this heritage—the individualism which called for immediate personal action and the general habit of carrying weapons.

Throughout Reconstruction newspapers commented on the impetuosity of Alabamians. Violent action occurred everywhere. A recent scholar noted that in the realm of politics, passion generally ran too high for objectivity.¹ A challenge at the polls was liable to launch a fight, if not a riot.² Barroom brawls and dock fights occurred as they always had, especially in Mobile, Tuscaloosa, Montgomery, and other river ports. But violence in the streets now became common. Fights over the right-of-way among pedestrians erupted with regularity. Trivial incidents would become provocation to murder. A man would walk up to another on the street, say a few words, then draw a revolver and fire. Occasionally a heavy horse-whip would replace a more deadly weapon, but rarely were there any preliminaries to such an attack. J. F. James, a Mobilian, explained part of this during his arraignment on assault charges by observing that as he had been threatened with violence on sight, he merely wanted to strike first.³

Such self-reliance and proclivity to immediate action or retaliation would have been less disastrous except for another

¹ Robert S. Rhodes, "The Registration of Voters and the Election of Delegates to the Reconstruction Convention in Alabama," *Alabama Review*, VIII (April, 1955) 120.

² *New York Times*, August 30, 1874.

³ *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, October 6, 1865, January 20, 1866, September 8, 1865, June 21, 1866, November 17, 1865; Rhodes, "Registration," p. 130. When told not to shoot anyone by a boy three years his senior, an eighteen-year-old

frontier habit—carrying deadly weapons. Advertisements for arms were displayed prominently in the newspapers. Double-barrelled shotguns, short on range but a boon to poor shots, were all the rage, especially with the new Lefoucheur breech-loaders offering the increased firepower of cartridges. For those who preferred a weapon more easily concealed, derringers and “Colt’s Pistols” headed the list.⁴ Though the general disorder of the country during and after the war was blamed for the habit, such a milieu does not tell the whole story. Negroes purchased guns for protection and as a badge of their new freedom from slavery; whites wore them for protection and from custom.⁵ Exhibiting the temper of the times, the *Mobile Register and Advertiser* decried the ban on carrying concealed weapons so long as soldiers were present to stir up trouble and, during one outbreak of crime, noted that “Every man of fair standing should be allowed to carry weapons of defence.”⁶ Editor John Forsyth could have saved his breath. Guns were kept

turned the pistol he had just snapped upon the intruder and shot him in the chest. *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, November 17, 1865. In Greensboro John C. Orrick, a young native, walked up to Alexander Webb, colored Register of the 19th District, and shot him. A posse, raised as soon as Orrick left the street, was unable to locate the young man.

Mobile Register and Advertiser, October 21, 1865, December 5, 1865, November 19, 1865; Ignatius A. Few to William H. Smith, July 19, 1869, William H. Smith Papers (Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery). In any hardware store’s advertisements weapons were listed first and in the boldest type. As late as 1881, the State Auditor reported \$305,613 worth of tools and farm implements, \$354,247 in guns, pistols and dirks. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South* (Baton Rouge, 1951), 160.

Walter L. Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama* (Columbia, 1905), 691; *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, January 11, 1866, March 15, 1866; Cecil E. McNair, “Reconstruction in Bullock County,” *Alabama Historical Quarterly*, XV (Spring, 1953), 88-9; U. S. Congress, Senate, *The Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States: Alabama* 42nd Congress, 2nd Session, 1872, Rept. 41, pt. 8, 75-76; hereafter cited as *Affairs in Alabama*. The three volumes relating to conditions in Alabama, parts 8, 9, and 10 are also designated as *Alabama*, Volumes I, II, and III, which designation is hereafter used.

January 11, 1866. Such appeals were often made, though a few months later it was calling for “all good, law-abiding citizens” to “no longer go armed” and “Lay aside all deadly weapons like brave men.” April 17, 1866. Evidently the “fact that guns and pistols were being fired in all parts of the city, day and night” was getting on editor John Forsyth’s nerves. April 18, 1866. The prevalence of carrying arms in Mobile can be seen in the constant convictions for that crime—December 27, 1865, December 29, 1865, for example. Violations were cited almost daily.

in almost every house, and illegal or not, everyone carried weapons. Young men generally wore pistols belted to their waist in full view, while Negroes and the older whites concealed their arms. It was a fad, just as it had been before the war, to go armed.⁷ To some, firearms were regarded as toys, to be snapped at companions as a practical joke. Everyone from newsboys to legislators carried arms, with protection from equally-armed opponents usually being the accepted reason. In an attempt to control the problem, the legislature outlawed brass knuckles and even sling shots.⁸ But more legislative ban was hardly effective in the area of weapon control. Instinct and long custom prevailed.

Violence in Reconstruction Alabama can also be explained in terms of yet another legacy. Like the influence of the frontier, the *ante bellum* social structure made its mark in Alabama. That impress had two distinct facets, both of which were manifest during Reconstruction: the loss of political power by those who had held unquestioned sway, and the fear of the Negro which was rooted in the *ante bellum* horror of a slave revolt. Throughout the *ante bellum* South whites had spoken in apprehensive whispers of a slave uprising. Neither the fact that none occurred during the war nor that of Negro freedom quieted their fears. Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey were well-remembered names. Perhaps the fear proved so tenacious because it was irrational. This problem of social control added urgency to the problem of regaining political power as the whites sought once more to make their society safe.

The fear of Negroes running amok was real indeed. Any sizable encounter between blacks and whites was heralded as the harbinger of revolt. The idea of armed Negroes, especially after the formation of the Loyal League, brought abolitionist prophecies of doom to mind. When armed Negroes stood guard at League meetings while their fellows drilled, rumors circu-

⁷ *Affairs in Alabama*, I, 75-6; II, 1166, 1318, III, 1686-7, 1835-6.

⁸ *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, November 17, 1865; Fleming *Civil War*, 759; McNair, "Bullock County," 111.

⁹ *Acts of Alabama*, 1872, 130-1. Bowie knives, too useful to outlaw, were taxed, and proved a useful source of revenue; *Acts of Alabama*, 1865, 7.

lated among the white population.¹⁰ When trouble erupted in Bladon Springs, Choctaw County, just before Christmas, 1865, the *Mobile Register and Advertiser* tried to calm fears by printing the truth. Pointing out that the excitement was hardly worth the name "insurrection," it quoted some of the rumors circulating and begged readers not to "repeat and magnify (as is almost invariably the case) such reports."¹¹ Repeatedly Forsyth pointed out the falsity of such rumors and observed that, while many had predicted a general insurrection during Christmas, no such trouble had occurred; nor was it likely to.¹² Yet until they regained power, the native white population refused to relinquish their fears. Men left women and children alone only when absolutely necessary, and then with foreboding.¹³ Negroes marched to the polls in military formation until 1876, and the riots no doubt occurred in part because of the edginess of the armed whites.¹⁴

Because they had held enough power to keep their position secure during the antebellum period, the lack of such security during Reconstruction made the position of the native whites maddening. They felt there were specific problems to be solved—problems which they assumed no one else could master. The native whites felt trapped by a corrupt government from which they could get no justice but which they were powerless to change. From the war's end until the fall of that same year, there was no real government in the State. Order, such as it was, came from the military posts and the commanders' authority. Then, as Walter L. Fleming put it, the "carpetbagger and scalawag, using the former slave as an instrument," assumed power.¹⁵ This was the crowning insult. The military which

¹⁰ Fleming, *Civil War*, 5-6, 514-15, 561-2, 565, 568; Walter L. Fleming, "The Formation of the Union League in Alabama," *Gulf States Historical Magazine*, II (September, 1903), 81-3; Albert B. Moore, *History of Alabama* (Tuscaloosa, 1934), 476; McNair, "Bullock County," 95.

¹¹ December 23, 1865. One of the rumors was that seventeen people had just been massacred at Notasulga as part of a general uprising.

¹² January 10, 12, 1866.

¹³ Letter from Mrs. Campbell Cory, quoted in Euba E. DuBose, "The History of Mount Stirling," *Alabama Historical Quarterly*, XXV (Fall, 1963), 327, 322.

¹⁴ *New York Times*, April 17, 1866; Harry P. Owens, "The Eufaula Riot of 1874," *Alabama Review*, XVI (July, 1963), 232-3, 235-6; see footnote 10 for other information on armed Negroes during elections.

¹⁵ Fleming, *Civil War*, 653-4, 656, 262-3; Moore, *Alabama*, 462.

sustained this political structure was regarded as an oppressor. Soldiers as well as outlaws in Federal uniforms gave the native whites even more cause for hatred. The occupying army was not careful and little matters were magnified, as a few soldiers gave the rest a bad name. Many of the stories have the ring of atrocity fictions. Yet true or false, word of outrages committed by soldiers and the arbitrary nature of their power circulated freely in Alabama. Much of the South heard of the arrest of the entire 44th Indiana Volunteers for depredations committed in Stevenson, Alabama, but the emphasis was on the crime rather than the arrest.¹⁶ More interesting to the former Confederates were stories of robbery and murder committed by the "Bluebellies."¹⁷ Tales of horror like the little Negro girl whose ears were cut off by a soldier because she refused his advances, were believed and repeated.¹⁸ And when soldiers shot unarmed prisoners as soon as they appeared, jailed a butcher (the victim of a robbery and assault, during which his wife was almost killed) for preferring charges against a Negro, or whipped, then dragged a white man until he almost died, the perfidity and unnatural, arbitrarily-exercised power of the military was clearly proved.¹⁹

It is no wonder that trouble erupted between the locals, both white and Negro, and the occupying forces. Fights occurred everywhere. The streets were the usual setting, as when a Negro drew a revolver on an officer, but even "a house of ill-repute" in Greenville hosted a brawl between "some citizens and soldiers."²⁰ Some idea of the local feeling can be gained by seeing not only what was said while under "soldier rule," but comments made later as well. When reporting the arbitrary punishment and imprisonment of a local citizen, editor Lon Grant of the *Gadsden Times* observed that "such injustice made the

¹⁶ Mobile, *Register and Advertiser*, September 21, 1865.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, August 25, 1865; September 4, 1865; McNair, "Bullock County," 104; Fleming, *Civil War*, 119-120.

¹⁸ Mobile, *Register and Advertiser*, January 12, 1866.

¹⁹ Fleming, *Civil War*, 500; Mobile *Register and Advertiser*, October 6, 1865; Elbert L. Watson, "Gadsden from Tepees to Steamboats," *Alabama Review*, XI (October, 1958), 252.

²⁰ Mobile *Register and Advertiser*, September 19, 1865, March 10, 1866. The Negro, Henry, was probably so quick with his gun because the troopers seemed to pick Negroes to victimize. January 7, 9, 11, 1866.

blood boil and the fingers tingle to pull the trigger again on our oppressors."²¹ Editor Forsyth reprinted the more reserved remarks of a Montgomery newspaperman that "Such inhumanities should be ferretted out and the guilty parties punished severely whoever they may be. Where the civil authority has not power to act the military certainly has, and we trust between the two, no acts of the kind will be allowed to disgrace the community."²² Perhaps the best clue is in the statement of the *Eufaula News* after the shooting of two Negroes: "Such baseness and meanness, now that the Yankees have left, will not again be perpetrated with impunity in our midst. We hope, now, to see the return of law, order, and quiet; and hear no more of the robbing, shooting, or maltreating of negroes."²³ And the men these troops helped maintain in office fared no better in public opinion.

To keep power, the Republicans had to run Republicans for office, no matter how unqualified. Though there were exceptions, ignorance and corruption pervaded most levels of government. Even a Republican admitted the problems of finding qualified men of the proper political persuasion, going so far as to call the state courts "a farce." As late as 1871, three years before the government was "redeemed," the *New York Times* observed that the civil authorities were "utterly powerless to execute the laws."²⁴ When the military authorities in Montgomery permitted prostitution and legalized it by issuing licenses to "houses of ill-repute" for \$25 a week plus \$5 a week for each inmate, the local citizens complained bitterly. But when that apostle of social control, Justice of the Peace Jesse

²¹ Watson, "Gadsden," 252.

²² *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, January 12, 1866, quoting the *Advertiser* of January 9.

²³ Quoted in the *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, January 25, 1866.

²⁴ Moore, *Alabama*, 482; Fleming, *Civil War*, 656; *Affairs in Alabama*, I, 58, II, 873; *New York Times*, June 28, 1871. When the legislature passed an act authorizing the Governor to pardon men before their conviction, the native whites were sure this was simply one more attempt to keep misfits in office and outside the law's reach. *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, June 17, 1866. A Republican realized that "we had placed in power a great many incompetent officers, men who were totally unfit either by their moral or their mental character to administer the laws." Lucille Griffith, *History of Alabama 1540-1900* (Northport, 1962), 341.

Hays, was sentenced to five months and a \$100 fine for prescribing a punishment for a Negro which was inapplicable to a white man, the Republicans went too far. Though merely a symbol, this Monroe County man personified the necessity for regaining Democratic control of the government.²⁵

The attempt to wrest control from the "vile wretches in power" would naturally necessitate the use of force. First, the average voters were tired of voting when they felt their votes meant nothing.²⁶ Second, the Republicans would use every hint of violence as proof of the necessity of continuing Reconstruction and even manufactures tales to prove their allegation. Democrats evidently felt that they might as well profit from what they were portrayed as doing.²⁷ And finally, the Conservatives saw their attempt to cajole the Negro vote fail. Their speakers were "insulted, stoned, and sometimes killed," while social ostracism (and more drastic measures—whipping, for instance) by and large preserved the Negro vote inviolately Republican.²⁸ Even the *New York Times* noted the fraudulent government, the unqualified leaders, and the absolute hold corruption had on much of the state government.²⁹ So the Conservatives spoke of driving out "the thieves" and convinced themselves, one by one, that "If the radicals carry this county and the state, we will be well nigh ruined."³⁰

²⁵ Fleming, *Civil War*, 416-417, 487.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 535, 542; Hilary A. Herbert, "How We Redeemed Alabama," *Century Magazine*, LXXXV (April, 1913), 854, 857; Edgar A. Stuart, "The Journal of James Mallory, 1834-1877," *Alabama Review*, XIV (July, 1961), 231.

²⁷ It was admitted by both sides that, while many were true, many of the stories of outrages were fiction. DuBose, "Stirling," 323-324; Fleming, *Civil War*, 399; John L. Sloan, "The Ku Klux Klan and the Alabama Election of 1872," *Alabama Review*, XVII (April, 1965), 114-115, 118, 120-121, 123. By the time the Republicans developed factions, the more conservative ones, like William H. Smith, charged their more radical opponents with "feeding off crime."

²⁸ Negro women were especially effective in keeping the Negro vote Republican. No Democrat got a meal cooked, clothes washed, or a warm bed, not even from his wife. On both sides, the women were more rabid than the men. Fleming, *Civil War*, 774, 778; Herbert, "Redeemed," 860; H. E. Sterkx, "William C. Jordan and Reconstruction in Bullock County, Alabama," *Alabama Review*, XV (January, 1962), 71.

²⁹ October 29, 1874, December 31, 1865, for example. Generally recognition came during the latter part of the era.

³⁰ Stewart, "Mallory Journal," 231, 232.

The milieu provided the native whites with a "feel" for violence inherited from the frontier and the *ante bellum* era, a situation aggravated by specific grievances which called for prompt action. Not only were direct methods the natural inclination; they seemed the only recourse for the "disinherited." For the Negroes and Republicans, the problem was similar. It was their presence which upset the traditional system, so it was against them that the brutality would be directed. It was a case of resist or abdicate. A feeling of suspicion and hate was in the air, and all sides—Negro, Democrat and Republican—developed a regrettable tolerance for bloodshed. But there were reasons for the adoption of violence by the Negroes and Republicans aside from the essentially negative one of self-preservation. The Republicans employed ferocity to maintain their political position (and strengthen it), to correct situations which seemingly would yield to no other solutions, and out of fear; the Negroes adopted terrorism because of their sense of freedom, the political conjurings of their leaders (Negro and white), and out of fear as well. The opposing forces gave much the same reasons for their fury—each essentially feared the other, and each saw some facet of the political scene which seemed amenable to change only through force.

The Republicans were faced with an intractable element to govern. Jesse Hays was a symbol for them as well as for the Democrats. To Republicans, Justice of the Peace Hays typified the obstinate Alabamian who refused to abide by the decision of the iron dice he had rolled. Throughout Reconstruction, Republicans had to contend with courts which could produce no justice because of lack of witnesses or because juries simply failed to convict.³¹ To those in power, justice seemed unattainable. A major Republican complaint was always of ineffective courts and local government.³² Because of this situation, the Republicans had no alternative but to reply in kind if they wished to end the intimidation of Negro Republicans. Though the Legislature could remove all penalties for

³¹ *Affairs in Alabama*, I, 58; *New York Times*, June 28, 1871; Ignatius A. Few to Smith, July 19, 1869; Colored Citizens of Tuscaloosa to Smith, April 22, 1869, William H. Smith Papers.

³² *Affairs in Alabama*, I, 58; Ignatius A. Few to Smith, July 19, 1869; Colored Citizens of Tuscaloosa to Smith, April 22, 1869, William H. Smith Papers.

violence in 1872, the *Daily Advertiser* once again had the last word: "Ven zee Frenchman hunt zee tigarre, zee sport ees grand-manifique, but by gar ven zee tigarre hunt ze Frenchman zer ess the vaire daiable to pay." Substitute Yankee for Frenchman and 'rebel' for tiger in this quotation and the picture is true to the very life."⁴⁴ Unfortunately, the Democrats did not let the matter rest there.

As Reconstruction progressed, the language became more inflammatory. Articles speculating on the future would be given such provocative titles as "Bayonets Next."⁴⁵ A forthright challenge was issued by the *Mobile Register* in 1874. Calling on the "Blearyeyed gentry," the editor warned them that white violence will keep pace with black violence; that for one blow they shall have two, with full measure; that there shall be no more polls in quiet possession of negro mobs, and white men deterred from casting their ballots, and all under the command of carpet-bag bullies. If you can beat us in voting, all right. If you can beat us at bullying, all right too. But in both cases you have got to fight for it as you have never been called upon, in Alabama, to fight before.

Calling for a virtual surrender to Caucasian Supremacy, the article concluded: "first disarm your negroes, who are drilling and drum-beating everywhere, in every town and village and hill and valley, and then talk about peace to the white people."⁴⁶

While challenging the Republicans in such rash terms, the natives often spoke longingly of a return to the more dignified violence of the Confederacy period. That was a time when foes could be dealt with openly, and it bespoke a kind of

⁴⁴ Quoted in Robert Partin, "Alabama Newspaper Humor during Reconstruction," *Alabama Review*, XVII (October, 1964), 245-6. For an indication of how the Republicans were lambasted by political cartoons, see Sarah Van V. Woolfolk, "The Political Cartoons of the *Tuscaloosa Independent Monitor* and *Tuscaloosa Blade* 1867-1873," *Alabama Historical Quarterly*, XXVII (Fall, 1965), 140-165.

⁴⁵ *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, June 29, 1866.

⁴⁶ Quoted in *New York Times*, September 5, 1874.

demoralization" followed the conflict. The *Mobile Register and Advertiser* hailed Governor Lewis H. Parsons' proclamation on the alarming prevalence of crime in the state, though it lamented the necessity for such a public statement.⁴² James Mallory, a perceptive denizen of the state, calendared the development of the war-caused lawlessness. Less than a month after Appomattox, Mallory mourned the "disorder and lawlessness through the land" and expressed the fear that "order will never be again restored." By the end of the year he observed that "Crime has become alarming, and with the strong arm of the law failing to check it, we may yet reap more bitter fruit than even from the war." In the middle of 1867, with a sense of foreboding, Mallory wondered—"what will be the result, God only knows."⁴³ This war-engendered lawlessness was encouraged by the epithets both sides delighted in employing, and by the rumors such unbridled tongues spread. Democrats and Republicans alike resorted to language calculated to infuriate the opposition; the Democrats were probably more adept at using invective, despite their inclination to action.

Republicans found themselves the butt of jokes, the objects of personal threats, members of a maligned group, and even heard Conservatives wish for a return to the gray uniform. Prodding the "oppressors" in such a way as to enjoy a laugh at their expense became a prime pastime for Alabama editors. In 1866 the *Montgomery Daily Advertiser* informed its readers of the habits of the "Puritan Reformers" (Northern missionaries). "Wife," the reported conversation went, "put the baby to sleep with some laudanum, then bring me my Bible and pistols, and come with me; I'm going to attend a meeting for the relief of the freedman and the amelioration of the human race." Two years later the same paper attempted to enlighten its clientele about the Radical. On March 14, a schoolboy "parsed Radical" for the public: "A Radical is a compound unconstitutional noun, black in person, declining in number, African gender, and desperate case, governed by niggers, and according to the Puritan rule, one ignoramous governs another." And when the Radicals complained of Southern

⁴² August 25, 1865.

⁴³ Stewart, "Mallory Journal," 228, 229, 230.

to the Government."³⁸ The atrocity stories, whether true or false, could not have helped a Republican's peace of mind; neither were they a source of solace to the freedman.

Having been slaves, the freedmen knew what to expect. They no doubt also gloried in the power their votes gave them. Now that they comprised a free work force, they also had an economic hold on their former masters. The vote, however, seemed to be their most potent weapon, and the fear that this privilege would be removed was skillfully played on by white Republicans. White Alabamians clearly displayed their resentment of the Negro franchise. Even those who had never owned slaves were opposed to this innovation, and a Republican in the state noted that these former non-slaveowners were more bitterly opposed "than any secessionist in the state." The entire white population of Mobile, observed another, had as much as declared that "the 'nigger' should not be permitted to vote there."³⁹ After spending three months in the state, a *New York Times* correspondent wrote; "in some localities they [Negroes] are treated brutally, robbed on the highway and frequently killed."⁴⁰ An antagonism quickly arose between whites and blacks, and while the Negroes no doubt armed themselves out of a sense of freedom, it was also done because for the first time they could defend themselves. There was no more need passively to accept whatever violence came to them.⁴¹

The effect of the war on society and the intemperate language used by both sides added to the explosive atmosphere. The war set the tone. A resort to public force, war loosened the bonds of moral restraint, encouraging individuals to imitate the public example and take the law into their own hands. Since the trend could not be offset by a strong magistracy, "public

³⁸ *New York Times*, January 13, 1873.

³⁹ Rhodes, "Registration," 126, 127, quoting letters from Joseph C. Bradley (April 17, 1867) and J. Silsby (April 1, 1867) to Gen. Wager Swayne.

⁴⁰ April 17, 1866.

⁴¹ *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, January 10, 1866, August 25, 28, 1865, September 10, 1865, February 4, 1866; Herbert, "Redeemed," 854. Colored Citizens of Tuscaloosa to Smith, April 22, 1869, William H. Smith Papers. That the whites didn't like negroes carrying arms is attested to by Forsyth's editorial advising the freedmen to quit carrying concealed weapons. *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, March 15, 1866.

killing a man if he were disguised, more direct action was called for. At every hand Republicans found the registration of Negroes opposed. The locals used every method possible "without making themselves liable to arrest by the military authorities" at first.³³ Then they escalated their activities to include night-riding and, later, murder. Officials as well as voters suffered.³⁴ Intimidation of this variety later gave way to rowdyism at Republican meetings and at the polls themselves. Riots were common on election day, and some were so bad that martial law was proclaimed and civil officials replaced because they had not been zealous in ending the fighting and protecting the freedmen.³⁵

About five thousand Northerners had come to Alabama in an apolitical capacity, and these men were readily accepted by the natives. A Republican wrote that a business partner had received only the "kindest treatment" and heartiest encouragement" from neighbors. "A Northern man," he concluded, "who is not a natural fool, or a foolish fanatic, may live pleasantly anywhere in Alabama."³⁶ But once the Yankee left business for politics, he crossed into the war zone. Often Republicans expressed the belief, privately or in public, that many Southerners were ready to renew the war, possibly by guerrilla action.³⁷ But even more insistent in the Republican's minds lurked the thought of personal danger. Outside observers noted that "Quarrels are sought with men of known Republican politics for the simple purpose of affording an opportunity to assassinate them," with their only crime being that of "remaining loyal

³³ *Acts of Alabama*, 1868, 444-6; Rhodes, "Registration," 131.

³⁴ Ignatius A. Few to Smith, July 19, 1869; Colored Citizens of Tuscaloosa to Smith, April 22, 1869; Daniel Price to Smith, October 7, 1868; John Hamilton to Smith, August 5, 1869; Jacob Fisher to Smith, June 14, 1869, William H. Smith Papers; *New York Times*, January 13, 1873. See footnote 3 for the murder of Alexander Webb, Register.

³⁵ Herbert, "Redeemed," 862; Fleming, *Civil War*, 794. The biggest riots occurred in 1874, at Mobile, Belmont, Gainesville, and Eufaula. Mobile suffered two earlier ones, in 1866 and 1869 (after the first of which martial law was proclaimed) and Patona-Cross Plains suffered in 1870. Fleming covers most of the riots. The Mobile riots made the *New York Times*.

³⁶ Rhodes, "Registration," 121; Sarah Van V. Woolfolk, "Carpetbaggers in Alabama: Tradition Versus Truth," *Alabama Review*, XV (April, 1962), 143.

³⁷ *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, March 10, 1866.

freedom which Democrats felt they now lacked. "I am ready as before," wrote George M. Drake, editor of the *Union Springs Times*, "to bear arms to the best of my poor ability, against all infamous Radical enemies of my State and of the cause of civil liberty."⁴⁷ Often such reveries would be coupled with a personal threat, as when William C. Jordan, white Alabamian, lost his temper when confronted by a blue-uniformed officer. Pointing a steady forefinger at the uniform he recalled how he had often fired at just such a target during the war. And Jordan concluded that, unless left alone, he was willing to fight again, observing that "a pistol ball will make negro heads go up like a whirlwind."⁴⁸

The election of 1874 proved the culmination of the fight to "redeem" the state government. It was also the high point of threats delivered with political intent. The natives were intent upon ousting the Republicans and exerted every effort to do so. Sure that 1874 was their year, the Democrats warned Negroes what might be in the future. A Negro canvassing for an "ebony congressman" was matter-of-factly told by a white "You might as well quit. We have made up our minds to carry the state or kill half of you negroes on election day." Another Conservative like-wise enlightened a "sable Republican" about the coming campaign. "God damn you," he shouted, "you have voted my land down to half a dollar an acre, and I wish you was down in the bottom of hell." He then threatened personally to help send a few on their way.⁴⁹

The natives did not have a monopoly on unbridled tongues. Their political opponents were skilled in the use of invective, and they had the help of newspapers and politicians outside the state. Though hardly a danger, Chicago's "Long John" Wentworth's threat to hang Confederates "as high as Haman" was not easily forgotten. Negroes, well-aware of their freedom, at times angered men accustomed to unquestioning obedience. By stating that something was none of the questioner's business,

⁴⁷ Letter to the *Montgomery Advertiser*, quoted in the *New York Times*, November 1, 1868.

⁴⁸ H. E. Sterkx, "William C. Jordan and Reconstruction in Bullock County, Alabama," 65, 71.

⁴⁹ Fleming, *Civil War*, 792.

the freedmen would throw the native into a rage. "Insolence" and "uppity behavior" were, to the former rulers in a slave society, if not crimes, at least completely unacceptable behavior.⁵⁰ Taking their politics very seriously, the mostly-Republican former slaves regarded any Democrat in their midst as a "renegade nigger." Often an intrepid black Democrat would be greeted with cries of "Beat him; kill him; kill the Democrat devil." When questioned about washing or cooking for such a misfit, one old woman said, "Wash him a shirt? I'll wash his nose in blood."⁵¹ Coupled with Republican complaints of Democratic violence in circulars which in effect advised Republicans to do as they pleased (after all, troops and U.S. Marshals were available in case of trouble), such language infuriated the natives.⁵²

Both sides used the newspaper with great effectiveness, and except for verbal threats, the daily and weekly sheets made maddening an ever-increasing number of people a possibility. The same drunken brawl would, with opposite interpretations placed upon it, be construed by Radical papers as a murderous attack on Negroes and by Democratic journals as a Negro outrage on whites. Though newspapers were bound by law to keep within the bounds of "legitimate discussion" and "violent and incendiary articles" were banned, moderation was generally an unheard of virtue. The *Mobile Republican*, for example, was suppressed by General Pope for "instructing the negro population how, when and for what purpose to use firearms—being a direct and distinct attempt to incite them to riot and disorder."⁵³

When such open appeals to violence were made, especially considering the reasons the various groups had to resort to force, the outcome was almost inevitable. The effect of these grievances produced an extremely tense situation, especially at election time. All types of violence were perpetrated by bands and by individuals. The personal and economic manifestations of the

⁵⁰ William B. Hesseltine and Larry Gara, "Confederate Leaders in Post-War Alabama," *Alabama Review*, IV (January, 1951), 5, 18; *New York Times*, November 4, 1874; DuBose, "Mount Stirling," 322.

⁵¹ *New York Times*, November 4, 1874.

⁵² Moore, *Alabama*, 467, 486; *New York Times*, September 21, 1874.

resulting clashes were political in nature, for they would have been unnecessary had the old social structure remained—Alabama had been a two-party state before the formation of the Republican party. There was more than the normal amount of crime immediately after the war. River pirates flourished and armed bands roamed rural regions. Even the urban areas, though better policed than the outlying sections, faced an upsurge of crime. Mobile testified to that fact as Editor Forsyth remarked on the unsightliness of a particular post near the post office, generally spattered with brains and surrounded by pools of blood, and lamented the amount of crime in the city.⁵³ The activities of marauding bands were doubtless the most non-political of all. Republican and Democrat alike suffered from the roaming bands of criminals. Republicans and Conservatives also both suffered from “economic violence.” Once the Negro became a free agent, his labor was his own to sell, and agriculture, which had flourished under the hands of slaves, still required laborers. The transition from a slave to a free economy, difficult at best, was resented by employers who had to pay wages. Many found the change unbearable, and without political power to ameliorate what they considered an injustice, the “disinherited” turned to force.⁵⁴

While they generally scheduled their exploits so as to insure time to do their own work and were careful not to frighten away their own laborers, the Democratic “regulators” tried to control the hiring of Negroes. Often the poorer whites would drive Negro tenants from the more fertile lands and move in behind them. More usual was the practice of riding in and telling Negroes who to work for and at what price, then threatening drastic measures if matters went contrary to orders. Often employers of former slaves would see gin houses, fences, and stock destroyed or their employees “maltreated” because

⁵³ Fleming, *Civil War*, 497; *New York Times*, March 26, 1866, June 3, 1867.

⁵⁴ *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, January 9, 1866, December 2, 1865. One of the big Mobile stories from December, 1865 through May of the next year was of the band of guerrillas on the Tombigbee who captured the steamboat *Lilly* and attempted to sink the *Belfast*. In North Alabama brigandage was such that guerrilla warfare was the practical result as “Federal and Confederate deserters, and bushwackers and outlaws of every description” fought each other. Fleming, *Civil War*, 654, 264-8; Moore, *Alabama*, 463.

⁵⁵ Fleming, *Civil War*, 654, 264-8.

they had hired the wrong freedmen⁵⁰ Wherever the Negro turned he faced trouble because he was an economic threat to one group or another. White transient workers clashed with freedmen on the Mobile and Girard Railroad near Union Springs over the question of jobs on the railroad.⁵⁷ And even in politics, the Negro proved a threat as he voted land prices down.⁵⁸ This was just a part of the link between economics and politics in Reconstruction Alabama. The connection of personal violence with political preferences was even closer.

At first, political violence was at a minimum in Alabama. A war-weariness or apathy settled like a damp fog on the populace; the Republicans faced no real political opposition during their first year of power. Then trouble began in earnest.⁵⁶ Personal brutality had in the beginning been just that—man to man. The leaders of both sides were open game—it seemed the rules of the contest.⁶⁰ Shortly after Appomattox, however, two groups were formed which largely took the political aspect of savagery from the individual and institutionalized it. The Union or Loyal League was a Republican organization mainly for its fledglings, the freedmen; the Ku Klux Klan became the Democrats' answer to the League threat.⁶¹

In their incipient stages, the League and the Klan were completely different. While the League was primarily a political organization, the Klan was a social club which rapidly became an association of regulators banded together to provide protection for its adherents and a measure of social control.⁶²

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 682, 729; *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, May 8, 1866; Elkor Malichi to Smith, July, 1869, William H. Smith Papers.

⁵⁷ McNair, "Bullock County," 88. One Negro was killed and one wounded. The whites suffered no casualties, the only one brought into court being acquitted.

⁵⁸ Fleming, *Civil War*, 792.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 677.

⁶⁰ *New York Times*, January 13, 1873; Hesseltine and Gara, "Leaders," 18.

⁶¹ For information on the League, see Fleming, "Union League." For biased accounts of the Ku Klux Klan, see Stanley F. Horn, *Invisible Empire: The Story of the Ku Klux Klan 1866-1871* (Boston, 1939) or Susan L. Davis, *Authentic History of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York, 1924). Miss Davis's father organized the first Alabama den at Athens.

⁶² Toward the end of the era, people began to say that the Klan had been formed to counter the League. See Fleming, "Loyal League," 88; Fleming, *Civil War*, 655; McNair, "Bullock County," 100.

Despite the dissimilarity during their inchoate period, both groups soon became tools in the struggle for political power in Alabama. Bands of Negroes and bands of whites roamed the countryside, especially at night. Alabamians become so familiar with this Ku Klux Klan method of political persuasion and social control that whenever anyone suffered from any group of disguised men he was considered "kukluxed." The political activities of these groups were largely confined to a few months before each election, but the frenzy was most intense in 1868 and 1874.

The 1868 outbreak was mainly perpetrated by the Klan and occasioned by the failure of the natives to enlist Negro support for the Democratic Party.⁶³ "Jail delivery" became popular, as Klansmen (and later others) freed prisoners from their confinement to insure "justice"—releasing those considered unjustly incarcerated and punishing others (often by death).⁶⁴ The troubles of 1874 were the culmination of the political power struggle. Sensing victory, the Democrats redoubled their efforts, and fearing defeat, the Republicans countered with all the force at their disposal. As early as July, Governor Lewis received letters from the Black Belt complaining of turmoil.⁶⁵ Factions formed within the Republican Party, and the hatred between the two was so intense that civil war almost erupted.⁶⁶ Though busy fighting among themselves, the Republicans found time to insult, stone and kill Democrats, break up meetings, shoot into Democratic homes, and force conservatives to hide out at night.⁶⁷ Both parties ran full slates of officers, county as well as state, and feelings ran even higher. Vehement

⁶³ J. Roneryne to Charles Miller, October 15, 1868; N. H. Rice to William B. Figures, November 3, 1868; John H. Wager to Smith, William H. Smith Papers. See also U. S. Congress, House, 40th Congress, 3rd Session, House Misc. Doc. 23, *Outrages by Ku-Klux Klan*.

⁶⁴ For examples of this common practice, see *Affairs in Alabama*, I, 57; II, 1480; *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, April 3, 1866.

⁶⁵ Edward G. Williamson, "The Alabama Election of 1874," *Alabama Review*, XVII (July, 1964), 217.

⁶⁶ Fleming, *Civil War*, 774; *New York Times*, October 26, 1874; Herbert, "Redeemed," 860.

⁶⁷ Fleming, *Civil War*, 774, 778. One Negro complained that his children were beaten by the others at school. The teacher explained that nothing better could be expected so long as he remained a Democrat.

language became the rule and few political rallies lasted the appointed length of time. When meetings were held to agree on candidates for city offices, the discussion became so heated that fights often resulted.⁶⁸

Troops were requested to deal with the difficulties. The Republicans, in a numerical minority, sent numerous urgent requests for a company or so of soldiers and usually a few marshals as well.⁶⁹ Little word of trouble leaked out of south Alabama, but from the north and west came stories in profusion. The Ku Klux Klan, Men of Justice, the Order of Peace, and Knights of the White Camelia fought with the various "un-affiliated" groups of natives against the Loyal League and various Anti-KKK leagues (Mossbacks in Fayette County)⁷⁰ Joseph G. Hester, a special agent for the Justice Department, summed the situation up concisely when he remarked that he had "rather be in the heart of Comanche country than in Sumter County without soldiers."⁷¹

The occasion which focused national attention upon Alabama's internal disorder was the occurrence of two murders in Sumter County. The first murder, that of lawyer W P Billings, was mentioned in the *New York Times*. But on October 6, under the headlines "The Murdered Route Agent" and "Warrants for the Arrest of Nine of the Murderers, Including the Sheriff of Sumter County," violence in Alabama gained national notoriety. For a month, the murder of Billings and Thomas Ivey rated front page coverage. Several Sumter County citizens—Stephen S. Renfroe, a prominent farmer and presumable instigator of the killings; Charles H. Bullock; P. A. Hillman; and W L. (Fred) Childs—were carried to Mobile to stand trial for both crimes. In the follow-up story on November 24, the *Times* ran a two-column spread on the accused, the trial,

⁶⁸ Herbert, "Redeemed," 854, 860; McNair, "Bullock County," 117. In one such fight one Negro hit through the underlip of another, while a companion "bit a plug from the cheek of an adversary." Quoted from the *Union Springs Herald and Times*, January 13, 1875.

⁶⁹ Owens, "Riot," 231.

⁷⁰ Griffith, *Alabama*, 322, 341, 483; Fleming, *Civil War*, 657-660, 514-15, 561-2, 565, 690; Fleming, "Loyal League," 75, 81-2; Horn, *Empire*, 136; *Affairs in Alabama*, II, 721, 1172.

⁷¹ Williamson, "Alabama Elections," 217.

and an "exclusive interview."⁷² Concluding the story of the trial, the *Times* observed that, despite a Negro politician's threat to "carry Sumter County or ride chin-deep in blood," there was no evidence of a political connotation for the murders.⁷³ Such political connections were admittedly hard to find—these incidents merely seemed part of the general trend toward anarchy. But violence was on the wane. As early as 1869 Alabamians had been warned by scalawag Alexander H. White to "Let bygones be bygones." He had had "enough of the bayonet" and would rather "rely on the ballot instead."⁷⁴ The Klan, "symbol of violence in disguise," lost public support.⁷⁵ Alabamians had learned the infinite advantages of fraud at the ballot boxes.

Where intimidation had been successful, the Democrats faced no trouble, though occasionally they simply found it necessary to count out the Negro vote or destroy the ballots.⁷⁶ The polls were carefully guarded by Democrats, and every highway leading into the state was monitored "to prevent the importation of voters." Railroad officials carefully noted every "foreign Negro" who arrived and at what station he debarked.⁷⁷ The *New York Times* chronicled the relative quiet of the election after the turbulence of the pre-election fury. The writer observed that police from Columbus, Georgia, had taken over the polls at Girard, in Russell County, but did not comment upon the effect of this action. That fraud had replaced violence, however, the correspondent was certain. With the aid of hindsight, a much later article realized that, while fraud had replaced violence in the last election, "the knowledge existed in the mind of every colored man that the Democrats would have resorted to violence if simple fraud had not availed."⁷⁸

⁷² August 14, 1874.

⁷³ October 6, 7, 8, 20, November 24, 1874; January 10, 1875. See also unpublished manuscript on Stephen S. Renfroe by William Warren Rogers. Ms. in private possession.

⁷⁴ Sarah Van V. Woolfolk, "Alabama Attitudes Toward the Republican Party in 1868 and 1964," *Alabama Review*, XX (January, 1967), 29-30.

⁷⁵ Horn, *Empire*, 144.

⁷⁶ Fleming, *Civil War*, 798, 800. The Eufaula riot resulted in the unfortunate destruction of enough Republican votes to ensure a Democratic victory. See Owens, "Eufaula Riot."

⁷⁷ Herbert, "Redeemed," 861.

⁷⁸ January 4, 1875, October 9, 1876. The correspondent wrote that "The proscription, social ostracism, withdrawal of business and loss of employment

Thus did the pattern of violence end in Alabama. Perhaps the most significant indicator of the changed attitude was Grand Cyclops Ryland Randolph. For despite his earlier firey-tongued eloquence, the Tuscaloosa editor now called for peace. In an editorial entitled "Let Murders Cease" he realized that "We now have a sheriff of our choice, and we must sustain him . . ."⁷⁰ Violence had ended because, having regained political power, the natives could correct the inequities by which they had felt oppressed and exercise social and economic control "legally." A few individuals were convinced that the trouble had always been due to simple reasons. A New York *Times* correspondent related that those to whom he talked blamed the turbulence on drunkenness.⁸⁰ Others cited a break-down of communications between the two sides, which led to the accession to power of bad men.⁸¹ The New York *Times* observed darkly that Alabama learned to kill men for opinion's sake, and "she is now showing how power, secured by the deadly bullet of the assassin, may be perpetuated by the bogus ballot of the Registrar."⁸² The democratic process was, of course, ignored. Power once attained, had to be kept. There was no chance for a return to the situation of Reconstruction Alabama, but that it was politically rooted is shown by the decrease in violence once the natives regained their accustomed place of power.

In Reconstruction Alabama, violence became an instrument of policy, an instrument used by all segments of the political spectrum. The moderates as well as both extremes either believed or found it a necessity. The savagery's form varied, and it was used both as an offensive and as a defensive weapon. While its immediate effects can be measured, or at least docu-

among Republicans" was due to politics, and that such action caused "thousands of voters" to be lost by the Republicans.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Horn, *Empire*, 140.

⁸⁰ March 26, 1866. This view was given some credence by the Montgomery *Advertiser's* observation that "one of the most favorable signs of a better day dawning" was "the decline in the drinking of whiskey," a beverage which was losing its place to lager beer. Quoted in the *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, April 24, 1866.

⁸¹ Rhodes, "Registration," 141. This would help account for the fear and wild rumors prevalent on both sides.

⁸² October 9, 1876.

mented, the use of force to achieve political ends and influence every facet of life—social and economic as well as political—had far-ranging consequences. Such a resort to violence proved a tragic precedent for the nation, especially the New South, for even while fostering a permissive attitude toward violence, this experience showed that such a course of action could be successful, especially when the cost was ignored.

