

A CRITIC AT LARGE APRIL 8, 2019 ISSUE

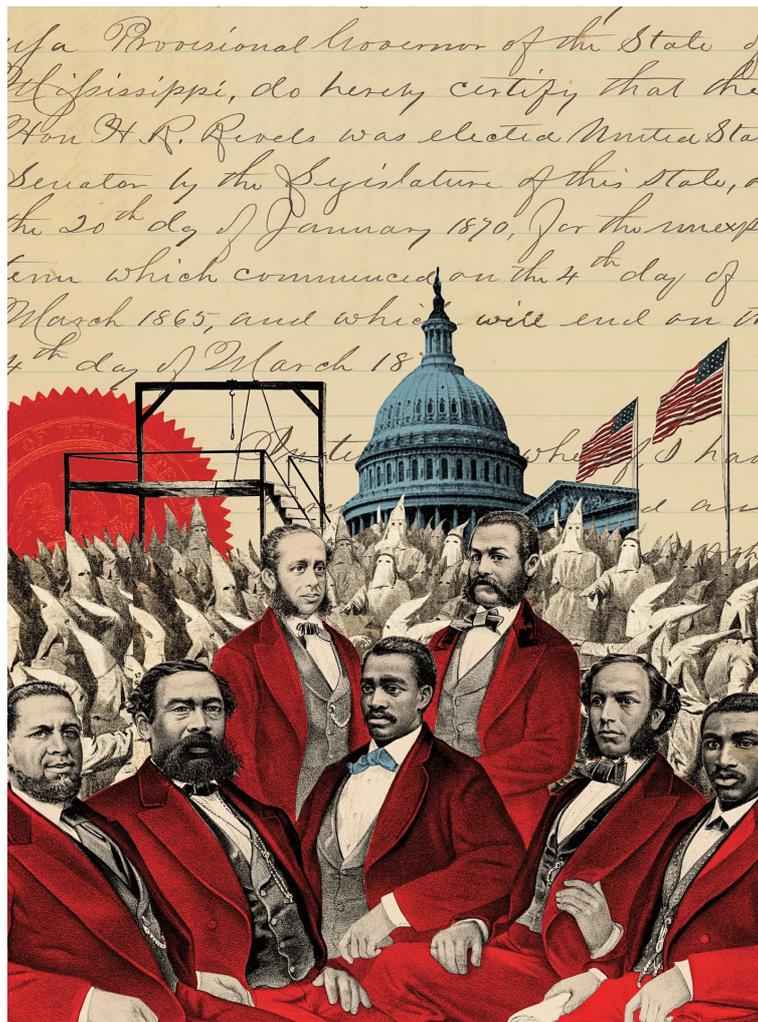
# HOW THE SOUTH WON THE CIVIL WAR

*During Reconstruction, true citizenship finally seemed in reach for black Americans. Then their dreams were dismantled.*



By Adam Gopnik

April 1, 2019



## Content

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Not so long ago, the Civil War was taken to be this country's central moral drama. Now we think that the aftermath—the confrontation not of blue and gray but of white and black, and the reimposition of apartheid through terror—is what has left the deepest mark on American history. Instead of arguing about whether the war could have turned out any other way, we argue about whether the postwar could have turned out any other way. Was there ever a fighting chance for full black citizenship, equality before the law, agrarian reform? Or did the combination of hostility and indifference among white Americans make the disaster inevitable?

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his new book, “Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow” (Penguin Press), rightly believes that this argument has special currency in the post-Obama, or mid-Trump, era. He compares the rosy confidence, in 2008, that the essential stain of American racism would fade through the elevation of a black President with the same kind of short-lived hopes found in 1865, when all the suffering of the war seemed sure to end with civil equality. Instead, the appearance of African-American empowerment seemed only to deepen the rage of a white majority. Then it brought forward Klan terrorism and Jim Crow in the South; now it has brought to power the most overtly racist President since Woodrow Wilson, openly catering to a white revanchist base. It's a depressing prospect, and Gates is properly depressed and depressing about it.

The broad outlines of the Reconstruction story have long been familiar, though the particular interpretive pressures put on particular moments have changed with every era. Toward the end of the war, Washington politicians debated what to do with the millions of newly freed black slaves. Lincoln, after foolishly toying with recolonization schemes, had settled on black suffrage, at least for black soldiers who had fought in the war. (It was a speech of Lincoln's to this effect that sealed his assassination: John Wilkes Booth, hearing it, said, “That means nigger citizenship. Now, by God, I'll put him through.”)

After Lincoln's death, his hapless and ill-chosen Vice-President, Andrew Johnson, did as much as he could to slow the process of black emancipation in the South, while the "radical" core of the abolitionist Republicans in Congress tried to advance it, and, for a while, succeeded. Long dismissed as destructive fanatics, they now seem to be voices of simple human decency. Thaddeus Stevens, the abolitionist congressman from Pennsylvania, proposed shortly after the war's end, in his "Lancaster" speech, a simple policy: punish the rebel leaders; treat the secessionist states as territories to be supervised by Congress, thus protecting the new black citizens; take the confiscated plantations on which masters had worked slaves like animals, and break up those plantations into forty-acre lots for the ex-slaves to own (a form of the classic "forty acres and a mule"). That this minimally equitable plan was long regarded as "radical" says something about how bent toward injustice the conversation quickly became.

Freed slaves eagerly participated in the first elections after the war, and distinguished black leaders went to Congress. The 1872 lithograph of "The First Colored Senator and Representatives," by Currier & Ives, no less, shows seven black men given the full weight of mid-century Seriousness, including the first black senator from Mississippi, Hiram Rhodes Revels.

But white state governments steadily reconstituted themselves. By the eighteen-nineties, they were passing laws that, piece by piece, reclaimed the right to vote for whites alone. All of this was made worse by one of those essentially theological "constitutional" points which American professors and politicians love to belabor. Lincoln's argument was always that, since it was unconstitutional for states to secede on their own, the rebel states had never seceded. The rebels were not an enemy nation; they were just a mob with a flag waiting to be policed, and the Union Army was the policeman. The idea was to limit any well-meaning attempt at negotiation, and to discourage foreign powers from treating the Confederacy as a separate state. After the war, though, this same idea implied that, since the state governments had never gone out of existence, their reborn legislatures could instantly reclaim all the rights enjoyed by states, including deciding who could vote and when.

As Stevens pointed out, the reasoning that says that no states seceded because the Constitution won't allow it would also say that no man can ever commit murder

because the law forbids it. “Black Codes” were put in place in most Southern states that, through various means, some overt and some insidious (anti-vagrancy statutes were a particular favorite), limited the rights of blacks to work and to relocate. The legislative reconquest was backed by violence: the Ku Klux Klan, formed as a terrorist organization by ex-Confederate officers, began murdering and maiming assertive black citizens. In 1877, after a mere dozen years in which black suffrage and racial equality were at least grudgingly accepted national principles, the federal government pulled its last troops from the South and, in what could be called the Great Betrayal, an order of racial subjugation was restored.

It’s a story with fewer pivotal three-day battles than the war fought over slavery, but its general shape is oddly similar: after a stunning series of victories and advances in the early years by the “rebels”—in this case, egalitarian forces—the armies of Reconstruction began to fall victim to the sheer numbers of the opposing side and to the exhaustion of their allies and reserves. Some battles, both real and rhetorical, do stand out. There were the arguments in Congress, pitting newly minted and almost impossibly eloquent black representatives against ex-Confederate politicians who a few years earlier had been sending hundreds of thousands of young men to their death in order to preserve the right to keep their new colleagues in perpetual servitude. There was the so-called Battle of Liberty Place, in New Orleans in 1874, a riot on behalf of the White League, a gang of ex-Confederate soldiers who sought to oust Louisiana’s Republican governor and its black lieutenant governor. In a moment of extraordinary moral courage, as worthy of a film as any Civil War battle, James Longstreet, the most capable of General Lee’s Confederate lieutenants, agreed to lead municipal police, including black officers, to put down the white riot and restore the elected government. He knew what it would cost him in status throughout the old Confederacy, but he did it anyway, because it was the right thing to do. Naturally, the city’s monument to the attempted coup bore an inscription that conveyed the White League’s point of view, and, sobering fact, it was scarcely two years ago that the racist memorial to the riot finally came down—with a police escort to protect the movers.

Gates emphasizes that Reconstruction was destroyed not by white terrorism alone but also by a fiendishly complicated series of ever more enervating legal and practical assaults. The Supreme Court played a crucial role in enabling the oppression of newly freed blacks, while pretending merely to be protecting the constitutional guarantee of states' rights—one more instance in which “calling balls and strikes” means refusing to see the chains on the feet of the batter. The overtly racist decision in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) arrived long after the worst was already done, but it sealed the earlier discrimination in place, and Jim Crow thrived for another half century. Meanwhile, at least some of those Northern liberal abolitionists—including the likes of Henry Adams and the well-meaning Horace Greeley—managed, in the way of high-minded reformers, to let their pieties get the better of their priorities: recoiling against the apparent improprieties of the pro-suffrage Grant Administration, they made common cause with the Democrats who were ending democracy in the South. “When, therefore, the conscience of the United States attacked corruption,” W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in his classic 1935 study, Black Reconstruction in America,” in many ways the most astute account of the period ever produced, “it at the same time attacked in the Republican Party the only power that could support democracy in the South. It was a paradox too tragic to explain.”

Gates is one of the few academic historians who do not disdain the methods of the journalist, and his book (which accompanies a four-hour PBS series he has made on the subject) is flecked with incidental interviews with and inquiries of other scholars, including the great revisionist historian Eric Foner. Though this gives the book a light, flexible, talking-out-loud texture, it is enraging to read—to

realize how high those hopes were, how close to being realized, how rapidly eradicated. That Currier & Ives lithograph of the black legislators, which Gates reproduces, takes on almost unbearable pathos. The last black U.S. representative from North Carolina was forced out of office in 1901—and there would not be another until 1991. The eclipse of formal black political power happened, in significant part, by violence. The historian David Blight estimates that, between 1867 and 1868, something like ten per cent of the blacks who attended constitutional conventions in the South were attacked by the Klan.

Gates quickly moves beyond the immediate political context of black disenfranchisement to tell the sad story of how an ideology that justified racism as science, and bigotry as reason, grew and governed minds across the country. There's the pseudoscientific racism promulgated by Louis Agassiz, of Harvard, who sought to show that blacks belonged to a separate, inferior species; the repellent but pervasive popular cartoon spectre of the black defilement of white women; the larger ideology of shame that also assigned to black men a childlike place as grinning waiters and minstrels. When they weren't raping white women, they were clowning for white kids.

The historical literature that arose to defend white supremacy was soon accepted as a chronicle of truths, especially in the countless sober-seeming memoirs of the former leaders of the slave states, including Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederacy, who insisted that slavery was a side issue in a states'-rights war. The "Lost Cause" took on popular literary form in Thomas Dixon's novel "The Clansman," which became the basis for D. W. Griffith's 1915 "The Birth of a Nation," the first great American feature film. In Griffith's Reconstruction, blacks, many played by white actors in blackface, are either menaces or morons (black legislators of the kind depicted in that lithograph spend their time in the statehouse drinking and eating), and are, thankfully, routed by the Klan—shown dressing in sheets because they have grasped the primitive African fear of ghosts.

It is still difficult to credit how long the Lost Cause lie lasted. Writing in the left-wing *The Nation*, James Agee, the brilliant film critic and the author of the text for "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," could announce, in 1948, that "Griffith's absolute desire to be fair, and understandable, is written all over the picture; so are

degrees of understanding, honesty, and compassion far beyond the capacity of his accusers. So, of course, are the salient facts of the so-called Reconstruction years.” Even as late as the nineteen-sixties, the Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison, in what was then a standard “Oxford History of the American People,” called for “ten thousand curses on the memory of that foulest of assassins, J. Wilkes Booth”—but for a surprising reason. “Not only did he kill a great and good President; he gave fresh life to the very forces of hate and vengeance which Lincoln himself was trying to kill,” Morison wrote. “Had Lincoln lived, there is every likelihood that his magnanimous policy towards the South would have prevailed; for, even after his death, it almost went through despite the Radicals.” The thought that the failure of Reconstruction had been its insufficient attention to the feelings and the interests of the white majority—like the thought that “The Birth of a Nation” should be considered to hold the “salient facts” of Reconstruction—strikes us now as astounding, but it was orthodox textbook history and criticism for an unimaginably long time, and among people who believed themselves to be progressive.

A turn in the South has happened, though. Reading Richard White’s volume “The Republic for Which It Stands,” in the new Oxford History of the United States, we could not be further from an aggrieved account of how mean Reconstruction was to the South. White, writing with a microscopically attentive eye to the fine shadings of the period, gives a full picture of terror rampant, justice recumbent, and liberty repressed. Curiously, however, he uses the old vocabulary of disdain, designating pro-Reconstruction Southern whites as “scalawags” and pro-Reconstruction Northerners as “carpetbaggers,” just as their enemies styled them. (What are the limits of appropriating a derogatory vocabulary? It is fine to call painters who had no desire to give us their impressions Impressionists, but it somehow feels unfair to use epithets that imply bad intentions where one can find purposes largely good.)

Could things have gone otherwise? Contingency counts and individuals matter. When it came to the exacting task of managing the postwar settlement, it’s hard to imagine a worse successor than Andrew Johnson. Chosen in the good-enough-to-balance-the-ticket way that Vice-Presidents so often were, right up through Harry Truman, Johnson was openly racist, poorly educated, and bad-tempered. But President Grant followed President Johnson, and Grant, as Ron Chernow showed in his recent biography, tried very hard for a while to end the terror and to maintain

what were already being called civil rights. His Attorney General, Amos Akerman, declared that the Ku Klux Klan was “the most atrocious organization that the civilized part of the world has ever known,” and helped bring in more than eleven hundred convictions against it. In 1872, the year of that glorious lithograph, the Klan was, as Chernow says, “smashed in the South.”

Yet even that hardly helped. One mistake the North made was to allow the Confederate leadership to escape essentially unscathed. Lincoln’s plea for charity and against malice was admirable, but it left out the third term of the liberal equation: charity for all, malice to none, and political reform for the persecutors. The premise of postwar de-Nazification, in Germany, was a sound one: you had to root out the evil and make it clear that it was one, and only then would minds change. The gingerly treatment of the secessionists gave the impression—more, it created the reality—that treason in defense of slavery was a forgivable, even “honorable,” difference of opinion. Despite various halfhearted and soon rescinded congressional measures to prevent ex-Confederate leaders from returning to power, many of them didn’t just skip out but skipped right back into Congress.

One might at first find it inspiring to read the gallant and generous 1874 remarks of Robert Brown Elliott, a black congressman representing South Carolina, as he defended civil rights against Representative Alexander Stephens, of Georgia, the former Vice-President of the Confederacy. Elliott’s voice is so ringing and defiant, and at the same time so uncannily courteous. “Let him put away entirely the false and fatal theories that have so greatly marred an otherwise enviable record,” he declared, addressing Stephens. “Let him accept, in its fullness and beneficence, the great doctrine that American citizenship carries with it every civil and political right which manhood can confer.” But then one recalls Abraham Lincoln’s beseeching letters to Stephens in 1860, between his election and his Inauguration, seeking some possible compromise before war came. Stephens then made it plain that slavery was the only thing at issue, and its permanent perpetuation the only demand that could never be compromised. What the hell was he *doing* back there in Congress, one wonders, after all that death and suffering? He should have counted himself lucky not to have been hanged. But he was there and, soon enough, Elliott wasn’t.

Surprisingly few in the educated classes in the South had the foresight to recognize that reform was needed for the South's own sake. Du Bois reproduces an 1866 speech from Governor Brownlow, of Andrew Johnson's own state of Tennessee, in which he stated bluntly, "I am an advocate of Negro suffrage, and impartial suffrage. I would rather associate with loyal Negroes than with disloyal white men. I would rather be buried in a Negro graveyard than in a rebel graveyard." Yet Robert E. Lee—subsequently ennobled for not actually leading a backwoods guerrilla campaign—never made a statement accepting the new order, never said, in the language of the time, something like: "A great struggle has gone on, and Providence has settled the question on the anti-slavery side. We must now accept these men as citizens and comrades, if not fully as brothers."

One Confederate general who did make the turn was Longstreet, a genuinely heroic figure. The only member of Lee's inner circle at Gettysburg who was smart enough to grasp that Lee's aggressive strategy, and thus Pickett's Charge, was doomed in advance, he was also smart enough to see that the strategy of permanent segregation was ultimately ill-fated. Yet the broader legacy of Pickett's Charge is part of the story, too. Fifty thousand casualties in three days at Gettysburg: for us, those are numbers; for their countrymen, it was fifty thousand fathers and sons and brothers wounded or dead. War weariness is essential to the shape of the postwar collapse. The hope that, in 1870, even a well-intended cohort of former abolitionists would focus properly on the denial of civil rights to blacks in the South was morally ambitious in a way that is not entirely realistic. Richard White, like many others, points to the retreat on the part of Northern liberals from aggressively advocating for black rights, while perhaps not sufficiently stressing one good reason for it: the unimaginable brutality many had experienced in fighting the war. In ways that Louis Menand explored in his book "The Metaphysical Club," it left a generation stripped of the appetite for more war-making and even (as Menand has argued) of any confidence in moral absolutism. The horror of the Civil War made it difficult to accept that more fighting might be necessary to secure its gains. Nothing is easier to spark than an appetite for war, and nothing harder to sustain than a continued appetite for war once a country learns what war is really like. War hunger and war hatred are parts of the same cycle of mass arousal and inhibition.

The other brutality lay in the strange demographics of race in America: basically, the black people were in the South, and their natural allies were in the North. Even today, African-Americans form a huge nation, almost forty-four million people—bigger than Australia or Canada—but they also represent only about thirteen per cent of the U.S. population, never large enough to act without allies. In the postwar period, clustered in the South, they found that their chief ethnic allies were far away. This demographic paradox—a population large enough to be terrifying to the majority population nearby but not large or concentrated enough to claim its own national territory—was part of the tragedy, and increased the brutality by increasing the fear. The adjusted percentage of the Jewish population in Poland before the Holocaust was similar, and had similar implications: enough to loom large in the minds of their haters, not enough to be able to act without assistance in the face of an oppressor.

Gates goes on to illuminate the complex efforts of black intellectuals, in the face of the reimposition of white rule, to find a sane and safe position against it. The “New South” was met by the “New Negro,” a phrase that arose in the eighteen-nineties. The emancipated, educated, fully literary black bourgeoisie would undeniably be a full citizen. This urge to “earn” full citizenship by effort instead of by claiming it as a birthright seems forlorn now, a product of minds exposed so long to toxic bigotry that some of it had seeped inside and curdled into self-hatred. But, as Gates shows, it was possible to be entirely committed to the rights of black people while still being convinced of the need for education to uplift them—indeed, while still voicing sympathy for the travails of the defeated South. Hiram Rhodes Revels, the black senator from Mississippi, who is on the left in that Currier & Ives lithograph, blamed Republican interlopers for bringing racial discord to the South, writing to Grant in 1875 that, “since Reconstruction, the masses of my people have been, as it were, enslaved in mind by unprincipled adventurers, who, caring nothing for country, were willing to stoop to anything, no matter how infamous, to secure power to themselves, and perpetuate it. . . . The bitterness and hate created by the late civil strife has, in my opinion, been obliterated in this state, except perhaps in some localities, and would have long since been entirely obliterated, were it not for some unprincipled men who would keep alive the bitterness of the past, and inculcate a hatred between the races, in order that they may aggrandize themselves

by office.” Revels himself left his Senate seat after a year and became the head of the newly formed Alcorn University, devoting the rest of his life to educational uplift.

It is easy to regard leaders like Revels (including, later, the electorally reticent Booker T. Washington) as “Uncle Toms”—a term that, Gates notes, doesn’t become pejorative until the next century. But their reading of the circumstance assumed, optimistically, that once blacks had earned equality they would be treated equally. They believed passionately that the ex-slave population, degraded by centuries of slavery, needed to be educated into the professions. The New Negro, as he emerged in the twentieth century, was so narrowly focussed on literary and scholarly accomplishment that he tended, Gates insists, to neglect the most astounding cultural achievement of his own country and kin. “There was, in fact, a genuine renaissance occurring during the Harlem literary renaissance, but it wasn’t among the writers,” Gates observes. “The renaissance was occurring among those great geniuses of black vernacular culture, the musicians who created the world’s greatest art form in the twentieth century—jazz.” The New Negroes were hardly alone among aspirational Americans in the pathos and dignity of their respectability; one sees the same attempt to outwit the oppressor by becoming like the oppressor among the lace-curtain Irish or the stained-glass Jews. Indeed, combining the New Negro emphasis on formal education with a more capacious understanding of the riches of black inheritance was a task that, Gates understands, had to be left for later generations, not least his own.

**R**evisionism always risks revising right out of existence not just the old, too rosy account but also the multi-hued reality. Here there are lessons we can take from Du Bois’s extraordinary, prophetic history. For the curious thing is that Du Bois pays more attention to the enduring legacy of Reconstruction than have many of his revisionist successors. At a time when the era had been reduced to the D. W. Griffith fable of illiterate blacks conspiring with opportunistic whites, Du Bois wanted to assert the lasting value and significance of what *had* been achieved in the all too brief period of black political enfranchisement. We couldn’t understand the enormity of the betrayal, Du Bois thought, if we didn’t understand the magnitude of what was betrayed. So, along with the horrors of terrorism and the slow crawl of renascent white supremacy, Du Bois also registers the accomplishments that Reconstruction created in its brief moment: public-health departments were

established where none had existed before; public education for blacks began— miserably underfunded, but, still, there were schools where less than a decade before it had been a crime for a slave to learn to read. This is a view that Foner shares as well. As he writes, “Although black schools and colleges remained woefully underfunded, education continued to be available to most African Americans. And the autonomous family and church, pillars of the black community that emerged during Reconstruction, remained vital forces in black life, and the springboard from which future challenges to racial injustice would emerge.”

It’s also why Frederick Douglass, in ways that seem puzzling to us now, was not so single-mindedly incensed about the Great Betrayal as one might have expected. Described by his detractors as simply having lost the appetite for the fight, in truth he must have had a clear enough memory of what chattel slavery had been like not to confuse it with subjection. The oppressed—blacks on their land, Jews in their shtetl—can build cultural fellowships that ease their burden and point a path out. The enslaved—blacks in the cabins, Jews in the camps—have no plausible path at all. It is at once not enough of a difference and all the difference in the world.



*“Of course having dinner with your parents is important to me. I just don’t know how much longer I’m going to be in this whale.”*



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Du Bois tries strenuously to fit the story of the end of Reconstruction into a Marxist framework: the Southern capitalists were forcing serfdom upon their agricultural laborers in parallel to the way that the Northern ones were forcing it on their industrial workers. His effort is still echoed in some contemporary scholarship. But an agricultural class reduced to serfdom is exactly the kind of stagnant arrangement that capitalism chafes against. Sharecropping is not shareholding. When the entrepreneurial white South wanted to assert its departure from the antebellum order, it invoked a South emancipated from the planter classes and, in a slogan from the next century, now “too busy to hate.” At the same time, the agrarian rhetoric of the restored South was always an anti-modernist rhetoric, antagonistic toward bourgeois free enterprise. (That the so-called “Southern Agrarian” school later assembled some of America’s leading literary modernists is among the long-term ironies in the story.)

In truth, sharecropping, coupled with a cotton monoculture, was a terrible model for economic development, and, indeed, left the South long impoverished. Du Bois poises “property and privilege” against “race and culture” as causes that led to the reconquest of the South by white supremacy, and, though his Marxist training insists that it must somehow all be property and privilege, his experience as an American supplies a corrective afterthought or two. The motives of the South were, as Du Bois eventually suggests, essentially ideological and tribal, rather than economic. He recognized that, in a still familiar pattern, poor whites “would rather have low wages upon which they could eke out an existence than see colored labor with a decent wage,” and saw in “every advance of the Negroes a threat to their racial prerogatives.” It is the same formula of feeling that makes the “white working class” angrier at the thought that Obamacare might be subsidizing shiftless people of color than receptive to the advantages of having medical coverage for itself. Du Bois called it a “psychological wage,” but this is to give a Marxist-sounding name to a non-Marxist phenomenon: ethnic resentment and clan consciousness are social forces far more powerful than economic class. It reflects the permanent truth that all people, including poor people, follow their values, however perverted, rather than their interests, however plain.

here's no era in which thought is monolithic, and late-nineteenth-century America was probably as disputatious as any era has been. Gates charts the growth of Social Darwinism as well as the "biological" racism of Louis Agassiz—but it's worth emphasizing that Agassiz was a racist because he was fervently *anti*-Darwinian. His student William James, on a naturalist's expedition with him to Brazil, saw through his prejudices. There is no shortage of radical egalitarian thought at the time, coming from figures who were by no means marginalized. Thaddeus Stevens chose to be buried in an integrated cemetery, with the inscription on his stone reading "Finding other Cemeteries limited as to Race by Charter Rules, I have chosen this that I might illustrate in my death, the Principles which I advocated through a long life: EQUALITY OF MAN BEFORE HIS CREATOR."

And then the most famous American text by the most famous American writer of the period was Mark Twain's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," which, published in the eighteen-eighties and set half a century earlier, manages to take in all the stereotypes of the post-Reconstruction era (Jim is a type of the comic Negro) while complicating them in ways that remain stirring, and ending with an unequivocal gesture toward the equality of black and white, when Huck decides that he will go to Hell rather than betray a black friend. When the right side loses, it does not always mean that the truth has not been heard. We are too inclined to let what happens next determine the meaning of what happened before, and to suppose that the real meaning of Reconstruction was its repudiation. It's a style of thought that sees the true meaning of dinner as the next day's hunger and the real meaning of life as death. And yet yesterday's good deeds remain good even if today's bad ones occlude them.

There is plenty of cause to denounce the liberal institutions of the era, North and South and West, in the face of the reënslavement of the era's black people. But, even reading White's fiercely disabused history of the period, one can still be astonished by the degree to which liberal institutions worked to curb the worst social sadism that, until then, had been a commonplace of human history. It can be helpful to expand the historical scale just a tad. Although the failure of the Republic to sustain its ideals is appallingly self-evident, elections involving millions of people were held routinely, if imperfectly; venal bosses like Boss Tweed, instead of sending on power to his son, were tried and imprisoned; Jews worshipped freely; freethinkers

flourished; immigrants settled; reformers raged against corruption, and, in a few key cases, won their battle; dissent, even radical dissent, was aired and, though sporadically persecuted was, on the whole, heard and tolerated. No arrangement like it had ever been known before on so large a scale in human history. Compared with the system's ambitions and pretensions, it was as nothing. But, compared with the entirety of human history before, it was, in its way, quite something.

What is true and tragic is that the black population benefitted least of all from these institutions. Yet the same more than flawed institutions, in turn, enabled freed slaves, as Foner maintains, to build the social capital that would allow them to find ways around the supremacists. How did *that* happen? One turns back to Gates's best book, the incandescent memoir "Colored People," with its evocation of Piedmont, West Virginia, in the nineteen-fifties and sixties. Gates is clear-eyed about the patterns of bigotry that still obtained—only he would see that "Leave It to Beaver" was, above all, a television show about property—but he provides an intimate and affectionate sense of how all the richness of clan connection becomes cultural connection, of how the world of his childhood was illuminated by profound family relations and an enormously bountiful cultural heritage, in music, certainly, but in dance and literature and, yes, athleticism, too. (Athletics because it was the one place, he says, where blacks and whites directly butted heads, and blacks won.)

Accepting Gates's observation that jazz, and the popular music that flowed from it and through it, is the greatest of American inventions, we have to recognize both the bigotry that impeded it and the extraordinary self-emerging social institutions that empowered it. Every life of a great jazz musician shows us both—social sadism beyond belief to be endured, but also social networks of support, filled with intimately collaborative and competitive relationships, artists both supporting and outdoing one another—the creation of the great cutting contest that E. H. Gombrich long ago identified as the core engine of artistic progress. The most influential of American musicians, Louis Armstrong, suffered from bigotry in New Orleans, but there was the Colored Waif's home to teach him the cornet, a sympathetic Jewish émigré family with a thriving tailor shop to help him buy one, a talent contest at the Iroquois Theatre that a poor black boy could win, and even a saloon where he could go to hear, and later be hired by, the great King Oliver. In the town where the white mob had lynched blacks to end their freedom, the black

victims had improvised institutions to enable it. Sustaining traditions were available, at a price.

The moral arc of the universe *is* long. Eight years of Obama may be followed by eight of Trump, but the second cannot annihilate the first. At one point in “Stony the Road,” Gates writes wisely of images as weapons. Imagery can indeed have agency, but this takes actors—bad actors who weaponize the imagery. Anti-Semitic caricatures had persisted for centuries; *Der Stürmer’s* anti-Semitic cartoons had to be weaponized by Hitler. Patterns of oppression can be held in place only by oppressive people.

This is why the greatest divide among historians is between the academics who tend to see people as points of compressed social forces and those popular historians, chiefly biographers, who see the actors as nearly the whole of the story. The academics study the tides of history, while the popular historians go out fishing to find (and tag) the big fish that presumably make the ocean worth watching. The tidalists have the tenure, but the fishermen sell all the books. Gates, who is expert at both, catching fish while seeing tides, leaves us with a simple, implicit moral: a long fight for freedom, with too many losses along the way, can be sustained only by a rich and complicated culture. Resilience and resistance are the same activity, seen at different moments in the struggle. It’s a good thought to hold on to now. ♦

An earlier version of this article misidentified the state that Thaddeus Stevens represented and the kind of cemetery he was buried in.

*Published in the print edition of the April 8, 2019, issue, with the headline “The Takeback.”*



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