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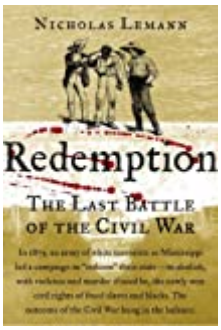

Nicholas Lemann. *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006. xi + 257 pp. $24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-24855-0.

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Nearly one month after resigning as governor of Mississippi, Adelbert Ames told a *New York Times* reporter in April 1876 that he did not blame the northern public for dismissing reports of fraud and violence in southern elections. "Before I went South," the Maine-born, former Union general explained, " ... I do not think that any amount of human testimony could have induced me to believe in such a condition of society as exists in Mississippi."[1] Ames knew that it was difficult for northerners to believe that heavily armed paramilitary organizations would scatter peaceful political gatherings, that ballot boxes were stolen and burned, that public officials could be gunned down in broad daylight in the center of town, and that battles erupted between white and black militias in response to local elections.

The electoral violence of the mid-1870s remains perplexing. Although historians have documented the violent counterrevolution that undermined Reconstruction, the general public knows little of these events and seems skeptical that white terrorists could have so brazenly subverted democratic governance in the United States. Nicholas Lemann's intention in *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* is to bring this forgotten story to a wider audience and explain why southern democracy and civil rights were snuffed out.

Redemption covers incidents of political violence in Mississippi and Louisiana between 1873 and 1876. Beginning with the Colfax massacre, Lemann lays out the major themes of the Redemption period. On Easter Sunday, 1873, a heavily armed white paramilitary force attacked black supporters of the recently elected black sheriff of Grant Parish who were holed up in the courthouse. Surrounded and outgunned, the black defenders held off the white army from behind earthworks, but the tables turned once the whites succeeded in setting fire to the courthouse. With nowhere left to hide, the blacks tried to run away but were cut down by a barrage of gunfire. Some were captured and then summarily executed; others held out in the courthouse, only to be consumed by the flames. At least seventy-one blacks were killed at Colfax. The struggle between white Democrats and black Republicans concerned, first and foremost, power: "who could vote and hold government office" (p. 4).

The other notable aspect of this period was the lack of accountability for the violence. The new sheriff of Grant Parish headed the army of white supremacists and was uninterested in probing his own actions or his supporters. A Republican state judge attempted to initiate criminal proceedings, but a mob of armed white men forced the judge to back down. The federal courts obtained indictments and three convictions, but the Supreme Court, in the landmark *Cruickshank* decision, negated these re-

sults, ruling that it was the states', not the federal government's, responsibility to protect citizens' rights. The effect was to validate the violence of the white terrorists as a means of wresting control of government from the hands of Republicans. For years, Democrats had tried all manner of intimidation, persuasion, and coercion to convince freedmen not to vote with the Republican Party. In 1873, the solution presented itself–drive black elected officeholders from power with overwhelming force. In the words of one White Liner, the intent of the violence was "to strike terror to the hearts of these negro men" (p. 157).

The Civil War "had, in effect broken out again," claims Lemann, but this "Last Battle" was very different from the theater of war in the 1860s (p. 28). To be sure the Union army played a pivotal role in protecting state officeholders, particularly in New Orleans, but the federal military presence in the 1870s was a shell of its former self. More pointedly, this new conflict was a war within local communities, not a sectional conflict. White neighbors faced off against black neighbors, southern Democrats vs. southern Republicans. It was not just the last phase of the Civil War but a new sectarian conflict that ripped apart communities all across the South.

Given the internecine component of this period, it is odd that Lemann chose Adelbert Ames as the main protagonist. As a white northerner, Ames had much less at stake in the conflict than the warring factions. Unlike local Republican politicians and ordinary black Mississippians, he benefited from state police protection and never considered Mississippi his home. But Ames's experience as an elected governor of Mississippi (1874-76) puts into high relief the revolutionary changes in racial attitudes and the equally sweeping changes in partisan politics.

At the end of the Civil War, Ames, like most white northerners, was skeptical that freedpeople deserved citizenship and equal rights. Nonetheless, he saw in the newly enfranchised black voters an opportunity to achieve substantial political power. After a short term as military governor, he convinced Mississippi's legislators (many of them black) to make him a U.S. senator. Next, he married Blanche Butler, daughter of Benjamin Butler, a leading Radical Republican with close ties to President Ulysses S. Grant. His quick ascent seemed to presage a long career in politics. While campaigning across the state, he realized that his earlier view of simpleminded freedpeople did not begin to describe the sophisticated black voters who he encountered at large political rallies. No longer merely concerned about attaining influential positions, Ames became convinced that African Americans' rights needed to be protected and that he was the one to do it. By 1873, Ames had won the governorship outright, ushering in "a new political order" that was as revolutionary as it was short-lived (p. 61).

Not long after Ames settled in the governor's mansion, White Liners seized control of the county government in Vicksburg. "Well-financed terrorists," writes Lemann, "were engaged in what seemed to be a planned campaign to unseat the Republican Party, and undo Negroes' civil rights and voting rights" (p. 76). In the next year, the white supremacist campaign repeated itself in places like Yazoo City, Clinton, and Port Gibson as armed white mobs seized local government offices and dared Ames or President Grant to send troops to re-establish legitimate governance. Reluctant to send the state militia since white militiamen would not fight other whites and the use of black militiamen threatened to expand the ever-widening conflict, Ames begged Grant for federal troops. But Grant, more concerned about looming elections in Ohio and a northern public that had soured on federal intervention, dithered and delayed. With federal and state power seemingly impotent, White Liners broke up Republican meetings, intimidated black voters, hunted officeholders, and murdered black community leaders. From the relative comfort of the governor's mansion, Ames witnessed the unfolding chaos but could do little to arrest the tide. Writing to his wife, Ames accurately understood the implications of the terrorism: "Yes, a *revolution* has taken place–by force of arms–and a race are disfranchised–they are to be returned to a condition of serfdom–an era of second slavery" (p. 132).

Applying the lessons from the 1875 election, Democratic parties in South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana instituted the so-called Mississippi Plan and overthrew the last remaining Republican governments in the former Confederacy. The abandonment of black citizens became complete when Republicans cut a deal to elevate Rutherford B. Hayes to the presidency. The South, in the words of the terrorists and their fellow travelers in the Democratic Party, had been redeemed. But the Redemption story was just gaining traction. In the last chapter of the book, Lemann charts how the story of black incompetence, carpetbagger malfeasance, and federal abuse of power spread from Thomas Dixon to William A. Dunning to John F. Kennedy, and in the process became a defining myth in American culture.

There is much to like about this book. Lemann, the dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University, utilizes an array of manuscript collections

and congressional records to bring this neglected history to a wider audience. Although the book adds little to the scholarship on Reconstruction, the story is well told and suitable for undergraduate courses.

A few mistakes, however, tarnish slightly what is otherwise a forceful presentation. The Black Codes applied not just to freed slaves but to all persons of color (p. 34). Hiram Revels was never "Mississippi's leading black politician," but a compromise candidate with limited influence (p. 48). More troubling is Lemann's use of racial terminology. At the outset, he informs the reader that he sought to use "contemporary" words to make the story more "vivid and resonant," and so he favors "Negro" over "African American" or "black" (p. xi). Other contemporary terms, such as "freedmen," are curiously neglected even though the author cites sources that use the same words. In an otherwise highly readable book, it is distracting when Lemann refers to a young black man seeking entry into West Point as a "colored boy" (p. 47).

Despite these criticisms, *Redemption* succeeds in linking southern political violence of the 1870s to the Civil War, demonstrating that the war was about citizenship, equal rights, and democracy. Furthermore, Lemann shows that the Reconstruction effort, in spite of its internal problems, succumbed to an unprecedented wave of terrorism. Hopefully, this critical look at Redemption will help to puncture the myths that remain a fixture in popular memory of Reconstruction.

Note

[1]. *New York Times*, May 2, 1876.

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