

**The 1873 Battle of Colfax :  
Paramilitarism and Counterrevolution in Louisiana<sup>1</sup>**

James K. Hogue  
Associate Professor of History  
UNC-Charlotte

---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Southern Historical Association Conference in Atlanta, GA on November 6, 1997. The author wishes to thank Leon Litwack, Joel Sipress, Dianne Miller Sommerville, James McPherson, Arno Mayer, and Paul Miles, Jr. for their insightful comments and the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation for its financial support.

In 1873, in the town of Colfax, Louisiana, a thirteen day siege, battle, and massacre took place between black and white Civil War veterans that played a critical role in destroying Radical Reconstruction, not only in Grant Parish and Louisiana but throughout the states of the former Confederacy. In April of that year, hundreds of armed black militia and their families flocked to the parish seat; commandeered the parish courthouse; and formed themselves into organized squads and companies. Like any well organized militia of their day, they drilled in the streets; dug entrenchments; attempted to procure heavy weapons and reserves; and posted sentries to defend the limits of the area they commanded. Their leader, William Ward, was a former slave and a veteran of the Union Army. He was also the acknowledged black political leader of the parish, a state representative, and captain of a state militia company. Within days, a white paramilitary force from Grant Parish and the surrounding parishes gathered in the hundreds at an armed camp near the town. At last, they issued an ultimatum threatening an assault if the militia did not promptly vacate the town. Their leader, Captain C. C. Nash, was in some ways a curious mirror-image of his black counterpart: a captain in the Confederate army, Nash was a veteran of thirty six engagements in the Civil War-- and apparently a number of vigilante actions in Louisiana since then. Before it was over, this showdown on the Red River resulted in the call-up of units from the Radical-controlled state militia, a military occupation by units of the federal Army, and a tragic anticlimax in a landmark case decided in the Supreme Court of the United States that defined the constitutional scope of the Fourteenth Amendment. But to understand the battle of Colfax first requires a deeper understanding of the historical forces at work in the wake of the Second American Revolution.

Few chapters in American history have been the subject of more conflicting interpretations than Reconstruction. Before the 1960's, the prevailing interpretation emphasized the evils of Radical Reconstruction: the corruption of the carpetbagger regimes ruling over state governments in the former

Confederacy; the tyrannical use of "bayonet rule" by the federal government; and the general unfitness of the freedmen for democratic self-rule. Since then, the aftershocks of the Civil Rights movement have generated repeated waves of historical revision that have significantly altered-- if not entirely demolished-- the older view. New emphasis has been placed on the powerful transformations in political, social, and economic relations within the South as well as the agency of the freedmen struggling to create a new society upon the ruins of an old one. Eric Foner, perhaps the most prominent of the new revisionists of Reconstruction history, refers to the period as "America's Unfinished Revolution."<sup>2</sup>

Yet, the very magnitude of this revolution that left no facet of Southern life untouched by its effects, begs a question implicit in Foner's title: why was this revolution "unfinished?" To be sure, historians have grappled with several dimensions of this question. Many of the early revisionists, emphasizing political factors, drew attention to the weakness of the Republican Party's dedication to civil and political rights for the freedmen, which paved the way for a national retreat from Reconstruction in the 1870's and beyond.<sup>3</sup> Others, including Foner himself, emphasize the primacy of economic factors, particularly the devastating impact of the Panic of 1873 and the long depression that followed on a Southern economy already reeling from the effects of the Civil War.<sup>4</sup> Still other historians, including C. Vann Woodward and Joel Williamson, have underlined the inherited and all but intractable problem of social relations

---

<sup>2</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). See Foner's preface for a comprehensive review of the historiographical shifts in the interpretation of Reconstruction.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, William McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather: General O. O. Howard and the Freedmen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968); William Gillette, *Retreat from Reconstruction: A Political History, 1867-1878* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979); and Michael Perman, *The Road to Redemption: Southern Politics, 1869-1879* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univeristy of North Carolina Press, 1984).

<sup>4</sup>Foner *Reconstruction*, pp. 512-563; and Mark W. Summers, *Railroads, Reconstruction, and the Gospel of Prosperity: Aid under the Radical Republicans, 1865-1877* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

between the races as central to the resurgence of white supremacy and the fall of a brief experiment in biracial democracy.<sup>5</sup>

All of these factors no doubt played their roles in the waning of Reconstruction, but they seem to miss a blunt fact as well: at the grass roots level, Reconstruction as a revolutionary process was not so much "unfinished"-- like, for example, a house that never got a roof or a chimney-- as it was destroyed: more like a house (or perhaps even more appropriately, a church) that was burned to the ground and whose inhabitants were massacred, exiled, or terrorized into submission. It makes little sense to map out the historical progress of Reconstruction as a revolutionary experience without at the same time delineating the actions of counterrevolutionary forces dedicated to effacing that progress.<sup>6</sup>

One way to make sense of the dynamics of revolution and counterrevolution in Reconstruction might be to see the era as a kind of protracted civil war after the Civil War, whose ultimate prize was not an independent Southern nation, but the re-establishment of power over local and state governments across the former Confederacy. Unfortunately, most of the existing scholarship of American military history is not much help. For most historians of war, the era of Reconstruction-- following directly on the heels of America's largest and most dramatic war-- scarcely seems to exist at all. Russell Weigley, probably the best known historian of the United States Army in the

---

<sup>5</sup>C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 3rd ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); and Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> See Arno J. Mayer, *The Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe, 1870-1956: An Analytic Framework* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) for a theoretical exposition of the problem of counterrevolution in nineteenth and twentieth century European history. According to Mayer's model, the secession of the Confederate states in 1861 was a "preemptive counterrevolution," determined to prevent the demise of slavery foreseeable in the election of Abraham Lincoln as president. The repeated and then cresting waves of violence after 1865 correspond to his conception of "posterior counterrevolutions," which did not completely restore the old regime (i.e., plantation slavery), but rather retrieved as much of it as was possible within the structure of a federal polity which continued to recognize great latitude in state governments' authority to determine voting rights, civil rights, and property rights.

second half of the twentieth century, did not consider the Army's role in Reconstruction significant enough to merit a passage, let alone a chapter, in his *The American Way of War*, even though Reconstruction lasted longer than the Civil War (twelve years versus five); embroiled the U.S. Army in a string of national crises revolving around civil-military relations (the impeachment of Andrew Johnson and the question of "bayonet rule" in both the national elections of 1872 and 1876); and consumed a significant portion of the attention of the Army's leadership after the Civil War.<sup>7</sup>

The failure of historians of war to treat Reconstruction with the same degree of attention that it has received from other historians stems in part from the conceptual problem of violence in Reconstruction. For many-- if not most--military historians, defining a particular historical episode as "war" demands the presence of massed armies fighting great battles for organized governments.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup>Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of the United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1977). Weigley's *History of the United States Army* (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1984), does include a section on Reconstruction, but only within a framework which treats the post-Civil War period as an era in which the Federal Army lacked a defining mission. His work also skirts the creation of Radical state militias as a significant historical experience, linking black military service in the Union Army to black aspirations for political power and autonomy in Reconstruction. The monograph on the role of the U.S. Army in Louisiana, Joseph Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction: Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), contains a wealth of primary source detail from official U.S. Army records but never comes to grips with the central facts of ex-Confederate veterans' determination to oust the Radicals from power and the Army from its constabulary role of surveillance over the states' elections. The standard work on the history of the militia in the United States, John K. Mahon, *History of the Militia and the National Guard* (New York: Macmillan, 1983), is an uncritical chronicle of the rise of the National Guard which has little to say about either black state militias or white paramilitary groups in Reconstruction. The latter is a particularly curious omission, considering the critical role paramilitary leaders invariably played in recasting the state militia and the emerging of the National Guard in states "redeemed" by Conservative forces.

<sup>8</sup>Terminology is a key problem in analyzing what I have referred to as the "battles" of Reconstruction. John Keegan, the popular military historian and author of *The Face of Battle* would might not agree to call the events I analyze here as "battles." Most historical accounts, regardless of interpretation, invariably and often uncritically describe the events which took place in Grant Parish in 1873 as a "riot." Similar episodes in the South during Reconstruction, such as the Hamburg "Riot" in South Carolina in 1876 are still described to this day in equally evasive and erroneous terms. Revisionist historical accounts sometimes use the term "massacre" for these events, but I find that term misleading as well. Atrocities which can be described as "massacres" certainly did take place during Reconstruction-- one took place right after the battle

Reconstruction never presented so tidy a picture. After Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Confederate veterans never again took up arms in the hope of winning Southern independence from the United States. Nonetheless, their willingness to take up arms after 1865 became the cornerstone for numerous campaigns against local and state governments in the South that helped overthrow Reconstruction's achievements "from the bottom up." While not every Confederate veteran became a violent enemy of Reconstruction, every violent campaign against Reconstruction crystallized around the leadership and participation of Confederate veterans.

Although it varied considerably by time and place, in general, the counterrevolution against Reconstruction took on three distinguishable but overlapping phases. The initial and best known phase of resistance was vigilante action, made infamous by the Ku Klux Klan. It featured covert terrorist actions, usually by small groups operating at night or in disguise, or both. Vigilante action by Confederate veterans, especially in early Reconstruction from 1865 to 1872, was directed against a broad and indiscriminate range of targets, including schools, churches, local Republican officials, as well as freedmen and their families. While vigilante action undeniably produced waves of terror that inflicted considerable damage and doubtlessly blunted the growth of the Radical political infrastructure in the South, it was generally not as politically effective as has frequently been imagined, partly because of its indiscriminate nature, and partly because it was so unfocused and undisciplined that it provoked a series of countermeasures, such as the recruitment of Radical state militias, the federal

---

of Colfax. The term "massacre," however, cannot stand alone to describe the events at Colfax because it carries the connotation that one side was either unarmed or did not fight back. This was, as I hope to demonstrate in the text, not the case at Colfax nor in many of these battles in Reconstruction where black Union veterans were armed, organized, politically aware, and unquestionably fought back against armed vigilante, paramilitary, and Conservative militia attacks. See John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), pp. 296-297.

intervention of the U. S. Army and the newly-created and empowered Department of Justice.<sup>9</sup>

Paramilitary action represented a second and intermediate stage of violence by white supremacists, which began in 1873 and in some cases continued well past 1877. Despite the fact that they were often described as "riots"—suggestive of a good measure of spontaneity-- paramilitary actions demanded extensive planning and mobilization to bring hundreds of armed men together against targets that had been chosen after considerable-- if not always careful-- deliberation. Unlike vigilante action, little about paramilitary action was covert. Paramilitary leaders were invariably well-known local leaders, often addressed in public by the military rank they had earned as Confederate Army officers. Their identities were generally known in public, and they usually sought rather than shunned exposure in local media, a key shift that differentiated paramilitary action from vigilante action. Favored targets of the paramilitaries (variously known as White Leagues, Red Shirts, or rifle companies) tended to be more complex but more focused targets: local governments, black militia companies, or Republican political rallies. Timing of the paramilitary action was also critical, with disruption of fall election campaigns the most prized goal. Organized with sufficient care and numbers, the successful paramilitary action might result in political capitulation and dissolution on the spot with only the threat, rather than the actual use of force. In any case, an assault against local Republican officials and party leaders frequently produced one party rule in some counties or parishes for decades

---

<sup>9</sup>There has been considerable scholarship on Reconstruction violence. While some of it is quite good, in general it has, in this author's view, two significant shortcomings. First, it does not adequately explore the origins of Reconstruction violence in the Confederate military experience. Secondly, it overemphasizes vigilante organization like the Ku Klux Klan at the expense of later white supremacists groups (both paramilitaries and militias), which were at least as violent and usually more successful. See especially Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan*, 3rd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press,

because it triggered the slaughter of many of the fragile first generation of leaders among the freedmen and exile or intimidation for the remainder. Although they often emphatically disavowed any explicit political intent, paramilitaries in effect acted as the armed wing of the Conservative/ Democratic party and were frequently one and the same.

The most sophisticated stage of counterrevolution, present only in Louisiana and Arkansas but contemplated in Mississippi in 1875 and South Carolina in 1877, was the formation of a quasi-legal militia to challenge the Radical state militia in battle and a formal plan to overthrow the state government in the capital by *coup d'état*. Various armed combinations attempted coups against the state government in New Orleans in 1872, 1873, 1874, and 1877. The coups of 1872 and 1873 failed through a variety of factors, some of which could be traced to defects in the internal designs of the coup plotters themselves, but partly because of the efficacy of the actions of the Radical militia. Coups in 1874 and 1877 both succeeded, but the 1874 coup was reversed by the intervention of federal troops, a factor anticipated by the coup plotters but not adequately countered. The coup of 1877, building upon the experience of previous failures, succeeded not simply because the counterrevolutionaries in New Orleans organized a large and tightly disciplined militia force, but also because they wielded it with considerable political sophistication, both at home and through their representatives in Washington during the paralyzing national crisis that attended the disputed Presidential election of 1876.<sup>10</sup>

---

1987); and George C. Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction*, (Athens, GA: Georgia University Press, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> The literature on the *coup d'état* is thin, but stimulating. See especially Curzio Malapart, *Technique du Coup d'Etat* (Paris: Glasse, 1931); Edward Luttwak, *Coup D'Etat: A Practical Handbook* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), which argues for the "political neutrality" of the coup d'état in the modern era; and a blistering rejoinder in a review of Luttwak's work by Eric J. Hobsbawm, "Coup d'Etat," in *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays* (New York: Pantheon, 1973), which makes a cogent case for the conservative, if not reactionary, orientation of those with the military experience needed to launch coups.



### *Grant Parish and the Origins of the Battle of Colfax*

Fittingly enough, Grant Parish was a child of Reconstruction, created in 1869 by the Radical-controlled Louisiana Legislature and its notorious carpetbag governor, Henry Clay Warmoth. Warmoth, who was a lawyer and former colonel in the Union Army, hoped that creating a number of new parishes in contested areas across the state would help Republican rule take root at the local level and make it more difficult for his Conservative political opponents to control the newly enfranchised freedmen.<sup>11</sup> Warmoth's fears were well placed. In 1866, the New Orleans police, then dominated by Confederate Army veterans, tried to forestall the coming of black enfranchisement when they inflicted a bloody massacre on blacks and whites.<sup>12</sup> Warmoth became governor in 1868 thanks only to the armed surveillance of voter registration and polling by the U.S. Army. In their first legislative session, Republicans held narrow majorities of 56 to 45 in the House and 20 to 16 in the Senate. The creation of eight new parishes in Louisiana during Reconstruction-- deliberately gerrymandered to

---

<sup>11</sup> See Henry Clay Warmoth, *War, Politics, and Reconstruction: Stormy Days in Louisiana* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1930) and Richard Nelson Current's collective biography of Northerners who went South after the war (in which Warmoth is a key character), *Those Terrible Carpetbaggers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Joe Gray Taylor in *Louisiana Reconstructed, 1863-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), p. 209, suggested that Warmoth was the most powerful governor in the history of Louisiana, except for Huey Long, and that Long styled his dictatorial methods of rule after a careful study of Warmoth, a view first proposed by T. Harry Williams in his still controversial work, *Huey Long* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), pp. 183-184.

<sup>12</sup> Warmoth personally witnessed scenes of the New Orleans massacre of 1866 from a balcony overlooking Canal Street and knew many of those killed and wounded in the attack. In his first months as governor, he was helpless to stop vigilante attacks aimed at preventing a large black turnout supporting Grant and the Republican ticket in the fall of 1868. These harrowing experiences powerfully shaped his views on the need for stronger state police powers in the form of the Metropolitan Police and the Radical militia. See Warmoth, *War, Politics, and Reconstruction*, pp. 49-50. A study of the origins of the New Orleans massacre of 1866 is found in Gilles Vandal, *The New Orleans Riot of 1866: Anatomy of a Tragedy* (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern 1983). Vigilante actions of 1868 are covered in Melinda Meek Hennessey, "Race and Violence in Reconstruction New Orleans: The 1868 Riot," *Louisiana History*, 20 (Winter, 1979), pp. 77-92.

achieve black majorities-- therefore offered an appealing method of expanding the number of Republican seats in the legislature. In addition to gains at the Statehouse, new parishes automatically created fresh opportunities to stimulate local patronage, since the constitution of 1868 (which Warmoth helped draft) permitted the governor to appoint the first slate of parish officials and each of these offices came with a salary attached.<sup>13</sup>

Among Warmoth's other actions that would figure prominently into the battle of Colfax were the creation of new state military forces designed to shore up Republican power. Once in office, Warmoth feared that the waves of vigilante violence accompanying the national elections of November 1868, not to mention death threats against him, might imperil his tenure in office. He rammed a bill through the legislature in 1869 authorizing the creation of a heavily armed state police force (known as the Metropolitan Police) to oversee the capital and serve under his direct command, rather than answer to a Democratic mayor of New Orleans. Another bill authorized a state militia force of 5,000 volunteers, composed of both black and white units. He chose for his first adjutant general a man with a formidable military reputation: Lieutenant General James Longstreet, former corps commander in Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. One of these new militia companies, mustered into service by William Ward in 1871, was from Colfax and was led primarily by black Union Army veterans-- the most visible and threatening symbol to white Southerners that the bottom rail had indeed arrived on top.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> For an in-depth portrait of the creation of another Reconstruction-era parish in Louisiana, based upon the diary of its carpetbag leader, Marshall Harvey Twitchell, see Ted Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana, 1862-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984).

<sup>14</sup> The first report of the Metropolitan Police is found in "Annual Report of the Board of Metropolitan Police," in Louisiana, *Legislative Documents, 1869* (New Orleans, 1870). Louisiana's Reconstruction-era militia (often erroneously referred to as a black militia), constituted at truly unique social organization in its time and was a testament to Warmoth's exquisite attention to the details of political patronage: it included units composed of blacks Union Army veterans, white Confederate Army veterans, and white Union Army veterans. The inaugural Radical state militia command is outlined in Louisiana, *Annual Report of the Adjutant General of the State of*

The land chosen to form Grant Parish was an uneasy amalgam of two starkly contrasting geographic and demographic regions.<sup>15</sup> Grant Parish's western edge bordered the Red River, whose alluvial plain was highly-prized by ante-bellum cotton planters for its fertile soil, long growing season, and easy access to the port of New Orleans by steamboat. It also stood at the northern edge of Louisiana's sugar producing region, though the potential for producing cane profitably by the 1860's depended upon the federal sugar tariff. This fact alone kept a number of the region's planters who would probably otherwise have been pro-slavery Democrats clinging to the last remnants of the Whig Party.<sup>16</sup> In 1860, the wealthiest of the dozen large planters in the area of what would become Grant Parish was Meredith Smith Calhoun of Calhoun's Landing (later Colfax), who owned four plantations totaling more than 14,000 acres and 700 slaves. On the eve of the Civil War, his estates were valued at more than \$1,000,000 and were profitable enough to allow him to invest \$100,000 in a new sugar mill. With few exceptions, the Grant Parish freedmen present after the Civil War had grown up on these plantations adjoining the Red River, and in 1873 most still lived in small communities, like Smithfield Quarters just north of Colfax, that had been slave quarters just a few years earlier.<sup>17</sup>

---

*Louisiana for the year ending December 31, 1870* (New Orleans, 1871). There is little question that Longstreet became a scapegoat for many Confederate apologists as much for his role in Reconstruction-era Louisiana as for anything he did in the military service of the Confederacy. The 1870 report makes clear, however, that Longstreet was joined in his apostasy by almost one thousand Louisiana Confederate veterans who, at least for a few years, volunteered their allegiance to the new Radical government and reaped the rewards of Republican Party patronage.

<sup>15</sup>Robert Ransom and Richard Sutch used Grant Parish as one of their "typical" counties for the economic study of the Southern transition from slave labor to sharecropping in *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 292.

<sup>16</sup>An example of this phenomenon was James Madison Wells, a Whig planter from Rapides Parish, just south of Grant Parish, who became governor under Presidential Reconstruction. See Walter M. Lowery, "The Political Career of James Madison Wells," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 31 (October, 1948), pp. 995-1,123.

<sup>17</sup>On the extent of Calhoun's holdings, see Joseph Karl Menn, *The Large Slaveholders of Louisiana-1860* (New Orleans: Pelican, 1964), pp. 104-105. On the ante-bellum history of the parish area, see Mabel Fletcher Harrison and Lavinia McGuire McNeely, *Grant Parish, Louisiana: A History* (Baton

Not unlike the alluvial plain of the Red River, the white planter elite of Grant Parish represented only a narrow demographic band. Beyond the three mile wide river bottoms, the land rose into low hills covered by poorly-irrigated soil and long needle pines, most of which is part of the Kisatchie National Forest today. On this land, cotton growing was not nearly so profitable and the antebellum whites who lived here had few if any slaves. The hardscrabble character and long-standing poverty of this area is suggested by noting that before 1869 the northern part of the parish belonged to Winn Parish, the hotbed of white Populism in Louisiana in the 1890's and birthplace of the enigmatic Huey Long. The 1870 Census, while notoriously inaccurate, nevertheless conveys a revealing portrait of the area at the time: 2400 blacks and 2200 whites, a rough balance with a narrow black majority deliberately crafted to put Grant Parish in Republican hands.<sup>18</sup>

Politically, the battle of Colfax had its roots in the hotly disputed governor's election of 1872. Four years of Republican rule had not reconciled many Confederate veterans to the continued political power of ex-slaves and their Yankee carpetbagger allies. After a wild campaign featuring five different factional tickets and an election in which each side charged the other with widespread fraud and intimidation, both the Republican candidate, William Pitt Kellogg (a Union Army colonel born in Vermont and residing in New Orleans), and the Conservative candidate, John O. McEnery (a Confederate Army colonel and cotton planter's son from Monroe), claimed victory. Three different state Returning Boards (the state electoral commission established under the authority of outgoing Governor Warmoth) returned three different verdicts on the election.

---

Rouge, LA: Claitor's Publishing Division, 1969). Grant Parish was not the site of any significant fighting during the Civil War, although General Nathaniel P. Banks moved up the Red River past Calhoun's Landing in his 1864 campaign against General Richard Taylor's forces in the vicinity of Shreveport. See Ludwell H. Johnson, *Red River Campaign: Politics and Cotton in the Civil War* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins Press, 1958).

The first board decided in favor of Kellogg. The second board reversed a number of contested parishes and decided in favor of McEnery. The third board, created by another of Warmoth's parliamentary sleights-of-hand, voided both the first and second boards, and created a new board which then handed the election to McEnery, though with different vote totals than the second board. Alarmed at the prospect of losing the governor's office, Republican leaders in New Orleans obtained a hasty federal court order, occupied the Statehouse with federal troops under arms and, in a tumultuous emergency session voted to impeach Warmoth, whom they accused of offering a \$50,000 bribe to Lieutenant Governor P. B. S. Pinchback in exchange for control of the Senate. Both candidates appealed to the President and Congress for recognition and federal intervention, and both held inaugurations in New Orleans on January 14, 1873. Open warfare in Louisiana seemed imminent after some of McEnery's infuriated supporters staged a mutiny in several white regiments of the state militia and initiated a brief but failed *putsch* in New Orleans on March 5, 1873.<sup>19</sup>

In the escalating struggle to gain the upper hand, the two rival governments sought to demonstrate their authority by recognizing different slates of officials in contested Louisiana parishes.<sup>20</sup> McEnery recognized

---

<sup>18</sup>U. S. Department of Commerce, *Negro Population, 1790-1915* (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1918, reprinted with introduction by James McPherson, New York: Arno Press, 1968).

<sup>19</sup>Only the barest outline of the byzantine political maneuverings within the Louisiana state government in 1872-1873 has been provided here. The 1872 election was repeatedly investigated by both houses of Congress without conclusive decision, resulting in the failure to count Louisiana's electoral votes for either side in the Electoral College and the continuing *de facto* recognition of Radical rule in New Orleans by the Grant Administration. The 1873 report is contained in U. S. Congress, *House Executive Documents*, 42nd Congress, 3rd Session, No. 91, "Condition of Affairs in Louisiana," (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1875), pp. 1-319. The 1875 report is found in U. S. Congress, *House Reports*, 43rd Congress, 2nd Session, No. 261, "Condition of Affairs in the Southern States," (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1875), pp. 1-131.

<sup>20</sup>As is more often than not the case concerning battle narratives, contemporary reports of what happened at Colfax are contradictory, often confused, and always heavily colored by the allegiances of the eyewitnesses involved. For a view sympathetic to the white supremacists involved, see Manie White Johnson, "The Colfax Riot of April, 1873," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, 13 (July 1930), pp. 399-427. This author has attempted to reconstruct a plausible-- if

Alphonze Cazabat as judge and C. C. Nash as sheriff of Grant Parish in December 1872, even before his own inauguration. Early in March 1873, Kellogg certified the Republican candidates, R. C. Register and Daniel Shaw as parish judge and sheriff, respectively. On March 25, Register and Shaw broke into the courthouse and took physical possession of their offices. After rumors reached the town that hostile whites were organizing ten miles away in Montgomery to retake the courthouse by force they deputized a *posse comitatus* of twenty to thirty men. Attempts to negotiate a compromise failed and then on April 5 the situation took a turn for the worse when a black man, Jesse McKinney, was murdered in front of his own house outside of Colfax by a band of unknown white men. William Ward, in his capacity as militia captain, responded by ordering his company to muster in Colfax. An influx of three hundred black men and their families seeking safety in numbers at Colfax ensued in the following days. Once summoned to the town, black militiamen divided into watches and began drilling under arms. Pickets posted at the major roads leading into town forbade unknown whites from entering, and at least some whites in town, including Judge Rutland (the previous parish judge) and his family, either fled the town or left under duress. Fearing an imminent attack by whites from the surrounding area, Captain Ward and Judge Register left Colfax on April 8 for New Orleans, hoping to persuade Governor Kellogg to send reinforcements. They left Levin Allen, another black Union Army veteran, in command of the militia at Colfax.<sup>21</sup>

---

not definitive-- narrative of the events of the battle from the lengthy Congressional testimony on Colfax. Especially useful is the testimony of J. R. Beckwith, the federal prosecuting attorney at both of the Colfax trials held in 1874. Beckwith interviewed more witnesses to the battle of Colfax than anyone else and was dedicated to justice for the dead and massacred. See Testimony of J. R. Beckwith, in *House Reports*, 43rd Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 261, "Condition of Affairs in the Southern States," pp. 409-421. Beckwith's testimony substantially agrees in all major points with the charge of Judge W. B. Woods, the judge in the original trial of the Colfax defendants. Reprinted in *ibid.*, pp. 856-865.

<sup>21</sup>William Ward received a commission as a captain in the state militia on December 1, 1871, but almost immediately caused General Longstreet and his staff difficulties by his provocative parading and drilling of the Colfax militia company, which upset a number of local whites.

Fears of an attack were well justified. James West Hadnot, a Confederate Army veteran and reputed head of the local Ku Klux Klan in 1868, led a mounted force of twenty men to the outskirts Colfax on April 1, where Cazabat and Register met to discuss their political quarrel. When Register refused to yield, Cazabat broke off negotiations but promised he would defend his claim to office, by force if necessary. Over the next five days, an armed camp of several hundred armed white men coalesced at Bayou Darrow, about five miles north of Colfax, consisting of paramilitary companies from Grant and a number of the surrounding parishes. On April 5, another armed reconnaissance party under Captain C. C. Nash approached Colfax but was driven off by Levin Allen, Alexander Tillman (another black Union veteran) and a force of armed black militia, when word reached them of Jesse McKinney's murder.<sup>22</sup>

While tensions built in Colfax, Governor Kellogg prevaricated in New Orleans. On April 9, Judge Rutland, who had made his way downriver by steamboat, pleaded with Governor Kellogg, General Longstreet, and Major General W. H. Emory (the commander of federal troops in New Orleans) to send reinforcements to Colfax. General Longstreet was willing to send a detachment of the Metropolitan Police right away, but Kellogg refused Rutland's request, preferring to pass the action to the federal authorities. General Emory, who had yet to receive word from Washington on whether Kellogg or McEnery was the *de jure* governor of the state, declared the standoff at Colfax a local matter and declined to intervene without explicit orders from Washington. After new pleas from Ward and Register, who arrived in New Orleans on April 10, Kellogg

---

Longstreet eventually ordered an investigation of Ward and subsequently forbade him from drilling his company without permission-- a rather mild disciplinary measure. The Adjutant General's Reports for 1872 and 1873 are silent on whether his militia company's weapons were ever returned to the State Arsenal. See Louisiana, *Annual Report of the Adjutant General of the State of Louisiana for the year ending December 31, 1871* (New Orleans, 1872), p. 22; and Special Orders No. 52, dated December 11, 1871, *Ibid.*, p. 39. On William Ward's political career, see Charles Vincent, *Black Legislators in Louisiana during Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), pp. 268-270.

reversed himself and decided to send two state militia officers to investigate the situation at Colfax. It was too little and too late. The stage had already been set for battle.<sup>23</sup>

### *The Battle and Massacre at Colfax*

Captain Nash gathered his paramilitary force just north of Colfax for an assault to take the town on Easter Sunday, April 13. Precise numbers have never been definitively established for either side, but the white supremacist forces probably amounted to three hundred armed men. Beside more than one hundred from Grant Parish, Nash could count on three companies from Rapides Parish, commanded by Captain George W. Stafford, Captain David C. Paul, and Captain Joseph W. Texada; a company from Winn Parish, commanded by Captain James Bird; and a company from Catahoula Parish commanded by Captain J. W. Wiggins.<sup>24</sup> The paramilitaries came with their own weapons, but many of them were armed not just with hunting shotguns and Civil War-era rifled muskets, but with newer model Winchester repeating rifles and revolvers firing cased ammunition, which easily overmatched the Enfields and shotguns of the black militia in Colfax. Captain Nash also procured a small cannon from the Red River steamboat, *John T. Moore*, and a blacksmith from Montgomery forged ammunition for it. In addition to being well armed, Nash's men were highly mobile as well. No source explicitly mentions it, but most allude to the fact that every man under his command had his own horse and most had probably grown

---

<sup>22</sup>Testimony of J. R. Beckwith, in *House Reports*, 43rd Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 261, "Condition of Affairs in the Southern States," p. 410.

<sup>23</sup>Dawson, *Army Generals and Reconstruction*, pp. 144-145.

<sup>24</sup>Captain Wiggins and the Catahoula Parish paramilitaries later shielded men implicated in the battle of Colfax from detection and prosecution. They also threatened and expelled Republican officeholders before the disputed 1874 election in their home parish in a local campaign of terror.



up in the saddle. Against this force, Levin Allen had mustered around 150 black militiamen, armed mostly with shotguns and several crudely fashioned cannons. Most, though probably not all, were natives of Grant Parish, and while some had their own mules in town, they could not match the mobility of Nash's force. On Saturday, after rumors reached Colfax of the impending assault, militiamen started digging a ring of breastworks encircling the courthouse, but by Sunday morning their trenches were only two feet deep and encircled just three sides of the building.<sup>25</sup>

At noon, Nash formed a battle line several miles north of town and prepared to assault this black Alamo on the Red River. Riding up to the militia picket line under a flag of truce, he offered their leader, Levin Allen, one last opportunity to surrender the courthouse and their weapons. Allen curtly refused, insisting that he and his men would not share Jesse McKinney's fate. Nash then gave Allen thirty minutes to remove all the women and children who had taken refuge in the town before his attack commenced. Allen dared Nash to come get the men he wanted and then rode back to Colfax to prepare his defenses.<sup>26</sup>

Thirty minutes later, the attack began. Nash's force advanced on line southward, unhindered by fire from the defenders' homemade cannons, and occupied Smithfield Quarters without loss. Moving on the center of town, the paramilitaries encountered heavy fire from blacks entrenched in the earthworks around the courthouse and their skirmish line stalled. For more than an hour, this crossfire continued, with whites unable to either advance or dislodge the black militia. Stymied, Captain Nash sent a detachment led by James Daniels, another Confederate veteran, to move west of the courthouse with the

---

Testimony of James Forsythe in *House Reports*, 43rd Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 261, "Condition of Affairs in the Southern States," pp. 377-384.

<sup>25</sup> Testimony of J. R. Beckwith, in *House Reports*, 43rd Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 261, "Condition of Affairs in the Southern States," p. 411.

<sup>26</sup> Testimony of J. R. Beckwith, in *House Reports*, 43rd Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 261, "Condition of Affairs in the Southern States," p. 411; Johnson, "The Colfax Riot of April, 1873," p. 411

paramilitaries' cannon. He ordered them to flank the black militia position from the levee on the river, while the rest of his line kept up a masking fire. Shortly after 2:00 PM Daniels' force moved out and achieved complete surprise. Cannon fire suddenly enfiladed the defenders' trenches and the militia's defensive line crumpled. Stunned by this surprise attack, the black militia force split in two. About half retreated into the safety of the courthouse building itself. The remainder ran for concealment in the fields of Calhoun's plantation south of town, while a portion of Nash's men rode them down by horseback.<sup>27</sup>

Determined to finish the fighting quickly, the paramilitaries forced one of their black prisoners, Benjamin Brimm, to torch the roof of the courthouse. As the building burned, Nash sent James West Hadnot forward with another flag of truce to demand an immediate surrender. In the smoke and confusion that followed, shots rang out and both Hadnot and Sidney Harris fell mortally wounded, probably from friendly fire. Some black militiamen, including Alex Tillman, refused to surrender and probably died in the courthouse fire. Those attempting to flee the burning courthouse were reportedly "ridden down in the open fields and shot without mercy." At least thirty seven black defenders, had been taken prisoner by the time the fighting ceased around 3:00 PM. That night, most of the paramilitaries left town for their homes. Some remained in Colfax to guard their prisoners, however, and some time after 9:00 PM, following desultory discussions about how to dispose of their captured prisoners, they assembled the survivors and summarily executed each one with a pistol shot to the back of the head. Perhaps because some of the paramilitaries had celebrated their victory by getting drunk, several of their prisoners survived being shot not

---

<sup>27</sup> Testimony of J. R Beckwith, in *House Reports*, 43rd Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 261, "Condition of Affairs in the Southern States," pp. 412-413.

just once but twice, and later testified about the massacre to federal investigators.<sup>28</sup>

Considerable dispute has remained about numbers killed and wounded in the battle and massacre. Three whites subsequently died from their wounds, although subsequent medical examination supported the claim that Harris and Hadnot were accidentally killed by their own men. The number of blacks estimated killed in the battle and massacre varies wildly from sixty four to four hundred in different accounts of the time, many of which were either fanciful or based on guesswork. Some Republican newspapers, particularly in the North, probably reported the higher numbers in an attempt to reap the partisan benefits of the sensational nature of the event. Those sympathetic to the attackers at first denied the massacre and later blamed the extent of slaughter on a justifiable retaliation against "negro treachery" in the supposed firing on Hadnot and Harris under a flag of truce. The true number killed is probably closer to the lower end of the range of estimates, if only because the tiny courthouse could have held no more than a hundred people. The United States deputy marshal, T. W. DeKlyne, who investigated the scene and supervised the burial party, reported fifty nine bodies buried, but also noted that at least four other bodies had already been claimed by family members before he arrived and others were probably mortally wounded but never reported. At least another twenty five had been wounded but managed to escape the battlefield before the massacre. The body of Levin Allen, the black militia commander, was never identified and it remains unknown whether he perished in the fire or escaped. Given his determination to fight, the former seems more likely.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Johnson, "The Colfax Riot of April, 1873," pp. 412-413; Testimony of J. R. Beckwith, in *House Reports*, 43rd Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 261, "Condition of Affairs in the Southern States," p. 413 and pp. 415-416.

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, "The Colfax Riot of April, 1873," p. 418, fn. 115, discusses the various estimates of the contemporary sources. See also Testimony of J. R. Beckwith, in *House Reports*, 43rd Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 261, "Condition of Affairs in the Southern States," p. 413. Like much else about the

On April 15, Metropolitan Police arrived from New Orleans by steamboat. They were too late to do anything except begin a search for the attackers, who had gone into hiding in northern Louisiana or fled across the state border to refuge in Texas, where Conservatives had already "redeemed" the state government from Radical Republican rule. On April 21, two companies of federal troops arrived. Armed with orders from the United States marshal in New Orleans, they began to arrest suspects to be indicted for federal charges. Ninety seven men were eventually indicted, but only nine were actually tried for federal violations of the 1871 Enforcement Act (popularly known as the Ku Klux Klan Act), established to enable the enforcement provisions of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. The first trial, held in February 1874 in New Orleans, ended in a mistrial for eight defendants and acquittal for one. The second trial, held in May 1874, acquitted five defendants but found the other three guilty of conspiracy against the right of peaceful assembly and fifteen other counts, but not murder. After a lengthy appeal, the United States Supreme Court, ruling in 1876 in the case of *Cruikshank vs. United States*, voided key sections of the Enforcement Act and decided that the Fourteenth Amendment applied only to actions committed by state governments and not by private individuals. The justices remanded the case to the jurisdiction of the state courts of Louisiana. None of those participating in the attack were ever convicted or punished for any crime connected with the battle of Colfax. Captain Nash became something of a local legend in northern Louisiana, marrying a local woman from Natchitoches and serving several terms as sheriff of Grant Parish, where he was always regarded as a respectable member of the white community.<sup>30</sup>

---

battle of Colfax, the number killed is primarily influenced by the perspective of those telling the story. A precise number probably cannot be fixed at this late date.

<sup>30</sup> The legal history of the case is explored in Robert J. Kaczorowski, *The Politics of Judicial Interpretation: The Federal Courts, Department of Justice and Civil Rights, 1866-1876* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1985), pp. 141-151, and pp. 176-183.

*The Aftermath of the Battle of Colfax*

The battle of Colfax, set against a background of waning federal power to uphold the Civil War Amendments, provided a spark to ignite a wildfire blaze of paramilitary formations in Louisiana and those Deep South states where Republicans remained in power. After the heavy publicity and failure to gain a federal conviction in the first Colfax trial, dozens of paramilitary companies modeled on Captain Nash's force-- now known as the White Leagues-- sprang up across Louisiana. By early 1874, carefully staged violence or its unmistakable threat became an integral component of a virulent new strategy to "draw the white line" among Louisiana voters and seize political power from the Republicans, first in parish courthouses across the countryside and then at the state capital (see Table I). Colfax thus became not only the spark, but also the blueprint for the overthrow of Radical rule.<sup>31</sup>

Paramilitary actions in Louisiana ran the gamut from intimidation by armed rally to outright murder, but the political focus increasingly shifted toward wielding force to achieve tangible political results. In May 1873, 600 white men led by Colonel Alcibiades De Blanc, former head of the vigilantes of the 1868 elections known as the Knights of the White Camellia, marched into St. Martinville in St. Martin Parish and held a public rally to demand the ouster of Radical parish officials. His *coup de main* was interrupted only by the timely arrival of a mounted detachment of the Metropolitan Police, which arrested De Blanc and jailed him in New Orleans. Elsewhere though, the White Leagues' show of force in remote areas almost always prevailed. Above Colfax on the Red River at Natchitoches, one thousand White Leaguers (including C. C. Nash, who was still technically in hiding from federal authorities) ousted five Radicals from

parish office in a bloodless uprising on June 27, 1874. White Leaguers permitted the ousted to leave with their lives provided they promised never to return.<sup>32</sup> White Leaguers showed no compunction about spilling blood when the mood seized them, however. In August 1874, the Red River Parish White League, commanded by Captain T. W. Abney, forced carpetbagger Marshall Harvey Twitchell's family and friends to resign from their parish offices at Coushatta after an intimidating armed mass rally. Nevertheless, a few days later all six white ex-officeholders were assassinated after leaving Coushatta, probably by members of the De Soto Parish White League. This resort to assassination, however, brought undesired attention to the White Leagues' seizure of power and a mopping-up operation had to be launched, in which unidentified whites lynched two black men in Coushatta, apparently to ensure there would be no hostile witnesses to the seizure of power in Red River. Similar mopping-up assassinations also went on in Grant Parish for several years, both as reprisal for testifying against the Colfax paramilitaries in federal court and as part of an ongoing effort to snuff out the last embers of the local Republican party.<sup>33</sup>

Violence by unreconstructed Confederate veterans metamorphosed to a new level of sophistication and nearly achieved a permanent overthrow of Radical rule in the Battle of Canal Street at New Orleans on September 14, 1874. For Governor Kellogg, who had failed to act decisively to stave off the battle of Colfax, the street battle of September 14 was not only a humiliating defeat of his militia but a successful *coup d'état* that deeply damaged the legitimacy of Republican rule in the eyes of national public opinion. Two thousand White Leaguers, claiming to be the *de jure* state militia under the command of General

---

<sup>31</sup> Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed*, pp. 274-275

<sup>32</sup> On the expulsion of Radical officeholders in Natchitoches Parish, see the testimony of the black state senator, Raiford Blunt, who was present during the crisis. Blunt narrowly escaped subsequent assassination by White Leaguers determined to prevent him from telling state and federal authorities what had happened. Testimony of Raiford Blunt, in *House Reports*, 43rd Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 261, "Condition of Affairs in the Southern States," pp. 214-223.

<sup>33</sup> Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction*, pp. 173-209.

Frederick N. Ogden, accompanied by hundreds of eager free-lance supporters defeated Longstreet's force of 500 black militia and 500 Metropolitan Police in a deadly firefight killing and wounding scores near the United States Customs House. After taking possession of the Statehouse in the St. Louis Hotel and the militia arsenal just off Jackson Square, the White League militia held sway over the city for several days and installed a Conservative state government in power. Federal troops restored Kellogg to office after Grant issued a Presidential proclamation calling on the White Leagues to disband, but the spectacular defeat of Kellogg's forces and his restoration by the armed intervention of the United States Army revealed his government's survival dependence on the presence of federal bayonets. Over the next two years, White League-dominated Louisiana parishes coolly ignored Kellogg's authority and refused to pay any taxes at all to the state government, sapping its already precarious fiscal health. Governor Kellogg and the Republicans clung to the façade of power by hunkering down in their state offices in New Orleans, but the substance of power and political legitimacy ebbed away. In January 1875, Kellogg survived a parliamentary coup attempt in the Statehouse, again thanks to the direct intervention of federal troops. In April 1877, as part of the compromise permitting Rutherford B. Hayes to take office as president, federal troops withdrew from guard duty over state offices to their quarters in Jackson Barracks. By then Republican authority extended no further than their besieged Statehouse offices in the St. Louis Hotel. Behind its walls, Radical officeholders and a few Metropolitans barricaded themselves against General Ogden's newly enlarged White League, which had reoccupied the rest of New Orleans and once again asserted its legitimacy as the rightful militia of the sovereign state of Louisiana. It was a remarkable reenactment of the standoff at Colfax on a much larger scale and for much bigger stakes.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Two prominent Louisiana White League leaders played critical roles in the Washington negotiations leading to the Compromise of 1877. They were E. John Ellis, U. S. Congressman and

*The Battle of Colfax and the Forgotten Military Dimension of Reconstruction*

The battle of Colfax stands as a microcosm of the violent struggle of Reconstruction. Violence in Reconstruction was not simply a more or less random series of terrorist acts against blacks and Southern Republicans, as is often portrayed, but an *essential* component in the counterrevolution that rolled back the tide of Radical Reconstruction and restored command of Southern political institutions to white supremacy. Only with a successful political counterrevolution behind it could white supremacist leadership hope to launch the economic and social counterrevolutions in the 1880's and 1890's that forged an increasingly repressive grip of one party/ one race rule over the Solid South. Absent a carefully crafted strategy embracing an integral appeal to violence, it is difficult to see how ex-Confederate states with majority black electorates (South Carolina, Louisiana, and Mississippi) might have been reclaimed by Conservative Democrats in fair and free elections. The strategic course and cultural form that this violence appropriated was, by necessity, far different than that of the period from 1861 to 1865 when the slaveholders' *ancien régime* was destroyed not only by the Union's military defeat of their armies, but also by Lincoln's adherence to a political strategy that unleashed a far-reaching social revolution: emancipation and the large-scale arming of ex-slaves across the Deep South. In its multiple dimensions, the bitter conflicts of Reconstruction must be therefore be seen in historical perspective as product of the coalescence of counterrevolutionary forces that touched off a protracted civil war against that revolution.

---

one of two principal defense lawyers for the Colfax defendants, and Major E. A. Burke, Governor F. R. T. Nicholls' political campaign manager and a key staff officer for General Ogden in the street battle of 1874. See Joy Jackson, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age: Politics and Urban Progress, 1880-1896* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), pp. 38-52.



The popular movement of paramilitarism that emerged from the battle of Colfax deserves an extended historical analysis that can only be analyzed in abbreviated form here. If, according to Stuart McConnell, Union Army veterans represented an Army of Contentment after their victory in 1865, then surely Confederate Army veterans represented a vast Army of Discontent in the wake of the most catastrophic military defeat in American history.<sup>35</sup> Few historical works on the nineteenth century South adequately convey how much cultural borrowing the vigilantes, paramilitaries, and white militias of Reconstruction took from their experiences in Confederate Army. The Confederate Army, probably the single greatest mass mobilization in percentage terms in American history, not only provided the leaders, the followers, and the martial skills for the counterrevolution against Reconstruction but also infused in Confederate veterans-- courtesy of the death, destruction, and suffering of four years of unprecedented war-- a unique world view and shared sense of values that made it possible for many of them to accept and even relish their instrumental roles in a campaign of stark terror, atrocity, and brutality. Too many historians have simply-- and perhaps too conveniently-- looked past the Confederate experience to the Old South for the origins of violence in Reconstruction. To be sure, the culture of the Old South had its violent folkways, but that civil culture had also been highly refracted, distilled, and intensified by a martial culture in a general crisis in which an estimated eighty percent of white Southern males of military age fought in the Confederate Army.<sup>36</sup> If we want to understand how so many "ordinary men" -- to use Christopher Browning's chilling phrase-- from the antebellum South could become cold-blooded killers like the men who massacred

---

<sup>35</sup> Stuart McConnell, *Glorious Contentment* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

<sup>36</sup> For an estimate of the number of white Southerners who fought in the Confederate Army, see James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 306-307n; see also Maris A. Vinovskis, "Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War? Some Preliminary Demographic Speculations," in Maris A. Vinovskis, ed., *Toward a Social*

their prisoners after the battle of Colfax, we can never lose sight of the context of the Civil War and their life-shaping experiences in it.<sup>37</sup>

An analysis of the available information about the Confederate veteran status of the known and suspected participants of the battle of Colfax may put the centrality of the Confederate experience to Reconstruction violence into some perspective. At Table II. is a listing of 211 men who were either known at the time or believed later by the local white community to have been present at Colfax, correlated with their rank and unit in the Confederate Army. A total of 79 of these men (37%) can be positively identified as members of Louisiana Confederate Army units. Of perhaps even more significance, however, is the even stronger correlation of paramilitary leadership with Confederate service. All six of the commanders of paramilitary formations at Colfax (James Bird, David C. Paul, C. C. Nash, Joseph W. Texada, G. W. Stafford, and J. W. Wiggins) were Confederate veterans, and of these six at least four (David C. Paul, C. C. Nash, Joseph W. Texada, and G. W. Stafford) are known to have been Confederate officers. Nash and Stafford in particular were hardened infantry combat leaders, having led troops in virtually every campaign of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia from Manassas to Appomattox. Captain Stafford's father, Brigadier General Leroy Augustus Stafford, had organized and fought with troops from Rapides Parish in both the Mexican and Civil Wars and was mortally wounded leading a charge of his brigade of Louisianans at the battle of the Wilderness in 1864.<sup>38</sup>

Another important facet of the paramilitary movements of the 1870's was the stereotypical fashion in which they were created and the startling manner in which they fanned out at the grassroots level to overwhelm existing

---

*History of the American Civil War: Exploratory Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press), pp. 1-30.

<sup>37</sup> Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

<sup>38</sup> For General Stafford's biography, see Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Gray: Lives of the Confederate Commanders* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959), pp. 287-288.

Conservative Democratic party organizations. After a succession of frustrating and fruitless political campaigns, there was nothing quite like a spectacular racial massacre to rivet the attention and fuel the energy of the white population in the Deep South into hatred of the Radicals and determination to eject them by any means necessary. Hunger for graphic coverage of the battle of Colfax and the activities of the White Leagues ignited a boomlet in Louisiana tabloid journalism, with new issues like the *Alexandria Caucasian* and the *Natchitoches Vindicator* doing a brisk trade for a time.<sup>39</sup> Personal accounts of Colfax were particularly prized for their capacity to attract a readership eager for more details. Captain Stafford gave a lengthy personal account to one Alexandria newspaper in which he alluded to the overarching justification for the massacre at Colfax by noting that, "To the most observant mind it must be apparent that in a war of races under such circumstances *there can be no quarter...* Exceptions to this rule may be made by our race before being maddened by loss of friends or kinsmen; after that the black flag must prevail."<sup>40</sup>

Like the battle of Colfax, the explosive growth of paramilitary movements in Mississippi and South Carolina (where they were known as "rifle clubs" and Red Shirts) were sparked by battles and more-or-less deliberate atrocities directed against black posses or militia companies (Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1875; and Hamburg, South Carolina in July 1876) that terrorized their ideological opponents; gained converts attracted by the thrill of violence and the possibilities for petty personal revenge cloaked in appeals to a nobler purpose; and posed a frustrating challenge for state and federal authorities who wanted peace but were charged with preserving public order. John O. McEnery, the failed Conservative candidate for governor in 1872, summed up the newly invigorated

---

<sup>39</sup> See the interesting collection of articles in *House Reports*, 43rd Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 261, "Condition of Affairs in the Southern States," pp. 752-938.

<sup>40</sup> George W. Stafford, "Statement of Colfax Fight," *Louisiana Democrat*, May 14, 1873, reprinted in *House Reports*, 43rd Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 261, "Condition of Affairs in the Southern States," p. 850.

character of the campaign to "redeem" Louisiana in 1874 when he told a White League rally in Bienville Parish, " We shall carry the next election, if we have to ride *saddle-deep in blood to do it*."<sup>41</sup>

While the paramilitary atrocities of Reconstruction retain their power to shock and disgust the modern reader, it is essential to understand that their irregular occurrence and the amorphous nature of the threat they posed proved so elusive that as the decade of the 1870's wore on, a monotonous accumulation of Southern atrocity stories eroded both the sensitivity and the determination of northern Republicans to carry on the struggle against an elusive foe. President Grant's Attorney General, George A. Williams, probably accurately summed up the prevailing national mood in a famous telegram denying Mississippi's Governor Adelbert Ames plea for federal troops in 1875 when he declared, "The whole public are tired out with autumnal outbreaks in the South, and the great majority are now ready to condemn any interference on the part of the government."<sup>42</sup> If the object of the insurgent in a protracted civil war is to exhaust the will of a stronger opponent to continue, Southern paramilitaries had succeeded in large part several years before federal troops withdrew in 1877.

Finally, it must be understood that the paramilitary campaigns of Reconstruction have had lasting effects on Southern society and politics that echo down to the present. After their successful *coup d'état* in 1877, the White Leagues were absorbed into the state militia, assuming a new identity as the National Guard of Louisiana. Although quite old by that time, the distinguished Confederate general Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard served as Adjutant General for more than a decade. Under his leadership the Louisiana National Guard proved to be a solid defender of the Redeemers, and enjoyed noted success in crushing a series of strikes by black and white sugar workers

---

<sup>41</sup> John O. McEnery, quoted in *Claiborne Advocate*, September 8, 1874, reprinted in *House Reports*, 43rd Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 261, "Condition of Affairs in the Southern States," p. 789.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in *Current*, *Those Terrible Carpetbaggers*, p. 321.

organized by the Knights of Labor in the 1880's.<sup>43</sup> Many personalities in Louisiana political life, including some too young to have served in the Confederate Army themselves, rose to public prominence based on their service in the White Leagues. One such young man was Murphy J. Foster, a particularly favored protégé of Colonel Alcibiades De Blanc, the reputed leader of the Knights of the White Camellia and local White League commander. In 1892 Foster was elected governor of the state and went on to organize the constitutional convention that disfranchised Louisiana's black voters in 1898. In 1995, Murphy J. Foster's grandson, "Mike" Foster, was elected governor of Louisiana, breaking at least one old family tradition by running as a Republican, but continuing to champion the right of Louisianans to keep and bear arms.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Evans J. Casso, *Louisiana Legacy: A History of the State National Guard* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Press, 1976); Jeffrey Gould, "The Strike of 1887: Louisiana Sugar War." *Southern Exposure* 12(Nov-Dec, 1984) pp. 45-55.

<sup>44</sup> On Murphy J. Foster, see Jackson, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age*, pp. 33-34, pp. 130-131, and pp. 228-229; and Sidney James Romero, "The Political Career of Murphy James Foster, Governor of Louisiana, 1892-1900," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, v. 28 (1946), pp. 1129-1243.

NOTE: For purposes of brevity, the data in Table I. (Growth of the White Leagues in Louisiana, 1874) and Table II. (Battle of Colfax Paramilitaries) and the research notes that accompany them have been omitted. Readers who desire copies of tables and notes (as well as a parish map of the state of Louisiana depicting the spread of the White Leagues) may request a copy from the author.