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‘From the Ballot to the Bullet’, The Counter-Reconstruction of the Louisiana Red River Valley Press'

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'From the Ballot to the Bullet', The Counter-Reconstruction of the Louisiana Red River Valley Press

Sabrina A. Otterloo

> Let it be known, once for all, that we intend to clean out that Augean stable – yelped the Legislature of Louisiana – of all its filth, if we have to turn a river of liquid fire through it, despite the slander of the radical press, the stolidity of the negro, the rapacity of carpet-baggers, the treason of scalawags, and the restiveness of Iron-Grays.[1]

The white Southern newspaper *The People's Vindicator* did not hide its purpose as a Democratic campaign paper during the heated state elections of Louisiana in August 1874. Like other white conservative newspapers of the Red River Valley, the paper expressed an aggressive animosity towards the Republican Party by pointing at specific targets like Governor Kellogg or his local officials. Although not particularly tasteful – the paper claimed that these men were:

> (…) conceived in sin, brought forth in pollution, nursed by filthy harpies and dropped in Louisiana, to show to the world to what depth of corruption, disgrace, and infamy, human nature can stoop, when the flesh is weak and the spirit willing.[2]

Its stigmatizations were not that much different from tactics used in passionate campaigns nowadays. However, the Red River Valley papers went far beyond political defamation. Calling for ostracism, forced resignation, and even assassination of Republican leaders,

[1] 'The Iron-Grays', *Natchitoches People's Vindicator*, August 29, 1874, 2, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University Baton Rouge (hereafter: LSU).
[2] Ibidem.

they declared that for specific politicians 'Only a grass rope and a lamp post can do the matter justice.'[3]

These extreme editorials appeared during the political campaigns in Louisiana of 1874. The election rounds of 1874 and 1876 were possibly the ugliest in American history,[4] as the Lower South state was struggling in its quest against Reconstruction. When the Civil War (1861-1865) had ended, the triumphant Republican Party took control of Congress and launched Congressional or Radical Reconstruction.[5] Its policy of reform aimed to restore order in the South, provide the freedmen with the rights of freedom, vote and participation in politics, and reorganize society in such a way that these former slaves could practice their new rights. Yet, this was not an easy task and would unfortunately end in failure. The belligerent Counter-Reconstruction of white conservatives generated the segregated society in the South that would obstruct the implementation of social equality until the civil rights acts of the 1960s.

Disputed elections and domestic terrorism

After the Civil War, Republicans had come to power in the Southern states through federal intervention – by removing power from ex-confederate leaders while enfranchising blacks – they encountered strong resistance of conservative Southern whites. Bitter fights broke out in and outside the political arena. This resulted in disputed elections and the extraordinary violent period the Reconstruction Era now stands for. The conservative

[3] *Shreveport Times,* June 4, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.

[4] M. Perman, *Pursuit of Unity. A Political History of the American South* (Chapel Hill 2009) 138.

[5] Congressional Reconstruction was preceded by the mild Presidential Reconstruction of President Andrew Johnson (1865-1869), who did not want to impose harsh terms on the South and failed to ensure the rights of the freedmen. By 1867, this policy was opposed and eventually impeded by the Radical Republicans – the radical faction that had come to dominate the Republican Party at this time. Consolidating their party's national ascendancy the Radicals dismissed Johnson's Southern governments and established their reform and emancipation policy in the South by the support of the federal army and the Freedmen's Bureau, a temporary agency to distribute necessities to the freedmen and oversee their labor contracts.

white Democrats, accusing the Republican officials of misrule and corruption while using a 'rule or ruin' tactic of terrorism themselves, regained power in each Southern state by 1877. Louisiana was the last state to abandon Reconstruction after the compromised victory of President Rutherford B. Hayes, by which it was agreed that if the presidential votes would go to the Republican Hayes, federal intervention in the South would cease. The Republican Party quietly gave up on its commitment to black equality and the Democratic Party had risen from its ashes, triumphing for almost a century in the South.

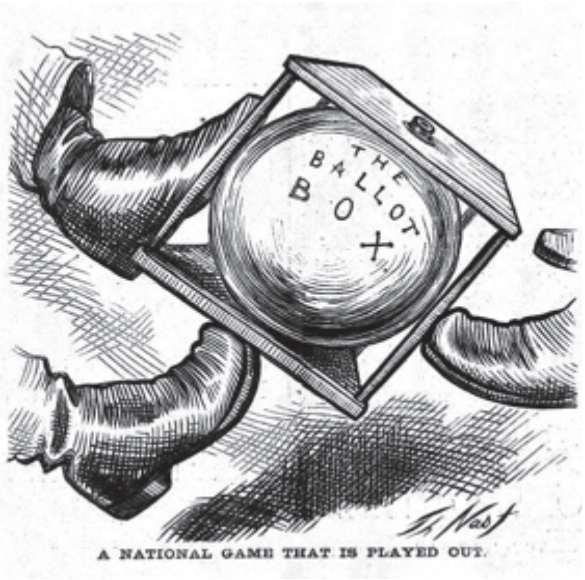

Fig. 1: 'A National Game That Is Played Out.' Election cartoon depicting the ballot box as political football in the disputed Hayes-Tilden election of 1876. By Thomas Nast (1876).

The disputed election of George W. Bush in 2000 brought back the memory of the contested elections during Reconstruction. In that twenty-first century election the majority of the American public suddenly became aware of the fact there was not just one presidential election, but so many different elections per county or city. The lack of oversight by the federal

government shocked Americans, unfamiliar with the legacy of Reconstruction. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the Republican Party had tried to ensure free and fair elections in the South by extending federal power where traditionally elections had been a local matter, but this effort did not succeed in the end. The Reconstruction became a testimonial of subversion of federal control. Especially as the native white Southerners prevented the implementation of social equality by the use of terrorism in the form of intimidation, shootings, riots, and mass murder. It proves that obstruction of government by terror is not a new development in U.S. history. Almost a century and a half ago, in Louisiana and the South in general, domestic terrorist movements were actually able to defy the Reconstruction administrations.

The most violent place in the South

How the violence could grow into such an incredible force is not easily answered. In Louisiana, W.E.B. Du Bois stated already in 1935, economic and social differences were 'more complicated than in any other American state, and this makes the history of Reconstruction more difficult to follow.'[6] Louisiana had the longest period of Reconstruction, it served as a prime testing ground for Lincoln's experiment during the Civil War, which only ended after the compromise of the 1876 elections. Louisiana was, as *Harper's Weekly* already asserted in 1874, 'the most unlucky of all the States.'[7]

The Pelican state was tormented by turmoil and lawlessness and the intensification of violence or clear-cut terrorism at election time underlines the political motives behind the aggression. In many parts of the state, the Republican Party had a built-in majority because of the large black population. The white conservative minorities, desperate by the loss of their social structures and fears of black insurrection or black rule, unleashed their frustration through violence. Every major election from the Civil War on caused excitement and the spilling of human blood. However, during the elections of 1874 and 1876, the campaign of terror took a different course. Particularly in Red River Valley, where the Colfax and Coushatta massacres

[6] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (1935; New York 1998) 470.

[7] 'Everything Points To A Democratic Victory This Fall', *Harper's Weekly*, October 31, 1874.

– in which nearly a hundred blacks in Grant Parish and subsequently all white Republican officials of Red River Parish were murdered – became the most notable bloodbaths of this era. During this period, the Red River Valley was, as Reconstruction historian Ted Tunnell acknowledged, 'the most violent place in Louisiana and probably the most violent place in the South.'[8]

Fig. 2: 'The White League and the Ku Klux Klan. Worse than Slavery', cartoon in *Harper's Weekly* by Thomas Nast (1874)

[8] T. Tunnell in the PBS documentary *Reconstruction: The Second Civil War* (PBS, 2004).

The Red River Valley press and the White League campaign

The pursuit of illegitimate methods and lethal aggression was not simply a revival of the wave of terrorist violence under the Knights of the White Camelia and the Ku Klux Klan, which had ceased in 1872.[9] White Southerners had a different determination now: Political organization was their core purpose and they combined it with an open campaign of terror and sought to frighten blacks into not voting. 'As a result of this two-year campaign by armed bands, encouraged by the Democratic Party,' political historian Michael Perman affirms, 'the Republican Party in Louisiana was effectively demolished.'[10] The violent rhetoric of the Red River Valley press had an important role in this defeat of Reconstruction. In this period of political conflict, the North-Louisiana region became the political battleground, regionally as well as nationally. It was vital for controlling the State, and control of Louisiana was crucial for the Republican Party nationally as stability in this key state was essential to remain in power after the coming presidential elections. Yet, the fierce communications of the Red River Valley press helped the Democratic Party organize and triumph. This press was not just a messenger of local news or a reflection of public opinion; it was an actor, a pressure group, that influenced the political system with its promotion of white supremacy and terror.

In 1875, the senate Committee on the Condition of the South reported in its investigation on the extensive political violence in Louisiana that 'the election of 1874 was neither full, free, nor fair.'[11] For its power to inflame 'great bodies of people', the press was granted its share of culpability: 'The press was filled with threats of violence (…) leading articles in the press urged the people to deeds of violence.'[12] With their persistent,

[9] The terroristic organizations of the early Ku Klux Klan and the Knights of the White Camelia, operating in the period between 1868 and 1872, were secret vigilant societies that dressed up and mostly acted at night. The White League, formed in 1874, shared similar characteristics, but was better organized and openly performed its actions. The band even invited publicity, confident of the support of the majority of the white population.

[10] Perman, *Pursuit of Unity*, 139-140.

[11] Report and Recommendations of the Minority by Chairman George F. Hoar, House Reports, 43rd Cong., 2nd Sess, no. 261 'Condition of Affairs in the Southern States' (Washington; Government Printing Office, 1875) (hereafter: 'Condition of the South') 16.

[12] 'Condition of the South', 15, 19.

harsh, and contemptuous stories and contra-propaganda, the local press was so successful in the derision of federal soldiers and Republican officials that many of them became disillusioned and demoralized. One of them was Major Lewis Merrill, the federal investigator who exterminated the early Ku Klux Klan in South Carolina and was sent to Louisiana to quash the succeeding White League and restore law and order in the Red River Valley. Aggravated by another round of malicious reporting, he accounted:

> So long as freedom of the press means license to lie and slander at pleasure every officer whose discharge of duty offends one, or frequently both political parties, there would seem to be no remedy for the officer, and nothing for him to do but possess his soul patience, and wait for a change of station to some frontier post, where the savages, whose feelings he must hurt, have no newspapers through which to assail him.[13]

Some of the most aggressive rhetoric emanated from three Red River Valley editors who spearheaded the White League campaign[14] during the 1874 elections. These were James H. Cosgrove of the Natchitoches *People's Vindicator*, Robert P. Hunter of the Alexandria *Caucasian*, and Albert H. Leonard of the *Shreveport Times*. Although there is a lack of letters or other documents showing the extent of cooperation, it is clear these three editors acted in concert by the communications in their newspapers. They were quoting each other, swapping stories and using the same argumentation and strategies to address their white readers. According to historian Joe Gray Taylor there was an immediate connection between the extreme newspapers and the unofficial paramilitary arm of the Democratic Party, the White League: 'The formation of the White League in Louisiana (…) begun with the publication of a newspaper, the *Caucasian*, at Alexandria on March 28,

[13] J. M. Martinez, *Carpetbaggers, Cavalry, and the Ku Klux Klan: Exposing the Invisible Empire during Reconstruction* (Lanham 2007) 226.

[14] Since the Democratic Party was blamed for secession and defeat in the Civil War, the name of the Democratic Party was discredited and the white Southern conservatives had to broaden the party's appeal. Therefore, the political campaign did not immediately adopt the label of the Democratic Party, but used various synonyms as the 'White Men's Party', 'People's Party' or 'Conservative Party'. The other strategy was the affiliation with the paramilitaristic White League and its aggressive and white supremacist stance.

1874.'[15] In this weekly, white Democrat Robert Hunter proposed 'that the campaign of this fall should be a fair, square, stand-up fight of the honest and intelligent white people against negro incompetence and carpet-bag-rascality.'[16] The paper was straightforward and aggressive, depicting the Republicans as the enemy. After thanking the editor of the Republican Rapides *Gazette* for his kind wishes, the *Caucasian* announced, 'we shall wage war against his political party.'[17] Hunter pleaded for a 'bold, determined, and united effort for white supremacy'[18] and tried to persuade the Democratic Party to adopt a 'white line' strategy. As he told the investigating committee in 1875:

> In 1874, preparatory to the inauguration of the campaign of that year, three of us determined to conduct a campaign paper. We started the Caucasian (…) to advocate what, at that time, was a new idea in politics – the drawing of the color-line. I think that the salutary [editorial] in the Caucasian on the 28th March was the first that was said in this State about a white man's party or a white league.[19]

Three months later, on June 20, 1874, James H. Cosgrove established his anti-compromise newspaper, the *People's Vindicator*, in the neighboring parish of Natchitoches. Like Hunter, Cosgrove entered the newspaper field in reaction to the political state of affairs with the aim 'to combat the Republicans and to return the white Democratic Southerner to political power.'[20] Cosgrove was even more aggressive and uncompromising than Hunter. Known for his temper, in writing as well as in real life, Cosgrove advocated a hard-line policy that endorsed white solidarity and opposition to Radical Reconstruction, while scorning every form of conciliation between Democrats and Republicans. In his 1875 testimony to the senate

[15] J. G. Taylor, *Louisiana Reconstructed, 1863-1877* (Baton Rouge 1974) 214.
[16] 'Salutary', Alexandria *Caucasian*, March 28, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.
[17] 'The Rapides Gazette', Alexandria *Caucasian*, April 4, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.
[18] 'The Issue', Alexandria *Caucasian*, April 4, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.
[19] 'Condition of the South', 508.
[20] D. B. Maxwell, James Hugh Cosgrove, Louisiana Newspaper Editor, 1842-1914 (MA-thesis, Northwestern State University of Louisiana 1973) iii.

committee, Edward L. Pierson, editor of the Natchitoches *Republican*, described the newspaper's tone as 'violent and incendiary.'[21] Cosgrove attacked many Republican officials in his paper. Pleading for vengeance on the 'wicked swindles' of the Republican government, Cosgrove cryptically claimed in his first issue to resist: 'Kellogg and his minions as usurpers and unprincipled villains (…) with all the means the God of nature has placed within our reach.' He did not refrain from explicit and personal attacks against the highest officials of the state: 'The white man's party is determined to rescue Louisiana from the polluting embraces of such a hybrid pack of lecherous pimps as Kellogg, Packard, Durell, Pinchback, Dibble, Casey, Dubuclet, and their followers.'[22]

The *Shreveport Times* was, if anything, even more vehement. By mid-1874 Albert H. Leonard's *Times* had established itself as 'Louisiana's most conservative and influential rural newspaper'[23] and in every edition the intention was put forward: 'The paper is thoroughly Democratic, and will wage an uncompromising warfare upon the corruptions of the RADICAL PARTY.'[24] In June 1874 it warned Louisiana: 'if the class of men who are now controlling this State, remain much longer in power, there will be no judge whose tribunals will be respected but Judge Lynch.'[25]

Counter-Reconstruction propaganda

Provoking aggression and racism was a means to activate the white Southerners politically and unite them under the banner of the Democratic Party. By the early 1870s, as Reconstruction seemed a fait accompli, the white Southerners and their Democratic Party had faced a legitimacy crisis.[26]

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[21] 'Condition of the South', 134.

[22] *Natchitoches People's Vindicator*, August 29, 1874, 2, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.

[23] G. Vandal, 'Albert H. Leonard's Road from the White League to the Republican Party', *Louisiana History* 36.1 (1995) 58.

[24] *Shreveport Times*, June 3, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.

[25] 'The Fall of the Judiciary', *Shreveport Times*, June 3, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.

[26] E. Foner, *Reconstruction. America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (Perennial 2002) 346, 412.

They had realized that the earlier tactic of 'masterly inactivity',[27] an uncompromisable but passive stance of resistance, resulted in disorganization and lack of strength for the Democrats. The 1872 'New Departure' approach to appeal to a broader constituency – shifting the party towards the center to attract the moderates (and blacks) of the Republican Party – failed dramatically as well. These Democratic defeats reflected the disillusionment of the white Southerners. As Michael Perman argues, they 'had simply not bothered to vote.'[28] They felt betrayed: 'Party distinctions had been blurred, party loyalty unrewarded, and party discipline undermined.'[29] The confidence of Southern Democrats in politics and its ability to solve their problems was severely damaged.[30] Therefore, when under the second Grant administration scandals and economic crisis shocked the country, white Southern newspapers took the initiative for the white line campaign with its emphasis on race and white supremacy. They responded to the need of the defeated white Southerners to restore their honor and authority in a changed society, a constituency that traditionally saw violence as a legitimate means to protect one's dignity and manhood. The *Caucasian* explained:

> There will be no security, no peace, and no prosperity for Louisiana, until the government of the State is restored to the hands of the honest, intelligent, and tax paying white masses; until the superiority of the Caucasian over the African, in all affairs pertaining to government, is acknowledged and established.[31]

In their 'warfare' against Reconstruction, these three editors knew how to influence white Southern public opinion and to control the rhetoric on Republicans and race. For this, they utilized the stereotypes already set in the earlier period of Reconstruction. Referring to Republicans as 'Radicals' was a degrading idiom, depicting them as extremist, fanatic and dangerous. Yet, the rhetorical weapons of 'carpetbagger', 'scalawag', and 'Negro Rule'

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[27] M. Perman, *Reunion without Compromise. The South and Reconstruction: 1865-1868* (Cambridge 1973) 208, 234-250.
[28] M. Perman, *The Road to Redemption. Southern Politics, 1869-1879* (Chapel Hill 1984) 122.
[29] Perman, *The Road to Redemption,* 127.
[30] Foner, *Reconstruction*, 421, 425; Perman, *The Road to Redemption*, 109-131.
[31] 'The Issue', Alexandria *Caucasian*, April 4, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.

were even more powerful. These three terms shaped the debate on Reconstruction as well as the course of the Counter-Reconstruction crusade. 'By 1870,' according to Tunnell, 'no political actor in either the North or the South could discuss the future of Reconstruction without – in some fashion – engaging in this rhetoric.'[32] Even Republican newspapers used the terms 'carpetbagger' and 'scalawag.' However, by actively promoting these stereotypes, Southern conservative editors portrayed Republican rule as corrupt to the core. Relentlessly, the Red River Valley editors deplored the 'Carpet-baggers, scalawags and the rascally class of freedmen who are fattening and growing rich upon the toil of the more honest, though less cunning of their class.'[33]

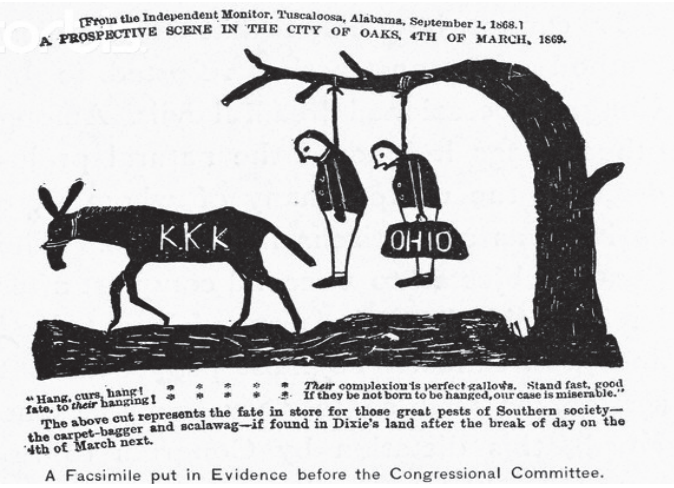


Fig. 3: Use of the stereotypes and intimidation in the *Independent Monitor*, Alabama already in 1869 (before the anti-KKK act of 1871), representing the fate of 'those great pests of Southern society: the carpet-bagger and scalawag.'

[32] Tunnell, 'Creating the Propaganda of History: Southern Editors and the Origins of *Carpetbagger* and *Scalawag*', *Journal of Southern History* 72.4 (November 2006) 789-822: 790.

[33] 'The New Party', *Shreveport Times*, June 10, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.

The epithet 'carpetbagger' proved especially effective propaganda; the stereotype was that of a penniless northern adventurer migrating south to enrich himself by plundering and corrupting the misfortunate South. They were referred to as thieves, swindlers, and usurpers. This image not only inflamed the white Southern masses, but also embarrassed the Northern Republican public. To the South they embodied the lowbred newcomer, outsider, and interloper with a carpet-bag, who did not care for the Southern hardship, but only for the votes of the black men. Southern editors seemed perfectly aware this image was a useful device, undermining Northern support for Reconstruction. The white Southern attitude towards Republicans was not recognized by the Northern press as a party label, but as proof that the new Republican regimes in the South had failed and were no longer worthy of support.[34]

Scalawags – native white Southerners who supported the Union during the war and now voted for the Republican Party – received their share of threats and abuse as well. As Leonard warned in his *Shreveport Times*: 'Look out ye scurvy scalawags! Beware ye Pimps of usurpation, the eyes of the people are on you.'[35] Conceiving these fellow Southerners as parasites within their communities, the press endorsed an ideology of exclusion. Social ostracism was propagated to isolate and silence Southern white Republicans. The *People's Vindicator* advocated:

> Let us never cease to make war upon them, both in their official and private capacities - discountenance any person who meets them as gentlemen upon our street; shut you doors and your hearts to them; let them be out-casts to every feeling of mercy you may have; so that living they may only encumber the earth, and dying descend to hell covered with the curses of every virtuous man in Louisiana.[36]

It proved an effective and drastic way to terminate opponents and polarize society. After Judge Henry C. Myers had fled Natchitoches in fear of his life, his wife testified: 'I was left alone with my sick and dying children. None of

[34] M. W. Summers, *The Press Gang: Newspapers and Politics, 1865-1878* (Chapel Hill and London 1994) 191-193; Tunnell, *Edge of the Sword*, 2; Tunnell, 'Creating the Propaganda of History', 791, 796.
[35] Quoted in: 'The Right Way', *Natchitoches People's Vindicator*, November 21, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.
[36] *Natchitoches People's Vindicator*, October 10, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.

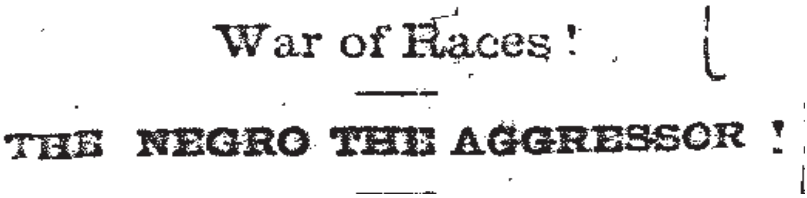
my neighbors came to my assistance. My child died. I sent to the tomb-builder to make its little tomb, and he being a democrat refused to do it.'[37]

Additionally, they devised a system of blacklisting people who voted Republican. The *People's Vindicator* proposed a 'book or Remembrance, in every parish, wherein should be inscribed the names of those White men, who in this emergency (…) adhere to the negro party.'[38] That these lists terrified people is illustrated by the cards and letters that were received by the papers, explaining why they had not voted for the Democratic Party. One of them explained his affiliation with a high Republican official was against his will: 'I am now sorry I ever had anything to do with him or with politics, and in the future will let politics alone, and (...) I will vote the 'People's Ticket.''[39] There were lists for black voters as well, to encourage whites to hire labor in consideration of that list and proving to the freedmen 'what we will do for them if they show an inclination to assist us in redeeming the State.'[40]

Furthermore, the editors aroused the frustrated white Southerners by the threat of black rule, discussing how white Republicans were Africanizing the Southern States by manipulation of the freedmen as the chief instrument of their corrupt Reconstruction governments. Blacks were arrogant, dishonest, contemptuous and scorned the rights of the white man in their incessant demands for offices from the State and Federal Government: 'They dream of the gradual exodus of the whites, which will leave Louisiana to their exclusive control like another Haiti.' [41] The newspapers' frightening warnings of 'negro insurrections' and 'negro rule' fed the public excitement, making the paramilitaristic White League all the more attractive. The *Shreveport Times* warned that 'discontent that comes of idleness and want, may, at any moment, arouse the impatience of the negroes and prompt them to seek [what the Republicans promised them] by

[37] 'Condition of the South', 16.
[38] *Natchitoches People's Vindicator*, September 12, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.
[39] Charles Williams in *Natchitoches People's Vindicator*, September 12, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.
[40] 'The Street Contracts', *Shreveport Times*, June 3, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.
[41] 'The White League', *The People's Vindicator*, July 18, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.

violence.'[42] Therefore, the whites were forced to act: 'A league of the whites is the inevitable result of that formidable, oath-bound and blindly obedient league of the blacks, which (…) may at any moment plunge us into a war of races.' The *People's Vindicator* pleaded: 'unite with us against that supreme danger' and 'teach the blacks to beware of further insolence and aggression.' The White League was determined to maintain the rights of the white citizens 'by all the means that may become necessary for that purpose.'[43]


War of Races!

THE NEGRO THE AGGRESSOR!

Fig.4: A headline in the Natchitoches *People's Vindicator* of July 25, 1874, warning for black insurrection and the coming of a war of races.

Criticism to their aggressive stance was sharply countered. Dismissing Republican complaints that they promoted aggression, the editors blamed the Republicans for any violence that occurred. They reversed the Republican accusations, stating that white conservatives acted out of self-defense against the pack of 'narrow minded despots' who were 'plundering the people of the South without reason or mercy.'[44] Republican newspapers claimed that:

> We have reason to believe that there was no election at all in Union, while in Caddo, Natchitoches, Bienville, Rapides, Grant, and half a dozen others, there was simple political chaos and nothing else.[45]

[42] 'Keeting's Land Speculation', *Shreveport Times*, June 5, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.
[43] 'The White League', *The People's Vindicator*, July 18, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.
[44] 'The Colored People and the White Radical', *Natchitoches People's Vindicator*, October 24, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.
[45] New Orleans *Republican*, November 14, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.

However, Democratic papers asserted that intimidation occurred by 'Radicals' trying to prevent people from voting the conservative ticket and even after the elections were persecuting conservative voters. As the *Caucasian* put it: 'Every man shall vote as he pleases, and while we will not trouble you for voting against us, you *shall not* trouble any man who voted with us.'[46] During the election campaign, however, the editors never ceased their threats and warnings, telling the black population to choose the Democratic Party – any other course 'would be a grave and suicidal action.'[47]

Democratic politics and intimidation went hand in glove. Inventing the strategy of 'bulldozing', the editors directly threatened Republican officials, some of whom were so terrified that they left their parishes in the middle of the night. Cosgrove told white Southerners to close ranks and rush upon their enemies: 'Honest and capable men must and shall be the only recipients of office, and the scalawag and negro leaders here should be made to distinctly understand it.' More ominously, he assured his readers, 'your only succor lies in your own right-arms.' According to the investigating committee, this kind of rhetoric made 'the holding of fair and peaceable elections (…) impossible.' The outcome of the elections had to be reexamined,[48] because 'many more voters than were needed to give the Republican Party a complete victory were prevented from voting at all or coerced into voting the white man's ticket.'[49]

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[46] Alexandria *Caucasian*, November 14, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.

[47] *Natchitoches People's Vindicator*, October 31, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.

[48] Reexamination of election results was conducted after every election during Reconstruction, causing even more tension and discontent over the results. In reaction to the Democratic violence and intimidation Governor Henry C. Warmoth created the State Returning Board after the terrorized elections of 1868. Since then, all election returns had to be reported to the State Returning Board for validity and approval. Yet, this did not bring Louisiana more stability or contentment. The supervision of the Returning Board was accused of acting in the benefit of the Republican Party, which was not an entirely untruthful allegation. As Garnie W. McGinty stated: 'Citizens soon learned it was more important to count than to cast the votes.' G. W. McGinty, *Louisiana Redeemed: The Overthrow of Carpet-Bag Rule 1876-1880* (Gretna 1998) 10.

[49] 'Condition of the South', 16.

The lesson of 1874

Eventually, the Republicans were turned out of power. Yet, not by a landslide election victory in 1874, nor by the aggressive coup d'état attempted by the White League in September in New Orleans. The White Line strategy failed in the short run because federal intervention restored the Republicans to power. At that time, officials in Washington and Northern public opinion were still too strongly focused on Reconstruction and restoring order in the occupied South. As the campaign of 1876 approached, the common front within the Democratic Party broke down. Divisions resurfaced, with the revival of compromise talk as a result. The Democratic Party never had a natural unity other than over the issue of race. As the vast majority of Democrats never accepted black congressional Reconstruction as legitimate, this was the unifying cause. Yet, they had been divided about how to oppose it. The lesson learned from 1874 was that they would not get away with an openly violent coup. Democratic leaders urged whites to forego violence, to avoid provoking more federal intervention. They now adopted a contradictory policy that combined a racist appeal to whites with promises to respect black rights, even seeking to win black voters as well.

Taking public opinion in the North into consideration proved successful in the end. After another disputed election round in 1876, during which the Republicans feared losing the White House to the Democrats in the national elections, an agreement was made by which on state level Louisiana would get a Democratic governor and the South would be left alone. Federal intervention in Louisiana ceased and the Republican Party quietly gave up on its commitment to black equality. The last remains of Reconstruction fell, making an end to reform, while the Democratic Party took control of what became known as the Solid South.

Evaluating the influence of the Red River Valley Press

What was the role of the white Southern press in this? Although the White League attempt to power in 1874 had failed and the moderate faction of the Democratic Party revived, the press had already achieved its goal of stirring up and organizing white Southerners at the grassroots. The editors had helped them overcome the disillusionment and activated them socially and

politically for the benefit of the Democratic Party. Their White Line strategy demonstrated how effective the issue of race was in arousing and mobilizing the party's essential constituency. Stigmatizing the Republican Party was particularly successful, as it gradually weakened the Reconstruction regimes. The violent rhetoric promoted bulldozing – the ostracism and intimidation of Republicans. However, the influence of the extreme newspapers is not directly assessed. The image of an extreme, aggressive and active press as an actor that instigated the violence in the area can not be bluntly made, before some nuances are taken into consideration.

Racist and violent language was commonplace in mid-nineteenth century Louisiana. Indeed, the American press in general was notorious for its rough and feisty rhetoric. The public was used to aggressive language. Especially in the South, racism as well as violence was part of the general culture. It was a culture of honor and shame, in which the white man defended the honor of himself and his family and black subordination was deemed a necessity. In this culture 'politics raised the stakes of honor', as the possible esteem became higher and the danger of assault on one's honor greater.[50] Appealing to voters by means of violent rhetoric and racial identity was the same rhetoric that had been used before the Civil War to defend slavery.

Making use of race as a main target in politics was, according to Perman, the 'great discovery that the Democratic-Conservatives made between 1874 and 1876.'[51] The three editors were certainly not the only ones who used it in their papers. However, as Hunter mentioned in 1875, they were the earliest papers to use this White Line strategy so unambiguously. Their direct threats were exceptional even in the region reputed to be the 'most violent place of the South.'[52] Moreover, Leonard and Hunter were pillars of their community; lawyers, educated and established men. They reflected and connected to the general public opinion of the White Southerners in the area, especially that of 'Wild West' towns like Shreveport.

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[50] E. L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (New York 1984) 4, 16, 19.

[51] M. Perman ed., 'Southern Democrats and the Overthrow of Reconstruction, 1873-1876' in: *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction: Documents and Essays* (D.C. Heath 1991) 560.

[52] Tunnell in the PBS documentary *Reconstruction: The Second Civil War* (PBS, 2004).

Cosgrove, a failed commercial steamboat agent, was more of an outsider in his parish of Natchitoches. Known for his inflammability, in writing as well as verbal and physical conduct, 'Cosgrove battled the opposition with his fists as well as with his pen.'[53] However, the majority of the parish denounced violence as a means to political ends. Yet, although seen as an extremist by his own parishioners, he was also typified as an influential voice of white Southerners and a spokesman for the paramilitary White League. His paper was mentioned in many contemporary newspapers and testimonies as the leading White League organ. E. L. Pierson testified that the *People's Vindicator* 'advocated hanging every republican to a lamppost' and intimidated the black population 'so as to prevent them from registering and voting.'[54] Cosgrove was even that closely connected to the violence that he was arrested after the Coushatta massacre, after which various papers protested to this breach of the freedom of the press.

All three papers were part and parcel of the White League. At a regional White League meeting in August in Coushatta it was even decided to furnish the *Vindicator* as well as the *Shreveport Times* with proceedings of their meeting.[55] The editors eagerly started to print the communications of the meetings. The *Caucasian* joined them in promoting the meetings and legitimizing the belligerent interactions. Alongside advertisements and announcements for mass meetings of the White League and the White Man's Party, the paper prompted in articles for public conventions to unite the 'oppressed white people' so 'they should attempt to defend themselves.'[56] In the three newspapers the organization of the political campaign and the campaign of terror appeared in chorus, as calls for meetings of the paramilitary White League were openly printed next to the political line of strategy discussed in the various anti-Republican meetings.

In many testimonies the three names are connected to the violence and destruction of the democratic process. However, their influence was

[53] Cosgrove would eventually even kill his rival editor of the *Republican* E. L. Pierson in a duel in 1875, although this was then not perceived to be a political murder but a defense of his honor as Pierson had publicly accused him of being a coward. Maxwell, 'James Hugh Cosgrove', IV, X.

[54] 'Condition of the South', 137.

[55] *Natchitoches People's Vindicator*, August 1, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.

[56] 'What are we waiting for!' *Alexandria Caucasian*, July 11, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.

also connected to the revival of the Democratic Party. Leonard, the most fanatical and influential white supremacist of South-West, seemed to have been a leading figure on political organizational level, as his suggestions of taxpayers' associations and election rounds and locations in the *Shreveport Times* were adopted by the Democratic organizations and parishes all over Louisiana. The papers were aware of their power and knew how to play with public opinion. Leonard stated himself in 1874:

> We have the means of arousing and harmonizing our people, and of making a fight that will redeem the State (...) The awakening and organization of the people, and the success of the canvass, depends, very greatly, and, we say it in no spirit of egotism, upon the press of Louisiana.[57]

A climate of fear

In the South, the press was of utmost importance to the public of even the smallest village. The people in this rural part of the United States depended on the papers to keep themselves informed of local developments as well as national and political news. In the small communities where everybody knew everybody, including the editors, the impact of the naming and shaming was personal and direct. Therefore, the threats must have been intimidating. Social exclusion affected everyday life. Testimonies state that around the elections of 1874 and 1876 Republicans and blacks were severely intimidated and threatened. Pierson testified that when he asked the Shreveport white citizens why a paper as the *Shreveport Times* existed and why they supported it:

> They would generally give me an evasive answer; they would say that it did not express their opinions, and some of those men have used expressions which led me to believe that they were as much intimidated by the clique that conducts the Times as anybody else.[58]

[57] *Shreveport Times,* June 7, 1874, microfilm, Special Collections, Hill Memorial Library, LSU.
[58] 'Condition the South', 149-150.

One of them even confessed, 'they are too violent.'[59] Although the campaign of terror failed to coerce blacks into a wholesale abandonment of the polls, the promise of victory and the renewed determination that the press set off, generated a thrill among the white Louisianans adequately invigorating to make them return to the polls in the benefit of the Democratic Party.[60]

Ultimately, the skill and power of the three white Southern editors and their allies in other states was confirmed by the gradual acceptance in the North of the extreme propaganda. How could any Republican who read those agitated stories from the South take their claims of black insurrection and denial of white violence seriously? Even before the special senatorial committee presented its findings on the political violence in Louisiana, the North was aware of the aggressive actions of white Louisianans and the involvement of its press, as The New York Times reported in September 1874 on the Coushatta massacre of Republican officials:

> We charge distinctly that this atrocious deed is the direct and legitimate outgrowth of the violent Red River White League organizations, and for it the able and diabolical White League organ, the Shreveport Times, is, in a large measure, responsible.[61]

Although not all Republicans bought the ambivalent story of 'the poor whites', the national party did eventually come to the conclusion that the Republican governments in the South were no longer worthy of support. Disillusionment with democracy in the South set in, with devastating long-term consequences for social equality and the conduct of elections. In their extensive use of the freedom of the press, the three editors of the Red River Valley made a momentous contribution to the political system and peculiar democracy of the post-Civil War South. The extreme communications instigated the political organization and terrorism that created a climate of fear. Uncensored, the editors added significantly to the success in the battle for political control. The decision of the Reconstruction governments to sustain freedom of the press had facilitated bulldozing, intimidation, and political violence. It undermined the Republican reform by the propaganda

[59] 'Condition the South', 149-150.
[60] Perman, *Pursuit of Unity*, 140.
[61] 'The Southern Terror', *The New York Times*, September 2, 1874, digital archive at www.nytimes.com, viewed on: February 20, 2012.

that influenced Northern opinion as well. In the end an unofficial one-party rule and white supremacy could prevail for another century. The role of the press in the political violence used to this end can not be ignored. Creating a public sentiment aggressive enough to propel the Counter-Reconstruction, these newspapers appealed the white Louisianans 'from the ballot to the bullet.'[62]

[62] 'The Louisiana Troubles', *The New York Times*, April 21, 1873, digital archive at www.nytimes.com, viewed on May 3, 2012.