

1863 these riots were cited as the fulfillment of the urban and industrial nightmare. The draft riots bore witness to the "volcano under the city" that middle- and upper-class Americans had come to dread. Within the larger history of rioting in America, however, they have a different import. These riots stand as a symbol and manifestation of the major trends in popular disorder during the nineteenth century. They illustrate the twisted and conflicted animosities that had emerged between different groups within American society. The grievances of the draft rioters were many and diverse. Yet these frustrations and hatreds became projected onto the issue of race—an area in which howling and raging crowds would continue to express their greatest brutality.

Reconstruction

After the Civil War the effort by white southerners to limit the effects of emancipation created the most violent and nastiest rioting in American history. There is no way to relate the full dimensions of this rioting, nor can we ever comprehend the mixture of emotions that marked the Reconstruction experience of black Americans. Freedom brought great expectations smashed by a reign of white terror. A survey of Reconstruction riots suggests at least four major categories of disturbances. First, there were some riots initiated by blacks. Second, there were a few major outbreaks of urban popular disorder, two of which—Memphis and New Orleans in 1866—had a significant impact on Reconstruction history. Third, there were several rural disturbances that were so bloody and so infamous that they stand out on their own. Finally, there were the countless acts of terror and intimidation practiced by the Ku Klux Klan and other groups of whites. All four areas of rioting reflect the violence and divisions that had come to mark nineteenth-century popular disorder.¹⁸

Southerners had built their society upon a myth of a corporate identity whose foundation lay in black slavery. Blacks were not invisible in the antebellum South; they were merely property and did not count as human beings. The Union victory threatened southern assumptions by abolishing slavery. White southerners, asserting their racist vision of a united community, struggled to prevent black participation in politics and refute equitable social and economic arrangements. In a flurry of activity—often joining traditional techniques of collective action with extreme violence—southern whites strove to deny the results of the Civil War.

White southerners viewed their resort to violence as a necessary means to save their civilization. One editor deplored mobs, but explained that a lynching in Texas "had become . . . an unavoidable necessity. The sanctity of home, the peace and safety of society, the prosperity of the country, and the security of life itself demanded . . ." action.¹⁹ In this scenario, repeated by scholars even in the middle of the twentieth century, the freedmen, inspired by northern carpetbaggers and supported by southern scalawags, plotted to overthrow

republican institutions and install themselves as the dominant force.²⁰ In every shadow and whisper southern whites saw the beginnings of black conspiracy and race genocide.

Did whites have any real basis for these fears? African Americans, fueled by the promise of freedom and exhilarated by the defeat of white masters, initiated some riots. These disturbances presaged the fulfillment of the southern whites' worst nightmares. For more than a week in June 1866 in Charleston, South Carolina, black gangs, shouting phrases like "Kill the rebel son of a bitch," sporadically attacked whites. Despite participation of Republican whites in Union Leagues, these political clubs that allowed blacks to discuss issues and learn more about their rights aggravated race relations. The presence of armed guards at some meetings sent a shudder down many a white spine. At times, the Union League provided a vehicle to mobilize blacks against their racist opponents. In the fall of 1867 at Hunnicutt's Crossing, South Carolina, Union League blacks fought with whites from a local debating club, killing one and arresting others.²¹

If African-American assertiveness offered a shred of evidence to rationalize—not substantiate—white fears, the response often was out of all proportion to the stimulus. Blacks ordinarily paid a very high price for any sign of aggression. Near Columbia, Tennessee, on the night of July 4, 1868, about twenty to thirty blacks ambushed a Ku Klux Klan gathering, killing one, and wounding three or four others before retreating to the protection of the army. Within a few weeks the Klan, in parties as large as two hundred, hunted down three of the blacks who had participated in the attack and lynched them. In the fall of 1868 an Arkansas trader shot at a black at Shady Grove, Louisiana. Outraged blacks captured the man, roughed him up and tied him to a tree before some whites, after a struggle that saw loss of life on both sides, rescued him. Word spread that the blacks were in a state of rebellion. Seventy-five whites crossed over from Arkansas and killed blacks indiscriminately. Another armed party of whites came from Shreveport, and although they turned back before reaching Shady Grove, they killed nine blacks along the way. This incident set off a series of white attacks on blacks in the area that left as many as from 150 to 200 dead.²²

The explosiveness of southern race relations and black combativeness is further illustrated by an incident in Cross Plains, Alabama, in July 1870. After several whites beat a freedman, ten armed blacks returned to town seeking vengeance. A short gun battle ensued in which no one was injured. But the whites were now convinced that a black uprising had occurred. Whites scoured the countryside, captured all but a few of those involved in the shooting, and arrested a white teacher who had been preaching racial equality to the blacks. An ad hoc court under a magistrate commenced its investigation. When the proceedings took longer than a day, the Klan stepped in and hanged the white teacher and six blacks.²³