There are those who say to you—we are rushing the issue of civil rights. I say we are 172 years late.

Hubert Humphrey to Democrat National Convention (1948)

In the summer of 1948, two Mississippi Valley men, Hubert Horatio Humphrey, mayor of Minneapolis, Minnesota, and U.S. President Harry S. Truman of Independence, Missouri, challenged the segregationist wing of their own Democratic Party. Humphrey and Truman did not act alone or in a historic vacuum. For decades, Black freedom activists, most notably members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), had labored alongside Black clergymen, professionals, and other community members to advance civil rights. The nation’s white private business sector joined in, most notably with the Brooklyn Dodgers’ 1947 signing of Jackie Robinson to desegregate major league baseball. And the Republican Party’s 1948 platform boasted a strong civil rights plank supported by their presidential candidate Thomas Dewey and his running mate Earl Warren, who was destined to soon make a huge contribution to the civil rights movement. The late President Franklin D. Roosevelt had promised Blacks he would advance their cause, but Roosevelt had prioritized civil rights

below ending Depression-era economic collapse and winning World War II. Hubert Humphrey and Harry Truman believed 1948 was the time for the party of Jefferson and Jackson to change its course.2

Truman got the ball rolling in 1947 by appointing a bipartisan Civil Rights Commission to issue recommendations regarding anti-lynching action, equal employment opportunity, voting rights, and desegregation of federal government jobs, including the military. When Democrats met in July of 1948, an alliance of northern moderates, the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), and Black political leaders like Congressman William L. Dawson had formed. They supported the thirty-seven-year-old Humphrey in a floor fight over the civil rights plank in the party platform. Facing sharp opposition from southern segregationists led by Georgia Senator Richard Russell and South Carolina Governor Strom Thurmond, Humphrey took the floor and offered his amendment. In one of the most electrifying speeches in American political history, he denounced those southern Democrats who believed “the issue of civil rights is an infringement on states’ rights.” Humphrey proclaimed, “The time has arrived for the Democratic party to get out of the shadow of states’ rights and walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights.”3

The ayes won closely, by 70 votes out of 1,234 cast. Mississippi and Alabama delegates walked out, Truman handily defeated Russell for the Democrat presidential nomination and, on July 26, Truman issued Executive Order 8981 desegregating the U.S. Army, Navy, and Marine Corps. Although Strom Thurmond ran as a third-party presidential candidate, he and most “Dixiecrats” returned to the party fold under the re-elected Truman and kept fighting for their “states’ rights” to segregate Black men and women from white.

Thus in 1948, the nation at last stood poised to face huge

unresolved problems stemming from debates over race intertwined with federalism. To fully understand this, we must first look back in American history eight decades earlier, to the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction. The entire United States endured this turbulent time, and the Mississippi Valley played a pivotal role in events as they unfolded.

CAIRO TO CHATTANOOGA

“My family is American, and has been for generations, in all its branches, direct and collateral,” stated General and President Ulysses S. Grant in his *Personal Memoirs*, one of the best written of all presidential autobiographies. Descended from New Englanders and Pennsylvanians, Grant’s family was further tempered and reshaped by the rigors of life in the Mississippi River Valley.4

The western rivers wind through Ulysses S. Grant’s life story. He was born to Jesse R. and Hannah Simpson Grant on April 27, 1822, at Point Pleasant, Ohio, on the upper Ohio River, near Cincinnati. He spent his early life in nearby Georgetown, Ohio, and as a youth visited Chillicothe, Ohio, and Covington, Maysville, and Louisville in Kentucky. Much later, after his first army career in the Far West, Grant resided with his wife Julia near her family in Saint Louis, Missouri. Immediately prior to his Civil War service, Grant and Julia moved north to live alongside Jesse, Hannah, and Grant’s siblings in Galena, Illinois, on the upper Mississippi River. Much of Ulysses S. Grant’s most consequential Civil War service took place along the Ohio, Cumberland, Tennessee, and Mississippi Rivers, where he led a brilliant 1861–63 campaign cutting the Confederacy in two. Then, after the war, Grant and Julia returned to Galena, where Grant learned of his 1868 election to the presidency of the United States.5

Grant was a brown-haired, freckled child whose temperament more closely resembled his quiet, reticent mother than his brash, argumentative father. Jesse Grant was a successful hide tanner who was drawn to politics. Following Andrew Jackson’s final term as president, Jesse disavowed the Democrats and became an anti-slavery Whig and, eventually, an abolitionist Republican. Young Ulysses’ calm, firm demeanor made him an excellent horseman, and all his life he loved to train and ride horses. But the freedom of his Ohio Valley youth ended suddenly in 1839 when Jesse informed his son he had secured him an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. The 17-year-old, five-foot-one-inch, 117-lb. boy from Georgetown, Ohio, did not make waves at West Point. Grant excelled in math and struggled in French; he enjoyed reading novels and took up drawing and painting. A growth spurt brought him a muscled frame and height of five feet, eight inches. In his study of military tactics, Grant was drawn to some (not all) European practices, which he was to combine with the more coarse warfare techniques of Mississippi Valley frontiersmen.

Grant graduated in the middle of his class and returned to the Midwest when he and his academy roommate Fred Dent were posted at Jefferson Barracks in Saint Louis. Ulysses often visited the nearby Dent plantation, White Haven, where he met and fell in love with Fred’s sister Julia. Jesse Grant was furious to learn Ulysses had taken up with slaveholders, but that is not the reason Julia and Ulysses remained unwed until 1848. Grant’s regiment first moved to Louisiana, and then to Texas. Grant had achieved the rank of first lieutenant on the eve of the Mexican-American War.

Grant was one of dozens of Civil War generals who earned their spurs in the Mexican-American War of 1846–47. A perusal of Mexican war lieutenants, captains, and majors reveals that Robert E. Lee, George McClellan, Stonewall Jackson, P. G. T. Beauregard, Richard Ewell, Joe Johnston, Albert Sidney

6. McFeely, Grant, 5–12; Adriana Bosch, dir., Ulysses S. Grant: Warrior President, part 1, American Experience, season 14 (Boston, 2002), DVD.
7. McFeely, Grant, 20–27.
Johnston, George Pickett, A. P. Hill, Benjamin Meade, John B. Gordon, George Thomas, Braxton Bragg, Joe Hooker, and many more served in Mexico under Generals Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott. Although assigned behind the lines to Taylor’s Quartermaster (supply) Corps, Grant soon found his way to the front and fought bravely at Monterrey. Here, Grant’s horsemanship served him well as he “charged with the regiment” and, once inside the city, risked his life to fetch more ammunition. His biographer William McFeeley writes: “With his arm around the neck of the horse, his left foot up behind the saddle, his right in the stirrup, and his body protected by the right side of the horse, he rode at full run past the Mexicans shooting at him.” Grant later recalled, “I got out safely without a scratch.”

In August of 1848, at war’s end, Grant at last married Julia in Saint Louis; Jesse and Hannah so opposed his marriage into a slaveholding family they refused to attend the wedding. Captain Grant resumed his military career, but during his 1852–54 service at Fort Humboldt, an isolated post on the California coast, he grew weary of military life. The difficulties of separation from Julia and his new family (their first son, Frederick, was born in 1850) led Grant to heavy drinking. After fifteen years in the army, he resigned and returned to farm some Missouri land he dubbed Hardscrabble. When this and other business ventures failed, he turned to his parents for help. Jesse initially refused, writing, “So long as you make your home among a tribe of slaveholders I will do nothing.” With three children to support and Julia pregnant with their fourth, Grant submitted to his father’s will. In 1860, the Grant family rode a Mississippi steamboat to Galena, Illinois, where Ulysses went to work as a clerk in his father’s leather and harness shop. In less than a year, however, the nation was embroiled in civil war.

The Civil War made Ulysses S. Grant. Although he had failed in farming and business, Grant possessed the intellect and courage necessary to help lead the Union to victory. Upon

8. Ibid., 28–34; Grant, Personal Memoirs, 1:78–81.
9. Bosch, Ulysses S. Grant.
hearing of the Confederate secession, Grant re-enlisted in the U.S. Army, declaring, “There are but two parties now, traitors and patriots.” Promoted to brigadier general in July 1861, he was selected to command the 21st Illinois Infantry Regiment. Grant assumed command at Cairo, Illinois, at the juncture of the Ohio and Mississippi, on September 4 and moved to occupy Paducah, Kentucky, on September 6, 1861.10

During this time, and before his promotion to general, Grant had been called briefly to Missouri to assist in keeping that rebellious state in the Union. Near Florida, Missouri (in the northeastern part of the state), he nearly crossed paths with young Sam Clemens, who had joined Marion’s Rangers, a ragtag Confederate militia unit. Clemens served without distinction and soon deserted to trek to Nevada Territory. Under his pen name Mark Twain, he later wrote, “In time I came to know that Union colonel whose coming frightened me out of the war, and crippled the Southern cause to that extent—General Grant. I came within a few hours of seeing him when he was as unknown as myself.” Twenty-four years after their Missouri wartime experience, Twain assisted an ailing and impoverished Grant in the expeditious publication of his Memoirs. The book’s success ensured widowed Julia a source of income.11

The idea to cut the Confederacy in half through control of the Mississippi River can be traced back to General Winfield Scott’s Anaconda Plan, but Grant, William Tecumseh Sherman, David Farragut, David Porter, and other Union commanders greatly refined Scott’s overly simplistic strategy. Like many northerners in 1861, Scott mistakenly believed the Civil War would be short and the Union would easily prevail without major battles and bloodshed. He reasoned that if Union sailors and soldiers simply surrounded the Confederate states and applied steady pressure (like an anaconda snake), the unsupplied Rebels would succumb with no need for a direct Union invasion and accompanying

10. Ibid.; James McPherson, Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction (New York, 1982), 154; William C. Davis, Battlefields of the Civil War (London 1990), 34.
casualties. Yet the Confederates fought fiercely from the start. Along the Mississippi, they immediately moved to counter Grant by seizing New Madrid, Missouri, and sharp engagements followed at Columbus, Kentucky, and Belmont, Missouri. Early on, Grant and Sherman saw the Civil War was going to be a much more difficult affair. While control of the Mississippi River was crucial, the Union would also need to capture the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers and take the battle into the heart of the Confederacy.\textsuperscript{12}

In his \textit{Memoirs}, Grant describes his two-year campaign on the western rivers. Confederate Forts Henry and Donelson, near the mouths of the Tennessee and Cumberland respectively, were “strongly fortified” and of “immense importance,” he wrote. Grant’s troops advanced as navy gunboats under Flag Officer Andrew Foote bombarded Fort Henry on February 6, 1862. “With Fort Henry in our hands,” Grant recalled, “we had a navigable stream [the Tennessee River] open to us up to Muscle Shoals, in Alabama.” Yet most of Fort Henry’s Rebel garrison managed to escape to nearby Fort Donelson; Grant pursued them, marching a 27,000-man army overland while Foote’s ironclad Yankee gunboats ascended the Cumberland to lay siege.\textsuperscript{13}

Fort Donelson’s defenders, led by Generals Nathan Bedford Forrest and Grant’s old army friend Simon Bolivar Buckner, proved much tougher than those at Fort Henry. Yankee and Rebel soldiers and sailors battled fiercely in bitter winter cold February 13–16. As Grant began to gain traction, Buckner tried to negotiate favorable surrender terms for his 13,000 men. Grant refused. Outside Donelson, he wrote Buckner two of the most famous sentences in the history of the American Civil War: “No terms except an unconditional and immediate surrender can be accepted. I propose to move immediately upon your works.” On February 16, 1862, Buckner reluctantly surrendered to the man who would now be known as U. S. “Unconditional Surrender”


\textsuperscript{13} McPherson, \textit{Ordeal by Fire}, 222; Grant, \textit{Personal Memoirs}, 1:188; Davis, \textit{Battlefields of the Civil War}, 34.
Grant. Promoted to major general for his feat, Grant later reflected, “Fort Donelson was the gate to Nashville, a place of great military and political importance.”

As winter turned to spring, Confederates evacuated Nashville on the Cumberland while Grant used the newly won Tennessee River to sail supplies and soldiers into the southwestern corner of Tennessee. His ultimate aim was to fight Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnston’s army near Corinth, a northwestern Mississippi town near the Tennessee state line. With its vital railroad links, Corinth was the Confederacy’s western hub. Grant remembered, “The enemy was in strength at Corinth … the great strategic position at the West between the Tennessee and the Mississippi rivers and between Nashville and Vicksburg.”

In March, Grant led 40,000 men to Pittsburg Landing, on the Tennessee River, a mere twenty miles from Corinth. There he was joined by General William Tecumseh Sherman, who positioned his men at a nearby log church named Shiloh. They awaited gunboats and infantry reinforcements under General Don Carlos Buell. But Albert Sidney Johnston was not going to sit idly while the Yankees prepared to march into Mississippi; he and Louisiana General Pierre Gustave Touissant Beauregard shrewdly elected to march north and deliver the first blow. On April 6, 1862, Johnston’s 40,000-man army slammed against Grant’s and Sherman’s men, and the two-day Battle of Shiloh began.

“Shiloh was the severest battle fought at the West during the war, and but few in the East equaled it for hard, determined fighting,” Grant recalled. The combination of the number of men involved (more than 100,000), their lack of combat experience, and the closeness of battle all contributed to Shiloh’s terrible carnage. Johnston caught Sherman off-guard, and before Grant could move reinforcements up to Shiloh church the Union line

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14. Grant Personal Memoirs, 1:188, 208; McPherson, Ordeal by Fire, 222–25; Davis, Battlefields of the Civil War, 34.
15. Grant, Personal Memoirs, 1:221.
16. McPherson, Ordeal by Fire, 225–26; Davis, Battlefields of the Civil War, 33–49.
was badly beaten back on both its ends. But in the Hornet’s Nest, a sunken road at the center of the Yankee line, Benjamin Prentiss’s riflemen and artillerymen held off the Rebels in a horrific firefight that lasted until late afternoon April 6. This gave Grant time to build a defensive position along the Tennessee River, where he and Sherman spent a tense night awaiting Buell’s arrival. In his demeanor this night we see U. S. Grant’s remarkable clarity of mind and steadiness. Unlike some men who panic or stall in life-threatening situations, Grant always remained calm and decisive; he was unshakable in crisis. So too was Sherman, who that evening famously remarked to Grant they had suffered the “Devil’s own day.” Grant nodded, but added, “Lick ’em tomorrow though.”

What Grant and Sherman did not know in those early morning hours was that Albert Sidney Johnston lay dead and the Rebel attack was expended. With Buell’s 25,000 troops ferried across the Tennessee, the April 7 Yankee counter-attack forced Beauregard to lead a Rebel retreat back into Mississippi. Those who criticize Grant for his lack of pursuit that day should consider the greenness of his troops and the carnage they beheld. Nearly 4,000 men lay dead or dying on the Shiloh battlefield, with 16,000 wounded. Amazingly, Grant would see even worse carnage in Virginia in 1864. At Shiloh, he remarked that there were so many dead bodies one could walk on them without touching the ground.

Today, a visit to the Shiloh National Military Park, near Savannah, Tennessee, is a profoundly moving—some might say haunting—experience. Because the battle was fought during the warm west Tennessee spring, Union officers thought it imperative to immediately bury the dead. While according their own troops full burial honors, they buried their defeated enemies in unmarked mass graves. Those huge graves stand today as testament to the extent of the bloodletting at Shiloh. One can only imagine the psychological impact that battle had on the men.

17. Davis, Battlefields of the Civil War, 39–49; Grant, Personal Memoirs, 1:238; McPherson, Ordeal by Fire, 225–27.
who fought it. Grant had always been a realist, yet in the spring of 1862 he was struck by both the Confederates’ grit, and the bare fact that Shiloh was no turning point—that this kind of fighting would continue on with no end in sight.19

During and after Shiloh, Ulysses S. Grant, who had never been as enamored with West Point training and European military style as, say, George B. McClellan, began to further Americanize his ideas about warfare. Grant was born in the Mississippi Valley only a few years after the white/Indian guerilla warfare of Tippecanoe, the Thames, Horseshoe Bend, and the first Seminole War. He matured during Black Hawk’s War, the second Seminole War, and the army’s forceful removal of the Cherokee Indians to land west of the Mississippi. While the European formalism taught at West Point directed officers to stress organizational hierarchies and organize seasonal campaigns, carry huge baggage trains, and leave civilians alone whenever possible, Grant began to think more broadly and aggressively. He joined others in devising a hybrid strategy utilizing both European formal and American guerilla warfare tactics, and he readied his forces to respond to Confederate guerilla attacks. Grant’s style of dress and egalitarian demeanor symbolized his frontier influences. He rarely wore a full dress uniform (historians always note the differences between his rough apparel and that of Robert E. Lee at Appomattox Courthouse). Even when called to command back east in 1864, he declined to wear a forage hat (like McClellan) and instead continued to sport the broad-brimmed field hat (a cowboy hat of sorts) worn by western Union soldiers. Grant’s down-to-earth demeanor was also reflected in his command style and the informal ways he treated fellow officers and enlisted men.20

While Ulysses S. Grant’s year on the Mississippi, Cumberland, and Tennessee Rivers reconfirmed his belief in cutting the

20. Waugh, U. S. Grant, 88; Larry Schweikart, America’s Victories: Why the U.S. Wins Wars and Will Win the War on Terror (New York, 2006), 250, 110–11. For guerilla tactics, see Donald E. Sutherland, A Savage Conflict: The Decisive Role of Guerillas in the American Civil War (Charlotte, N.C., 2010).
Confederacy in two, he now began to enlarge and add nuance to that plan. He became an advocate of two equal and simultaneous fronts (east and west) and a more aggressive and, at times, ruthless style of fighting. In this he joined intellectual company with another Mississippi Valley man, the Ohioan William Tecumseh Sherman. A namesake of William Henry Harrison’s Tippecanoe foe, the Shawnee chief Tecumseh, Sherman believed in making war as terrible as possible in order for it to end as soon as possible. Sherman called this kind of fighting “Hard War.” Later reflecting on his infamous march across Georgia, Sherman wrote that he always aimed to “whip the rebels, to humble their pride, to follow them to their inmost recesses, and make them fear and dread us.” The final member of this Union Hard War triumvirate was also a down-to-earth Mississippi Valley man, President Abraham Lincoln. In Grant and Sherman, Lincoln at last found generals who would wield the “terrible swift sword.”

Grant wrote, “Up to the battle of Shiloh I, as well as thousands of other citizens, believed the rebellion, against the Government would collapse suddenly and soon, if a decisive victory could be gained over any of its armies.” But after Shiloh, and despite the fact the “Tennessee and Cumberland rivers, from their mouths to the head of navigation, were secured,” the Rebels continued their “gallant effort.” It was then, Grant continued, that “I gave up the idea of saving the Union except by complete conquest.” Up to that time, Grant had protected private property of southern noncombatants, but now “I regarded it as humane to both sides” to seize any property “that could be used to support or supply armies.”

Grant’s critics assailed his alleged callousness and condemned the huge Union losses at Shiloh. Some critics called him “the butcher” or “Butcher Grant,” a charge that escalated as the war ground on. Even today, some historians still embrace the view that Grant was a brutal general compared to supposedly more chivalrous southern commanders. This viewpoint originates in

part from the Lost Cause myth embraced by some postbellum southerners who romanticized the Confederacy and berated alleged Yankee brutality. Immediately following Shiloh, General Henry W. Halleck actually re-assigned Grant to desk work, but much of Halleck’s and others’ criticisms of Grant were based on professional jealousy. Also debatable are their frequent accusations regarding Grant’s alleged drinking problem, though historians today continue to repeat them. Abraham Lincoln saw in Grant the answer to his long search for a general with enough intellect and grit to endure the bloodshed necessary to subdue the Rebels. After a thorough investigation, Lincoln countermanded Halleck’s order and ordered Grant to continue his campaign to capture control of the Mississippi River.  

Meanwhile, more pieces in the puzzle of securing the Mississippi for the Union were falling into place. The Rebels had fortified Island Number Ten at the base of an S-shaped curve near the Kentucky-Tennessee border, and no Union vessel could pass downstream. In early spring, General John Pope surrounded the Rebels by securing the Missouri shore, running two ironclads past Rebel artillery, and digging a canal bypassing Number Ten. The canal enabled navy troop transports to slip downstream and ferry men across to the northwest Tennessee shore. Outmaneuvered, Island Number Ten’s 7,000 Rebels surrendered to Pope’s 20,000-man force on April 8, just as Beauregard’s men were retreating from Shiloh back into Corinth, Mississippi.

Far to the south, and also in the month of April, Admiral David Farragut and Commodore David Porter were steadily advancing up the Mississippi toward the city of New Orleans. Farragut’s seventeen-ship fleet steamed from the Gulf of Mexico upriver to a series of Confederate forts defending the Crescent City. While Commodore David Porter (another Hard War practitioner) mortared the Rebels, Farragut sailed his steamers single file through enemy fire so heavy that one Union officer compared

it to “all the earthquakes in the world and all the thunder and lightning storms together, in a space of two miles, all going off at once.” New Orleans surrendered on April 25, but Admiral Farragut did not stop there. He sailed seven steamers upstream, captured the Louisiana capital of Baton Rouge, and then moved north to Natchez, Mississippi, which surrendered in late May. Meanwhile, the Union ironclads that had supported Pope at Island Number Ten continued their descent of the Mississippi and, on June 6, 1862, Memphis, Tennessee, surrendered to the Union. Now Vicksburg, Mississippi, remained the last major obstacle to linking the two fleets and armies and bringing complete Union dominance of the Mississippi River.25

In his Memoirs, Grant wrote, “Vicksburg was important to the enemy because it occupied the high ground coming close to the river below Memphis. From there a railroad runs east [to Jackson, Mississippi], connecting with other roads leading to all points of the Southern States… Vicksburg was the only channel … connecting the parts of the Confederacy divided by the Mississippi… So long as it was held by the enemy, the free navigation of the river was prevented.”26

Situated atop a high bluff overlooking a hairpin turn in the Mississippi River, and defended by a 30,000-man Confederate Army under General John C. Pemberton, Vicksburg proved to be a tough nut to crack. The city was unassailable from its immediate (western) front; to the east lay strong Rebel defenses along the railroad line to Jackson, the Mississippi state capital. To the north and south, the Mississippi Delta’s swamps and bayous prevented troop and supply movement during the wet winter and early spring. The same was true farther west, across the river on the Louisiana side. Grant rightly concluded the best plan was to somehow use the Louisiana shore to move troops and some supply boats below Vicksburg, then ferry the men and supplies across the river to Port Gibson, on the Mississippi shore. He would then march to Jackson and use the railroad to move men

25. McPherson, Ordeal by Fire, 230–31. Thanks to Paul Moldt for his notes on Island Number Ten. Port Hudson, below Vicksburg, also remained in Rebel hands.
and supplies west and assault Pemberton at Vicksburg. In a sense, he was attempting a version of Pope’s successful canaling around Island Number Ten, but the task was much, much larger and more difficult. To that end, Grant’s and Sherman’s men spent November through April of 1862–63 attempting to dig three separate canals through the bayous along the Louisiana shore. All three efforts failed.27

As April approached, the delta’s waters receded and Grant began to see a way to send men and a few supplies south. On the Louisiana side, Grant recalled, “There was a good road back of the levees, along these bayous, to carry troops, artillery, and wagon trains over whenever the water receded a little, and after a few days of dry weather.” Grant could, with difficulty, move his army and some supplies via that route. But Grant still needed gunboats and supply boats. They would have to run the gauntlet, a huge risk Grant ordered the navy to take. On the one-year anniversary of Shiloh, he set his men in motion. Two corps of infantry crossed above Vicksburg on April 5 and began to slog southward. Then, on the moonless night of April 16–17, Commodore David Porter sailed twelve Yankee boats south through four miles of blistering Rebel fire, losing only one vessel. Five transports and six barges broke through a few days later, and a combined fleet ferried men and supplies from Louisiana to Mississippi. By early May, Grant and Sherman had assembled 44,000 men south of Vicksburg at Port Gibson.28

Because he possessed only the food and supplies ferried to Port Gibson, Grant determined to take another huge risk. He would live off the country—another Hard War tactic—while he and Sherman marched to Jackson. For two weeks, from May 1 to 14, Grant conducted one of the most successful campaigns in American military history. With Yankee cavalrmen protecting their flanks, Grant, Sherman, and General James McPherson marched their army 180 miles, fought and won four major battles, and forced General Joseph Johnston’s Confederates into retreat. The Yankees captured Jackson, its railroads, and all the

27. McPherson, Ordeal by Fire, 307–312; Davis, Battlefields of the Civil War, 140–46.
28. Ibid., 146; Grant, Personal Memoirs, 1:303; McPherson, Ordeal by Fire, 312–14.
supplies they needed to advance toward Vicksburg. On May 16, at Champion’s Hill, halfway between Jackson and Vicksburg, Pemberton came out to fight. Grant sent the Rebels limping back into Vicksburg, but then he grew overconfident. Falsely sensing imminent victory, he ordered two direct assaults on Pemberton’s well-entrenched troops. On May 19 and 22, the Confederates held Vicksburg, killing and wounding 4,200 Union soldiers. Though completely surrounded, Pemberton announced his intention to dig in and defend “the most important point in the Confederacy.”

After his two failed frontal attacks, Grant recalled,

I now determined upon a regular siege—to “out camp the enemy,” as it were, and to incur no more losses... We went to work on the defenses and approaches with a will. With the navy holding the river, the investment of Vicksburg was complete. As long as we could hold our position the enemy was limited in supplies of food, men, and munitions of war to what they had on hand. These could not last always.

The siege lasted seven weeks. Throughout this time, Grant’s Union rivals criticized the Butcher and his two costly failed assaults, and gossiped that he had begun drinking heavily. Lincoln had earlier responded to such accusations of alcoholism: “I can’t spare this man; he fights.” One tale describes the dry-witted president telling an annoying gossip that, given Grant’s many military successes to date, perhaps it would be a good idea if all of the Union generals drank more heavily.

Vicksburg’s civilians suffered greatly during the daily bombardment. As supplies ran out, they printed daily newspapers on wallpaper. As food grew scarce, mule and horse meat appeared on dinner tables (one way to postpone slaughtering animals was to first make soup from their boiled ears and tails). While a few folks actually grew accustomed to the shelling, most retreated daily to cave bunkers (“Rats to your holes!” Rebel troops reportedly chided them). There, as many as

29. Ibid., 313–17.
two dozen people huddled together in a single cave for hours on end. The streets were littered with iron shrapnel fragments. “No glass [was] left,” one survivor recalled. “Glass couldn’t stand such a bombardment; it was all shivered out. Windows of the houses vacant—looked like eyeholes in a skull.” Homes were destroyed, and civilians as well soldiers died at Vicksburg.31

Pemberton surrendered the city and his 30,000-man army to Grant on Independence Day, July 4, 1863. He chose this day because he reasoned the Yankees would be in a festive mood and would grant more generous terms. Sherman marched east towards Jackson and Joe Johnston retreated, leaving central Mississippi to the Union. When Grant received word that Union General George Meade had defeated Robert E. Lee at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on July 3, he could see the Civil War had at last reached a tipping point. The South was now cut in two by the Mississippi and, although Lee did not realize it at the time, his army was too weakened to ever again invade the North. With every Union advance, the institution of slavery continued to crumble, and Blacks welcomed the conquering army. Grant could not have known in early July that Abraham Lincoln would soon decide to appoint him commanding general of all Union forces, and besides, he had other things on his mind. In the late summer of 1863, Grant turned his gaze once again on the Tennessee River, this time on the city of Chattanooga.32

The Union Army faced a grim situation in the upper Tennessee River Valley. Though General William S. Rosecrans had pushed the Rebels out of Tennessee and captured the Chattanooga railhead and steamboat port, his men subsequently suffered a terrible beating in north Georgia. At Chickamauga Creek, on September 19, 1863, Rosecrans’s troops faced off against those of Confederate Generals Braxton Bragg and James Longstreet. During a battle bloodier than even Shiloh, the Rebels sent Rosecrans scurrying back to Chattanooga. Only a heroic stand

by Union General George Thomas—the “Rock of Chickamauga”—prevented a total rout. As some 35,000 Yankees huddled in Chattanooga with no supplies, Bragg prepared to bombard and starve them into submission. Thus Rosecrans faced a situation direly similar to that of Pemberton in Vicksburg.33

However, Lincoln and his commanders quickly moved to salvage the campaign. The Yankees used captured Rebel railroads to rush General Joe Hooker and 20,000 Union reinforcements to help defend Chattanooga. Next, Lincoln ordered Ulysses S. Grant east from Mississippi to take command and, while en route, Grant decisively replaced Rosecrans with George Thomas. The Confederates, Grant remembered, hungrily eyed the city of Chattanooga from the high ground and, because of their recent triumph at Chickamauga, “looked upon the [Union] garrison at Chattanooga, as prisoners of war.” The stunned and unsupplied Yankees had remained dispirited even after Hooker’s arrival. But when Grant rode in on October 23, 1863, he immediately took charge, issuing verbal and written directives. One officer remembered that after Grant appeared, “We began to see things move. We felt that everything came from a plan.”34

As noted, Chattanooga sat with its back to the Tennessee River. Missionary Ridge and Lookout Mountain, both controlled by Confederate forces, lay to its immediate south and west. Within a week after Grant took command, Union troops managed to open a supply line to the west and foodstuffs began to flow over what the Yanks dubbed the “Cracker Line.” When Sherman arrived with an additional 17,000 troops in mid-November, the Union was ready to move against Bragg’s army atop Missionary Ridge. “The plan of battle,” Grant wrote, “was for Sherman to attack the enemy’s right flank… Hooker was to perform like service on our right… Thomas, with the Army of the Cumberland, occupied the centre, and was to assault while the enemy engaged most of his forces on his two flanks.”35

34. Davis, Battlefields of the Civil War, 177–88; Grant, Personal Memoirs, 2:413; McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, 670-75.
Grant was pleasantly surprised by what happened next. Bragg’s “centre” sat atop the seemingly unassailable Missionary Ridge. Moreover, Thomas’s weary force had vivid memories of the terrible beating the Rebels had given them two months prior. Thus Grant pinned his fortunes on Hooker’s and Sherman’s fresh troops assaulting Bragg’s flanks. Hooker did drive the Confederates from Lookout Mountain on November 24, but then both he and Sherman stalled. Fortunately, Thomas and his 23,000 men in the Union “centre” had something to prove. On the afternoon of November 25, they marched tentatively towards Missionary Ridge; overwhelming the first line of Rebel defenders, they continued on (without orders from either Grant or Thomas) and kept fighting, sending two more lines of Rebels running back up the hill in retreat. Chanting “Chickamauga! Chickamauga!” the revengeful Yankees took the ridge before sundown and used their perch to watch Bragg’s men retreating back into Georgia.36

“The victory at Chattanooga was won against great odds, considering the advantage the enemy had of position,” Grant wrote in understatement in his Memoirs. When a student of the battle later remarked to Grant that the Rebel generals considered their position impregnable, Grant responded with a dose of Midwestern irony, “Well, it was impregnable.” Grant always gave great praise and credit to Thomas’s men for the Chattanooga victory, yet he knew that he also had Braxton Bragg to thank. Bragg was “naturally disputatious,” he wrote; infighting with fellow officers led him to foolishly order Longstreet and Leonidas Polk away exactly when he needed them most (the fiery Nathan Bedford Forrest rode away from Bragg without orders). Bragg’s other mistake, Grant recalled, was placing too large and exposed a force at the base of the Ridge “on the plain in front of his impregnable position” that turned out to pregnable.37

Chattanooga was to be Grant’s last battle in the western theater of the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln had at long last found

his general. “The bill restoring the grade of lieutenant-general of the army,” Grant wrote, led to his appointment March 2, 1864, and he became the first officer to hold that rank after George Washington. “It had been my intention before this to remain in the West, even if I was made lieutenant-general; but when I got to Washington and saw the situation it was plain that here was the point for the commanding general to be.” Grant “determined therefore to have Sherman advanced to my late position” and to take his commanding generalship into the Virginia theater, headquartering alongside General Meade, “commanding the Army of the Potomac.”

As Lincoln had deduced, Ulysses S. Grant was well prepared to face Robert E. Lee in Virginia in 1864–65. He brought with him knowledge from difficult lessons he learned in the 1862–63 Mississippi Valley campaign. At Forts Henry and Donelson, Shiloh, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga, Grant learned to combine formal military tactics with a guerilla warfare style to achieve success. Some called Grant a butcher and criticized him for ordering his men to make bloody assaults, seizing civilians’ property, and bombarding civilians at Vicksburg, yet he had cut the South in two, and Sherman was proceeding to cut it into quarters. Although Grant now faced east, he did so as a westerner wearing a broad-brimmed western campaign hat. Grant remained a Mississippi Valley man who knew that only through complete conquest and Hard War could he help to end slavery and save the Union.

**THE FIRST REPUBLICAN SOUTH**

Writing in his 1913 memoir *The Facts of Reconstruction*, the former three-term Mississippi Congressman John Roy Lynch staunchly defended the record of the Republican Party in the postbellum South. He attacked revisionist historians who characterized Reconstruction governments as corrupt and ineffective. Lynch aimed to present the “other side” of the story, a

“true, candid, and impartial statement based upon materials and important facts.” Throughout The Facts of Reconstruction, Lynch pointed to “commendable and meritorious” Republican accomplishments in public education, tax and prison reform, and the granting of political rights to the former slaves, the freedmen. This “accurate and trustworthy information relative to Reconstruction” was necessary, Lynch argued, to counter negative southern Democrat-influenced accounts of the period.39

Congressman Lynch was in a good position to comment on the status of freedmen during Reconstruction, because he had been born into slavery in Vidalia, Louisiana. Freed by the Emancipation Proclamation and 13th Amendment to the Constitution, Lynch became one of twenty-three African American Republican Congressmen and Senators who served their southern homes between 1870 and 1901. In addition, more than 1,500 Blacks served in lesser offices, from county sheriffs to city councilmen and state representatives. Like Lynch, many of them were Mississippi Valley men. Although defeated by resurgent Democrat “Redeemers” following his third term, Lynch lived a full life as a Republican activist, lawyer, scholar and author, and major in the U.S. Army. The fascinating story of Lynch and his fellow African American Republicans reflects the complexity and contradictory nature of the story of Reconstruction.40

Reconstruction—the postbellum period when victorious northerners brought the defeated South back into the Union—is best viewed as a sweeping clock pendulum of action and reaction. Historians have long been drawn to the physicists’ truth that for every action, there is an equal but opposite reaction. The applicability of this to social science is reflected, for example, in historical scenarios like the French and Russian revolutions. In both, absolutist regimes were overthrown, a period of hopeful

and unrestrained liberty followed, which in turn ushered in more absolutism. Thus King Louis XVI’s tyranny produced the French Republicans, who in turn begat the despotism of the Emperor Napoleon. Similarly, Czar Nicholas’s cruelty brought the white Russians who begat the Reds who, within a generation produced Stalinist tyranny. These dramatic historical shifts—actions and reactions—are often generational.41

Fortunately, Americans have, for most (not all) of our history, proved to be remarkably moderate revolutionaries. We have produced actions and reactions to be sure, but they were not equally strong. Thus King George III’s monarchy was countered by the revolutionary Articles of Confederation. This in turn brought the Federal Constitution and two sparring ideological groups, the nationalists and sectionalists. Before and after the Civil War, nationalists and sectionalists used ballots instead of bullets to shift political power back and forth and debate the issues of federalism and slavery.42 During the Civil War, however, more than 650,000 of them died for their beliefs.

Viewed through the symbol of a clock’s pendulum, the South started the Civil War as a pro-slavery reaction to the Free Soil movement and Abraham Lincoln’s 1860 presidential victory. The North reacted to the South’s secession by waging a war to save the Union, and the pendulum continued its radical swing when Lincoln added emancipation of the Black slaves (the 13th Amendment to the Constitution) to northern war aims. Upon Lincoln’s assassination, Radical Republicans continued this sweeping pendulum reaction, instituting equality and citizenship among the freedmen (the former slaves) via the 14th and 15th Amendments. Yet by 1877, white northern and southern leaders began to react to this radicalism, slowly moving away from the goal of Black equality. The infamous 1896 Supreme Court decision of Plessy v. Ferguson constitutionalized segregation and marked the final end of Reconstruction. Thus, the North’s

reaction to secession had not been equally strong. Although slavery was purged and the Union restored, by 1896 there was no longer equality for the freedmen. The road back to Black political equality awaited another reactive pendulum swing by future generations of Americans in the twentieth century.\footnote{380}

President Abraham Lincoln had become radicalized well before the Civil War’s end. His 1860 Free Soil platform called for saving the Union while allowing slavery’s continued existence but halting its geographic growth. Yet he continued the radical swing when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. Some have ascribed Lincoln’s change solely to a selfish desire to gain Black troops and British aid, but Lincoln had in fact become an abolitionist. He believed, as he had scolded Stephen Douglas in 1858, that “in the right to eat the bread, without leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns [the Black man] is my equal, and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man.” By 1864, one year after the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln had progressed even further. He wrote Union-occupied Louisiana’s new Governor Michael Hahn, suggesting that in the proposed state constitution, “some of the colored people” ought to gain the right to vote. Because an assassin’s bullet intervened, we do not know if Lincoln would have followed this radical swing to its natural end: citizenship and the right to vote for all of the freedmen. What we do know is that Lincoln started the swing to radicalism within the Republican Party, and Radical Republicans, including newly freed African American slaves, carried the torch for over a generation after his death.\footnote{44}

We also know Lincoln aimed to treat white southern Rebels more generously than any other group of defeated traitors in the history of western civilization. This is another noteworthy example of American moderation; most civil wars end with the victors slaughtering their foes and burying them in trenches. Lincoln’s Ten Percent Plan called for disenfranchising only a few

\footnote{380}{Schweikart and Allen, \textit{Patriot’s History}, 354–55.}
thousand high-ranking Confederate officials while welcoming all other white southerners back into the Union as soon as 10 percent of eligible voters of each southern state swore loyalty and ratified the 13th Amendment. Lincoln’s vice president, the Tennessee Unionist Andrew Johnson, agreed. After he became President following Lincoln’s April 1865 assassination, Johnson used executive orders and his power as commander in chief to immediately and unilaterally bring the former Confederates back into the Union. But Johnson, a Union Democrat who opposed Black equality, miscalculated; the sweep of the pendulum had not run its course. Radical Republicans in Congress moved immediately to impeach Johnson and grant Constitutional rights to the freedmen.45

The Radical Republicans were a powerful bloc within a diverse Republican Party. In Republican ranks stood former Whigs and Free Soilers, abolitionists, freedmen, and some former Democrats. Senators Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens, Supreme Court Justice Salmon P. Chase, and the abolitionist Fredrick Douglass all favored the Radical cause. Though Radicals controlled the Republican Party for a relatively brief time and failed by one vote to remove President Johnson from office, they produced the most dramatic changes in American politics and culture since the American Revolution.46 They created the Freedmen’s Bureau (1865) to begin the work of aiding and educating former slaves. Their Civil Rights Act (1866) granted citizenship and the right to vote to the freedmen and was to become enshrined in the 14th (1868) and 15th (1870) Amendments to the Constitution. The Radicals’ Military Reconstruction Act (1867) divided the Confederacy into five military districts to be ruled by a Union general until southerners swore loyalty and ratified the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments.

Radicals no doubt possessed some selfish motivations. They

sought revenge against former Rebels, and they desired Republican political supremacy over southern and northern Democrats. Why, they reasoned, should the deaths of 350,000 Union soldiers be in vain? Why should peace lead to the return to power of the Democrats, some of whom had led the nation into war in 1861? Yet the vast majority of Radicals also embraced idealistic goals. Like antebellum abolitionists, they were devout Christians, still steeped in the enthusiasm of the Second Great Awakening. To them, slavery was a sin and slaveholders were sinners. God had seen fit to punish the South through northern (and Republican) victory, the “terrible swift sword.” Thus God’s will was to punish evil southerners while fostering justice and equality among the former slaves. To accomplish this it was imperative that only Republicans, including Black Republicans, possess the power to govern the states of the former Confederacy, including the lower Mississippi Valley.47

From Reconstruction through the early years of the twentieth century, Black Republicans composed an important part of the Republican coalition. The term “Black Republican,” which came into use shortly before and after the Civil War, is difficult for modern readers to fully understand. In those days, Democrat detractors used “Black Republican” as a racist epithet to hurl against white Republicans. Lincoln was called a “Black Republican” by his enemies (some of whom even claimed Lincoln had African American ancestry). Later, “carpetbaggers” and “scalawags” (like the former Confederate generals James Longstreet and P. G. T. Beauregard) were branded “Black Republicans” by their enemies. White Republicans at the time respectfully referred to African American Republicans using the terms “colored” and “Negro,” words the Blacks themselves used. Modern Americans now believe the noun “Negro” to be disrespectful; they have reconstructed “colored” into “people of color” (they believe the former term offensive but the latter acceptable). Contemporary Americans much prefer the noun “African American” (never used in the nineteenth century) and

the noun “Black,” though the latter is the English equivalent of the Spanish noun “negro,” which they consider to be disrespectful.48

Of the twenty-three African Americans elected to the United States Senate and House of Representatives following passage of the 14th and 15th Amendments, fifteen came from the southeastern seaboard states, while the lower Mississippi Valley elected two Black Senators and five Congressmen. A residue of fear and racism led to the House of Representatives’ refusal to seat the Black Louisiana Congressman John Willis Menard in 1868, but Menard was soon followed in 1870–71 by six Black Congressmen and one Senator, who were all sworn in and served. More followed over the next three decades until the last Black Republican Congressman, George Henry White of North Carolina, was defeated and left office in 1901. Meanwhile, more than 1,500 Black men also served during this time at the city, county, and state levels as councilmen, commissioners, constitutional convention delegates, legislators, cabinet members, and elected executives, including two interim governors.49

The Mississippi Congressman John Roy Lynch (1847–1939) was born the son of a Louisiana slave mother and an Irish plantation overseer. As the Civil War ended, Lynch served the Union Army’s 49th Illinois Volunteers as a cook and camp worker, before launching a successful career as a photographer and real estate speculator. He moved to Natchez, Mississippi, joined the Republican Party in 1868, and advanced from justice of the peace to serve in the Mississippi state legislature at age twenty-two. In 1872 his colleagues chose him Speaker of the House. In three hard-fought Congressional elections, Lynch overcame fraud and violent threats to serve southern Mississippi in Washington, D.C., 1873–77 and 1882–83. Lynch was


important in advancing several pieces of Congressional legislation, including the Civil Rights Act of 1875.\textsuperscript{50}

Preceding Lynch as a Black Mississippi Valley legislator was Hiram Rhodes Revels, who won Jefferson Davis’s old Senate seat in 1870. Although Revels served only one year in the Senate, he became the first president of Alcorn State College, Mississippi’s first Black college. Blanche Bruce, an escaped Virginia slave who had attended Oberlin College, served as Mississippi’s second African American Senator, from 1875 to 1881. He defended Indian land rights and opposed the Chinese Exclusion Act. At the 1880 National Republican Convention, Bruce received a handful of votes for the vice presidential slot (at the 1888 Republican Convention, Frederick Douglass was nominated for the presidency, though the convention chose Benjamin Harrison).\textsuperscript{51}

The Louisianan Charles Edmund Nash’s military record helped gain him one term in the U.S. Congress, 1875–77. Born a free Black in 1844, Nash attended public schools and worked as a bricklayer before the Civil War. In 1863, he joined Company A of the 82nd Regiment, United States Army Volunteers, as a private. Nash had attained the rank of sergeant major when he lost part of his leg in the Battle of Fort Blakely (Alabama), only a few days before Lee’s surrender to Grant. With New Orleans’ free mulatto populace as his political base, Nash was elected to Congress amid violence and turmoil. He arrived in Washington, D.C., in 1875 only to learn he would have to thwart the will of the new Democrat House majority to be allowed to speak before his colleagues on the floor of the House. After his brief Congressional service, Nash lived out his life in New Orleans.\textsuperscript{52}

Meanwhile, Alabama Republicans sent three different Black representatives to Washington, D.C., between 1870 and 1878. Jeremiah Haralson was a self-educated slave known as a powerful orator, but he was contentious within the Republican

\textsuperscript{50} Franklin, “John Roy Lynch,” 39–58.


Party and lost his seat after one term. Benjamin S. Turner was born into slavery and saw his wife sold away as a white man’s mistress (he never remarried). During the war, Turner accumulated modest savings managing his master’s Selma hotel and livery stable. Turner also farmed, and when he announced for Congress in 1870, he sold his horse to finance the campaign. Always a moderate (he simultaneously advocated “Universal Suffrage” for freedmen and “Universal Amnesty” for Confederate officials), Turner was defeated in 1874. James T. Rapier was born on the Tennessee River to well-to-do free Black parents in Florence, Alabama; he worked as a teacher, journalist, and cotton farmer before his 1872 election as north Alabama’s Congressman. During his term, Rapier worked alongside John Lynch to secure passage of the Civil Rights Act in the lame duck Republican session of 1875. “Nothing short of complete acknowledgement of my manhood will satisfy me,” he proclaimed on the House floor. Interestingly, though Rapier and Haralson suffered election defeats, they were both subsequently awarded government posts by white Republican patrons in the Customs Bureau, Department of the Interior, Pension Bureau, and Internal Revenue Service.53

President Ulysses S. Grant, who succeeded Andrew Johnson in 1869, was supportive of Black Republicans and the Radical program. Like many (not all) professional soldiers, Grant avoided politics while serving in the army. Yet, as we have seen, he was raised in an abolitionist household with a father who heartily disapproved his marrying into a “tribe of slaveholders.” In the late 1850s, when Grant’s failed Missouri farm and other business ventures forced him to liquidate all of his assets to pay his debts, he nevertheless freed his only slave, a “gift” from his father-in-law. Grant then had to pawn his gold watch to pay for Christmas presents for his children.54

While Grant entertained some of the racist assumptions

54. Bosch, Ulysses S. Grant.
characterizing most nineteenth-century white Americans, his anti-slavery views are delineated in detail in his *Memoirs*. “Slavery was [t]he cause of the great Rebellion against the United States” because it “required unusual guarantees for its security wherever it existed; and in a country like ours where the larger portion of it was free territory inhabited by an intelligent and well-to-do population, the people would naturally have little sympathy with demands upon them for its protection.” The desire to annex Texas and the Southwest, Grant reflected, was “from the inception of the movement to its final consummation, a conspiracy to acquire territory out of which slave states might be formed for the American Union.” Moreover, the Fugitive Slave Law “was a degradation which the North would not permit any longer than until they could get the power to expunge such laws from the statute books.”

As noted, in 1861 Grant immediately labeled secessionists “traitors” and, like Lincoln, methodically moved from a Free Soil to an abolitionist stance. During the winter of 1862–63, as Grant was moving his army south into Mississippi in his Vicksburg campaign, he fed and employed escaped slaves throughout the region. He even established farms for some of them and wrote Lincoln, “They will make good soldiers.” In an 1863 letter, Grant wrote that he tried “to judge fa[ir]ly & honestly and it became patent in my mind early in the rebellion that the North and South could never live at peace with each other except as one nation, and that without Slavery. As anxious as I am to see peace reestablished I would not therefore be willing to see any settlement until this question is forever settled.”

Thus, by war’s end Ulysses S. Grant had already adopted two fundamental Republican beliefs—union and emancipation—and as his presidency commenced he would swing with the pendulum to become an advocate of the third and more radical goal: equality for the freedmen. Grant assumed the presidency in 1869 while Radicalism was at its peak, and he sustained the radical cause through 1873. Yet by the mid-1870s, during his

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second term, Grant would play a significant role in the slow shift away from radicalism and the beginning of the end of Radical Reconstruction in the lower Mississippi Valley and the rest of the former Confederacy.\(^{57}\)

Upon taking the oath of office, Grant was appalled at white southern intransigence. The Radicals were generous to former Rebels. No one was tried for treason; indeed, Robert E. Lee soon became a college president, while Jefferson Davis retired to the Gulf Coast to write his memoirs. All Confederates except a few military officers and high government officials could regain their rights and clout in their state governments—they simply had to swear an oath of loyalty to defend the Constitution, including the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. Yet in 1866, white southerners had elected forty-seven former Confederate Army officers and officeholders to the federal Congress! After Republicans refused to seat them, many of these white southerners turned their backs on the system and refused to participate. In some states this boycott lasted nearly a decade. Into this power vacuum stepped southern Republicans—the so-called carpetbaggers and scalawags—and Black Republicans.\(^{58}\)

President Grant’s contempt for former Rebels boycotting the system invites two conflicting metaphors. One might say Grant thought the Rebels were thumbing their noses at the North; yet it is just as apt to say these same Rebels were cutting off their noses to spite their faces. Grant’s attitude was that until the former Confederates admitted defeat and rejoined civil society under the terms offered, he would keep federal troops in the South to enforce the law and sustain the new Republican governments.\(^{59}\)

Grant’s first target was the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Formed as a secret society in 1866, the Klan committed violent acts against freedmen and state Republican leaders; hooded Klansmen harassed governmental officials and bullied and lynched Blacks who dared to register to vote and hold office. Republicans in Congress responded with a series of Enforcement Acts

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(1870–71) making the Klan’s violence a federal crime. As commander in chief, Grant ordered federal troops into southern counties to enforce the freedmen’s 14th and 15th Amendment rights. Of course, it cannot have escaped Grant’s attention that the Klan’s outrages also had political consequences that could lose the newly Republican South to Democrat “Redefiners.” While it is true that recalcitrant southern whites continued to form other secret non-Klan societies and committed acts of violence, most historians agree that Grant’s tough stand put the KKK out of business for nearly forty years.60

As Grant’s anti-slavery philosophy had matured into abolitionism, he had also become a Republican partisan who saw the freedmen as a key to postbellum Republican dominance. Grant was willing to do anything necessary, within the law, to ensure that Black men voted. Grant also developed an unrealized plan to provide a haven for persecuted freedmen by annexing the Caribbean isle of the Dominican Republic (Santo Domingo). Like Booker T. Washington, Grant believed the free market would play a role in integration; he believed white southerners would curb their abuses if they actually faced the loss of Black laborers and consumers. Grant proposed a new African American state in the Dominican Republic as a sort of safety valve, a place where freedmen could escape danger yet remain in the Union. Viewed today, the plan seems eccentric; Radical Republican contemporaries like Sumner and Garrison were quick to point out its imperialistic and racist basis. But in the context of the late nineteenth century, Grant’s Dominican Republic proposal reflects a genuine desire to help the freedmen. Obviously, the plan never gained traction.61

Having surveyed all of Grant’s admirable motives and actions to protect the freedmen, we also know that the end to this story is not a happy one. One historian puts it bluntly, saying, “Grant

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blinked.” As his first term was ending, Redeemers began to swallow their pride and once again became active southern Democrats. In most instances they did so legally, putting violence aside and, at least for the time being, professing to be the Republicans’ law-abiding and loyal opposition. Meanwhile many former Confederate officeholders filed appeals to Congress and once again became citizens (Lee and Davis did not). In most, not all, former Confederate states, the math was on their side; organized white Democrats could muster majorities and win elections. Between 1869 and 1875, eight of eleven of the old Confederate states saw Redeemers take back the reins of state government. Moreover, in the 1874 national off-year elections, Democrats won the majority in the House of Representatives for the first time since 1860. Thus they were poised to again become the majority party if they could “redeem” the three remaining Republican southern states—Louisiana, South Carolina, and Florida.62

In the lower Mississippi Valley, the situation had gotten ugly. Some Louisianans had organized as the White League and instigated racial warfare in New Orleans and rural Louisiana parishes. Fifty freedmen lost their lives in the infamous 1874 Colfax, Louisiana, shootout. Grant deployed federal troops to quell the Louisiana bloodshed, but they were too little and too late. And one year later, when Mississippi Democrats used similar acts of violence while redeeming that state, Grant did nothing. After seven years as president, his stance towards the freedmen had begun a slow pendulum-like shift. By 1875 Grant had returned to the ideological position of advocating restoration of the Union and emancipation of the freedmen but abandoning his commitment to their equality.63

Why did Grant blink? The answer is found in three crises that beset the Grant administration and nation and turned America’s gaze away from civil rights. First were the Plains Indian wars. Fought between 1864 and 1876 against the Comanche,
Cheyenne, Sioux (Lakota), and other fierce Great Plains Indian warriors, these wars consumed lives and money, and shifted the nation’s attention away from southern race relations. Next came a series of scandals. Historians agree Ulysses S. Grant was an honest man who foolishly relied upon dishonest friends in the legislative and executive branches. The Credit Mobilier scandal actually germinated before Grant took office, but the 1872 disclosure of graft in construction of the government-subsidized Union Pacific Railroad implicated Republican Congressmen and Grant’s own vice president. The Whisky Ring scandal of 1875 disclosed scores of Treasury Department officials taking bribes from liquor distillers who paid no federal taxes. Grant’s secretary of war, William Belknap, was also on the take, this time from government subcontractors on the Indian reservations. And early in the administration, the speculators Jay Gould and Jim Fisk enlisted the aid of Grant’s brother-in-law to help them corner and temporarily profit from the market in gold.64

The latter incident combined with over-speculation, indebtedness, and a weak economy to lead to the Panic of 1873. The failure of Jay Cooke’s financial firm started a domino effect resulting in the bankruptcy of dozens of the nation’s railroads and, eventually, more than 18,000 other businesses. Double-digit unemployment swept the nation. The only ones to profit from this chaos were Democrats who, as noted, were swept back into their Congressional majority in 1874. Grant’s response was to circle the wagons, as it were. Although he never articulated it as such, he chose to reprioritize his government’s goals at the expense of African American men and women. Although Grant signed the 1875 Civil Rights Act, he spent most of the year working to win the Indian wars, cleanse government of corruption, and stabilize the economy. Certainly the racism that characterized both northern and southern whites played a role in Grant’s turning away from the freedmen. In 1868, Grant had run on a platform that declared, “Let Us Have Peace.” By 1876 it was

clear he believed the nation could not continue to use occupation troops to keep fighting the Civil War for another generation.65

Two years after he left office, Grant reflected at some length about the fate of the freedmen. Denying the Rebel leaders suffrage “was a mild penalty for the stupendous crime of treason,” he wrote. He personally favored army occupation of the South for another decade to enforce Black suffrage. But that was a political impossibility. The white public, north and south, strongly opposed continuing martial law because “it was not in accordance with our [republican] institutions.” Grant is often quoted as saying he regretted granting the vote to Blacks in the first place, but that remark was made in the context of his fear of how white southerners might exploit the 14th Amendment. What particularly galled Grant was that white Southerners had actually gained electoral votes through the 14th Amendment (ending the Three-Fifths Compromise); he feared Redeemers were preparing to disenfranchise Blacks to use those votes to become the majority party again. “[Black] Suffrage once given can never be taken away,” Grant stated (erroneously) in 1879, “and all that remains for us now is to make good that gift by protecting those who have received it.”66

Today, Americans often hear a distorted history of the military career and presidency of Ulysses S. Grant. It is said that Grant was a hopeless alcoholic who disregarded human life, and an inept, corrupt politician who betrayed the freedmen and abided the Ku Klux Klan. Grant had flaws, but he was in fact a shrewd and heroic commander, and an important president who fought to end slavery and make citizens of the freedmen. We know for a fact he was regarded as such by his contemporaries. Late nineteenth-century Americans ranked Grant alongside George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. What happened? The historian Joan Waugh has shown that early twentieth-century revisionist historians succeeded in portraying Grant from the Rebel perspective. The Lost Cause view of the Civil War

65. Deane, Ulysses S. Grant.
prevailed, and U. S. Grant unfairly goes down in history as a failure.67

Grant’s 1876 decision to not seek re-election ushered in a presidential contest that would mark the beginning of the end of Reconstruction. The election of 1876 is one of seven American presidential elections (the others are 1800, 1824, 1888, 1960, 2000, and 2016) in which the Electoral College did not directly reflect the popular vote. American voters always seem surprised to learn they live in a republic and not a democracy, and 1876 certainly delivered such a surprise. To succeed Grant, the Republicans ran a staunch supporter of the freedmen, the former Union general and Ohio governor Rutherford B. Hayes. The Democrats, poised to elect their first president since 1856, ran a northerner, New York Governor Samuel J. Tilden. When the votes were tallied, Tilden narrowly won the popular vote 4,288,546 to 4,034,311; he was also ahead in the Electoral College, 184 to 165. But Tilden was one electoral vote short, needing 185 to win. Obviously, something was missing, and it should not come as a surprise to learn the electoral votes of Louisiana, Florida, and South Carolina, the last Republican states in the old Confederacy, were in dispute. To win the residency for the GOP, Hayes needed to take all three.68

There is to this day strident argument over who rightly won Louisiana, Florida, and South Carolina. Most historians agree the voting in all three was tainted with corruption, but that the Republicans probably won Louisiana and South Carolina, while Tilden carried Florida. Since Tilden needed only one electoral vote, this scenario should have made him president. But some Republicans still considered Democrats traitors, and both parties naturally dug in for a terrific fight during the winter of 1876–77. In Washington, D.C., each party controlled one chamber of Congress. The Constitution states that when there is no electoral majority, the House is to select the president and the Senate the

67. Ibid., 2–3, 185–88. The Lost Cause myth is discussed again below.
68. Foner, Reconstruction, 564–75; One of the disputed electoral votes came from Oregon, where the Republican elector was a government employee, a violation of state law.
vice president. The Constitution, however, is silent on the subject of contested electoral votes.69

In 1876 leaders had to improvise. Congress created a special Electoral Commission made up of five Supreme Court Justices, five Congressmen, and five Senators. Divided by party, this added up to eight Republicans and seven Democrats. These men faced two unsavory outcomes: They could return the political party stained by secession and slavery to power after sixteen years; or they could choose the Republicans by engaging in a travesty of justice. The eight Republicans opted for the travesty of justice, and the commission awarded all of the contested electoral votes to Hayes, who won the presidency 185–184. Then, as in all but one of the many bitter elections in our country’s history, the losers did not start shooting; they grumbled and accepted their fate. This is a nation of laws, and Congress and the Supreme Court had acted. And, as it turned out, the Democrats had not fared so badly after all.70

The so-called Compromise of 1877 was not one written agreement; it was a collection of deals brokered during the tumultuous winter of 1876–77. The actions of Rutherford B. Hayes and Congress upon commencement of the new administration made it clear that such a compromise had been forged. Hayes immediately appointed a southern Democrat, Tennessee Senator David Key, to the Postmaster Generalship, the most lucrative patronage job in existence prior to Civil Service reform. Congress subsequently passed some federal subsidies to aid southern railroads and build infrastructure (e.g., levees and flood control projects) and otherwise help rebuild the South’s crippled economy. Most important, President Hayes used his authority as commander in chief to remove nearly all remaining federal occupation troops from Louisiana, Florida, and South Carolina. Within a year, all three states were back in the Democrat column. It is easy to read between the lines here. The Compromise of 1877 meant northern Republicans were in fact

69. McPherson, Ordeal by Fire, 600; Foner, Reconstruction, 575–76.
going to turn race relations and the fate of the freedmen over to the Redeemers.\textsuperscript{71}

Countless history teachers mistakenly label the Compromise of 1877 as the “end of Reconstruction” when in fact it was the \textit{beginning of the end} of Reconstruction. The Radical Republicans and their African American colleagues did not just fold up their tents and immediately concede defeat. The battles of the late 1860s and ’70s continued into the 1880s and ’90s, but with diminishing results for the Radicals. Black men continued to vote in pockets of the upper and lower South. Virginia and the Carolinas returned Black Republicans to Congress until 1901. At the state and local levels, African American men continued to serve. In Wilmington, North Carolina, Black Republican city councilmen famously clung to their posts amid racial violence until Redeemers at last overthrew them in 1898. Seventeen years earlier, however, Mississippi Senator Blanche Bruce had returned home, the last of the Mississippi Valley’s Black men to serve in the federal Congress.\textsuperscript{72}

It is true that some of the governments these Black Republicans served made mistakes and even broke the law; the Gilded Age was a corrupt time, and the Reconstruction governments saw their share of graft and inefficiencies. Yet the \textit{Gone with the Wind} portrayal of these men as fools and thieves is grossly inaccurate. Many historians support John Roy Lynch’s defense of the Black Republicans and show their governments’ many successes. They instituted tax reform, at last requiring the old planter elite to share the same tax burden as the rest of the populace. They reformed the judicial system and made improvements to state prisons, mental institutions, orphanages, and hospitals. They introduced universal elementary and secondary public schools for the first time in the history of the

\textsuperscript{71} Foner, \textit{Reconstruction}, 577–78, 580–82; Donald, “Reconstruction, 1865–77,” 511. Southern Democrats never gained the level of infrastructure money Republicans promised and reciprocated by breaking their promise to support James Garfield for Speaker of the House.

American South. And most important, the Republican Reconstruction governments enforced the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, ending slavery and bringing equal protection under law and the vote to freedmen and all law-abiding citizens.  

White Republicans slowly abandoned the freedmen. Grant had signed the 1875 Civil Rights Act, and his successor Rutherford B. Hayes boasted a strong Congressional record of support for Black voting rights. As President, however, Hayes withdrew federal troops, pinning his hopes for Black progress on economic integration and markets (Booker T. Washington soon developed a similar strategy). President James Garfield’s vow to protect the freedmen ended with his assassination. Massachusetts Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge introduced a new Force Bill to guarantee the federal government would police southern elections and ensure Black suffrage, but it failed to pass. While the rise of populism initially promised an alliance between poor whites and Black folk in opposition to Redeemer control, Redeemers shrewdly played the race card to defeat the populists and unite white Southerners under the Democrat ticket. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court had weighed in on the 1875 Civil Rights Act, interpreting the 14th Amendment to the freedmen’s detriment in the Civil Rights Cases (1883).

The denouement to this sordid business was the 1896 Supreme Court decision in Plessy v. Ferguson, a case emanating from the lower Mississippi Valley. New Orleans had been a relatively open city until Redeemers passed Jim Crow laws requiring separate Black and white facilities. Homer Plessy, a biracial New Orleans citizen, purposely challenged the new order by attempting to board a whites-only rail car. Refused passage, Plessy took his case to court, and his appeal made it all the way to Washington, D.C. The Supreme Court’s Plessy 1896 verdict joins Dred Scott

73. Lynch, Facts of Reconstruction; Foner, Reconstruction, xvii–xxv.
as one of the most infamous in American legal history. In a tortured reading of the 14th Amendment, a majority of justices distinguished between political and social equality, and declared the 14th guaranteed only the former. The court declared social institutions (e.g., public and private transportation and schools) could be separate (segregated) so long as they were “equal”; Plessy could ride the train, but he had to ride in a separate railroad car of equal quality. This decision is based on two factual errors. First, the Black political equality (right to vote) the Court affirmed in *Plessy* was disappearing in most southern states, and the justices knew it. Moreover, the separate but equal social facilities the Court constitutionalized in *Plessy* were not then, nor ever, truly equal facilities; railroad cars, schools, and theater seats reserved for whites were always of better quality than those relegated to Blacks. This unjust decision would stand until the sweep of the pendulum reversed it in *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), where the Court declared separate facilities to be “inherently unequal.”

Slavery would never return, but African Americans in 1900 had much less freedom than they had enjoyed in the 1870s. Abandoned by their white allies and left to fend for themselves in the newly segregated South, Black men and women showed their mettle. Some of them migrated to the upper South or Northern cities in search of jobs and more freedom; others stayed home and turned to sharecropping as a means of survival in an economy without capital. Some attended segregated schools and colleges and built a small, sturdy Black middle class of teachers, doctors, nurses, and lawyers in the South. Blacks turned to their families, churches, and communities for support. As new state statutes and constitutional amendments took away the voting rights *Plessy* falsely guaranteed, Black Americans developed two disparate, competing survival strategies.


76. Luther Adams, *Way Up North in Louisville: African American Migration in the Urban South*
The less practicable of the two strategies, for immediate purposes, was that of W. E. B. DuBois. DuBois was a Black Massachusetts intellectual who traveled south after the Civil War to attend Fisk College in Nashville. He studied and worked in Reconstruction-era Tennessee and Georgia while his teaching advanced from one-room schoolhouses to Morehouse College in Atlanta. DuBois became the first Black person to earn a Ph.D. at Harvard University. A founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, DuBois was an activist who became a Marxist. He called for a small cadre of forceful African American intellectuals (a “Talented Tenth” [percent]) to lead Blacks and fight for full return to 14th and 15th Amendment rights. DuBois spent most of his life fighting for equal rights, and he is rightly regarded as a founder of the modern Black freedom movement. When DuBois was not occupied fighting against white racism, however, he devoted his energies to disparaging Blacks with whom he disagreed, most notably his nemesis, Booker T. Washington.77

Booker T. Washington proposed another course of action for the freedmen, one grounded in his experience in the increasingly dangerous Jim Crow South. Washington was born in 1856 to a Virginia slave mother and a white father whom he never met. He remembered that as a child he never slept in clean bedding or brushed his teeth; he never ate a family meal, or played at any children’s games. At war’s end, his mother moved the family to the upper Ohio River Valley in the new state of West Virginia. There Washington worked diligently to attain enough secondary education to gain admission to Hampton Institute (Virginia), where he earned bachelor and master of arts degrees and became an instructor. In 1881, Booker T. Washington founded his own college, Tuskegee Institute of Alabama, and labored to build it into one of the foremost Black colleges in the United States. A capitalist, pragmatist, and firm believer in applied education, Washington advocated professional and vocational training so

that freedmen might pursue careers as teachers, health and legal professionals, farmers, and mechanics. As one of the nation’s premier educators, Washington arguably succeeded Frederick Douglass as the late-nineteenth-century leader of the Black freedom movement. Although he was careful not to burn any political bridges with Redeemers, Washington naturally gravitated to the Republican Party and was a White House dinner guest of President Theodore Roosevelt.\textsuperscript{78}

Booker T. Washington’s 1901 memoir \textit{Up from Slavery} provides an excellent window to view the swing of the Reconstruction pendulum away from radicalism. Tuskegee was located in the heart of the Deep South and surrounded by white Redeemers; Washington knew well that if he overstepped he could easily lose everything he had spent his career building at Tuskegee. \textit{Up from Slavery} is thus built on two narratives, one radical and the other pragmatic. On the one hand, Washington emphatically condemns slavery, emergent segregation, and “the evil habit of lynching.” He protests disenfranchisement via literacy tests and he states unequivocally his belief in “universal, free suffrage.” “I do not believe that the Negro should cease voting,” Washington declares. Yet in the same passage, Washington urges Black men to turn their gaze away from politics and concentrate on education, capitalism, and building inner moral strength. “No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized... the time will come when the Negro in the South will be accorded all the political rights which his ability, character, and material possessions entitle him to.” Booker T. Washington thus dedicated his life to educating African American men and women to acquire professional “ability, character, and material possessions.”\textsuperscript{79}

It is hard to keep from reading between the lines here. Booker T. Washington obviously knew that northerners had abandoned the freedmen to fend for themselves. He chose to stay in the Deep South and continue to work for the improvement of his race. He knew that “agitation of questions of social equality is the

\textsuperscript{78} Booker T. Washington, \textit{Up from Slavery}, passim. See chapter 3, this work.

extremest folly,” which could in the worst case lead to violence and lynching. He thus came to believe the wisest course was for African Americans to work to improve themselves morally and economically as they waited for the pendulum to swing back in the direction of radicalism. While Booker T. Washington was mistaken in important ways (it ultimately did in part take “agitation” to achieve civil rights), he is absolutely correct in the context of his time and place, and he deserves at least as much acclaim as that accorded to DuBois. The contemporary writer and critic Ishmael Reed states,

Booker T. Washington deserves a reassessment unfettered by the biases of Northern elitist African-American intellectuals and comfortable white radicals who would only have been satisfied if Washington had engaged in a wild suicidal shootout with whites—who outnumbered the black population three to one—so that they might use his martyr’s photo to further their causes.

For over a decade after publication of *Up from Slavery*, Booker T. Washington continued to advance his beliefs, traveling and speaking widely. He died at his beloved Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1915.80

In the meantime, Congressman John Roy Lynch also continued to fight on. After Redeemers finally redrew the boundaries of his House district to defeat him in 1882, he twice ran unsuccessfully to regain his seat. He remained active in Republican politics, serving on the National Committee and as a convention delegate and staunch supporter of his Congressional colleague and friend James G. Blaine’s presidential bid. In 1884, Lynch became the first African American to deliver the keynote address at a national political convention. Married twice with one daughter, he practiced law in both Mississippi and Washington, D.C., until President William McKinley commissioned him an army major and paymaster during the

Spanish-American War; he subsequently served fourteen years in Cuba, the Philippines, Hawaii, and San Francisco before retiring from the army in 1911. Lynch then moved to Chicago, where he practiced law and began to write the history of his Reconstruction experiences.\(^{81}\)

Lynch had become alarmed by what he correctly saw as a pro-Redeemer bent in the writing of the history of Reconstruction. One generation removed from the end of the Civil War, the revisionist historians William Dunning, James W. Garner, James T. Rhodes, Claude Bowers, and others portrayed Reconstruction as a “Tragic Era” (Bowers’ words), a troubled time during which vengeful Radical Republicans and their inept Black allies ran roughshod over suffering white southerners, who at last redeemed the South from corruption and malice. This flawed interpretation, part and parcel of Lost Cause mythology, was reflected in the political science works of Woodrow Wilson, then a professor at Princeton, and, at the popular level, in D. W. Griffith’s movie Birth of a Nation (1915) and, later, Gone With the Wind (1939). John Roy Lynch, upon reading the historian James T. Rhodes’s rendering of Reconstruction in his History of the United States (1906), declared it “not only inaccurate and unreliable, but … the most one-sided, biased, partisan, and prejudiced historical work I have ever read.”\(^{82}\)

Lynch spent the last twenty-five years of his life refuting the Redeemer interpretation of Reconstruction. In The Facts of Reconstruction, subsequent articles in the Journal of Negro History, and Some Historical Errors of James Ford Rhodes (1922), Lynch aimed to show the “commendable and meritorious” accomplishments of Radical Republicans and his Black colleagues within the movement. Evenhandedly, he aimed to not “conceal, excuse, or justify any act that was questionable or wrong,” yet he meticulously documented Black achievements in the fields of constitution-making, budgeting, public education,

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taxation and social reforms, and defense and enforcement of the freedmen’s constitutional rights.\textsuperscript{83}

In 1939, on the eve of the next swing of the pendulum in the advance of the Black freedom movement, ninety-two-year-old John Roy Lynch died in Chicago. He had spent three decades of his life in the upper Midwest, far removed from the lower Mississippi Valley scenes of his youth and early political career. Frail but still mentally alert, Lynch had been editing the manuscript version of \textit{Reminiscences of an Active Life} the day prior to his death. In 1970, six years after passage of the most recent Civil Rights Act, the historian John Hope Franklin shepherded Congressman Lynch’s manuscript through publication.\textsuperscript{84}

\textbf{FDR AND THE RIVER}

When the federal government did aggressively reinsert itself into the lives of southerners, it was first in the areas of flood control and electrical power, not race relations. In his 1938 black-and-white documentary film \textit{The River}, Pare Lorentz combines art with propaganda to tell the story of the origins and mission of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA).\textsuperscript{85} Lorentz accomplishes this with striking visuals, an original musical score, and a compelling narration that somehow blends historical narrative, polemic, and free-verse poetry. The resulting movie tells about an important aspect of the environmental history of the Mississippi Valley from the perspective of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Progressive New Deal bureaucracy.

As Roosevelt made work for Americans during the Great Depression, he did not overlook unemployed artists. Painters, writers, musical composers, folklorists, and moviemakers found commissions at the many alphabet soup agencies of Roosevelt’s New Deal. The journalist and film critic Pare Lorentz got his chance to make movies for the Department of Agriculture, which released his Dust Bowl documentary, \textit{The Plow That Broke the

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., xxxviii–xxxix.
\textsuperscript{85} Pare Lorentz, dir., \textit{The River} (Farm Security Administration, 1938), film.
Plains, in 1936. While this movie told the story of aridity and soil exhaustion, The River told of the effects of too much water and the great Mississippi River flooding of 1927. Lorentz used actual news reel footage from the ’27 floods to show the need for the TVA in effecting flood control, agricultural reform, and rural electrification, all the while putting Americans back to work. In Lorentz’s hands, The River became a high-powered morality play.  

The movie begins with an evocative environmental overview of the Mississippi River Valley, then transitions into a sobering telling of the valley’s dire problems, and ends on an upbeat note as the TVA comes to the rescue. Visually, Lorentz opens with gorgeous, billowing clouds (in a style influenced by the German moviemaker Leni Riefenstahl), then moves quickly to scenes of rushing rivers, a recurrent motif under which the narrator urgently intones, “Down the Monongahela, down the Yellowstone, down the Milk, the White, and the Cheyenne,” et cetera, noting all of the Mississippi’s major tributaries. Human civilization is dramatically described in a similar poetic style: “From New Orleans to Baton Rouge, Baton Rouge to Natchez, Natchez to Vicksburg, Vicksburg to Memphis, Memphis to Cairo.” Underneath, Virgil Thomson’s musical score combines American folk idiom with modernist dissonance that rises and falls with the narrator’s voice and the filmed images and their messages. Human poverty and dire circumstances are juxtaposed with stark, barren landscapes evidencing soil erosion. The final arrival of the Tennessee Valley Authority comes as a triumph, accented by upbeat music underneath images of hydroelectric dams, electric power lines, and common American folk working at their newly created TVA jobs.

Like all good propaganda, The River makes selective use of evidence. Although many historians agree with Lorentz’s

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86. William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932–40 (New York, 1963), 329, 126–27; Pare Lorentz, The Plow That Broke the Plains (U.S. Resettlement Administration, 1936), film; Lorentz, River. Lorentz’s work has recently been complemented by the documentary filmmaker Bill Morrison’s Great Flood (2014).

87. Lorentz, River.
positive portrayal of the New Deal and TVA, some do not. And, as we shall see, another moviemaker would eventually portray the TVA in a more complex and critical light than Lorentz’s Depression-era classic.

Efforts to manage the Mississippi Valley’s rivers to avert natural disasters and improve navigation began with nineteenth-century Whig and Republican calls for “internal improvements” via the Army Engineers, known today as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. By mid-nineteenth century, the corps was attempting to manage the river’s current via wing dams and dikes; to prevent erosion they “shav[ed] the bank down to low-water mark … and ballast[ed] it with stones” and pilings. The latter quotation appears in a passage from Life on the Mississippi in which Mark Twain expresses skepticism about man’s ability to tame the forces of nature. The “military engineers,” he notes, “have taken upon their shoulders the job of making the Mississippi over again—a job transcended in size by only the original job of creating it.”

One who knows the Mississippi will promptly aver—not aloud, but to himself—that ten thousand River commissions … cannot tame that lawless stream, cannot curb it or confine it, cannot say to it, Go here, or Go there, and make it obey; cannot save a shore which it has sentenced; cannot bar its path with destruction which it will not tear down, dance over, and laugh at. But a discreet man will not put these things into spoken words; for the West Point engineers have not their superiors anywhere. They know all that can be known of their abstruse science; and so, since they conceive they can fetter and handcuff that river and boss him, it is but wisdom for the unscientific man to keep still, lie low, and wait till they do it.


Catastrophic flooding has been recurrent in the Mississippi River Valley since prehistoric times. Only areas surrounding the upper Mississippi bluffs, high ground on the upper Ohio, and the lower Mississippi bluff cities of Memphis, Vicksburg, Natchez, and Baton Rouge have for the most part been spared the worst of the floods. The torrents of 1719, 1734–35, 1779, 1795, 1802, 1813, 1849, 1858, 1874, 1917, 1927, 1927, 1937, 1944–45, 1973, 1993, and 2011 swept across the Mississippi floodplain causing extensive damage. The famous recent Mississippi Valley flooding catastrophe—caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005—was not exceptional; it was part of a historic pattern.⁹⁰

Supervising disaster relief during the 1927 flood was Herbert Hoover, President Calvin Coolidge’s secretary of commerce. Hoover was no stranger to the Mississippi Valley. He was born and spent the first nine years of his life in West Branch, Iowa, ten miles from the Iowa River and forty miles from the upper Mississippi at Davenport. A humanitarian who assisted President Woodrow Wilson in managing food relief to Belgium refugees during and after World War I, Hoover went right to work in 1927. The historian Jim Sam writes that Hoover coordinated hundreds of ships and steamboats to carry food and supplies and supervised building tent cities for refugees. He became the voice of the relief effort on radio and in press releases that helped raise money for the Red Cross and other private sector health and relief agencies. “I suppose I could have called in the whole of the army, but what was the use?” Hoover later recalled. “All I had to do was to call in Main Street itself.” Hoover melded the private and public sectors to aid flood victims.⁹¹

The severe 1927 flooding coincided with two pivotal political


developments—evolving progressivism and the Great Depression—to restart and greatly expand the federal government’s internal improvements projects. Progressivism was a late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century reform movement emanating from the activist wings of both political parties. Progressives were critics of capitalism who advocated, among other issues, large expansion of the federal government’s role in economic regulation and social welfare. Although Herbert Hoover belonged to the Republicans’ progressive (Bullmoose) wing, as president he advocated government partnership with capital instead of an adversarial relationship. In the 1930s, following Hoover’s defeat, Democrat Progressives under Franklin D. Roosevelt added electric power generation, job creation, agricultural improvements, conservation, and recreation to existing federal roles in river navigation improvement and flood control.

Immediately following his inauguration, Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) asked Congress to create the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) as “a corporation clothed with the power of government but possessed of the flexibility and initiative of a private enterprise.” Congress responded immediately, passing the TVA statute on May 18, 1933. Roosevelt’s vision for the TVA was both awe-inspiring and frightening. He aimed for the federal government to build nine hydroelectric dams along the Tennessee River, from its Appalachian headwaters to its mouth on the Ohio. To sidestep constitutional objections to an unprecedented creation of a federal utility corporation, he declared the TVA to be a “regional” public “corporation.” This language added the rhetorical weight of capitalism and states’ rights to what was in fact a federally owned electric power monopoly. While orders would come from Washington, D.C., nominal control of the TVA rested in state-located federal agencies. These spanned 80,000 square miles in states drained by the Tennessee River—Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Kentucky.

The institutional history of the TVA was punctuated by political jockeying among its founding bureaucrats (Arthur Morgan, Harcourt Morgan, and David Lilienthal) and a running battle with its myriad conservative and libertarian opponents. Amid this political strife the TVA achieved a great deal. The agency brought electric power into tens of thousands of southern homes previously fueled by only wood stoves and kerosene lamps. The TVA also began to directly sell discounted electrical appliances to these folks, eliminating capitalist middlemen. The TVA's electrical power brought industries and jobs to the Tennessee River Valley, and the new fertilizer manufacturing industry helped to restore depleted southern soil. The TVA replanted forests (in conjunction with the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps) and claimed to have lessened the spread of malaria in its wetlands. Moreover, the new Tennessee River dams created year-round navigation depth and were outfitted with locks to bring diesel towboat commerce all the way to Knoxville, Tennessee. Much later, tourism jobs arose as sportsmen flocked to TVA lakes and parks to fish and camp.

Yet opponents insisted the Tennessee Valley Authority wielded a double-edged sword. Opposition emerged early on, as fiscal conservatives decried the unprecedented deficit spending necessary to fund the TVA and other New Deal initiatives. Most debate over the TVA focused on constitutionality. Was building electric power dams and dispensing electricity a government job, or did it belong in the private sector? Progressives contended the Constitution’s interstate commerce and public defense clauses had long put the federal government into the business of river navigation improvements, including locks and dams. And because such dams could also be built to produce electricity, progressives took the argument a step further. They believed electric power was a “public good,” one that (like the

transcontinental railroad and highway systems) could best be produced by the central government. “I’m a gas and water socialist,” declared the Roosevelt advisor Rexford Guy Tugwell.97

From the days of Thomas Edison, private corporations had met much of the nation’s electricity demands. America in the 1930s, including the South, boasted scores of private electricity companies, including Commonwealth and Southern Electric, headed by the Indianan Wendell Willkie. These private interests were outraged that a federally subsidized, untaxed public corporation was undercutting them and monopolizing the electricity marketplace (and retailing electrical appliances to boot). Willkie was a former Democrat who supported some New Deal measures, but his opposition to TVA would catapult him to the 1940 GOP presidential nomination. Wilkie declared, “The true liberal is as much opposed to excessive concentration of power in the hands of government as … in the hands of business.” Progressives countered, pointing to swaths of unlit homes as evidence of the private sector’s failure to provide electric power to all of the American people.98

Both sides looked to the Supreme Court to settle the matter, and initially it appeared as though Willkie and the private sector would prevail. In 1935-36, the Court declared two lynchpin New Deal’s economic regulatory agencies—the National Industrial Recovery Administration (NRA) and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA)—unconstitutional. In its rulings, the Court declared the NRA’s and AAA’s management of intrastate commerce violated states’ rights. Moreover, the Court ruled that these bureaucrats’ production of extensive regulations supplanted Congress’s constitutional lawmaking duties. Initially stunned by these court decisions, FDR struck back. Despite a sixty-eight-year precedent for a nine-member Supreme Court, he called on Congressional Democrats to add six new justices to

98. Shlaes, Forgotten Man, 8, 237–38; Willkie quote in Susan Dunn, 1940: FDR, Willkie, Lindbergh, Hitler—the Election amid the Storm (New Haven, Conn., 2013), 89.
the court to put Progressives in the majority. But members of Roosevelt’s own party joined Republicans to squash his court-packing plan. In the end, however, FDR did not need new judges. As several lawsuits over TVA’s constitutionality wound their way to the Supreme Court, the court began to take a more progressive turn, serving up five-to-four decisions favoring the administration’s economic regulatory agencies. Unlike the NRA and AAA, TVA was never declared unconstitutional (though it did stop selling electrical appliances).99

It was folks evicted by the TVA who mounted the most emotional opposition. To clear valleys that would be flooded by the nine hydroelectric dams’ backwaters, the agency had to dislocate tens of thousands of southern farm families. The evictions began at Norris Dam (named for the TVA supporter Senator George Norris), near Knoxville, Tennessee. There, the TVA used the federal government’s power of eminent domain to buy 153,000 acres and remove 3,000 families residing in the basin the dam would soon turn into a lake. As part of the evacuation, the TVA disinterred and reburied the remains of 2,500 locals, some of whose graves dated back to the early nineteenth century. Although the evictees received cash compensation and welfare relief, Americans of all political stripes were taken aback by this raw demonstration of government authority. “TVA Evicts Family as Water Laps Cabin,” proclaimed a New York Times headline upon the eviction of the nine-member James Randolph family. The evictors also gathered up sixty chickens and a pig.100

Over two decades later, the Hollywood producer and director Elia Kazan made Wild River, a movie based on the TVA evictions that countered Pare Lorentz’s 1937 paean to the New Deal. Kazan had worked on the New York stage before making a series of motion pictures, many with lower Mississippi Valley settings

and stories. Like Lorentz, Kazan had traveled in 1930s leftist circles; as a young man, Kazan was a member of the Communist Party. Naturally drawn to the New Dealers’ critique of capitalism, he originally conceived *Wild River* as a nuanced, dramatic acclamation of the TVA and progressivism. Busy with other projects, he put the movie on the back burner until the late 1950s, when he teamed up with the screenwriter Paul Osborn. Kazan recalled that when Osborn “finally agreed to write the screenplay for my Tennessee Valley Authority story, *Wild River* ... in talking to him, I discovered an astonishing thing; I’d switched sides.”

I’d conceived of this film years before as a homage to the spirit of FDR; my hero was to be a resolute New Dealer engaged in the difficult task of convincing “reactionary” country people that it was necessary, in the name of the public good, for them to move off their land and allow themselves to be relocated. Now I found my sympathies were with the obdurate old lady who lived on the land that was to be inundated and who refused to be patriotic, or whatever it took to allow herself to be moved. I was all for her… I simply didn’t like the reformers I’d been with since 1933, whether they were Communists or progressives or whoever else was out to change the world.  

Filmed in and around Cleveland, Tennessee, near the juncture of the Tennessee and Ocoee rivers, *Wild River* is an authentically southern movie. Kazan uses local citizens as movie extras (some had small speaking parts), and vocal and instrumental renditions of the gospel tunes “He Walks with Me” and “Jesus Loves Me” play beneath the visuals. Like Lorentz, Kazan begins *Wild River* with gripping black-and-white news footage of the 1927 flooding, and he also includes a sound-tracked newsreel interview of flood victims. Then he switches to color film as moviegoers meet the proud widowed matriarch Ella Garth (Jo Van Fleet) and her extended family on their Tennessee River

island farmstead. Ella has defiantly ignored evacuation orders and, with the new dam almost finished, the TVA administrator Chuck Glover (Montgomery Clift) is dispatched to either persuade her to move or force her out. Glover immediately learns that he has met his match in Ella Garth and soon falls in love with her widowed daughter-in-law Carol (Lee Remick). In the first of several verbal jousts with Ella, Glover proudly informs her, “We aim to tame this whole river,” but she snaps back, “You do. Well I like things runnin’ wild, like Nature made ’em. There’s already enough dams lockin’ things up, tamin’ ’em, makin’ ’em go against their natural wants and needs. I’m agin’ dams of any kind… I ain’t goin’ against nature, and I ain’t crawlin for no damn government.”\textsuperscript{102}

*Wild River* is thus built on the authoritarian versus libertarian clash between Chuck and Ella, interwoven with romantic interludes between Chuck and Carol and with Chuck’s growing relationship with Carol’s two children. Kazan also places racism and segregation in the mix by portraying the Garths’ exploitation of Black sharecroppers alongside the anger of white townspeople (one played by a young Bruce Dern) who balk when the TVA hires Black workers. In his first assessment of the eviction conflict, Chuck Glover waxes ironic. Anti-authoritarianism and “rugged individualism” are the “American way of life,” he states. “We applaud that spirit. We admire it. We believe in it... But we’ve gotta get her the hell out of there.” Yet as he learns about the Garths and the culture of Tennessee River Valley folk (and as he falls in love with Carol), Glover grows much more ambivalent about his assignment. After the county sheriff sums up the evictions with the observation, “I guess it all goes under the general heading of progress,” Chuck responds, “Yeah, that’s what they say.” Of course, Ella Garth feels no ambivalence whatsoever about her eviction. Informed that the federal government will offer financial compensation and welfare “relief” to all evacuees, she bitterly says, “Just go and get yourselves relieved. Anytime you wanna. Me, I ain’t goin.”\textsuperscript{103}


\textsuperscript{103.} Ibid. The TVA did employ Blacks on its projects in segregated work parties.
In the end, however, Ella must go. In preparation for the flooding, TVA workers chop down all the trees on her island as she is led onto a river ferry flying an American flag. Ella has dressed in her Sunday best, complete with brooch and hat, and carries only a small box and a handbag. Relocated to a tiny federal tract house, she immediately arranges to pay the storekeeper a sixteen-cent debt for sugar. “That’s all I owe. To anybody.” Then Ella Garth dies. The TVA workers subsequently douse her old home with kerosene and set it ablaze. The moviegoer’s final view of the Garths’ island is the family graveyard being lapped by the new TVA lake. A hymn, “In the Pines,” plays underneath, but Elia Kazan is not quite finished. To underscore Glover’s (and his own, and his viewers’) ambivalence about the good and evil wrought by the New Deal, Kazan ends *Wild River* with a scene of Chuck and Carol and their two children in an airplane soaring above the new hydroelectric dam and the valley to which the Tennessee Valley Authority has brought jobs and electricity. The new family’s destination is unknown, but they will live in an America forever changed by the helping hand of a powerful central government.104

**FROM THE LOWER MISSOURI TO ROCK RIVER**

Discussion of the Civil War, emancipation, Reconstruction, race, federalism, and the New Deal naturally overlaps the history of the American presidency. The Mississippi Valley has produced twenty American presidents, including Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Harry S. Truman, and Ronald Reagan. These four were certainly pivotal men who altered America in major ways and changed the course of American history. Discussing antebellum politics in general, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner stressed the uniqueness of two of these Mississippi Valley presidents. Turner sharply contrasted the humble socioeconomic backgrounds, educations, early lifestyles, and earthy demeanors of the Tennessean Jackson and the Illinoisan

Lincoln with the more genteel George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. Turner argued these differences reflect the fact that, after struggling to throw off European monarchy, Americans made more room in their system for self-made men to rise in economic and civic life. A similar contrast is also evident in the twentieth century. Woodrow Wilson was a Johns Hopkins Ph.D. and president of Princeton College, and both Roosevelt cousins were well-born New Yorkers and Harvard graduates (though T.R. cultivated a wild, frontier image in reaction to his elite upbringing). By any measure, there is a world of difference in the social and cultural roots of Harry S. Truman and Ronald Reagan compared to Wilson and the Roosevelts.  

When Franklin D. Roosevelt informed his aide Admiral William Leahy in 1944 that he had chosen Harry Truman as his vice presidential running mate, Leahy reportedly asked, “Who the hell is Truman?” This rude response was only partly inappropriate, for Harry Truman was in 1944 a relatively obscure character. However, he would soon prove Leahy’s (and most others’) first impressions completely wrong.

“Who the hell is Truman?” Harry S Truman was born May 8, 1884, in Lamar, Missouri, near Independence and the lower reaches of the Missouri River. The oldest child of Martha Ellen Young Truman and John Anderson Truman, Harry was soon joined by brother Vivian and sister Mary Jane. Interestingly, the S in Harry S Truman’s name is only an initial; it does not represent a specific middle name and is not followed by a period on the birth certificate. Evidently Harry’s parents were trying to give both grandfathers, Solomon Young and John Shipp Truman, the impression that Harry was their namesake. Although Harry Truman’s family moved to Independence in 1890 and he lived

105. Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Mississippi Valley in American History,” *The Frontier in American History*, ed. Wilbur Jacobs (1920; repr. Tucson, Ariz., 1986), 192, 201, 202–204. The Mississippi Valley presidents are Jackson (Tenn.), William Harrison (Ohio), Polk (Tenn.), Taylor (La.), Lincoln (Ill.), Johnson (Tenn.), Grant (Ill.), Hayes (Ohio), Garfield (Ohio), Benjamin Harrison (Ohio), McKinley (Ohio), Taft (Ohio), Harding (Ohio), Truman (Mo.), Hoover (Iowa), Eisenhower (Kans.), Ford (Mich.), Reagan (Ill.), Clinton (Ark.), and Obama (Ill.).

in Kansas City during part of his young adulthood, he spent much of his youth and young adulthood on the 600-acre Truman family farm near Grandview, Missouri. The Trumans grew wheat, corn, oats, clover hay, and corn, and they raised horses, cattle, and hogs. Young Harry Truman daily crossed his family’s plowed fields to roam the surrounding woods and meadows. He recalled living “the happiest childhood imaginable.”

Despite his poor eyesight (he wore glasses by age six), Harry learned to read before he was five; a family tale has him reading “all the books in the Independence Public Library” by age fourteen. Truman himself recalled, “I read the Bible clear through twice before I went to school.” He also played the piano and early on dreamed of being a concert pianist. So, there were contrasting values of high and low culture—urban artist and intellectual and rural agrarian—in the life of the young west Missourian. Truman attended public schools near Grandview and, later, Independence, and graduated high school in 1901. He never went on to college, but moved to Kansas City and worked at odd jobs, in a drugstore and as a timekeeper (paymaster) on a railroad construction crew, before securing a position (and a seeming career path) as a bank clerk. In 1903, he was baptized in the Little Blue River, a tributary of the Missouri, and regularly attended the Baptist Church. Although smitten with Bess Virginia Wallace, he postponed marriage until he achieved solvency, which turned out to be a long wait.

By 1901, John Truman had lost all of his savings in bad investments but managed to keep the family farm. To pay off his debts, John eventually had to go to work on the Santa Fe Railroad. In 1906, some bad flooding destroyed the Trumans’ crops and twenty-two-year-old Harry was forced to leave his Kansas City bank job to return home and run the family farm. He worked at farming for the next eleven years, until the outbreak

of World War I. “There was some talk that I wouldn’t stay [on the farm], but I did,” Truman recalled. “I don’t give up on what I start. I’m a stubborn cuss. They all found that out when I was President. I was stubborn.”

Harry Truman flourished over the decade 1910–19. He joined the National Guard and Freemasons, and he took an interest in local politics (in 1900, the seventeen-year-old had accompanied his father to the Kansas City National Democratic Convention that nominated the agrarian populist William Jennings Bryan for president). He read everything he could about agriculture and made plans to improve farm yields in oats, corn, and clover. Later, he fondly recalled his farming career, boasting theirs was the “finest land you’d ever find anywhere.” He said, “I was very much interested in the creation of things that come from the ground.”

The land had to be harrowed, and I enjoyed that. It gave me plenty of time to think. Farmers really all have time to think, and some of them do it, and those are the ones who have made it possible for us to have free government. That’s what Jefferson was writing about. Farmers really have more time to think than city people do.

Obviously, Truman matured in an era when his family (and the Democratic Party to which the Trumans were staunchly loyal) still retained strong historic and mythic ties to Jeffersonian agrarian roots. “I stayed on the farm until the war came and I had to go,” he remembered. “I could have got an exemption of course, being a farmer, but I never even thought of it.”

A veteran lieutenant in the Missouri National Guard (1905–11), Harry Truman joined the U.S. Army with America’s 1917 entry into World War I. Captain Truman commanded Battery D of the 2nd Battalion, 129th Field Artillery, 35th Division, U.S. Army. In France in 1918–19, Truman fought in the St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne offensives and almost lost his life in a Vosges (France) artillery skirmish that he and his men

109. Hamby, Man of the People, 25–42; Truman and Miller, Plain Speaking, 89 (qtns).
110. Truman, Autobiography, 25–37; Truman and Miller, Plain Speaking, 89–90. Bryan was also the Democrats’ 1896 and 1908 nominee.
sarcastically dubbed the “Battle of Who Run.” By war’s end he was serving at Verdun. Returning home, he rejoined the guard reserves and ultimately attained the rank of colonel while continuing his civilian career.\textsuperscript{111}

Harry Truman never returned to farming. He married Bess as soon as he came home and started what turned out to be an unsuccessful clothing and hat business. Politics had always been a Truman family interest, and Harry sought a judgeship (county commissioner post) on the Jackson County Court. In the tradition of his hero Andrew Jackson, Truman entered public life without a college degree. Elected in 1922, he was defeated in 1924. In the meantime, he used his high school and military résumé to attain entrance to the Kansas City School of Law Night School, where he studied (without earning a degree) from 1923 to 1925. Elected presiding judge of Jackson County in 1926, he served until 1934 when, with the backing of the Democratic Party boss Tom Pendergast, he was elected Missouri’s United States Senator.\textsuperscript{112}

Truman came up in Jackson County politics in the heady days of the 1920s and early ’30s. Kansas City was a wide open town and home to a booming economy, burgeoning jazz and club scene, and the Negro Baseball League (NBL) famed Kansas City Monarchs. Presiding over all of this was Tom Pendergast, the boss who kept his Kansas City political machine oiled with welfare benefits, jobs for supporters, graft, and kickbacks from illegal alcohol, gambling, and prostitution operations. Truman quickly moved in and out of Pendergast’s system and was never implicated in any wrongdoing. Their partnership was symbiotic—Harry delivered the rural vote and Pendergast delivered Kansas City—and working with Pendergast was the unavoidable price of a political career in western Missouri. Years later, when old Tom Pendergast lay alone and dying in the federal prison at Leavenworth, Kansas, Vice President Harry Truman weathered blistering criticism and paid his former patron a final visit.\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{111} Hamby, \textit{Man of the People}, ix, 57–82, Truman, \textit{Autobiography}, 39–h51.

\textsuperscript{112} Hamby, \textit{Man of the People}, 83–100.
In Washington, D.C., Senator Harry Truman worked diligently and, with exceptions, out of the limelight. This all changed when, in 1944, Franklin D. Roosevelt grew weary of his leftist vice president, Henry Wallace, and tapped Truman for the number-two spot.\footnote{For Wallace, Truman, and mainstream Democrat discomfort with Wallace’s ties to the Communist Party, see John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, In Denial: Historians, Communism, and Espionage (San Francisco, Calif., 2003), 85, passim.} It seems unlikely, as some historians have implied, that no one in power believed Truman would ever serve as president. One need only look at 1944 film and photographs of the pale, haggard, chain-smoking Franklin Roosevelt to see what people at the time could see—a beloved and accomplished man in ill health. It is true that Roosevelt and his advisors did not properly brief Truman to prepare him for the presidency. Lasting only a few months after his inauguration, FDR succumbed on April 12, 1945. With America still embroiled in World War II, the farm boy from Missouri became President of the United States. In his first appearance as President, Harry Truman told a mourning and anxious nation: “I don’t know whether any of you … ever had a bull, or a load of hay fall on you, but last night the whole weight of the moon and stars fell on me. If you fellows pray, please pray for me.”\footnote{National Parks Service, “Harry S Truman,” exhibit narrative, Harry S Truman National Historic Site, Independence, Mo.; quote in Life Magazine 18 (April 23, 1945), 29.}

President Harry Truman had, and still has, many political enemies and critics. Yet he is remembered for domestic and foreign policy accomplishments that make his place as a pivotal U.S. president indisputable. Taking the reins after FDR’s death, Truman led the nation to final victory over Germany (May 8, 1945) and soon made the decision to drop the atom bomb on Japan, saving the staggering number of American and Japanese lives a prolonged invasion would have cost. When fascist defeat immediately produced a permanent Soviet Communist occupation of Eastern Europe, Truman took a stand with the Truman Doctrine (1947), commencing the Cold War and fighting Communists abroad and at home via the Marshall Plan,
NATO, the National Security Act, and the Central Intelligence Agency.\textsuperscript{116}

Of course there were problems and blemishes. Even as entrepreneurs and laborers arose from the ashes of depression and war, Truman and Congress ran up debt plowing money into his own Fair Deal version of FDR’s programs, adding subsidized government housing projects to the welfare state menu. Under Truman, Soviet agents stole classified U.S. data about the atom bomb (enabling them to expedite creation of their own nuclear arsenal) and all of mainland China fell under Communist domination. Truman’s foray into Korea proved very unpopular, as did his firing of General Douglas MacArthur, though in retrospect both decisions appear well-founded. Combined with a 1952 economic downturn, Harry Truman left office one of the most unpopular leaders in American history; his 1953 approval ratings registered in the low 20 percent range.\textsuperscript{117}

Yet Harry S Truman’s overall record indicates that he was clearly a pivotal president. Indeed, one year in Truman’s presidency—1948—proved to be one of the most significant years in the history of the American presidency. On May 14, 1948, Truman became the first world leader to recognize the new Jewish state of Israel, an action that reverberates to this day. On June 24 he ordered the Berlin Airlift to support the Communist-encircled city against a takeover. Although a southerner, he sided with advocates for Black civil rights at the 1948 Democratic Convention. Hubert Humphrey led the convention charge, while Truman on July 26 used his powers as commander in chief to unilaterally desegregate the U.S. Armed Forces. He appointed Blacks to federal posts and ordered Department of Justice efforts to aid the Black freedom movement. “Dixiecrats” got their wake-up call, and the fight for the heart and soul of the Democratic Party began. Harry Truman ended the year 1948 by clawing his way to victory in one of the most remarkable comebacks


\textsuperscript{117} Hamby, \textit{Man of the People}, 534–38, 644, 649.

“On January 20, 1953, I shall transfer the burden of the presidency and return to Independence, Missouri, a free and independent citizen of the greatest republic in the history of the world,” Truman wrote late in his second term. Harry and Bess Truman longed to live out their days in their 219 North Delaware Avenue family home. “I have had all of Washington I want,” Truman bluntly noted. “I prefer my life in Missouri.” Harry Truman is remembered today for his many accomplishments, but he is also remembered for his down-to-earth temperament, his no-nonsense speech and slang (and swear words), and his common sense. Many of these characteristics can be ascribed to his Mississippi Valley upbringing. Truman’s background was starkly different than that of the Ivy League educated president he succeeded; other than being proud Democrats, Franklin Roosevelt and Truman shared little in common. Indeed, Truman’s upbringing and demeanor is more similar to one of his Republican successors—a former Democrat who campaigned for him in 1948—Ronald Reagan of Dixon, Illinois.\footnote{Truman, \textit{Autobiography}, 99, 105; National Park Service, “Harry S Truman.”}

Ronald Wilson Reagan’s aide and biographer Peter Hannaford once explained:

Reagan is thought of as a Californian, a Westerner, but the values
that guided him all his life are straight out of the land where he spent the first 21 years of his life: northwestern Illinois. The characteristics associated with him—self-reliance, self-confidence, modesty, optimism, loyalty, tolerance, determination, good humor, and reverence for God—all came from his teachers, clergy, role models, the circumstances of his youth, and, especially his parents.  

Ronald Reagan was born February 6, 1911, in Tampico, Illinois, in the American heartland. His parents, John “Jack” Edward Reagan and Nelle Clyde Wilson Reagan, were of Irish, English, and Scottish ancestry, and he had one brother, Neil. Like Harry Truman, Reagan spent his formative upper Mississippi Valley years during that region’s transformation from agrarianism to modernity. As Hannaford states, Reagan was imbued with midwestern culture and values, and during his life he carried these traits with him to California, to Washington, D.C., and back to California again.

The small towns of Ronald Reagan’s youth lay amid green cornfields and pork and cattle farms. Like Truman, Reagan romantically recalled his Illinois childhood as “the happiest time of my life,” “one of those rare Huck Finn Tom Sawyer idylls” spent in wandering, hunting, and fishing in the surrounding woods. But there were hard times too. Truman’s family had faced serious economic setbacks, and the Reagan family’s life was even more troubled. Jack Reagan, a well-liked shoe salesman, was an alcoholic. Ronald Reagan recalled an evening in his youth when he found his father passed out in the snow in front of their

120. “Author Peter Hannaford Reflects on Reagan’s Early Years,” Libertas 33 (Summer 2012), 5. See also Peter Hannaford, Reagan’s Roots: The Peoples and Places That Shaped His Character (Bennington, Vt., 2011).

home. Jack was so drunk that to save him from exposure and sober him up Ronald had to drag his heavy body across the porch and into the house. Yet Jack Reagan also had good qualities that Ronald inherited—a compelling personality and talent for storytelling. And Reagan’s pious mother Nelle was a rock to which the struggling family could cling.  

Ronald Reagan’s family moved often during his early childhood, following Jack through a series of small northwestern Illinois towns. However, when Ronald turned nine the family’s fortunes took a turn for the better. Jack started a shoe store in Dixon, Illinois, where the Reagans at last found a home. Dixon sat alongside the Rock River, a tributary of the upper Mississippi, and it was in Dixon that Ronald Reagan matured and learned what he termed the “standards and values that would guide me for the rest of my life.” Good-looking “Dutch” Reagan (a nickname Jack gave him) flourished, making friends, joining clubs, acting in school plays, and playing on Dixon’s Northside High School football team. He also found a spiritual life and told his mother he wanted to be baptized. Nelle had brought Reagan up believing “the Lord will [p]rovide,” and he later wrote, “I’ve always believed … there is a plan, a divine plan for all of us.”

Nelle Reagan was a member of the First Christian Church (also known as Disciples of Christ), located on the banks of the Rock River at 123 South Hennepin Street. Here Reagan gained his religious education and, in his late teens, taught Sunday school. The Dixon Telegraph reported on Reagan’s skills as an inspirational speaker and his Christian outreach to hospitals and nursing homes. At age seventeen, he wrote a poem entitled “Life” for his high school yearbook, The Dixonian, reflecting his faith. The poem suggests that life’s many problems pale in the light of Christianity’s promise of eternal life: “But why does sorrow drench us / When our fellow passes on? / He’s just exchanged life’s dreary dirge / For an eternal life of song.” Reagan wrote that folks should not “weep at journey’s end,” for there will be a “door

Thus, teenaged Ronald Reagan overcame difficult circumstances to flourish in Dixon, Illinois. An important part of his happiness was connected to his job as a Rock River lifeguard. For six summers (1927–32), Dutch Reagan worked at Lowell Park, located on the Rock River two miles upstream from Dixon. At sunup each summer day he arrived to ice down cold drinks, stock the snack bar, prepare the beach recreation area, and man his lifeguard post when the first young swimmers arrived. He worked until early evening. It was a twelve-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week summer job that gained him great respect in the community. “We just all remember him as Lifeguard,” one Dixon woman remembered sixty years later. Although Reagan was said to have saved seventy-seven Rock River swimmers during his six summers, an old admirer recalled, “They weren’t all going to drown.” Yet some swimmers were endangered by the Rock’s swift current and undertow. Beneath a headline reading, “James Raider Pulled from the Jaws of Death,” the Dixon Evening Telegraph of August 3, 1928, praised “Life Guard Ronald ‘Dutch’ Reagan.” Local tales recount how after each rescue Reagan cut a notch on a log (much like Daniel Boone supposedly recorded his bear hunting exploits with tree carvings). After Reagan left Dixon and became famous, a commemorative plaque was attached to the log. The log has long since disappeared, but the plaque remains a museum piece.

There is a striking photograph of Dutch Reagan at Lowell Park in his lifeguard uniform. Years later, as an aged man beset by Alzheimer’s disease, Reagan lost his short- and medium-term memory. Yet like many Alzheimer’s sufferers, he retained distinct memories of the distant past. Family and visitors to the infirm Reagan’s home recall him showing them his old lifeguard picture as his mind happily wandered back to summer days alongside the

Rock River. “I think the Rock River was the central symbol of his youth,” states Reagan’s biographer, Edmund Morris.126

Following his 1928 Northside High School graduation, Reagan left Dixon to attend Eureka College in Eureka, Illinois. He chose Eureka because of its Disciples of Christ affiliation, affordability, and close proximity to his hometown. Eureka was a conservative college offering a liberal arts education, and Reagan studied history, philosophy, literature, and theater while majoring in economics. “My favorite subject was football,” he later joked, and his middling grades accompanied an active campus social life. Reagan earned letters in both varsity football and swimming, and he served as yearbook editor and chair of the student council. Of course, he was active in Drama Club and school plays. Nearing graduation at the height of the Great Depression, he made an uncanny pronouncement: “If I’m not making five thousand a year when I’m five years out of college, I’ll consider these four years here were wasted.” Reagan graduated from Eureka in 1932, the same year Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president and two years before the Missourian Harry Truman was elected to the United States Senate.127

Ronald Reagan immediately moved on to a radio broadcasting job at station WOC in Davenport, Iowa, where his talent for sports broadcasting soon got him promoted to the Des Moines station WHO. The handsome sportscaster became a regional celebrity calling Chicago Cubs games, and he attracted the attention of a Hollywood talent scout. By 1936, Reagan was driving west to California for a screen test for Warner Brothers Pictures. “I left Des Moines in a cloud of dust,” he wrote in a June 13, 1937, Des Moines Sunday Register feature he ironically titled “The Making of a Movie Star,” admitting that he felt just “a little bit scared.”128

During the next two and a half decades, Ronald Reagan

enjoyed a movie and television career that started out strong—with the acclaimed *Knute Rockne, All American* (1940) and *King’s Row* (1942)—and ended in a whimper. As a U.S. Army Reservist, Captain Ronald Reagan made World War II military training movies but never served in a combat theater. He married the film star Jane Wyman, divorced, and married the actress Nancy Davis, and raised two families. Meanwhile, his film career was complemented by twenty years of service as a labor union representative, most notably as board member and president of the Screen Actors Guild (AFL-CIO). Reagan entered this work as a Roosevelt Democrat who belonged to organizations as liberal as Americans for Democratic Action (ADA). However, at exactly the same time President Harry Truman was battling European and Asian Communists and domestic Communist spies, Ronald Reagan found himself squaring off against Communist organizers in the Screen Actors Guild and affiliated unions. He wrote that he faced “force & violence including street riots and bombings” from leftist union agitators. He also endured overt and anonymous threats (one caller told Reagan he would maim his face so badly he would never again work as an actor) and charges of McCarthyism (because of his willingness to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities).

From 1954 to 1962, Ronald Reagan worked as a celebrity spokesperson for the General Electric Company (GE), traversing the United States, appearing weekly on the *GE Theater* television series, and learning firsthand about the workings of the American business world. The GE experience combined with Reagan’s anti-Communism to complete his evolution from liberal Democrat to conservative Republican. In 1964, he made an impassioned speech on behalf of the GOP presidential candidate Barry Goldwater that drew a huge national television audience. His message—the urgent need for Americans to “fight Communism abroad and big government at home”—proved compelling. Two years later, he defeated the incumbent Pat Brown to begin the first of two consecutive terms as governor

of California. Reagan ran, unsuccessfully, against Richard Nixon for the GOP presidential nomination in 1968 and Gerald Ford in 1976. In 1980, amid economic downturn, double digit unemployment, spiking gas prices, Americans held hostage in Iran, and overall dispiritedness, Ronald Reagan won the Republican presidential nomination. In November, he carried forty states and swept the incumbent Democrat President Jimmy Carter out of office; four years later, he was re-elected in an even greater landslide (over Carter’s vice president, Walter Mondale), carrying forty-nine states. The boy from Dixon, Illinois, had earned the chance to fight Communism overseas and “big government” on the homefront.  

Ronald Reagan’s foreign and domestic policy achievements guarantee his status as a pivotal American president. Reagan made two major foreign policy mistakes—the Iran-Contra arms deal and deployment of U.S. Marines in Lebanon—causing scandal and loss of American lives. And his foreign policy record does not match Harry Truman’s perfect storm—helping to defeat German and Japanese fascists, challenging global Communists to begin the Cold War, and siding with Israel in the very beginning of another global war. Yet it was Ronald Reagan who ended a decade of American inaction against the Soviet Communists and helped set in motion events leading to Communism’s final demise. He ordered the American military to squash pro-Castro Grenadian rebels and bomb Libyan Islamist targets. Using skills acquired as a labor union negotiator, Reagan threatened a Strategic Defense Initiative (“Star Wars”), which the Soviets attempted to counter at the cost of bankruptcy. As Ronald Reagan stood at the Brandenburg Gate in divided Berlin demanding, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” Poland had already overthrown its Communist overlords and Chinese Communists were introducing an economic reform they called (without blushing) “market socialism.” The Cold War was about to end in capitalist victory, and Ronald Reagan deserves a portion of the credit.

130. Cannon, President Reagan, 22–30; D’Souza, Ronald Reagan, 52–55, 63–84; Bosch, Reagan, part 1 (qtn.). Goldwater is discussed below.
Ronald Reagan’s domestic accomplishments—the Reagan Revolution—launched the first successful conservative counter-offensive to FDR’s (and Truman’s and Lyndon Johnson’s) New Deal progressivism in forty-eight years and ushered in nearly three decades of Republican ascendancy. As with foreign policy, Reagan made mistakes, the greatest of which was his running up the national debt. However, Reagan also instituted major tax reforms that had long-term positive results. He combined historically large tax cuts with tax code reforms that lowered the maximum taxable rate from 50 percent to 28 percent, eliminated deductions and other loopholes, and still left the richest 1 percent paying the highest share of taxes. While Reagan ran deficits, his tax measures would ultimately help restart the American economic engine and lead to nearly two decades of growth and prosperity. Meanwhile, the former labor union leader fired 13,000 striking federal air traffic controllers, signaling a decline in unionism that continues today. Reagan supported and won the granting of amnesty to illegal immigrants, mostly Mexicans. And he reshaped the liberal federal judiciary. Joining with a new GOP Senate (the first since 1954 and the most enduring since 1930), he appointed scores of conservative federal district and appellate court judges and named Sandra Day O’Connor, a Republican moderate, America’s first female Supreme Court Justice.132

Following his presidency, Reagan returned to California, not the upper Mississippi Valley. He had become a Californian in the late 1930s, and in 1989 he aimed to spend the rest of his life in his beloved Rancho Cielo home. Yet, in a sense, Ronald Reagan had never left the Midwest. In his values and demeanor, he brought the upper Mississippi Valley with him to California, where he kept it, took it to Washington, D.C., for eight years, and then brought it home to California again.

Knute Rockne, All American (1940), Ronald Reagan’s first major

motion picture, reflects those Mississippi Valley values. Reagan played the part of George Gipp and Pat O’Brien starred as Notre Dame College’s storied football coach, Knute “Rock” Rockne. The movie is based on a true story set in America’s midwestern heartland during the first quarter of the twentieth century. The Norwegian immigrant Rockne came up the hard way to become a great Notre Dame teacher and coach, leading his beloved alma mater to the peak of American collegiate football. The movie recounts Rockne’s historic gridiron matches with the midwestern powerhouses Michigan and Illinois, and their annual Army (West Point) game. The legendary coaches Pop Warner and Alonzo Stagg make cameo appearances while actors portray Rockne’s most famous players, dubbed by fans the Four Horsemen of Notre Dame.¹³³

George Gipp played Notre Dame football under Rockne until 1920, when his promising career was cut short in a tragic death from pneumonia. Ronald Reagan ably portrays Gipp as a rakish north Indianan possessing great athletic talent but no self-discipline or manners. Rockne sees Gipp’s potential, mentors him, and the two develop a father-son relationship. As the football season progresses, George—nicknamed “the Gipper”—helps lead Notre Dame to victory. But along the way the Gipper develops a ragged cough. Hospitalized and lying on his deathbed, he tells Rockne, “Someday, when things are tough, maybe you can ask the boys to go in there and win one for the Gipper.” George Gipp’s deathbed speech and its consequences are the most celebrated scenes in Knute Rockne, All-American. The movie’s crescendo comes during the halftime of the historic 1928 Notre Dame versus Army game. Behind at the half, Rockne rallies “the boys” to go out and win. In a Hollywood recreation of the Rockne’s actual speech, he tells the team:

I’m going to tell you something I’ve kept to myself for years. None of you ever knew George Gipp. He was long before your time, but you all know what a tradition he is at Notre Dame. And the last

¹³³. Lloyd Bacon, dir., Knute Rockne, All-American (Warner Brothers, 1940), film. Also see Allen, “Ronald Reagan.”
thing he said to me, “Rock,” he said, “sometime when the team is up against it and the breaks are beating the boys, tell them to go out there with all they got and win just one for the Gipper. I don’t know where I’ll be then, Rock,” he said, “but I’ll know about it, and I’ll be happy.”

In the movie, as in the actual 1928 game, Notre Dame returns to the field and erases Army’s lead to “win one for the Gipper.”

Throughout the remainder of Ronald Reagan’s life, the popularity of *Knute Rockne, All American* was a source of great personal satisfaction. Yet Reagan had no idea of the ultimate significance of his portrayal of George Gipp. After he entered politics, Ronald Reagan’s legions of supporters would often implore one another to “win one for the Gipper,” and they continued to do so after Reagan’s 2004 death from pneumonia. Playing the Indianan George Gipp turned out to be the perfect role for the Illinoisan Ronald Reagan.

Dixon, Illinois, was, Ronald Reagan later remembered, “a small universe where I learned standards and values that would guide me for the rest of my life.” At the First Christian Church alongside the Rock River, Reagan gained the “unshakable” faith that gave him “a peace beyond description.” One of Ronald Reagan’s biographies is subtitled *How an Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader*, and “ordinary man” is a good summation of the mystique of both Reagan and Harry Truman, one of whose biographies is titled *Man of the People*. Truman recalled, “I tried never to forget who I was and where I’d come from and where I was going back to… After nearly eight years in the White House and ten years in the Senate, I found myself right back where I started in Independence, Missouri.” In Merle Miller’s *Plain Speaking*, Truman certainly spoke on the subject of destiny and whether or not he had felt it as a young man growing up in Missouri. Noting that many great world leaders had shown signs of greatness in their youths, Miller asked Truman if he had ever believed he would be called to do great things. Truman replied,
“No, no no. Those are the fellas that cause all the trouble. I just wanted to make a living and to do my job the best I could do it, and that’s about the size of it.”136

**FANNY AND PHYLLIS**

The Mississippian Fanny Lou Hamer gave a speech before the credentials committee of the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, that proved to be a coda to the Minnesotan Hubert Humphrey’s 1948 speech in Philadelphia as related above. Together, these two leaders formed bookends on the modern Democratic Party’s final, painful separation from the segregationist forces of the Jim Crow South. Hamer was one of the most important of Mississippi Valley women to participate in the American debate over race, slavery, segregation, and southern political party politics. These women add even more complexity to historians’ study of American womanhood and southern women on and off the pedestal.137

As discussed in chapter 1, the Scottish immigrant Frances Wright helped to fuse feminism with abolitionism in America’s antebellum South. She founded Nashoba in west Tennessee in 1825–26 with the goal of educating slaves whose freedom she had herself purchased. She and her friend and fellow immigrant Frances Trollope joined a small, vocal group of Mississippi Valley feminists in opposing slavery. Ohio’s Oberlin College became a hotbed of both feminism and abolitionism (and a stop on the Underground Railroad), all the while producing America’s first female college students and graduates. Yet women were divided over the issue of slavery, with some southern women defending the peculiar institution and working for Confederate victory in the Civil War.138


In 1894, following Reconstruction, the United Daughters of the Confederacy formed in Nashville, Tennessee, and did much good work. The Daughters assisted disabled veterans, widows, and orphans in getting economic aid, medical care, and education, and they erected monuments and museums “to collect and preserve the material” necessary for what they deemed a “truthful history of the War Between the States.” The Daughters also worked to “record the part played during the War by southern women, including their patient endurance of hardship, their patriotic devotion during the struggle, and their untiring efforts during the post-war reconstruction of the South.” However, the Daughters’ roles as self-appointed guardians of the southern heritage also drew them towards the Lost Cause mythology that advanced a false view of a Confederate unity. The Daughters often defended aspects of the institution of slavery and the segregation that had emerged by 1900. As the twentieth century advanced, the United Daughters of the Confederacy served as de facto defenders of the segregationist status quo.139

The Black freedom movement gained strength before and after World War II, and southern women both defended and fought against Jim Crow laws. Rosa Parks, the diminutive Alabaman who refused to give up her city bus seat to a white passenger, became an icon to desegregationists. Parks was both preceded and followed by brave Black women—Aurelia Browder, Claudette Colvin, Sue McDonald, Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, and Mary Louise Smith-Ware—who also refused to abide segregated transport. On the cultural front, the white Alabaman Harper Lee’s 1960 Pulitzer Prize–winning novel To Kill A Mockingbird brought national attention to the tragic consequences of

southern racial injustice; the 1962 movie adaptation of Lee’s novel, starring Gregory Peck, won the Academy Award for best actor and drew a massive movie audience. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was followed by equally powerful (though less influential) short stories by another white southern woman, the Mississippian Eudora Welty. Welty’s “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” (1963) portrays white racism through the eyes of a man who murders a Black civil rights worker (based on the Medgar Evers murder), while her subsequent story “The Demonstrators” (1966) expands upon the theme of dehumanization of Blacks in the Jim Crow South.\footnote{140}

However, Americans also witnessed white women aiding the murderers of a Black youngster. Fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was kidnapped and brutally murdered in 1955 because, as a Black northerner visiting relatives in the Mississippi Delta, he made the fatal mistake of speaking in a familiar tone to a white woman. The trial of accused murderers (the woman’s husband and his brother) proceeded, and American television and newspaper audiences saw the men in the company of their supportive, attractive young wives, women whose “honor” they had defended by murdering a teenaged boy. Both men were acquitted by an all-white jury (the defense argued Till’s mutilated body was unrecognizable) and quickly sold their confessions to *Look Magazine*.\footnote{141}

In the fall of 1960, a gang of New Orleans women became ugly

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symbols of white racism and resistance to school integration. Following a court order to desegregate the Orleans Parish schools, federal marshals daily escorted four young Black children—Ruby Bridges, Leona Tate, Tessie Prevost, and Gail Etienne—to two formerly all-white elementary schools in New Orleans’ Ninth Ward. The decision to initially enroll only the six- and seven-year-old girls was no doubt motivated by memories of the violent 1956 Little Rock (Arkansas) Central High School integration and the mistaken belief the presence of small girls might prevent a reprise. Instead, large crowds of working-class whites gathered daily to harass the children and federal marshals as they entered and departed McDonogh and William Frantz Elementary Schools. Leading the mob were so-called “cheerleaders”—young, working-class mothers who agitated the crowd by screaming racist epithets and spitting at the marshals and their young wards. The New Orleans cheerleaders immediately drew worldwide media attention and became a national embarrassment.142

The writer John Steinbeck first heard about the cheerleaders while touring the southwestern United States. He was driving a camper, accompanied only by his dog, and gathering stories for his memoir Travels with Charlie (1961). Steinbeck hurriedly crossed Texas and the Louisiana border, entering New Orleans to witness the spectacle for himself. He wrote that at a police barricade he found the group of women who, “by some curious definition of the term ‘mother,’ gathered every day to scream invectives at the children” in front of hundreds of spectators who assembled “to enjoy and applaud their performance.” Steinbeck wrote that these bigots, representing “three hundred years of fear and anger and terror of change in a changing world,” stood arrayed against “the littlest Negro girl you ever saw, dressed in shining starchy white, with new white shoes on feet so little they were almost round.”143

Steinbeck continued, describing the cheerleaders screaming one by one in “shrill, grating voices,” and the crowd responding with “howls” and applause. “No newspaper had printed the words these women shouted ... [but now I heard the words, bestial, and filthy, and degenerate]:

The words written down are dirty, carefully and selectedl y filthy. But there was something far worse here than the dirt, a kind of frightening witches’ Sabbath... These blowzy women with their little hats and their [newspaper] clippings hungered for attention. They wanted to be admired. They simpered in a happy almost innocent triumph when they were applauded. Theirs was the demented cruelty of egocentric children, and somehow this made their insensate beastliness much more heartbreaking. These were not mothers, not even women. They were crazy actors playing to a crazy audience.

In 1964, four years after Steinbeck stood at the McDonogh school barricades, Norman Rockwell’s painting of Ruby Bridges, the little girl “in shining starchy white, with new white shoes” appeared on the cover of Look Magazine. That same year, the United States Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, and Fanny Lou Hamer spoke before the credentials committee of the Democratic Party National Convention.144

Fannie Lou Hamer once recalled, “Because I believe in God, I asked God to give me a chance to just let me do something about what was going on in Mississippi.” Despite the fame that followed her entry into civil rights struggles, Hamer’s world always orbited around her Mississippi Delta home. Fannie Lou Townsend was born into a Montgomery County, Mississippi, family of sharecroppers in 1917, and matured amid the struggles of the Black freedom movement. As a youngster, she went to work as a farm laborer, quitting school at age twelve. Married to Perry “Pap” Hamer in 1944, Fanny raised two adopted daughters, farmed and picked cotton and other row crops, and watched with increasing interest as the civil rights movement grew up around her. Emmett Till was murdered in the vicinity of Fanny

144. Steinbeck, Travels with Charlie, 255–56; Coles, “Ruby Bridges and a Painting,” 110.
and Pap Hamer’s Ruleville, Mississippi, hometown, and Fanny learned of the school desegregation struggles in Little Rock, New Orleans’ Ninth Ward, and the University of Mississippi in Oxford. In 1962, she attended her first civil rights meeting and enlisted to help the Students Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in registering Black Mississippians to vote. SNCC was one of several groups with which Hamer would work. Although SNCC subsequently gained a reputation as a separatist Black power group, Hamer was dedicated to achieving an integrated civil rights movement that included northern whites (including Jews) and southern white allies, declaring, “If we’re going to break down this barrier of segregation, we can’t segregate ourselves.”  

Blacks had begun to vanish from Mississippi voting rolls around the time of the Redeemers’ rise and the 1882 defeat of the Black Republican Congressman Roy Lynch. By 1900, their extirpation was complete and they would stay shut out through the 1950s. Although Dixiecrats had a falling out with Harry Truman in 1948, they returned to the party in the 1950s to stage a last stand against the desegregationist wave. In 1964, Mississippi Senators James Eastland and John Stennis joined Al Gore, Sr., Harry Byrd, William J. Fulbright, Strom Thurmond, Russell Long, Robert Byrd, Sr., Richard Russell, and ten more southern Democrats to filibuster the Civil Rights Act. Their obstruction lasted for over two months until a bipartisan Senate supermajority, led by Hubert Humphrey, Mike Mansfield, and Everett Dirksen, broke the filibuster and passed the bill. Defeated at the national level, segregationists aimed to retain their clout within the Democratic Party, which was on track to nominate President Lyndon Johnson (a Texan and supporter of civil rights), with Hubert Humphrey as his running mate. When delegates arrived at their national convention in Atlantic City in August of

1964, a conflict was brewing, and Fanny Lou Hamer was there to stir the pot.  

The work to register Mississippi Black voters over fierce white opposition gave rise to a shrewd plan in which Fanny Lou Hamer played an important role. Predictably, Dixiecrats squashed Black voter registration and participation in caucus selection of Mississippi’s convention delegates. Hamer herself had been harassed, arrested, and physically beaten, because she tried to register to vote and to register others. SNCC, having publicly attempted and failed at every legal means of voter registration and caucus participation, then methodically created their own desegregated process, selecting both Black and white convention delegates under the banner of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). Those delegates traveled to Atlantic City, where they petitioned the credentials committee to be seated as the rightful Mississippi delegation. MFDP chose Fannie Lou Hamer as one of their witnesses to testify before the committee.  

President Lyndon Johnson, an advocate for racial equality and the 1964 Civil Rights Act, was now caught between the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the Dixiecrats. Like Harry Truman, Johnson saw desegregation as just (and inevitable) and the Dixiecrats as doomed. But Johnson also needed southern electoral votes in the November election. After having labored long and hard to help pass the Civil Rights Act, he was impatient with liberals bent on humiliating Dixiecrats in front of a national television audience and splintering the Democrat coalition in a presidential election year. Johnson was willing to hold his nose at the Dixiecrat smell for one more election cycle. In characteristic fashion, he dispatched Walter Reuther and Hubert Humphrey (and Humphrey’s young protégé Walter Mondale) to try to broker a deal between the liberals.
and the Dixiecrats. Well aware of Fannie Lou Hamer’s persuasive speaking style, Johnson scheduled his own news conference to preempt her credentials committee testimony. However, Fanny’s talk was so riveting the news networks re-ran it in its entirety, and Hamer instantly became a national (and international) sensation.148

“My name is Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, and I live at 626 East Lafayette Street, Ruleville, Mississippi, Sunflower County,” in the home state “of Senator James O. Eastland and Senator Stennis,” she began in her thick Mississippi accent. Her brief testimony told three powerful stories—her first attempt to register to vote, her subsequent loss of her job, and the beating she took after attending a civil rights organizing meeting. Fannie stated that on August 31, 1962, “eighteen of us traveled twenty-six miles to the county courthouse in Indianola to try to register to become first-class citizens.” After taking a literacy test and being ordered to leave, “city police and the state highway patrolmen” detained and fined them while en route home. That evening, the farmer for whom she and Pap had worked for eighteen years (she called him the “plantation owner”) was “raising Cain because I had tried to register” and insisted she withdraw her paperwork. Hamer refused, declaring, “I didn’t try to register for you. I tried to register for myself.” He fired her and she “had to leave the same night.”149

On June 9, 1963, Fannie continued, “I had attended a voter registration workshop [and] was returning back to Mississippi” when a state highway patrolman arrested and booked her in the county jail in Winona, Mississippi. There she heard a woman being beaten because she refused to call a police officer “Sir.” Three white men, one of whom was a state patrolman, entered Hamer’s cell, announcing, “We are going to make you wish you was dead.” As she lay on a bunk face down, the patrolman ordered “Negro prisoners” to beat her. “After the first Negro had

148. Mills, Like a Holy Crusade, 147, 152–53.
beat me until I was exhausted,” a second beat her while the first sat on her feet to keep her still.

I began to scream and one white man got up and began to beat me in my head and tell me to hush. One white man—my dress had worked up high—he walked over and pulled up my dress, I pulled my dress down and he pulled my dress back up.

As she spoke before the stunned credentials committee members and a national television audience, Fannie Lou Hamer concluded, “If the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave where … our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings, in America? Thank you.”

In the end, the committee only offered the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party two at-large seats, with the Dixiecrat delegation remaining intact. They refused the offer, with Hamer declaring, “We didn’t come all this way for no two seats.” And besides, the MFDP had brought their story of racial injustice before the American people in a fashion more dramatic and influential than they could have ever hoped for. Congress passed a Voting Rights Act in 1965, and by 1972 60 percent of eligible Black Mississippians were registered to vote (today, Mississippi has a higher per capita level of Black registration than Massachusetts). Fannie Lou Hamer became a nationally recognized civil rights leader who made national speeches, testified before Congress, and traveled to Africa. Yet as the mid-1960s turned into the early 1970s, Hamer typically kept her sights set on her Mississippi Delta home.

Returning to Ruleville, Fannie Lou Hamer ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. Congress and the Mississippi State Senate before focusing her efforts on economics. Her days with SNCC and her trip to Africa had instilled an interest in local socialism that

150. Ibid.
she now pursued. Hamer organized a low-income housing cooperative and an innovative Pig Bank, which loaned pregnant sows to needy families (who kept the piglets and returned the sow to the bank). Hamer’s group next purchased 640 acres and dubbed it Freedom Farm, to be populated and worked by needy families. Funded by government and private bank loans and money she raised from a legion of liberal admirers, Fannie’s utopian experiment resembled the one launched by the other Fanny—Frances Wright—145 years earlier at Nashoba, 150 miles to the north. The end results of Freedom Farm and Nashoba were also similar. The inherent difficulties of collective farming combined with Hamer’s disputatious nature and her ongoing medical problems (diabetes and hypertension) led to the Freedom Farm’s bankruptcy. Hamer’s physical condition worsened. On March 14, 1977, Fannie Lou Hamer died of heart failure in Mound Bayou, Mississippi.\[152\]

In retrospect, Fannie Lou Hamer is an important historical figure in the Black freedom movement, a woman who worked with others to cleanse the Democratic Party of segregationists. Yet no one at the time could have predicted the extent of damage to the 1960s and ’70s southern Democratic Party, which sat on the precipice of huge losses to the Republicans. Just as the South had become Republican during the desegregationist era following the Civil War, it returned to the Republican fold exactly one hundred years later, amid the downfall of Dixiecrats.\[153\] Fannie Lou Hamer played an important role in this. Yet the rebirth of the southern GOP was also the result of the labors of another Mississippi Valley woman—one who resided in Alton, Illinois.

Alton, just north of Saint Louis, has given America two controversial and important freedom fighters. The fiery abolitionist newspaperman Elijah P. Lovejoy was hanged by pro-

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slavery fanatics in the streets of Alton in 1837. One hundred and twenty-seven years later, a young Alton political activist named Phyllis Schlafly penned *A Choice Not an Echo*, a book that signaled a huge shift in the politics of the Mississippi Valley and all of America. Although Schlafly is best known as an opponent of '60s-style American feminism, her life story is one of a fiercely independent woman who rose to fame in a world dominated by men. Born in Saint Louis in 1924, Phyllis Stewart matured during the Great Depression as her librarian mother supported the family and her attorney father—a rock-ribbed Republican—looked for work. Schlafly paid her own way through Saint Louis’ Washington College by working graveyard and swing shifts at the Saint Louis Ordnance Plant, test-firing rifle and machine gun ammunition manufactured for use in World War II. She graduated at age nineteen, earned an M.A. in political science from Harvard (Radcliffe) in 1945, and worked briefly as a political researcher before marrying Fred Schlafly, a banker, in 1949. Phyllis began raising a family that grew to six children, and she appeared to be settling down to a comfortable life in Alton, Illinois. But as the 1950s and early 1960s unfolded, Schlafly, like Fannie Lou Hamer, was drawn into the dramatic political upheaval going on throughout America.\(^\text{154}\)

As it had been for Hamer, 1964 proved to be Phyllis Schlafly’s crucible. Always active in GOP politics, she became a member of the grassroots campaign that seized Republican Party leadership from East Coast progressives—those whom Schlafly disparagingly called “eggheads,” “kingmakers,” “Rockefeller Republicans,” and “alleged Republicans.” Schlafly and her fellow rebels succeeded in nominating the conservative Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater for president. Goldwater, the first American of Jewish ancestry (though not a practicing Jew) to stand for the presidency, was a staunch anti-Communist and states’ rights conservative.\(^\text{155}\) He favored individual freedom via

minimal government, low taxes, balanced budgets, and a strong military. Schlafly later reflected, “It is unlikely that any nominee for President who was not elected ever had the lasting influence on American politics that Barry Goldwater did.”

Barry Goldwater was the undisputed original leader of the modern conservative movement... If there hadn’t been a Barry Goldwater, there wouldn’t have been a Ronald Reagan... Goldwater was authentic, and what you saw was what you got. His political positions and agenda came from his personal convictions, not from reading the polls... By proclaiming from the start that he offered “a choice not an echo,” Goldwater made his supporters understand who their enemy was. That enemy was the liberal, eastern Rockefeller Republicans who, every four years from 1936 through 1960, had inflicted the Republican Party with a presidential candidate who “me-too-ed” the Democrats on the fundamental issues... The 27 million [voters] who withstood Big Media’s vitriol in 1964 kept the faith, and they grew into the 54 million mighty majority that validated the Reagan Revolution in 1984.

Goldwater’s popular 1960 book, Conscience of a Conservative, was joined in 1964 by A Choice Not an Echo, Schlafly’s own GOP manifesto and intellectual biography of the Senator. Schlafly published A Choice Not an Echo herself, through a company she dubbed Pere Marquette Press. Though lacking an agent or professional distributor, the book caught fire during the GOP primaries and convention process. By November, three and a half million copies had sold. All experts agree that Schlafly’s book played a major role in securing Goldwater the GOP nomination, and A Choice Not an Echo stands as one of the most widely read political tracts in American history.156

155. See Rick Perlstein, Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus (New York, 2001) and Peter Iverson, Barry Goldwater, Native Arizonan (Norman, Okla., 1997).

Schlafly was, like Goldwater, a small government desegregationist. One of her biographers, an enemy-turned-admirer, confesses being “so deep-down suspicious” and “hungry for anything I could get” on Schlafly that she invested hundreds of hours trying to unearth her assumed racist past. But there was no such past. Schlafly “had never shown herself to be a racist; had never tried to block or even stall integration.” Schlafly’s strong belief in property rights no doubt led her, like Goldwater, to question the tortured definition of “public” in the public accommodations section of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The public accommodations clause led Goldwater to vote against the entire bill—a principled action that proved a huge political mistake. Goldwater had belonged to the NAACP, and he desegregated his family’s Phoenix department store. As a U.S. Air Force major general, Goldwater was in charge of the desegregation of the Arizona Air National Guard. Yet he was unfairly branded a racist (and unwittingly embraced by some white southern segregationists) for his states’ rights views. Phyllis Schlafly never opposed the Civil Rights Act and in fact worked hand in hand for years with her fellow Illinoisan, Senator Everett Dirksen, a key Republican backer of the bill.157

“Why would a regular party Republican write a book which exposes the Convention intrigues of a few alleged Republicans?” Schlafly rhetorically asked in A Choice Not an Echo. Her answer was that in 1964, “the survival of American freedom and independence may depend on a Republican victory.” Of course, Schlafly and the Goldwaterites never reached their optimistic goals. The national media immediately branded Goldwater an extremist, and Johnson and Humphrey thumped him soundly in November. Goldwater won only 39 percent of the popular vote and the electoral votes of six states, one of which was his native Arizona. Yet he also won Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, 

157. Critchlow, Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism, 129–130, 142; Felsenthal, Sweetheart of the Silent Majority, xvii–xix. In a speech delivered a few weeks after the Senate passed the Civil Rights Act, Dirksen nominated Goldwater for the presidency at the GOP National Convention; the 1964 GOP platform pledged full enforcement of the Civil Rights Act. A less generous analysis is in Black and Black, Rise of the Southern Republicans, 208–10.
Georgia, and South Carolina—the first time these states had voted Republican since 1872 and 1876.\footnote{Schlafly, \textit{A Choice Not an Echo}, 117; Critchlow, \textit{Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism}, 136.}

Thus the Republican Party began to recapture the South. Though some of Barry Goldwater’s southern vote no doubt came from segregationists, their day was done. The new southern Republicans who emerged in the 1970s and ’80s were all desegregationists. With the important exception of Strom Thurmond, all of the old Dixiecrats—Gore, Fulbright, Byrd, Faubus, Stennis, Eastland, Russell, and their brethren Bull Connor and Lester Maddox—remained in the Democratic Party, where they ended their careers. George Wallace and a few others became Independents, refusing to join the GOP. Gradually, following both the GOP lead and the vision of Fannie Lou Hamer, southern Democrats replaced their old guard with desegregationist leaders like Jimmy Carter, Al Gore, Jr., and Bill Clinton. They lost the Deep South but remained competitive in Arkansas, west Tennessee, Missouri, and Florida. And in the upper Mississippi Valley, Democrats would remain strong in Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, and, of course, Hubert Humphrey’s home state of Minnesota.\footnote{Black and Black, \textit{Rise of the Southern Republicans}, 142–43, 211, 222, 390. Bull Connor served as Alabama’s Democratic national committeeman; Alabama Governor George Wallace ran as a third party candidate for president in 1968 and in the 1972 Democrat primaries before he was wounded by an assassin. For the 1980s rise of southern Democrat desegregationists, see ibid., 175–76.}

Meanwhile, Phyllis Schlafly continued her career as a political activist from her new home base on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River. Throughout the 1970s, Schlafly battled liberal feminists and the proposed Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which aimed to constitutionalize gender equality. In a stance that would probably have infuriated Fanny Wright but pleased southern women who sought to remain on the pedestal, Schlafly argued that the ERA was both unnecessary (because the 14th Amendment already codified citizen equality) and potentially dangerous (because it might lead to women being conscripted into military service or to the loss of their dependent wife social security benefit status). When the Equal Rights Amendment died
short of passage, both its supporters and opponents gave Schlafly a great deal of the credit or blame.\footnote{Critchlow, Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism, 212–42, 283–85.}

One of the Schlafly’s most important crusades is also the least known of her efforts. In the mid-1980s, at the height of Ronald Reagan’s popularity, she almost singlehandedly prevented many of her own conservative allies from calling a national constitutional convention to pass a balanced budget amendment. Although Schlafly certainly supported a balanced budget, she astutely foresaw nightmare scenarios for conservatives that might result were liberals to wrest control of the proposed constitutional convention. For example, she feared expanded Supreme Court powers, four-year terms for Congressmen, and the elimination of the Electoral College and the Senate filibuster. Phyllis Schlafly almost singlehandedly squashed the balanced budget amendment convention when it was only two states shy of approval.\footnote{This is based on my recollection of a 1987 speech Schlafly gave at Tennessee Technological University (Cookeville) and a conversation during our drive to the Nashville airport. Schlafly soon spent weeks in the Montana state capitol of Helena, where she at last stymied the balanced budget amendment convention proposal.}

The derision and venom Schlafly drew from women of the American left was unprecedented. The feminist Betty Friedan actually told Schlafly, “I’d like to burn you at the stake.” Her public talks were almost always peppered with catcalls and interruptions. However, Schlafly thrived amid the hostility and was known for cool demeanor and sharp wit in the face of hecklers. She was also known for her work ethic. In addition to her constitutional battles of the ’60s, ’70s and ’80s, she founded a political action group (Eagle Forum), ran unsuccessfully for Congress, served several terms as Illinois Republican Committeewoman and GOP National Convention delegate, appeared regularly on television and radio (eventually hosting her own weekly Eagle Forum radio show), and traversed the country as a guest speaker. In 1978, in the midst of the ERA battle, Schlafly earned a juris doctorate from Washington University. She continued to write, eventually publishing twenty
books. In 1998, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, a magazine known for strong editorial support of the ERA, named Schlafly one of the 100 most important women of the twentieth century. In 2016, Phyllis Schlafly died at her Saint Louis, Missouri, home, succumbing to cancer at the age of 92.\(^{162}\)

Phyllis Schlafly helped found the national political movement that elevated her fellow Mississippi Valley native Ronald Reagan to the presidency. Schaflly’s work to bolster local and state power against the increasing authority of the federal government helped reshape the American political landscape and create the second Republican South. A century after the conclusion of the American Civil War and Reconstruction, the rise of a strong desegregationist states’ rights movement was in part a result of her labor.