

Radical Republicans Then and Now: Radicalism and the Search for Equity in the 19th century

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As the author of a book about the outbreak of the Civil War, I am sometimes asked about the moment that we live in in 2021, and whether or not I feel like we are on the road to another Civil War. Certainly, we are dealing with rough times. We have seen intense partisanship and mistrust, even hatred among factions, and all this is laid against the backdrop of a reckoning with race relations, which makes people uncomfortable and fearful. In many ways, our experience of this moment evokes the anxiety, stress, anger, and the danger of the Civil War era.

I am happy to share with you, however, that no, I do not think that the tensions of the early 2020s can compare to the polarization that took place in the 1850s and 1860s. The buildup to the Civil War was much more intense than what we are experiencing now, and the Radical Republicans who are the subject of my research are much more extreme and provocative than even the January 2021 coup plotters. The Radical Republicans were a dangerous crew of activists, party organizers, and government and military officers – Black and white, men and women – active over a period of twenty years, from the founding of the Republican Party in 1854 to the end of the Civil War in 1865 and afterward during Reconstruction. I often forget to acknowledge that when we talk about the nineteenth century, we are talking about a Republican Party that not only addressed racial issues but wanted to stop the spread of slavery into the new Western territories of the United States. Every Republican believed preventing that spread to be a morally urgent necessity. The Radical Republican abolitionists not only wanted to stop the spread of slavery; they wanted to take steps to terminate it, by means legal and extra-legal.

My study of these participants shows them to be dangerous, and in fact, fomenters of the Civil War. Often when we talk about the causes of the Civil War, we focus on southern radicals, the Fire Eaters—those who would secede rather than accept the presidency of Abraham Lincoln, the reverse image of the Republican Party. I argue that the Republican Party itself, and activists aligned with the party, provoked suspicion with their acts and ultimately helped them to speed the country to war.

I want to note that a lot of Republicans were prone to self-sacrifice during this period. They were prone to civil disobedience at various times, and also to organized violence. I also acknowledge that, like extremists in our political life today, the Radical Republicans of the nineteenth century had their own proprietary media and private newspapers that were openly partisan. They had their own

protest music and groups, and they had their own influencers, anti-slavery activists that traveled the country, making speeches and publishing tracts and stirring up trouble where they could.

I am going to give you three examples of how their radicalism helped them to achieve their goals: to eradicate slavery, to promote equality, and to integrate African Americans into culture on the basis of equality. I will show you some examples from Kansas, and I will tell you about the operation of the Fugitive Slave Act in the north. I also want to describe how the Civil War created a revolution.

First, let us cover the Kansas Emergency, which created the Republican Party. There had been anti-slavery movements, there had been anti-slavery political types, but it was the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act that was, for many in politics, an intolerable escalation of the demands of what 19th-century progressives called the Slave Power. Political moderates as well as abolitionists grew incensed by the new law's betrayal of the Missouri Compromise, a promise that had been made in the 1820s. This compromise had promised that what was then known as Nebraska territory would create only states that would enter the Union free from slavery. Slavery could never be established, except for in Missouri, above the designated northern-most boundary.

When the Kansas-Nebraska Act overturned that promise in 1854, many bolted from both the Democratic Party and the Whig Party, which was on its way out of the political spectrum. That action not only created a new political party, the Republicans, but it also created a mass movement to colonize Kansas with anti-slavery settlers. Many from the North, especially from New England, organized themselves at the last moment to travel to Kansas to settle there and establish themselves as voters in time to vote, keeping with the Kansas-Nebraska Act's guarantee of "popular sovereignty," against the establishment of slavery there. They did that late in the year without the kind of preparations that pioneering families of the era typically had time to take. Even in December, migrants colonizing Kansas in the name of anti-slavery were sleeping in tents (Figure 1).¹ They also engaged in violent encounters, even what they called battles and wars, with the border-crossers from Missouri and even Texas, who were pro-slavery activists looking to control the outcome of elections and seek the admission of Kansas as a slaveholding state.

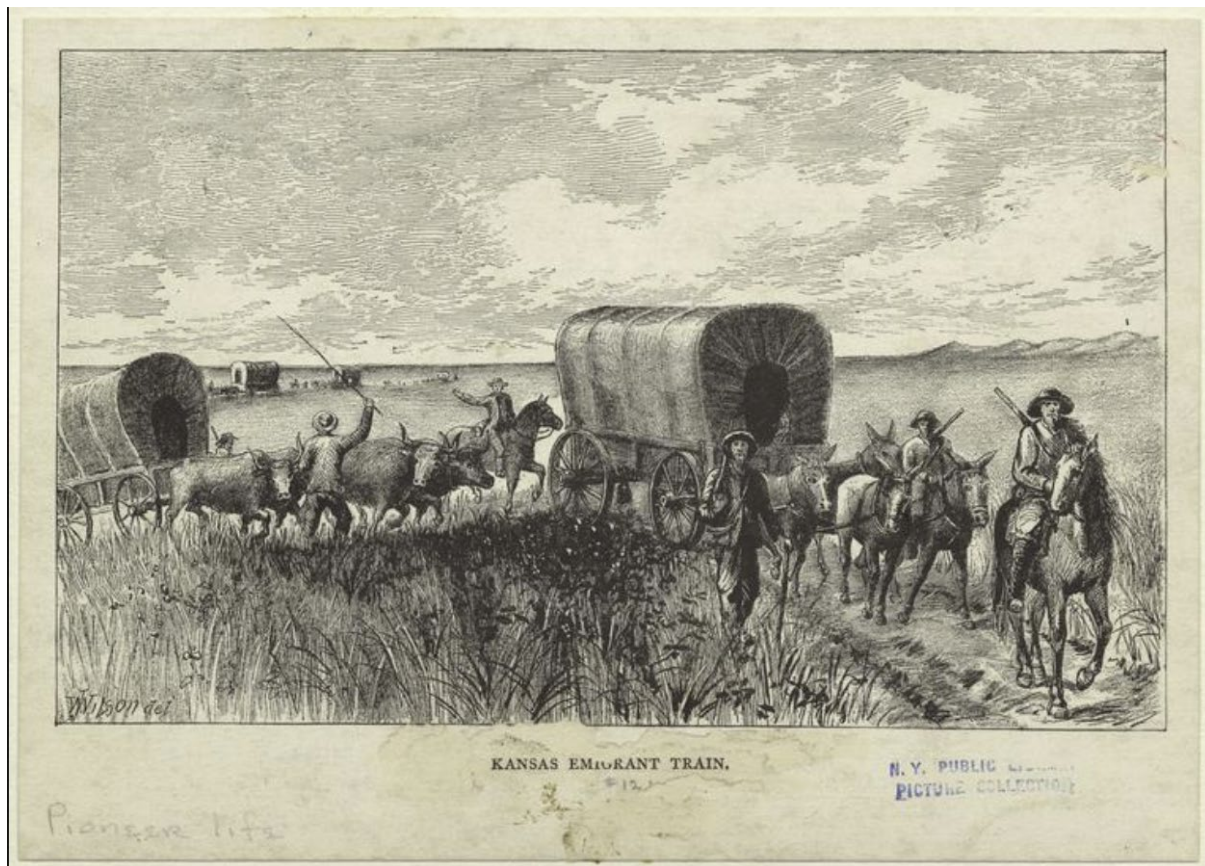


Figure 1. “Kansas Emigrant Train.” The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. New York Public Library Digital Collections. Public Domain.

These battles with border-crossers ultimately inspired settlers to stockpile a lot of weapons. They also started to drill. Male settlers drilled and engaged in military tactics and so too, did many women. One women’s civil defense strategy involved keeping a pot of boiling water on the stove and developing a technique to throw it on a home invader. This drilling and stockpiling of weapons connected to a nationwide campaign to collect money and armaments to send to Kansas, which ultimately gained the nickname “Beecher’s Bibles” in a gesture to Henry Ward Beecher, the anti-slavery Brooklyn minister who helped to raise money to purchase rifles that had been shipped to Kansas in crates labeled ‘Bibles’ as a subterfuge. This arms-funding was organized by many who were high-ranking activists in the Republican Party and was funded by rank-and-file Republicans in the North and the Northwest.²

Equipped with rifles and even a cannon that had been sent west by the already-famous designer of Central Park, Frederick Law Olmsted, Kansas settlers formed paramilitary organizations that outlasted the era of Bleeding Kansas and remained active in Kansas even after it ratified its antislavery constitution. Among those paramilitary organizations, of course, the most notorious was the one led by John Brown. Brown was certainly not a Republican—he was too radical for the Republicans and too uncompromising for electoral politics—but there were paramilitary

organizations that were operated by party members and officers. In fact, James H. Lane, one of the “Jayhawking” paramilitary captains, served in the United States Senate and later as a general in the Union Army.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was another of the most dramatic pieces of legislation of the nineteenth century. It created a big government program that mobilized resources on behalf of and in service to southerners seeking to reclaim fugitives from slavery in northern cities and rural communities. It was quite draconian in the way it operated. If U.S. marshals requested any citizen to assist them in the rendition of accused fugitives, and if that citizen refused, they were subjected to civil and criminal penalties. Many people felt that these and other features of the law were incredibly unjust, and in fact, it did increase the number of fugitives who were delivered over to purported owners. In the decade beginning in 1850 and ending with the civil war, ten times as many fugitives were sent back to the South as were in the whole previous era from 1789 to 1850.³ Therefore, it seemed like an emergency to the anti-slavery forces in the north that then were engaging in acts of civil disobedience and even organized violence, and it came to be the practice that northern Vigilance Associations engaged in surveillance and organized crowds to interdict Slave Act legal proceedings.

In the famous case of Anthony Burns, who was arrested the same week that the Kansas-Nebraska Act became law, Bostonians purchased axes and carried weapons to the courthouse. A prominent white minister went to the hardware store and came out carrying a crate of axes. A team led by Louis Hayden, an African American shop owner and leader of the Underground Railroad, picked up a battering ram that they used to knock down the doors of the courthouse (Figure 2). Though they did not succeed in liberating Burns, the activists shot a courthouse defender to death.⁴ In another case, the feminist Lucy Stone smuggled a dagger into the jail cell of an enslaved woman there who had stabbed her children while fleeing rather than let them be returned to slavery. Lucy Stone offered the woman, Margaret Garner, a knife, and then gave a speech comparing the poor mother to the Revolutionary War patriots on Bunker Hill. In another case of civil disobedience, students and professors from Oberlin College mobilized to try to rescue a person who was in custody of known slavecatchers. They surrounded and shut down a train station and climbed the walls of a boarding house in order to liberate a fugitive named John Price. A mixed group of about twenty-five Black and white men were prosecuted and held in jail for months as a result.

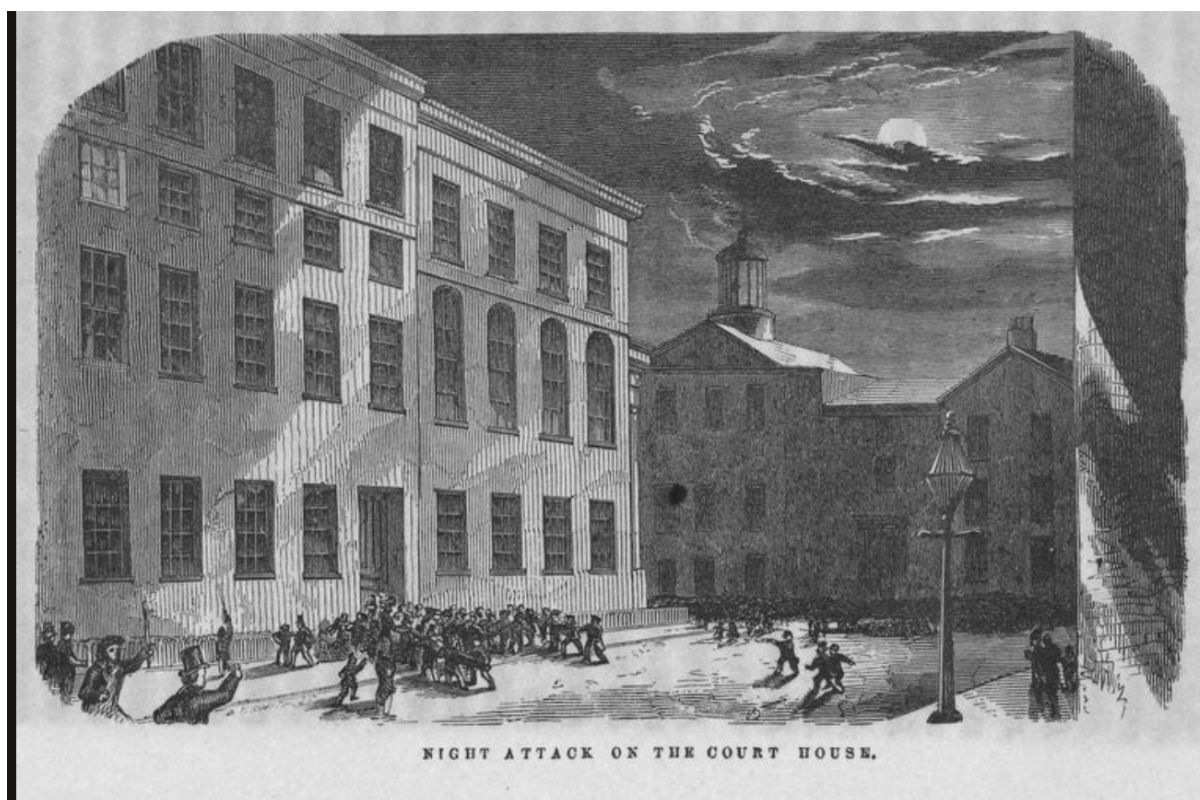


Figure 2. "Night attack on the court house." Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library. New York Public Library Digital Collections. Public Domain.

Surveillance of federal officials and their contacts became an important activity for antislavery Vigilance Committees in northern cities. In Worcester, Massachusetts in 1854, for example, antislavery spies observed a known slavecatcher getting off the train. Before he could leave the station, such a mob surrounded him that he was trapped in an outhouse for several hours. In other incidents, federal marshals were injured and even killed. Before this phenomenon ended, the paramilitary movement associated with John Brown, supported actively by Republicans at every level, escalated its operations beyond Kansas, organizing wholesale liberations of large numbers of enslaved people. Brown fled with eleven fugitives across the frozen winter plains to Chicago and to Canada, stopping for fundraisers and speeches along the way. Ultimately John Brown and his people seized control of the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry and the captain and many in his army lost their lives.

These were private actors and private organizations making big trouble, and that trouble was augmented as the government got involved in the extra-legal campaign against the features of what many thought of as a slave power conspiracy. State legislatures became sites of declarations that federal laws were void within state boundaries, an act of defiance known as nullification. Radicals serving in Free State legislatures were especially provoked by the Supreme Court ruling in the case *Dred and Harriett Scott v. Sandford* in 1857. The majority opinion in *Dred* ruled that the Missouri Compromise, which had guaranteed a portion of new territory to be free from slavery, had been

unconstitutional in part because Congress could not restrict the free movement of property in slaves. To add to the shock of this claim, which essentially invalidated the Republican Party's founding commitment to Free Soil, Chief Justice Roger Taney stated in his opinion that Black people could not be citizens and had no rights under the law. These claims motivated many loud protests about the illegitimacy and partisanship of the Supreme Court, including formal acts by the legislatures of New York, Ohio, Vermont, and New Hampshire.

Angered by additional Supreme Court maneuvering, and fearful about a pending case that applied the *Dred Scott* property doctrine to persons held as slaves in New York City, elected officials pronounced the opinion null and added on official statements of non-compliance with the Fugitive Slave Act. In fact, the state of New York passed a law saying that any person seeking to claim someone as a slave within the state, if convicted, would be fined up to \$10,000 and sentenced to two years of hard labor.⁵ They were serious in their resistance, and of course, the Radical Republicans began to perceive that their successes might be augmented by their control of government agencies, especially the federal government, which for so long, had been an enemy of the anti-slavery movement.

For multiple reasons, the federal government under the Constitution had empowered the slaveholding interest in the United States. One thing was the way the constitution favors rural areas over urban areas, which caused the agricultural states in the South to be overrepresented. Compounding these advantages, the regional cultural practice of reelecting officials repeatedly meant southern officials tended to accumulate a lot of seniority in Congress and a lot of power. Of course, we know that we had a whole series of slaveholding presidents from the founding era, and that those presidents stocked the Supreme Court, and other federal courts, with slaveholders and their sympathizers. Now Republicans imagined the federal government and control of anti-slavery as a powerful idea. Amid the tensions of the late 1850s, it was not a far leap to imagine the powerful federal government supercharged by the emergency of the increasingly impending Civil War – perhaps now not as the ally of enslavers but as an agent of liberation.

If I may add a word on the radical chic of the Radical Republicans, consider the look of the Wide Awakes of the 1860 electoral season (Figure 3). Starting with some speeches in Connecticut and growing into a movement of tens and thousands, men of all ages joined quasi-military companies called Wide Awakes. They learned military formations and parade commands and uniformed themselves in a military style. In their parades, they carried lanterns in medieval style, hanging on halberds. They wore black oilcloth raincoats to keep the kerosene from setting themselves on fire. They first assembled to accompany Republican candidates during 1860 campaign stops and later they appeared in their own huge parades in cities like New York and Boston and Chicago. These parades were always silent and scary, with slogans and depictions of a single open eye on their banners.⁶ The parades looked to southerners like an outgrowth of the John Brown militant antislavery spirit. As the

Radical Republicans assumed a more prominent public role, the fear of northern interference in the South formed part of what led to secession.⁷

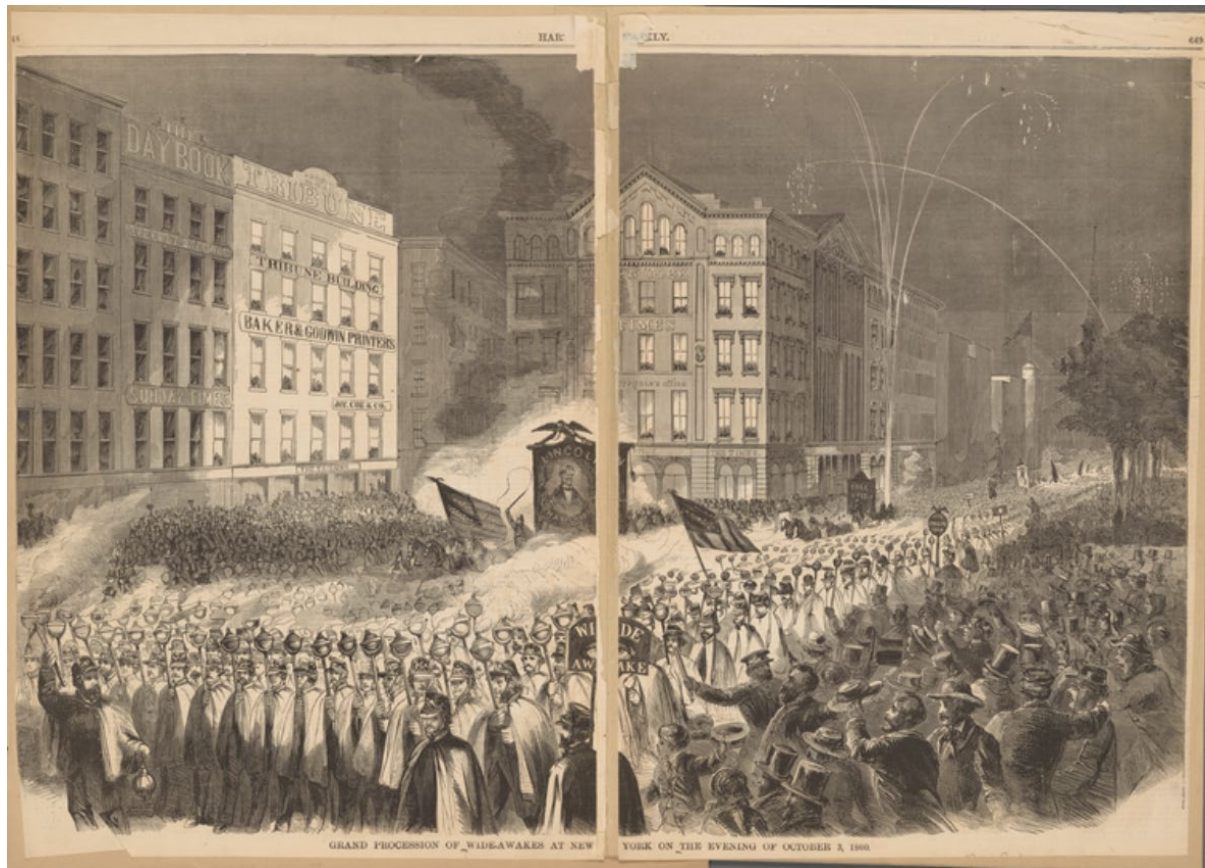


Figure 3. Irma and Paul Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy, The New York Public Library. "Grand Procession of Wide-awakes at New York on the evening of October 3, 1860." New York Public Library Digital Collections. Public Domain.

After Lincoln's victory, the government Radicals recognized that the Civil War could help them achieve their goals — emancipation and even the establishment of equal rights for African Americans. As secession and the Civil War were underway, Radicals pursued an agenda that truly revolutionized the government and changed society. They perceived that the war could and would result in the end of slavery by military emancipation. To that end, they pointed out the military necessity to take away the resources of the enemy, including the slave labor that helped to do things like build fortifications and provide for the Confederate troops. Those efforts resulted in several Confiscation Acts passed early in the war that we now view as stepping stones toward emancipation. In the near term, though, escaped enslaved people had a legal status called contrabands of war.

Ultimately, military officials came to see the military mission in the South as being in alignment with that of refugees with slavery. The armed services began to encounter, protect, and recognize the Black population as an asset to operations. Led by General Ulysses Grant, who was quick to perceive this, the interests of the Union army were deemed to be identical with the interests

of the enslaved population. The two of them worked together during the war, first with the Union army, doing what it could to assist, defend, and employ refugees from slavery by the creation of African American units.

Radicals quickly perceived that military service created an undeniable claim on the rise of citizenship for African American men. Of course, they were led by African Americans themselves, who served as recruiters, as non-commissioned officers, and as United States Colored Troops (USCT). Their claim on citizenship proceeded very quickly in the war years.⁸ Everything was compressed. Rights that might not have been guaranteed for a long time were delivered in light of the extremity of the circumstances in the Civil War. The Navy, the Army, and the government began to campaign to expand the sphere of African American rights and to do what they could to ease the transition from slavery to freedom. The most radical of these propositions was the effort to confiscate the property of Southern rebels and to distribute it to African Americans who were deemed more worthy. Confiscation and redistribution schemes were underway in New Orleans where artwork and racehorses were confiscated. Orange groves in Florida were auctioned and the estates of Confederates Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis were opened up as refugee camps and service centers during the war.

Ultimately these gestures helped to reassure African Americans who had been skeptical about Republicans for most of the 1850s and the war. Important Black activists such as Frederick Douglass, Martin Delany, John Mercer Langston, John Jones of Chicago, and John S. Rock allied with the Republicans and even held public offices.⁹ Based on this alliance and these intentions, Radical Republicans helped to create a new government during and after the Civil War, featuring a Constitution transformed by what historians call the New Birth of Freedom Amendments. While their goals have been achieved only partially, and while the Republican Party itself has largely set aside its former alliance with Black Americans, the achievements of the Civil War era helped to lay the foundation for much of what makes a better America in 2021. We stand on a stronger foundation thanks to the work of Radical Republicans back when their old party was grand.

SUMMARY OF QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question: Your speech was titled “Republicans Then and Now” but most of it was about the past. What does your research reveal about the Republican Party and American Politics in 2021?

Answer: It is not my expertise to talk about the politics of today, but like all citizens I have an interest in governance today and I have been making observations. I think about this often in the historical context, and it seems to me that the position of the Republican Party is not hostility toward black people but it is in favor of “colorblindness.” Colorblindness is the suggestion that pointing out

racial differences causes problems, creates discomfort, and does not accomplish anything. It is a way of turning a blind eye to the persistence of racism.

What I say in the book is that our contemporary mores make it more offensive to certain people to acknowledge racism than it is to be actually racist. That is how we get debates like the ones that are taking place in school boards and media settings now about whether or not we should teach critical race theory. I do not think people on the right always mean critical race theory, which is kind of a niche academic idea. What they really mean is why are we having conversations like this? Why should we talk about the history of racism in the United States? Why should we glamorize incidents of struggles like this, and why should we try to teach students that there is systemic racism? Today it has manifested itself in circumstances much like the white supremacists' control of the Democratic Party from 1854 to 1964. That is the answer to your question. I think that if we want to see the Republican Party open up to a posture that is more inclusive and that is more likely to result in policies that create more equality, we are going to have to get them to give up on colorblindness and embrace the discomfort of talking about racial issues.

Question: Are today's Republican extremists the heirs of the Civil War-era party?

Answer: While today's issues are of great concern, in looking at these activists from the Civil War era, their actions were more dire. Their commitment is greater. Their movement is larger, and the impact is tremendous.

Here is a picture of a celebration of Black voting under the Fifteenth Amendment. That doesn't look like what people think of as Republicans today (Figure 4).

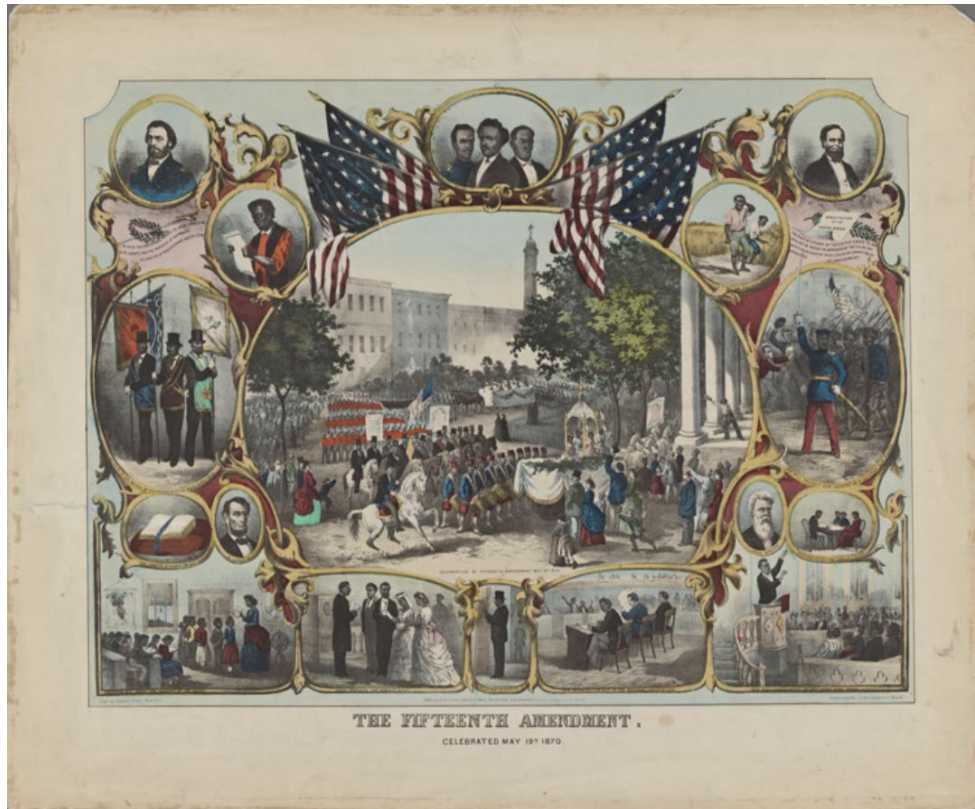


Figure 4. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. "The Fifteenth Amendment" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Public Domain.

Since I published my book in 2020 I have encountered complaints from conservatives who say I have written a book that tries to pretend that the old Republican Party was woke. That view misunderstands the past. The movement that existed in the 1850s and 1860s did not cut right or left by today's standards. In a lot of ways these guys resembled leftists because they believed in equality. They made a commitment to overcome systemic racism and slavery, but it is also true that like today's right-wingers they stockpiled weapons. They were committed to the right to bear arms. They were skeptics about the power of the federal government, especially when the opposition had control of it. There are no comfortable boundaries between what is right and what is left today and movements like this in the past. However, I do think if we look at the tactics, the assets, and the extra-legal behaviors that were adopted in the 1850s, the movement was incomparably more dangerous than today's events.

Question: When did the Republican Party become more conservative than the Democrats on racial issues?

Answer: I often get asked about today's Republicans because there is a certain inherent confusion that today's conservatives are yesterday's progressives. When the parties made their switch is a complicated story to tell briefly. One thing I like to say is that the Radical Republicans of

yesteryear were more progressive than the left-wing faction of today's Democratic Party, but that the Democrats of that era were much more extreme as racists than the Republican Party could be accused of being today. Democrats were openly the party of white supremacy for more than a hundred years starting in 1854. They threw their weight behind first the preservation of slavery, and then Jim Crow. Yesteryear's Democrats were more conservative and more reactionary than today's most conservative Republicans. That changed shortly after the end of Reconstruction.

My first book, about Reconstruction, talks about the way that the start of the conservative, reactionary, white southern forces in the 1870s helped to derail black voting and office holding to create an atmosphere of fear in which no one dared to identify as a Republican in southern states.¹⁰ Over time, though, the cost of maintaining opportunities for black Republicans in the south and white Republicans who were allied with them became more than most radicals were willing to bear. By the time of the Colfax Massacre (1873) and the Supreme Court decision in that case, many northerners were willing to say that the federal government could not intervene to prevent that violence. Many in the Radical Republican faction lost their commitment, lost their courage, and decided to focus on other matters. For a long time, the Republicans remained committed to race equality in name only.

After a while, by the end of the nineteenth century, they even lost that name. That identification passed away in the 1890s. The number of black Republicans dwindled down to almost nothing. At the same time that the Democratic party became the party of white supremacy, the Republican party became the party that did not care about white supremacy. Ultimately, as the Democrats took on African Americans as part of their political coalition, both parties shifted their ground on race relations, a change that was fully in effect by the end of the 1930s.

I hope everyone will learn the story of the Colfax Massacre because it reveals how one event that takes place in a remote location can have a tremendous national effect. The rights of African American men to vote and the right of their white allies to form a political coalition and vote Republican were suppressed in an incident arising from the contested election of 1872. In Louisiana, in Florida, one other confederate state as well, the outcome of the election could not be determined because there was so much violence and controversy, and neither side accepted the outcome. As a result, both sides celebrated a victory. There was a Republican governor and Democratic governor. There were Republican and Democratic legislatures, and there were Democratic and Republican office holders for every office in the state. It was a total breakdown in the credibility of elections.

That is why people are talking about the Colfax Massacre again today. The result in Colfax was that first one party controlled the courthouse and then the other. While the Republican-affiliated group controlled the courthouse, an army of white people began to form. About 300 paramilitary troops were amassed in the vicinity of Colfax. There were a few murders that took place on the outskirts, but on Easter Sunday, 1873, the white group invaded the town. They had a cannon, and they blasted their way into the courthouse. The black defenders—all their white allies having abandoned them—took shelter inside the courthouse, which was then set on fire. As they ran out of the

warehouse, they were shot. Some of them remained inside and were burned. A large group were taken prisoner. This phase was what you might describe as a battle. It was a one-sided battle in which African Americans did not really kill many people. About forty-eight were taken prisoner, and in the night, they were executed. The white people themselves estimated that 150 African American men were killed in Colfax.

At that time, the federal government had laws on the books that said sometimes courts cannot operate in certain districts because of intimidation or because of the racism of local officials. In those cases, the federal government could prosecute acts of violence intended to deprive people of their civil rights and their political rights. The case, however, did not work out. First, the local population helped to hide the nearly one hundred men who had been indicted. The small number that they successfully took into custody were convicted, but then their convictions were overturned, first at the circuit court level and then by the Supreme Court, which basically said if the government does not have the local will, there is nothing that the national government can do. They said police power is the prerogative of the states, and therefore the enforcement acts that had allowed this kind of double jeopardy to protect voting rights and civil rights in the South were overturned.

In the absence of federal action, there was intimidation and fraud at the election sites. The White League, which published its name in the newspapers after the ruling, had free reign, which caused African American voting to dwindle down. Totally white supremacist, Jim Crow governments were established, not just in Louisiana but everywhere.

Today the Republican Party talks a lot about voting fraud and stolen elections. The end of Reconstruction shows that it was once possible to undermine democracy by persistently applying violence and intimidation at election time. It is a challenge of our current moment to protect our elections against interference and cynicism. Radical Republicans stood up for what was right in the nineteenth century, but they could not protect their victories and voters in the South against white supremacy.

NOTES

1. LeeAnna Keith, *When It Was Grand: The Radical Republican History of the Civil War* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2020), 15-6; See also Elizabeth Varon, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008) and Robert K. Sutton, *Stark Mad Abolitionists: Lawrence, Kansas, and the Battle of Slavery in the Civil War Era* (New York: Skyhorse Publishers, 2017).
2. Keith, *When It Was Grand*, 19-22; See also Debby Applegate, *The Most Famous Man in America: A Biography of Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).
3. Keith, *When It Was Grand*, 32; See also Andrew Delbanco, *The War Before the War: Fugitive Slaves and the Struggle for America's Soul* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).

4. Keith, *When It Was Grand*, 37-41; See also Mark Peterson, *The City-State of Boston: The Rise and Fall of an Atlantic Power, 1630-1865* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).
5. Keith, *When It Was Grand*, 63-7; See also Austin L. Allen, *Origins of the Dred Scott Case: Jacksonian Jurisprudence and the Supreme Court, 1837-1857* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006).
6. Keith, *When It Was Grand*, 120, 125; See also Bruce Chadwick, *Lincoln for President: An Unlikely Candidate, an Audacious Strategy, and the Victory No One Saw Coming* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2010).
7. William L. Barney, *Rebels in the Making: The Secession Crisis and the Birth of the Confederacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
8. See also Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), and James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (New York: W. W Norton & Company, 2013).
9. Keith, *When It Was Grand*, 282-3; See also Tunde Adeleke, ed., *Martin Delany's Civil War and Reconstruction: A Primary Source Reader* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), and Peter Wirzbiki, *Fighting for the Higher Law: Black and White Transcendentalists Against Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).
10. LeeAnna Keith, *The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror, and the Death of Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).