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The Colfax Massacre: A Culmination of Political and Racial Disparity

Writing Process

I wrote this paper for the interdisciplinary humanities course The Development of Western Culture in a Global Context. My writing process consisted of first examining various primary and secondary sources on Southern Reconstruction and the Colfax Massacre. This gave me an understanding of how historians have come to understand the event throughout time. In my research, I found two categories of interpretations, which I then used to organize my ideas and develop my own understanding of the implications of the event.

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The Colfax Massacre: A Culmination of Political and Racial Disparity

Lian F. Mitzian

For Radical Republicans, the end of the Civil War gave rise to many questions regarding how to establish an effective government and advance the rights of freedmen. Conservatives and former slave owners were opposed to these ideals, which created a grave divide within politics and races in the United States. A conspicuous display of the gravity of these tensions is the Colfax Massacre. This massacre, which took place at the courthouse in Colfax Parish, Louisiana, on Easter Sunday, April 13, 1873, was initiated by Conservatives in response to their unrest with the local government. It resulted in the slaughter of over one hundred men by the Ku Klux Klan and is a crucial turning point in the downfall of the American Reconstruction. Following the massacre, the Klan was convicted of violating the 1870 Enforcement Act, and the case, known as *United States v. Cruikshank*, was eventually heard by the Supreme Court. In the end, the court sided with the defendants. To many, this decision illustrated shortcomings in government policy during Reconstruction and ultimately led to the end of an era. From the earliest publications to present day, historians have contested the meaning and significance of the Colfax Massacre. Interpretations from the 1800s and 1900s see it as a political dispute that arose between races as African Americans attempted to gain political power and civil rights. However, in the twenty-first century interpretations are being revisited and have evolved into seeing the Colfax Massacre as an act of white supremacy.

History's understanding of what gave rise to the Colfax Massacre and how public perception of the occurrence diverted the Reconstruction era has transformed over time. The writings of Morris T. Chester in 1873, James Rhodes in 1910, Everette Swinney in 1962, and Brooks D. Simpson in 1988 contend the Colfax Massacre resulted from the animosity between Conservatives and Radical

Republicans for government control and dissent over the extent to which emancipated slaves could exercise rights granted to them by the Fifteenth Amendment. Early twenty-first-century historians Joel M. Sipress and Christopher Waldrep also acknowledge the massacre was a consequence of the opposition between political parties as African Americans sought civil liberties and Conservatives fought to preserve their power. However, the most recent scholars, Charles Lane and Leeanna Keith, drastically altered the story and asserted the Colfax Massacre was devised to maintain white superiority.

In the earliest interpretation, “The Massacre in Grant Parish, Louisiana: Meeting of Colored Men in New Orleans: Address and Speeches,” Chester reports on the massacre and shares testimonies from St. James Chapel, a local church community in Grant Parish, Louisiana, shortly after it occurred. According to Chester, the timeline of the event is as follows: When the Conservative governor, John McEnery, threatened to overthrow the Republican government in Grant Parish, African Americans felt they were obligated to protect the courthouse. White leaders James West Hadnot and Christopher Columbus Nash demanded the blacks surrender, but their refusal led whites to open fire. As blacks struggled to escape toward the river, they were continuously shot at, inevitably leading them to capitulate, and whites halted their attacks. Reportedly 150 men were killed, and two were taken prisoner.¹ Chester argues the massacre is a direct assault on democracy and is an act of sedition demonstrating how citizens slaughtered and oppressed its own people.² Additionally, Senator P.B.S. Pinchback argues the massacre was a ploy by McEnery to instill fear in African Americans and deter them from voting in the local election in order to keep white men in office.³ This early source affirms the Colfax Massacre originated from political confrontation and should not be viewed as a racial dispute.

In accord with the 1873 source, Rhodes’ interpretation of the event, written thirty-seven years later in 1910, also contends Colfax was a matter of politics. According to Rhodes, the massacre was triggered by African Americans who

¹ Morris T. Chester, “The Massacre in Grant Parish, Louisiana: Meeting of Colored Men in New Orleans: Address and Speeches” (1873), in *Birney Anti-Slavery Collection*, New Orleans: The John Hopkins University Sheridan Libraries, (Republican Office), 11 – 12.

² Ibid., p. 8.

³ Ibid., p. 20.

were angered by the government's failure to grant them suffrage.⁴ Similar to Chester, Rhodes stresses that the white men were prompted to violence because they did not agree with whom Governor William P. Kellogg appointed as sheriff and parish judge. In response, Kellogg got blacks to help him protect the courthouse. On Easter Sunday, the blacks' refusing the demands of the Conservatives precipitated the murder of men on both sides, though mainly losses were within the ranks of blacks. Rhodes explains the Colfax Massacre delayed the chance of the Southern blacks gaining sympathy from Northerners.⁵

Chester and Rhodes convey the same motivations and similar chronology in their retelling. These historians write that the Conservatives were trying to regain political authority, whereas the blacks desired to have a say in government and to keep the Republican party in office. Both sources explain the Conservatives did provide the opportunity for blacks to surrender before they took action. However, there is a discrepancy in how long this grace period was. Chester upholds that Nash, the conservative sheriff, gave those at the courthouse a half an hour to surrender and get their "women and children" out of the way.⁶ Conversely, in Rhodes's account, these details are absent, as he never discloses any actions taken by the blacks. Rhodes simply says that after the refusal, whites began discharging the cannon.⁷ Moreover, although Chester and Rhodes argue similar intentions, there are differences in how they articulate the event, which may be the result of the time period and context of the source. It should also be noted that Chester's work is a subjective account that provides a more detailed description of the occurrence because it is provided by those directly affected. For instance, Chester refers to the victims as the "blood of our brothers," and the white men he describes as "remorseless."⁸ Rhodes refers to the victims as "negros."⁹

The notion persisted in the mid-twentieth century that the Colfax Massacre was spawned from political dissension. Swinney's 1962 journal article "Enforcing the Fifteenth Amendment, 1870–1877" addresses the legal significance of the

⁴ James F. Rhodes, *History of the United States: From the Compromise of 1850 to the Final Restoration of Home Rule at the South in 1877* (Norwood: The Macmillan Co., 1910), 112.

⁵ Ibid., p. 113.

⁶ Chester, 27.

⁷ Rhodes, 112.

⁸ Chester, 7, 16.

⁹ Rhodes, 113.

massacre and how it challenged the effectiveness of the Enforcement Acts.¹⁰ These three bills, passed by legislation in order to protect African American suffrage, made it illegal to overthrow the federal government, and it “declared everyone equal protection under the law.”¹¹ According to Swinney, Colfax was about African Americans’ fight for suffrage and is a “by-product of the struggle between the McEnery and William P. Kellogg governments for control over the state.”¹² The massacre resulted in the slaughtering of sixty blacks and the conviction of more than one hundred people by the Supreme Court for violating the Enforcement Acts.¹³ In the end, Swinney argues the Supreme Court’s decision to dismiss charges reflects the failure of the Fifteenth Amendment during Reconstruction.¹⁴

Late twentieth-century historians continued to present Colfax as a response to political turmoil. In Simpson’s 1988 journal article “Ulysses S. Grant and the Failure of Reconciliation,” Simpson dispenses the president’s perspective on the massacre and the national backlash that followed. President Grant’s take is that the event is a political battle perpetuated by the violent climate existing in the South. Grant describes the massacre as “a butchery of citizens.”¹⁵ He also declares Colfax and the other acts of violence are testimony to why “the whole scheme of colored enfranchisement is worse than mockery and little better than crime.”¹⁶ Lastly, parallel to Swinney’s argument, Grant emphasizes how the amnesty granted to the Conservatives shows how the nation was more focused on its animosity than on upholding the law.¹⁷

Earlier historians also presented analysis of how the news shaped the people’s opinions of the massacre. In Chester’s address, he criticizes the news for either suppressing or leaving out “important facts” and believes their reports are “unjust and prejudicial” against blacks.¹⁸ As a further matter, Chester reproves the news

¹⁰ Everette Swinney. Enforcing the Fifteenth Amendment, 1870 – 1877,” *The Journal of Southern History*, no. 2 (1962), doi: 10.2307/2205188.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 202 – 203

¹² Ibid., p. 207.

¹³ Ibid., p. 207.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 218.

¹⁵ Brooks D. Simpson, “Ulysses S. Grant and the Failure of Reconstruction,” *Illinois Historical Journal* 81, no. 4 (1988), 279, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40192091>

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 280.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 280.

¹⁸ Chester, 18.

for promulgating Colfax as a “war of the races” believing this shows the nation’s ignorance.¹⁹ Chester corrects the misunderstanding by elucidating those murdered were safeguarding the courthouse with no intentions of harming Conservatives.²⁰ Secondly, in Rhodes’s account, he tells of journalist George F. Hoar, who reported in the country-wide newspaper *The Nation* that the massacre was “without palliation or justification; it was deliberate, barbarous, cold-blooded murder.”²¹ This description is analogous to Grant’s perspective and attests to how the national headlines wanted the public to perceive the massacre and in turn, agitated racial tension. What differentiates Swinney from these earlier historians is how Grant evaluates Colfax in relation to other acts of racial violence and thus, how all of these occurrences show the disorder and the lack of government enforcement during Reconstruction.

Early twenty-first-century historians paint a similar picture of the Colfax Massacre. In the 2001 handbook *Racial Violence on Trial: A Handbook with Cases, Laws, and Document*, Waldrep elaborates on how the dispute over the elected governor sent Grant Parish into a frenzy as both candidates established a local government and military. Meanwhile, whites were fearful they would ultimately lose the vote, which led the Ku Klux Klan to plan an “attack and to capture the seat of the county government.”²² This was carried out in the Colfax Massacre when Conservatives enclosed the courthouse, besieged the blacks for one hour, and then set the courthouse on fire. The result was the annihilation of over one hundred blacks and forty other men who were taken prisoner before being killed.²³ Furthermore, similarly to Swinney in 1962, Waldrep elaborates upon the implications the Colfax Massacre had in the federal arena. Waldrep discusses *United States v. Cruikshank* and tells how the Supreme Court Justice’s final verdict overturned the previous court ruling and freed the Ku Klux Klan from indictment. This decision leads to more violence, deems the Enforcement Acts nominal, and makes it clear civil rights were up to the states, not the federal government.²⁴

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

²¹ Rhodes, 113.

²² Christopher Waldrep. *Racial Violence on Trial: A Handbook with Cases, Laws, and Documents* (Santa Barbara, CA: Christopher Waldrep, 2001), 42.

²³ Ibid., p. 42.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 50.

Joel Sipress is another early twenty-first-century historian who presents the Colfax Massacre as a political conflict. In his 2001 journal article “From the Barrel of a Gun: The Politics of Murder in Grant Parish,” Sipress expounds the political ideologies behind the massacre and sets forth that Colfax served to settle an over two-year-long “bitter struggle” between Conservatives and Radical Republicans for ascendancy of the parish.²⁵ The Radicals were fighting to defend the freedom of blacks, while Conservatives wanted to mitigate the military and political power of blacks. In addition, the Moderates joined to advance the Radicals’ agenda.²⁶ Sipress provides a similar narration to those of Chester and Rhodes. Like the earliest sources, Sipress affirms that Nash, the sheriff, came to the courthouse and granted thirty minutes for the 150 defendants to put down their weapons and promised that if the women and children left the scene, no one would be harmed. Despite this warning, the Radicals stood their ground, which led to the destruction²⁷. Sipress’s analysis builds upon these earlier historians’ allegation that the Colfax Massacre was not about hatred between opposing ideologies, but rather about domination. Therefore, Sipress predicates that the significance of the Colfax Massacre is that it shows how far “seemingly moderate men will go to preserve their power and authority.”²⁸

Despite being published in the same year and insisting disorder in the government was culpable for the massacre, Sipress and Waldrep are dissimilar in the focus of their interpretations. Sipress addresses the circumstances surrounding the local government. He argues the Colfax Massacre was a last-resort incident after the parish exhausted their efforts to “find middle ground between radical Republicanism and extreme conservatism.”²⁹ Conversely, Waldrep believes the study of Colfax should focus on how the event affected national politics and policy during the Reconstruction era, similarly to the twentieth-century historians. Like Simpson, Chester, and Rhodes, Waldrep also addresses how the news broadcast the massacre, providing a consistent narrative. Waldrep points out how both *The New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* labeled Colfax as “The War

²⁵ Joel M. Sipress, “From the Barrel of a Gun: The Politics of Murder in Grant Parish,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 42, no. 3 (2001), 303, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.udayton.edu/stable/4233762>.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 305.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 319.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 305.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 319.

of Races.”³⁰ Also, Waldrep reveals how the whites constructed stories to defend themselves and accuse blacks of causing the massacre. For instance, whites fabricated a story that suggested that before Easter, blacks had the intention of “forming a new race by raping white women.”³¹ These reports show how the original intention of Colfax was misconstrued by the press to sway the progress of Reconstruction.

Finally, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, consensus on how the Colfax Massacre should be interpreted remarkably shifted amongst modern historians who now see it as an act of white supremacy. In the 2008 book *The Day Freedom Died: The Colfax Massacre, the Supreme Court, and the Betrayal of Reconstruction*, Lane tells how the white men believed they were fighting to save civilization and “their women from rape.”³² They thought losing would mean “the rural South would sink to the level of Africa.”³³ Secondly, he explains how there are discrepancies in how whites and blacks retell the story. As in previous historians’ accounts, whites recalled how blacks’ refusal to surrender led whites to attack, and blacks claimed they did not riot, but acted out of fear for protection when word got around about whites killing the black farmer Jesse McKinney.³⁴ It should also be highlighted how Lane’s account contains minimal references to the Ku Klux Klan as Conservatives and instead calls them “whites,” making it apparent how the most contemporary scholars are investigating the massacre through the context of race.³⁵ Although Lane’s explanation diverges from those of early historians, they agree on a couple of aspects. For instance, Lane conforms with their opinion on how media presented the event as being about “race jealousy” and ex-slaves retaliating against their former masters.³⁶ Also, like Swinney and Waldrep, Lane believes Colfax and *United States v. Cruikshank* were a decisive point in the downfall of Reconstruction.³⁷

³⁰ Waldrep, 42.

³¹ Ibid., p. 43.

³² Charles Lane. *The Day Freedom Died: the Colfax Massacre, the Supreme Court, and the Betrayal of Reconstruction* (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 2008), 153.

³³ Ibid., p. 153.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 32.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 129.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 356.

In concert with Lane, Keith also renders the Colfax Massacre an exhibition of white domination. In the 2009 book *The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror, and the Death of Reconstruction*, Keith tells the narrative of Colfax and argues the event is significant because it manifested the superiority of the white race.³⁸ Contrary to the accounts of the rest of the historians, Keith claims the blacks' motivation to fight was not only to gain rights; they also saw Colfax as "the first step in a war of conquest to eradicate the white race."³⁹ Keith discloses how the blacks prepared weaponry, but it was no match compared to the whites' cannons.⁴⁰ After the fighting ceased, Keith points out how hanging prisoners on an "old pecan tree" gave the Ku Klux Klan pride.⁴¹ Lastly, she explains how whites left the bodies on the battlefield and continued to disfigure them—a representation and reassurance of their supremacy.⁴²

The story of what sparked the Colfax Massacre in 1873 and how the carnage altered the course of Reconstruction has been metamorphosed by historians since the event occurred. Primitive historiographers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—Chester, Rhodes, Swinney, and Simpson—establish that the Colfax Massacre was galvanized by the ongoing struggle between opposing political parties for jurisdiction of the parish. Historians in the beginning of the twenty-first century—Sipress and Waldrep—agree that the massacre was a manifestation of political tensions as African Americans attempted to gain more freedom. Present-day scholars—Lane and Keith—disregard these notions and allege the Colfax Massacre is about how the white race incited violence to display their dominance. I consider the narrative presented by the early historians, who elucidate the massacre was an upshot of political conflict, to be the best category of interpretation. In particular, I firmly believe Waldrep offers the most holistic study of the Colfax Massacre. He delineates the circumstances within the local government and gives all the prominent details about the assault and *United States v. Cruikshank*. Also, by addressing the stories that circulated across the United States following the event and how they shaped people's opinions not only about

³⁸ LeeAnna Keith. *The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror, and the Death of Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 110.

³⁹ Ibid., p.90.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 103.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.109.

⁴² Ibid., p. 110.

Colfax, but also their attitudes toward race relations, Waldrep is setting forth that the massacre not only affected those involved, but also had a widespread impact on citizens. Finally, Waldrep articulates the national significance of Colfax and how it leveraged the power of the Ku Klux Klan and in turn impeded the progress of civil rights and precipitated the end of Reconstruction. What is most striking about Waldrep's interpretation is how, unlike the other historians in his category who only allude to race as an element of the event, Waldrep recognizes the racial overtones surrounding the massacre without misconstruing the original intentions of the Conservative party.

Lastly, I challenge the interpretation by recent historians claiming Colfax was just an act of white supremacy. I think their conclusion is incomplete because they are not taking into account the entirety of Reconstruction and the challenges it presented. It is essential to investigate the Colfax Massacre through the lenses of both politics and race. Examining both the political and racial aspects of Colfax enables historians to see how the study of American history is interconnected, and in doing so, it leads us to have a better understanding of our own past.

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