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Lecture on The History of the History of Reconstruction on February 7, 2017

by Nicholas Lemann

Thank you. I am especially happy to be here because I so much admire what Mississippi is doing this year to commemorate its history. I am also grateful to have a chance to repay some of my debt to the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, without whose help I would not have been able to write about Reconstruction in Mississippi.

I'm going to talk about two things today: Reconstruction, and the history of Reconstruction. I know they may sound like the same thing, but they are not. Reconstruction first. The United States amended its Constitution three times because of the Civil War. The 13th Amendment, in 1865, abolished slavery. The 14th, in 1868, granted civil rights to former slaves. The 15th, in 1870, gave former slaves the right to vote. Think about these amendments for a minute. Their passage tells you that, strange as it may seem today, the Union entered the Civil War without a real plan for what would happen to four million African American slaves if it won the war. And simply abolishing slavery is not a plan. What kinds of rights would the former slaves, who outnumbered their former owners, have? How would those rights be enforced? If civil rights and voting rights had followed emancipation naturally and automatically, there would have been no need for the 14th and 15th Amendments. Another question worth thinking about is: Why was it necessary to have a civil rights movement in the middle decades of the 20th century if the rights that the movement was fighting for had been enshrined in the Constitution back in 1870? The story of Reconstruction is the answer to that question.

Here is a quick version of what happened here during Reconstruction. Immediately after the Civil War, Mississippi, along with the other Confederate states, was under military occupation by the U.S. Army. The general in charge of the state was Adelbert Ames, a highly decorated Union veteran from the state of Maine, who was barely into

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his thirties. After Mississippi accepted—not happily—the postwar Constitutional amendments and was readmitted to the United States, Ames was elected first U.S. senator, and then governor. At the time, the Democratic Party was politically conservative and almost all White, and the Republican Party was liberal and, in Mississippi, almost all Black. Ames's holding office depended entirely on the votes of Black Mississippians, who had become highly active and organized politically within just a few years of getting their rights.

But their participation in politics was by no means assured. All over the South, militia groups, mainly made up of Confederate veterans, appeared. The main group in Mississippi was called the White Line. For some reason, everybody today knows the name of one of these groups, the Ku Klux Klan, but the many others, all over the South, have largely been forgotten. Also, when we think of the Klan, we think of an organization of general-purpose violent racists who were devoted to terrorizing, and sometimes killing, Black people. This impression is somewhat misleading, because the militia groups were using their terror tactics in service of an explicitly political aim: to prevent Black people from voting, so as to restore the Democratic Party to power and then to take away the citizenship rights of Black Mississippians. And although the militias were covert, extra-legal terrorist organizations, they maintained a discreet line of communication to the respectable White political and business power structure.

Most of the militia activity followed a pattern: in a town with Black elected officials, or vigorous Black political activity, the Whites would hear a rumor of an incipient "Negro uprising." A White militia would appear, march off to engage in battle, and march back to report that it had won a heroic victory, which always involved politically active Black Mississippians being murdered by Whites, not only during the battle itself but also for several days afterward. In my research on this, it was impossible to find evidence that there was ever actually going to be an uprising—unless you define a political rally as an uprising—but the result of the supposed defeat of the uprising was that in whatever town it was, Black Mississippians lost political power, or could not vote, or were afraid to organize. Just to give you a sense of the scale of this violence, a careful accounting by the U.S. Army reported that in Louisiana alone, during the ten years following the end of the Civil War, more than 2,000 Black people were murdered by Whites, and more than 2,000 wounded. Contrast this with the

estimate that about 3,500 Black people were lynched in the entire South during the nine decades following the end of Reconstruction.

Only one thing could truly guarantee that the 14th and 15th Amendments would have the force of law in Mississippi: federal troops directly protecting Black political activity and Black voting. But as the 1870s wore on, this was increasingly unpopular outside the South, and it became more and more politically difficult for President Ulysses S. Grant to respond militarily to the militia activity. In several instances across the South, White militias forcibly ousted Black elected officials and took over county courthouses. Arkansas and Louisiana had two competing state legislatures and governors.

Here in Mississippi, matters came to a head in the summer of 1874. In Vicksburg, a militia group came to a Republican political rally on July 4 and started shooting. A general campaign of terror followed, and produced a Democratic victory in the municipal elections in August. Ames appealed to President Grant to send troops to Vicksburg, which was the site of his greatest military victory, nine years earlier—and Grant declined.

There was a second outbreak of violence in Vicksburg in December, just before the Black county sheriff, Peter Crosby, was supposed to collect taxes. Crosby fled to Jackson in the middle of the night. Governor Ames ordered him back to Vicksburg. When Crosby returned, he was put in jail. There was another days-long outbreak of violence, which left twenty-nine African Americans dead, and the Democrats, without having won an election, installed themselves in control of the county courthouse. This time Grant empowered General Philip Sheridan, now stationed in New Orleans, to send troops to Vicksburg to restore Crosby to power.

Mississippi was set to have statewide elections in the fall of 1875. During the early stages of the campaign, there were major outbreaks of White militia violence in Yazoo City, in the Delta, and in Clinton, a few miles west of Jackson. Hundreds of Black Mississippians fled for their lives and came to Jackson to live in temporary encampments, not far from where we are right now [in the Old Capitol]. Ames again asked Grant to send troops, but this time Grant told him that he would have to solve the problem himself.

A few weeks before the election, a representative of the U.S. attorney general arrived in Jackson and brokered a peace treaty between Ames and the Democratic Party: if Ames would agree not to raise a state militia, which would inevitably be almost all Black, to fight the White militias, the Democrats would guarantee a peaceful

election. No sooner did Ames sign the treaty than the Democrats broke it. Election-day violence against Black voters was widespread all over the state, and the Democrats won. The legislature impeached Ames. Rather than stand trial, he left Mississippi, never to return. In 1890, what the Democrats had won at gunpoint in 1875, the right to nullify the 14th and 15th Amendments, was enshrined in law through a new state constitution. These matters rested until the 1960s.

Many years ago, when I was in college, I persuaded the great Mississippi-born historian David Herbert Donald to admit me to an upper-level class that I was not really qualified for. I remember being surprised, in the first session of the class, to discover that we never talked about history in the sense of what actually happened, but only about arguments among historians about how to interpret what happened. That is, we were studying historians rather than studying history.

Over the years, I have come to see the wisdom of the approach Professor Donald introduced me to back then—and there is no better demonstration of why than Reconstruction. Everything I just told you about Reconstruction in Mississippi happened. It is based on primary documentary source material that I have read, at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History and elsewhere, and cited in my book so that other researchers can find it for themselves. But my account, like all histories, is highly selective, and it heavily emphasizes one aspect of the story—organized violence to deny Black Mississippians their voting rights. This has not, to say the least, been the only possible way of presenting the history of Reconstruction in Mississippi. The history has been understood in radically different ways over time. It is useful, but incomplete, to wonder which way of understanding the history is most factually accurate; changing values, rather than additional or corrected facts, explain most of the differences over time in the way Reconstruction history has been told. This is as good an example as I can think of for why historical disputes are anything but petty and academic. History matters. How people have understood Reconstruction has profoundly shaped the way that they have confronted racial issues in the present.

In Mississippi, and to some extent nationally, it is not a great exaggeration to say that history, as a professional pursuit, was invented in order to tell the history of Reconstruction. Franklin L. Riley, one of the

first Mississippians to be formally trained as a historian, became the first professor of history at the University of Mississippi in 1897. He revived the moribund Mississippi Historical Society and began publishing an associated historical journal. Then, in 1902, he successfully lobbied the state legislature to create the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. The department's first director, a lawyer named Dunbar Rowland, served in that position for thirty-five years, until his death in 1937.

The Proceedings of the Mississippi Historical Society were substantially devoted to the story of the end of Reconstruction, which Whites called Mississippi's "Redemption." These writings were mainly by the Redeemers themselves, who were often also Confederate veterans. They made no pretense to objectivity or conventional research methods. In 1906, for example, W. Calvin Wells, in an article called "Reconstruction and its Destruction in Hinds County," proudly described using his pistol to kill a Black man, who was armed only with a stick, during the battle in Clinton. He also laid out in candid detail the White Line's plans for winning the 1875 election through any means necessary, including intimidation and outright fraud, which turned out to be unnecessary because the intimidation had worked so well. "We were forced to a choice between the evils of negro rule and the evils of questionable practices to overthrow it," he wrote. "We chose what we thought was the lesser evil, and it is now not to be regretted." Dunbar Rowland himself wrote an article in the Proceedings in 1898 called "The Rise and Fall of Negro Rule in Mississippi," in which he called Reconstruction "the greatest and most criminal mistake of all time," and the successful campaign to overthrow it "the supreme effort of a brave people to save themselves and their posterity from the blighting ruin of Black supremacy."

These articles are useful as historical documents, not because they provide completely reliable information about what actually happened, but because they offer an unvarnished look at the self-concept of the Redeemers. These were people who lived in an emotional world that some of you in the audience may remember hearing about from your older relatives, as I do—a world of the lost paradise of the antebellum South, of the nobility of Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee, of the depredations visited on Mississippi after the war by scalawags and carpetbaggers. They treat the idea of legal equality of the races as simply unthinkable, and they are, as you have just seen, fairly candid, though not detailed, about having used organized political violence to overthrow Reconstruction. Some of the leading Redeemers' wives, during

the same period, formed the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and erected monuments in courthouse squares all over Mississippi.

It is important to note that during this period, outside the South, almost nobody except for the great African American scholar-activist W. E. B. DuBois was writing favorably about Reconstruction. The dominant historian of Reconstruction was a professor at Columbia, the university where I teach, named William Archibald Dunning. His graduate students produced a shelf's worth of state-by-state histories of Reconstruction; the one on Mississippi is by James Garner. Dunning was also an important leader of the American Historical Association in its early days.

The work of the Dunning School was self-consciously professional, but it treated Reconstruction as a terrible mistake. A Columbia political scientist, John W. Burgess, just as prominent in his field as Dunning was in his, was another impassioned critic of Reconstruction. And so was the only academic ever to become President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson. These people wrote in a calmer tone than the Redeemers, and they drew a gauzy curtain over the violence that ended Reconstruction. Their main argument was that the Reconstruction governments were corrupt and had nearly bankrupted their states through excessive taxation (the respectable wing of the opposition to Ames called itself the Taxpayers' League). Adelbert Ames, who lived to the age of ninety-eight, devoted a good deal of time in his later years refuting these arguments in detail. Dunbar Rowland, as the years went on and his own sense of himself as a professional grew, emphasized these non-racial aspects of Reconstruction more too. In 1934 he waged a spirited and nearly successful campaign to be named the first Archivist of the United States, which is a sign that his views were in no way out of the respectable mainstream.

Rowland worked hard and successfully to create an institution to preserve the history of Mississippi for researchers and the public. It was not automatic that that would happen. Just as history is complicated, the history of history is too. We would not be standing here today if it were not for the work of Dunbar Rowland. Although it did not occur to him to collect material from Black Mississippians, he did obtain plantation records that are of interest to students of Black history. He also carefully maintained and catalogued Adelbert Ames's gubernatorial papers, the records of his impeachment trial, and some papers from the period after he had left Mississippi. Researchers who are interested in Reconstruction from the point of view of its supporters can find primary material about that elsewhere, for example in the papers of the Freedmen's Bureau

and of the U.S. Army officers who were stationed here, and in the copious eyewitness testimony taken by Congressional investigators who often came to the South during the final years of Reconstruction.

Why did the Jim Crow system last so long? The answer to that question is complicated, but one important reason, I believe, is that the history of Reconstruction was written in the way it was. It was not a secret that Reconstruction ended because of a successful organized terrorist campaign to deny American citizens their rights and to defy provisions of the U.S. Constitution. That is amply documented, including, as I have said, by the Redeemers themselves. But the leading historians of the day chose to minimize this aspect of Reconstruction, to maximize its alleged corruption, and to celebrate its end nationally, following the 1876 presidential election, as the closing of a terrible chapter in American history, which enabled the country to move forward into its future as a great world power. This version of Reconstruction appeared in several generations' worth of history textbooks and was taught to almost all young Americans for decades, and also appeared in plays, movies, and popular histories. When Senator John F. Kennedy published *Profiles in Courage*, in 1956, he included a chapter about Mississippi's leading Bourbon and Redeemer, Senator Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus Lamar, which treated Governor Ames as indefensibly incompetent at governance.

During the time this version of Reconstruction was the conventional wisdom, no president sent troops to the South to enforce civil rights, and Congress passed no civil rights bill. When historians began to re-examine the period, beginning in the 1950s and 60s, it helped empower the civil rights movement. For one memorable example, Martin Luther King, in his great speech about voting rights on the steps of the Alabama state capitol building at the conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery march in 1965, extensively cited the work of one of the leading revisionist historians of the Jim Crow period, C. Vann Woodward. And as the historical consensus changed, the Mississippi Department of Archives and History began to change too. It appointed its first Black board member, Dr. Estes Smith of Jackson State University, in 1976, and it began collecting material from and about Black Mississippians. The opening of the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum later this year was made possible by a change in the way the history of Mississippi is understood and practiced.

Without in any way diminishing the admiration the Department of Archives and History has earned for what it is accomplishing, I would like to end by cautioning us against falling into a comfortable feeling that our forebears may have gotten history wrong while we have gotten it right. All history that is done well captures the essential elements of contention and contingency in the way that human affairs unfold. Nothing important ever happens without a fight, and everything that happened could have turned out differently. Understanding history as a smooth, stately progression is always a mistake. And the work of historians is, likewise, inescapably contentious. The past is subject to continuous reinterpretation, as new material emerges, as each new group of historians sets out to correct the flaws it perceives in the work of its predecessors, and as what is happening in the present makes us see things in the past that we had been missing.

The White Mississippians who supervised the making of Mississippi history during the first decades of the twentieth century would have been the first to admit that they were what we would now call “racist,” which is to say that they believed in an enforced rank-ordering of the races, by violent and extralegal means if necessary, into two distinct categories with different rights, resources, and powers. The more academic White Northerners who supervised the making of American history during the same period were not so explicit, but most of them also believed a rank-ordering of the races was natural, even scientifically justified, and, although they may have seen the violent way Reconstruction ended as unsavory rather than heroic, they treated it as a minor matter. Were they racists? Today we would probably say yes. But if we are going to make that kind of judgment, let us do it with a measure of humility. What happened in the past that we do not see as wrong, or as important enough to warrant our primary attention, but that future generations will chastise us for having downplayed or missed? I guarantee you, there will be something.

Of course, there are lessons for us in the mistakes of the early writers of the history of Reconstruction in Mississippi. The most obvious one is: always find all the available information, and always consider every possible point of view, before committing yourself to a version of the past. This is harder to do than it sounds, because the limitations of human consciousness, and of the scope of vision of the present in which all historians live while they do their work about the past, constrict the imaginations of even the most careful members of

the profession. In struggling to understand the past, we have a duty to push ourselves to try our best, and also not to be self-congratulatory about how well we are doing at this inescapably difficult task. That we are all gathered here today shows that we have come a long way. We should be proud of that. And we should be just as proud that the ongoing practice of history inevitably means that people who do this work after us will find that we did not get it right either.

