Spring 5-15-2015

“The Liberty of the Nation is in Jeopardy”: Views on the Battle of Liberty Place From Beyond Dixie

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“The Liberty of the Nation is in Jeopardy”: Views on the Battle of Liberty Place From Beyond Dixie

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in History

By
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B.A. University of New Orleans, 2013
May, 2015
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Molly Mitchell, Dr. Phillip Johnson, and Dr. Robert Dupont for serving on my thesis committee and providing me with advice and guidance as I wrote my thesis. I also want to thank my classmates from History 7000 that gave me useful criticism and helped me write my thesis from the very beginning. Finally, I want to thank my parents for their constant love and support throughout my life.
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Abstract

In the summer of 1874, tensions between the Democratic and Republican parties in New Orleans came to a boiling point. The violent episode that followed became known as the Battle of Liberty Place. Recent scholars of Reconstruction-era New Orleans, like their predecessors, have studied the episode, but draw mostly upon local newspapers and pro-Democratic sources. At the time of the event, newspapers across the country and President Ulysses S. Grant commented directly about the troubles in New Orleans. Despite an abundance of opinions from outside of the South, these attitudes towards the Battle of Liberty Place are absent from the historiography. This work reassess the Battle of Liberty Place using newspapers accounts, the personal comments of President Grant, and letters the President received in the wake of the Battle of Liberty Place. Based on these accounts, it is clear that President Grant and many Americans still supported federal Reconstruction policies.
Introduction

On September 14th 1874, in the Battle of Liberty Place, a group of about 1,500 armed white supremacists, identifying as members of the “White League,” gathered near the foot of Canal Street in New Orleans intent on overthrowing the state’s Republican government.\(^1\) Although Kellogg and the Republicans had the help of the local police, headed by Algernon Sidney Badger, and a few black militia units led by ex-Confederate General James Longstreet, the battle ended quickly and Democrats and their supporters celebrated victory.\(^2\) President Grant sent in federal troops to restore order and then reinstalled the Republican regime just a few days later.\(^3\) The violence left thirty-five dead, which included six innocent bystanders.\(^4\) Local newspapers at the time and early Reconstruction historians marked the event as a triumph for the Democrats and used President Grant’s actions to denounce the Republican presence in Louisiana as illegitimate. Indeed, the Battle of Liberty Place unified Louisiana Democrats well into the twentieth century, while many white Americans from outside of the South viewed the violence in New Orleans as a threat to representative government in the United States.

The Battle of Liberty Place and its aftermath were well documented events in New Orleans, but highlighting previously unheard voices from across the country not only adds to our understanding of the battle itself, but also to Reconstruction as a whole. This thesis reassess the Battle of Liberty Place using a random sampling of newspaper accounts from throughout the country, as well as the personal comments of President Grant, and letters the President received in the wake of the Battle of Liberty Place. Based on these accounts, it is clear the episode led

many groups outside of New Orleans to question the future of the relationship between the South and the nation, and the role of the federal government in state affairs, well after the Civil War. Newspapers and telegrams make it clear that support for the White League spread well beyond New Orleans, the rest of Louisiana, and even the South. Anger at President Grant’s intervention came from many regions of the United States. Moreover, letters and newspapers that supported Grant and denounced the White League prove that a large portion of the country felt outraged about the League’s overthrow of Republican government in Louisiana, and wished to stamp out any possibility of a second Civil War. With support for Reconstruction waning, Grant and his supporters used the Battle of Liberty Place as a means to reinvigorate excitement and commitment to federal Reconstruction policies in the South. But at the same time that Republicans in the South faced violent reaction from groups like the White League, the chief executive had to carry out his party’s Reconstruction plan under withering criticism from around the nation.

Louisiana witnessed numerous outbreaks of racially-and politically-charged violence during Reconstruction. As the 1872 gubernatorial election approached, however, political violence loomed large. Republican candidate William Pitt Kellogg faced the Democrat or “Fusionist,” John McEnery. The infamously corrupt carpetbag governor Henry Clay Warmoth still held office and wielded great influence over the Louisiana Returning Board. Republicans had actually founded the returning board in order to stop Democrats from their use of corrupt political methods. Yet, Republicans then used the board to gain political advantage. Warmoth’s political power and his complicated web of allegiances allowed parish registrars to manipulate votes. Warmoth’s command over the statewide Returning Board led to a fraudulent vote count, which given that both sides had already dedicated themselves to win at all costs, resulted in an
election dishonest even by Reconstruction standards. While the election elicited little violence, other traditional Louisiana means of ballot box corruption prevailed. Although Election Day turned out to be more peaceful than anticipated, widespread corruption, fraud, and intimidation made it impossible to tell which candidate had won. Eventually, President Grant declared Republican candidate William Pitt Kellogg as the victor. Enraged Louisiana Democrats then vowed to use force to remove the Republican Party from power once and for all.

Kellogg’s inauguration inspired fierce opposition to the newly elected governor and to federal policies generally. That opposition began to take organized form the following year. In March of 1874, the White supremacist newspaper The Caucasian, founded in Alexandria, Louisiana, encouraged agitated white citizens to draft resolutions and organize into militia-like units known as “White Leagues.” The first official White League meeting came to order in Opelousas, Louisiana, in April of 1874. The league wrote its constitution at this meeting, a document opposed to the free participation of African Americans in local and federal elections and in support of the return to “Home Rule” in the South. The resolutions of the League’s charter stated:

Be it resolved, 1\textsuperscript{st}, That we hold the colored people responsible for most of the evils arising from fraudulent and corrupt legislation….

Resolved, 2\textsuperscript{nd}, that our experience with the colored people demonstrates their utter incapacity for good government….

Resolved, 4\textsuperscript{th}, That the issue in the next campaign is not between Republicans and Democrats or Liberals, but between the whites and blacks, and that the issue is: Shall the white people of Louisiana govern Louisiana?...

Resolved, 5\textsuperscript{th}, That the conduct of the black man, as a politician, alone has forced upon the white man the necessity of making the issue in self defense, and…we can and will unite as a race to protect ourselves against…the other race…

Resolved, 7\textsuperscript{th}, That we recognize the necessity of union among ourselves…and that we earnestly invite all white men, without regard to former party affiliations, to unite with us under the banner of the White League; which alone can rescue us from dissention [sic] and defeat.

\footnote{Hogue, Uncivil War, 95.}

\footnote{Nystrom, New Orleans After the Civil War, 131.}
In June of 1874, the White League spread to New Orleans, the capital of Louisiana at that time, and the League found little resistance from the Democrats of the city. By the fall, the League was ready to take formal action against the Kellogg administration.

At 11 A.M. on September 14th, 1874 an angry white mob gathered around the Henry Clay statue on Canal Street, located on the neutral ground between Royal Street and St. Charles Avenue. The mob rallied support for the White League and the removal of Kellogg from the office of governor. After the protest, John McEnery’s Lieutenant governor, D.B. Penn, defended the White League in his proclamations to the “People of Louisiana.” In another notice, Penn assured African Americans that they had nothing to fear as “the rights of the colored, as well as the white races, we are determined to uphold and defend.”

Meanwhile, at the Jackson Square police station, A.S. Badger and James Longstreet prepared for the forthcoming attack. Against the police chief’s wishes, Longstreet ordered Badger and his Metropolitan officers to the foot of Canal street to set up their line of defense at the “Iron building” an elaborately designed structure that stored the city’s waterworks. The White League used Poydras Street, several blocks uptown from Canal Street, as their main line of defense while they determined their next move. The White League planned to rendezvous at the foot of Poydras, move along the Mississippi River levee, and then fight north up Canal Street.

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9 Nystrom, *New Orleans After the Civil War*, 171-172.
The League reached the levee around four in the afternoon and the shooting began shortly thereafter. Badger and his Metropolitans came under heavy fire from rooftop snipers, and the chief of police received gunshot wounds in the arm, hand, leg, and torso before sympathetic White Leaguers carried him off to Charity Hospital. The tide soon turned in favor of the White League as they overwhelmed the Metropolitans. Before long, the remaining Metropolitan police force either surrendered or ran in search of safety.11 For decades to come, the Battle of Liberty Place would be used in political campaigns to excite supporters of the Democrat party and to unite the party at election time. The Battle of Liberty Place served as a harsh example of just how far Democrats would go to maintain white supremacy. Conversely, the battle highlighted the incompetence of the Kellogg regime and the weakness of Reconstruction policies in Louisiana.12

**Historians & the Battle of Liberty Place**

State and local newspapers approached the Battle of Liberty Place in a one-sided manner that sought to justify the White League’s actions. Just two days after the battle, with the headline of “FINISHED,” the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* declared the end of the Kellogg regime. The newspaper then described Kellogg’s government as “insolent and overbearing” and questioned the opposition’s manhood with the assertion that Republicans “collapsed at one touch of honest indignation and gallant onslaught.” Moreover, the *Picayune* claimed “a dozen gallant lives” were “sacrificed on the altar of Liberty” while Kellogg and his “sneering” and “thieving”

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supporters “hid like moles.” Once the federal government intervened and reinstated Kellogg as governor, John McEnery delivered a farewell address to “A very large concourse of people” that gathered, “to witness the sad spectacle” of his surrender to the federal government. The Picayune noted, “Not a cheer nor a groan was heard. Every face wore a look of bitter disappointment” and that McEnery’s speech generated “no enthusiasm” from the crowd.

A similar interpretation of events governed many historians’ interpretations of the Battle through the 1950s. Stuart Omer Landry’s “The Battle of Liberty Place: the Overthrow of Carpet-Bag rule in New Orleans, September 14, 1874,” published in the mid-1950s, remains the only study that dedicated itself solely to that topic. Historians have cited these biased sources on the Battle for years, and they have continued to use them in publications as recent as Justin Nystrom’s work, published in 2010. While Landry and other historians who supported the White League described the battle with detail and accuracy, their transparent political leanings of these authors make it impossible to discern the larger significance of the event in the course of Reconstruction.

Landry made his White League sympathies clear with his suggestion that “freedom-loving Americans” resorted to violence in order to “throw off the shackles of a dictatorship of sordid politicians, illegally elected and holding office with the aid of Federal bayonets.” Landry insisted that carpetbag rule forced white Louisianans to take “extreme measures” against those who had “pillaged and defiled our fair land.” Landry even went so far as to defend the formation of violent hate organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and White Leagues as a way for Southerners

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13 “FINISHED/Last Rites and Obsequies of the Kellogg Government,” Daily Picayune, September 16th, 1874, 1.
14 “Gov. McEnery Delivers an Address Which Produces No Enthusiasm,” Daily Picayune, September 18, 1874, 1.
to “protect and defend their rights” from the Reconstruction policies of the “radicals in congress.” Landry included a list of several newspapers from across the country such as the New York Herald, Boston Post, and Philadelphia Enquirer that sympathized with the Crescent City White League in their fight against Republican infidels. Even so, Landry failed to mention the many newspapers that condemned the actions of the White League and its leaders. Landry concluded his study with the claim that the battle “brought about the end of Reconstruction in the South, and started the Southern people on their way to the great prosperity which they now enjoy.”

Justin A. Nystrom’s recently published New Orleans After the Civil War: Race, Politics, and a New Birth of Freedom is an objective and contemporary look at the subject, yet Nystrom relies on Landry and similar sources to describe the events of September 14th, 1874. While Nystrom draws upon local sources that opposed the White League, and mentions that the entire country felt stunned by the actions of the League, except for a few brief allusions to President Grant’s attitude, he fails to include any comments from outside of Louisiana. Joe Gray Taylor, author of Louisiana Reconstructed: 1863-1877, criticized early Reconstruction historians for subjectivity, yet Taylor also used the same flawed sources in his discussion of Liberty Place. Two of the most important works on Reconstruction, W.E.B. Du Bois’s Black Reconstruction and Eric Foner’s Reconstruction, also fail to elaborate on the greater consequences of the Battle of Liberty Place. Du Bois does not mention the battle at all, and Foner’s analysis of the event is brief and without details. Although the Daily Picayune and Landry felt empathetic toward the White League, they both offer some descriptive facts of the battle that recent writers such as

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15 Landry, The Battle of Liberty Place, 1-3, 170, 193.
16 Nystrom, New Orleans After the Civil War, 177.
17 Foner, Reconstruction, 551.
Nystrom have used. But these more contemporary historians never challenge the obvious partisanship that compromise the sources they used.

**Critics of the White League**

Several Newspapers from outside of the South covered the Battle of Liberty Place with views that differed sharply with the perspectives of local newspapers and historians from the past. While the Daily Picayune and some papers far outside the region celebrated the violent actions of the White League, other publications condemned the group’s behavior. Newspapers in states such as California, Massachusetts, Illinois, and New York, sided with the Republicans and President Grant, and these drastically different perspectives reveal that many parts of the country felt outraged over the violence caused by the White League.

The New York *Times* described members of the White League as “illiterate roughs, boys, and irresponsible men brought in from the country and plentifully supplied with whisky.” The *Times* also noted that because of the peculiar political circumstances in Louisiana a few “monstrously overrated” residents could “get up a statement declaring that the moon was made of green cheese, and that the sun revolved round the earth, and half the bankers and merchants of the city could be dragooned into signing it.”

A Chicago newspaper, the *Daily Inter Ocean*, described the White Leaguers as the “scum of the city, villains ready to do the bidding of the greater scoundrels who once attempted to destroy the Union.” The same paper placed the blame primarily on John McEnery. It declared: “The Murders committed in New Orleans are upon his head,” and the men that followed McEnery and his lieutenant governor D. B. Penn “are rioters subject to be shot on sight.” The editors then labeled D. B. Penn a “graceless traitor” as well as “a usurper, a murderer, and,

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consequently, an outlaw.”20 The Chicagoans described the overall battle as “a spasm of madness as stupid as criminal.”21 As a remedy to the violent outbreaks in New Orleans and the South, the Daily Inter Ocean prescribed military rule for every “late rebel state,” until “the treason of their people is burned and purged away.”22

Newspapers in Massachusetts, California, and Michigan offered opinions of white southerners and the region’s Democratic Party after the Battle of Liberty Place. The editorial board of The National Aegis, published in Worcester, Massachusetts, faulted white southerners for the recent violence and claimed that if the southern states “had remonstrated in a dignified and civilized way, with the acknowledgement that they had deserved the worst” they “would have been assisted and encouraged to work out their own redemption.”23 The Aegis felt that the White League’s instigation of “foolish” incidents like the Battle of Liberty Place hurt all those who lived in the South because “Southerners are surely destroying all sympathy with them at the North.”24

After the Battle of Liberty Place, a San Francisco newspaper predicted a bleak future for the South: “If the Southern people have so little command over themselves that their passions can always be excited” then, “there is but little hope for the present generation.”25 Because of Liberty Place, the editors of a Michigan newspaper felt convinced that “the Democratic party is not a peaceable or happy one for the country, nor for any part of it.” The Jackson Dailey Citizen feared for a nation under Democratic control and asked, “could those who rob and murder the

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20 “The South-The President’s Action,” Daily Inter Ocean, September 16, 1874, 4.
21 “The Rebellion in Louisiana,” Daily Inter Ocean/The Inter Ocean, September 15, 1874, 4.
22 “The South-The President’s Action,” Daily Inter Ocean, September 16, 1874, 4.
23 “Whether Kellogg; Ejection; Responsibility; Louisiana,” National Aegis, September 19, 1874, 4.
24 “Louisiana; Atlanta; Robert Tombs; Washington; Protesting; Resolutions,” National Aegis, September 19, 1874, 4.
negroes, teachers and missionaries, be brought to punishment? Would they not have universal
and complete license?” Democratic dominance “would mean the subjugation or slaughter of the
black men of the South by the White Leagues.”

The Daily Critic in Washington, D.C., felt some sympathy for the White League, but
ultimately sided with the president because “to suffer injustice may be hard, but to suffer the
evils of anarchy and chronic civil war” would be much worse. The Critic looked optimistically
to the future and conceded that supporters of the McEnery government have caused harm, but
their surrender to Grant “has in great measure atoned for their mistake.”

A newspaper in
Portland, Maine, praised Kellogg and his administration. It claimed that “Louisiana is not likely
to have a better governor soon” and if “there have been thievgeries and other rascalities [sic] in
Louisiana” Kellogg “has had no part in them.” If the White League had their way in Louisiana,
the Portland Daily Press concluded, “Republicans of every sort would be killed, subjugated or
driven away” and “the only political freedom tolerated would be freedom to vote the Democratic
ticket.”

The Duluth Minnesotian reported that the Battle of Liberty Place backfired for the White
League as the “wickedness” of the League’s actions “has excited a thrill of patriotism over the
North” that proves Northern citizens are always on guard to “crush out the first spark of the old
fire of revolution.” The Minnesotian felt that Liberty Place sent a message to the rest of the U.S.
that the victorious Union must have well-defined limits vis-à-vis a “local spirit, that cannot
appreciate kindness.”

The Daily State Gazette in Trenton, New Jersey, lamented the
“Melancholy spectacle” of Louisiana “under the complete, undisputed control of rebels against

26 “The Condition of the South,” Jackson Dailey Citizen, September 16, 1874, 2.
27 “New Orleans; Louisiana; U.S.,” Daily Critic, September 18, 1874, 2.
29 “A Rebel Bubble Bursted,” Duluth Minnesotian, September 19, 1874, 2.
its lawful authority” and the “creatures” placed in office soon after the overthrow of Kellogg and his officials. Despite such woes, the Gazette felt confident of the rebels submission to the President’s command to disperse simply because “Unconditional surrender Grant has spoken it.”

The League’s overwhelming victory in New Orleans had parts of the nation worried about a second Civil War. The New York Times predicted that “if it turns out that a lively insurrection is all that is needed to secure the overthrow of a State Government” then nearby states Alabama and Mississippi are “likely enough” to follow in the footsteps of Louisiana. The New Hampshire Sentinel agreed that reports from across the country indicated, “that Louisiana is not the only State ripe for rebellion” and in Southern states under Republican control “there is an uneasy, discontented feeling among ex-confederates” and all these states needed was “the leadership of some bold man” in order to jumpstart another war. The National Aegis in Massachusetts believes “the revolution was not accomplished by the people of Louisiana alone” and that Louisiana received “aid from parties of other states, disaffected like themselves.” In Michigan, the Jackson Daily Citizen looks at the broader implications of Liberty Place: “It matters little to the people of the United States, even to those of Louisiana, what man or party holds the offices in that state” However, “it is a concern of infinite importance, affecting the very life of the Nation itself, whether a mob by any name or under any pretense shall oust by force or by menace the existing government.”

33 “The South,” National Aegis, September 26, 1874, 6.
34 “Louisiana,” Jackson Daily Citizen, September 18, 1874, 2.
Supporters of the White League

While much of the country deplored the actions of the Crescent City White League, newspaper coverage of the Battle of Liberty Place also proved that the League had supporters from many different states. News of the white supremacists’ Victory at the Battle of Liberty Place soon spread out of the South and across the United States. Praise for the League’s strategy and tactics to maintain white supremacy came pouring in from regions outside of the South. The *Dallas Weekly Herald* sent its regards to the “gallant men of New Orleans, who struck so nobly for freedom,” and can rest assured “that wherever the English language is spoken their action will be applauded as the action of patriots and heroes.”

In West Virginia, the *Wheeling Register* took offense to Grant’s reinstating of Kellogg “and his thievish minions.” The *Register* compared the government’s treatment of Louisianans to that of the brutal dominance that the British held over the Irish, and related Grant to a power hungry monarch by writing: “The czar of Russia could do no more, and the Queen of Great Britain not half so much. And yet we have “the best government the world ever saw.” The *Baltimore Sun* voiced its contempt for Kellogg, “placed in power by fraud, and held in it by force, he collapsed the very moment there was a trial of strength between his usurped power and the real people of the state.” The *Sun* concluded “If this mere Punch and Judy government of Louisiana, with its puppets pulled by parties in Washington, is to be once more inaugurated, it will be amidst the general contempt of all mankind.” Even the *Providence Evening Press* in Providence, Rhode Island, wanted the “oppressions and villainies of the Kellogg government be made to cease at the earliest possible moment.” The Providence paper declared, “It is time this

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35 “President Grant; Louisiana,” *Dallas Weekly Herald*, September 19, 1874, 2.
36 “Poor Louisiana,” *Wheeling Register*, September 18, 1874, 2.
37 “Governor; Louisiana; Mr. Kellogg,” *Baltimore Sun*, September 18, 1874.
carpet-bag villainy was ended” as “these usurping governments” are “not of or from the people, but destructive of every true interest of the south.”

In 1874, western states seemed to favor the Picayune’s stance on Reconstruction as newspapers in states like Arizona, Colorado, and Idaho also spoke out against the actions of Grant, Kellogg, and Republicans in general. The Weekly Journal Miner in Prescott, Arizona, felt that “there is no telling to what extremes the robbed, crushed and insulted white citizens of Louisiana may be driven.” The Weekly Journal claimed that white Louisianans “cannot much longer live under Negro and Carpet-Bag despotism, and may prefer death to further insult and dishonor.” The Denver Mirror warned Northerners about judging southern affairs too quickly, as people in the North are “unacquainted with the deplorable condition to which the carpet-bag vandals have reduced the state.” The Mirror believed that “the people a thousand times prefer military to a carpet-bag government” and violence in the South would continue, “until the thieving carpet-baggers are driven from her borders.” A newspaper in Boise, Idaho, claimed that Kellogg “secured his position through usurpation and fraud and held it under the protection of the federal army.” Although the Boise paper had few positive words for Kellogg, editors worried that the White League “revolution” set “a dangerous precedent, and however just the cause, it ought not to be settled by force.”

Newspapers are important in understanding the Battle of Liberty Place, because they were not only the major news source for most of the country, but they also show how different regions of the country reacted to a major assault against the U.S. government just nine years after the end of the civil war. The areas that support Grant and Kellogg are frustrated at the actions of

38 “Kellogg; Government; Officers,” Providence Evening Press, September 19, 1874, 2.
40 “Louisiana,” Denver Mirror, September 20, 1874, 1.
the White League because they ran counter to their vision of a new and better Republic, built
from the ground up after such a devastating war. \(^{42}\) Newspapers defending the White League
remind the country that Louisiana is not the only state fed up with federal Reconstruction and its
allegedly tyrannical policies.

**The Federal Politics of Reconstruction**

The divergent interpretations of the Battle of Liberty Place can be explained, in part, by
the political divisions between Republicans and Democrats over the ultimate goals of
Reconstruction, goals that, from the start under Andrew Johnson, were contested at the highest
levels of government. In May of 1865, President Andrew Johnson had announced his two major
proclamations on Reconstruction. Part one of Johnson’s plan allowed pardons for those who
fought against the Union during the Civil War, as long as they pledged loyalty to the United
States and accepted emancipation. The proclamations forced high-ranking Confederate officers
and wealthy members of the planter class to apply individually to President Johnson in order to
receive a pardon. The other main part of Johnson’s plan stipulated that former Confederate
states modify their prewar constitutions before they might rejoin the Union. \(^{43}\)

At first Johnson’s proclamations generated wide support from the North and South alike.
Northerners anticipated a quick restoration of the Union and a return to normalcy, while
Southern Democrats envisioned a complete reversal of their recent misfortunes. But by the fall
of 1865, Radical Republicans had already grown concerned about Johnson’s Reconstruction
plan. Republicans wanted irrefutable proof that the South had accepted the repercussions of the
war and that they honestly regretted secession. Republicans demanded, at a bare minimum, that

\(^{42}\) David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA:
Harvard University Press, 2001), 57.

\(^{43}\) Foner, *Reconstruction*, 183.
white Southerners respect the rights of freedmen, exclude former Confederate leaders from electoral politics, and guarantee protection of Northerners and Unionists in the South.\footnote{Foner, \textit{Reconstruction}, 216, 224.}

President Johnson then began to chart a path that alienated himself from Republicans, both Radicals and Moderates.\footnote{James M. McPherson, \textit{Ordeal By Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction} (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, INC., 1982), 514-15.} First he vetoed the 1866 Civil Rights Bill, and did the same with an act extending the life of the Freedmen’s bureau by one year. Johnson also fought tooth and nail to obstruct the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, which guaranteed citizenship for African Americans. When the states ratified the Fourteenth Amendment, Johnson vetoed it and tried to have it repealed on the grounds that not every state had been readmitted to vote on the issue. Even Moderate Republicans broke with Johnson at this point.\footnote{McPherson, \textit{Ordeal By Fire}, 514-515, 518.}

Johnson’s stubborn refusal to accept compromise and his ambition to make Reconstruction his own project while excluding Congress, led infuriated Republicans to develop a plan to impeach him.\footnote{McPherson, \textit{Ordeal By Fire}, 525.} Although Johnson escaped conviction by a single vote, Republicans looked with unbounded hope to the 1868 national election. Although Civil War hero Ulysses S. Grant, the most popular man in the United States, may have been more conservative than Republicans desired, they nevertheless made him their candidate for President.\footnote{Foner, \textit{Reconstruction}, 337.}

Initially, President Grant adopted Andrew Johnson’s lenient approach to Southern Democrats, but numerous attacks on newly freed slaves and Unionists forced him to reconsider and begin to crack down on the violent behavior of white supremacists in the South.\footnote{McPherson, \textit{Ordeal By Fire}, 523.} In April 1871, with the support of the President, Congress passed the Ku Klux Klan act. With this new
law Republicans hoped to weaken the Klan’s power and to provide the government with the means to apprehend and convict the group’s leaders. U.S. Postmaster Marshall Jewell believed the president would not “hesitate to call out all the force in the United States” in the fight against the Klan and the chaos in Louisiana. Jewell characterized Grant’s attitude as “thoroughly determined.”

**President Grant Reacts**

With the passage of the Ku Klux Klan act Grant’s fight with the Klan and the White League was only beginning, and the political consequences of the Battle of Liberty Place forced the president to deal with the issue head on. The day of battle, Grant received a telegram from John McEnery’s Lieutenant governor D.B. Penn assuring the president that the League’s fight is with “the usurpers, plunderers, and enemies of the people,” not “the United States government and its officers.” Penn explained that “Property and officials of the United States” will be handled “with the profoundest respect and loyalty” and all Penn asked for in return was that Grant “withhold any aid or protection from our enemies.”

When the Battle of Liberty Placed commenced, then, Grant had already begun taking a hard line with white supremacist violence. On September 15, 1874, President Grant issued a proclamation to the “turbulent and disorderly persons” that “have combined together with force and arms to overthrow the State government of Louisiana.” Grant explained that during an uprising, it is within the powers of the president “to call forth the militia of any other State or States” with “the purpose of suppressing such insurrection.” The same day as his Liberty Place proclamation, the president was sent conflicting telegrams describing both Louisianaan sentiment

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52 Grant, *Papers of Ulysses S. Grant 1874*, 221.
toward the League’s victory and conditions in New Orleans after the battle. Albert H. Leonard of Shreveport sent Grant a telegram declaring the Kellogg administration “has ceased to exist, in North Louisiana,” but the president shouldn’t be worried because the officials installed by the McEnery government assumed power “Peacibly [sic] & without bloodshed,” and even African Americans “seem to participate in the enthusiasm of the whites.” Also on September 15th, Samuel H. Kennedy of New Orleans telegraphed President Grant that with the Kellogg government displaced, “perfect confidence” has returned to the people of New Orleans. Kennedy proudly stated that “not a single case of lawlessness” arose during the aftermath of battle, and to this newfound peace he credited “the calmness and courage of our citizens.” Similar to the Penn and Leonard telegrams, Kennedy reassured the president that African Americans “and all other citizens” should feel “perfectly secure in their lives and property.” On the night of September 15th, William G. Brown and Charles Clinton telegraphed Grant with a more realistic report of conditions in New Orleans stating that “armed mobs” were spotted all across the city and the White League is “much more formidable” than originally presumed. Brown and Clinton beg the president for help as “prompt action is necessary” and any stalling of aid could result in the loss of “hundreds of lives.”

Exasperated with the indifference Congress felt towards the Louisiana situation, Grant was determined to get to the bottom of what had been going on in Louisiana since the 1872 election. In December of 1874, Grant secretly called on his old friend, Phillip Sheridan, to head for New Orleans and report back on the situation there. A few weeks into his Southern visit, Sheridan telegraphed Secretary of War William W. Belknap “the terrorism now existing in Louisiana, Miss, and Arkansas, could be entirely removed” with the “arrest and trial of the ring

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54 Hogue, Uncivil War, 148.
leaders of the armed white leagues.”55 In the same telegraph, Sheridan infamously referred to members of the White League as “Banditti” and labeled as such, these criminals would face a military commission. Just one day after his first telegraph to Belknap, Sheridan wrote back to the Secretary of War that “The city is very quiet today” and although Sheridan received death threats because he “dared to tell the truth” Sheridan reassured Belknap that “I am not afraid and will not be stopped from informing the Government.” After he examined Sheridan’s report, Grant condemned “the political crimes and murders” that went “unpunished” in Louisiana, and claimed that they would “rest as a disgrace upon the state and [c]ountry long after the present generation has passed away.”56

Sheridan did not exaggerate about the death threats he faced, as both himself and President Grant received several threatening letters. On January 7, 1875, in a letter Signed “Conservative,” an anonymous citizen from Virginia warned Grant “You had better mend your corse [sic] towards the Southern States, if you do not you will not be a living man two months from today” and the president must “Call Phil Sheridan from New Orleans at once or boath [sic] of you will die by the hand of an assassin.” “Conservative” explains the motive behind the vendetta: “I owe old Phill [sic] and your self “hell,” for burning my home in the vally [sic] of Va.” On January 15, 1875, Grant received a letter from “Deadshot” in New Orleans warning the president that if he did not promptly remove federal troops from New Orleans, Grant should “PREPARE FOR, THE NEXT, WORLD!!!.” “Deadshot” would prefer to have a duel with the president, but if “that course should not be deemed advisable, you will be ASSASSINATED.” On January 18, President Grant received a message from “Charles Howard” in Indiana

56 Grant, Papers of Ulysses S. Grant 1875, 13, 19.
explaining to Grant that he joined a Southern militia group with the aim to “Seize all the forts and principal Cities in the South.” The organization even had blueprints of the white house and city streets in Washington in order to plan the best possible attack on the president. “Charles Howard” felt that he “could not rest with out telling you of the danger that is threatening you & your government” and confessed that “the above is not my name i [sic] am afraid to tell you as i [sic] am going South Again in 3 weeks.” Ephraim Hinds, the principle of the Hempstead Institute in Long Island wrote to Grant commending him on his “course in Louisiana affairs” despite “the abuse heaped upon you, by certain newspapers.” Hinds is aware of the “unparalleled difficulties” Grant faced as president and he is proud of the way the chief executive handled himself, as a lesser man would “have found favor in the eyes of all the ex rebels and Democrats.”

On January 13, 1875, President Grant addressed Congress in regard to the political situation in Louisiana. As Grant prepared for his speech, an associate described the president’s attitude as “plucky and serene.” In the address, Grant denounced activities that took place in the gubernatorial election of 1872. Furthermore, he claimed that Louisiana Democrats had committed “a shameful and undisguised conspiracy” prior to the election that undermined “republicans without regard to law or right.”

Grant evidenced his renewed commitment to Reconstruction when he pointed to the “frauds and forgeries” carried out against African American voters, who were either “denied registration” or “deterred by fear from casting their ballots.” He then recalled the 1873 Colfax

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57 Grant, *Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* 1875, 19-20.
59 Grant, *Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* 1875, 3.
60 Grant, *Papers of Ulysses S. Grant* 1875, 3.
massacre, the most violent outbreak that stemmed from the election of 1872 and the most violent episode during all of Reconstruction. Fearing that armed whites would take over Colfax, Louisiana, the Parish seat of Grant Parish, African Americans took over the small town and set up defenses. On Easter Sunday of 1873, a mob of violent white men stormed the town and butchered as many African Americans as they could find.\footnote{Foner, Reconstruction, 437.} The massacre, according to the president, had political origins. The trouble began when “supporters of McEnery proceeded to displace by force” “appointees of Governor Kellogg.” Democratic political shenanigans resulted in “a butchery of citizens was committed at Colfax, which in blood-thirstiness and barbarity is hardly surpassed by any acts of savage warfare.” Grant’s speech then turned to criticism of “conservative papers of the State” that “not only justified the massacre” but also cried “tyranny” when Federal troops arrived to bring the perpetrators of the massacre “to justice.”\footnote{Grant, Papers of Ulysses S. Grant 1875, 6-7.}

Grant quickly moved from the Colfax tragedy to discuss the Battle of Liberty Place noting that “Twenty or more people were killed, including a number of the police of the city,” and in the battle’s aftermath “the streets of the city were stained with blood.” The president used Liberty Place as a justification for the continued use of troops in Louisiana as the same White League force that prevailed on September 14, 1874 was still armed and organized and could “be called out at any hour, to resist the state government.” Near the end of his speech, Grant wanted Congress and the public to know that any mistakes he had made towards Louisiana affairs were unintentional and with the best intentions in mind such as “the preservation of good order, the maintenance of law, and the protection of life.”\footnote{Grant, Papers of Ulysses S. Grant 1875, 9, 15.}
President Grant expected little help from Congress, as Republicans began to regard Reconstruction as a political liability. Grant wondered if congressional lethargy had generated "great evil." Postmaster Jewell believed that Grant’s pleas to congress reflected his desire “to protect the colored voter in his rights to the extent of his power under the law, and if we cannot protect them we shall lose most of the fruits of this terrible war.” Indeed, as the hero of the federal victory in the Civil War, Grant understood the urgency of the situation as deeply as anyone. Moreover, as a lame duck president, Grant could still support Reconstruction without fear of any political blowback.

**Conclusion**

After Grant addressed the Senate the northern press showered him with praise and even drew support from a few Louisiana Democrats. Iowa governor Cyrus C. Carpenter assures Grant that the people of Iowa supported the President during the war and they now trust Grant to crush any “lingering spirit” of rebellion in New Orleans. Edwin H. Nevin of Philadelphia promises Grant that he has “sympathies and prayers of hundreds of Ministers of the gospel of Christ all over our Northern States.”

After he finished reading Grant’s “Louisiana message,” Congressman Ebenezer R. Hoar of Massachusetts declared, “the Republican party and the Country owe you a debt of gratitude” and delivered a glowing review of the speech. “It is manly, frank, and vigorous, and I am confident it will elicit a response from the People,” Hoar claimed. J. Fillmore, a minister from Providence, Rhode Island, alluded to the Battle of Liberty Place in a letter to Grant. In regard to the troubles in Louisiana, the minister wrote: “… the liberty of the nation is in jeopardy,” and

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64 Grant, *Papers of Ulysses S. Grant 1875*, 14.
that “the present government should be sustained, until legally displaced. Congressman W. Jasper Blackburn of Louisiana wrote to Grant and described the effect of the speech on Louisiana Democrats. He claimed “The Democrats have but little to say, but I can see that it touches them deeply. It contains too much plain and outspoken truth.” He then concluded with a plea to the president: “If you forsake us, all is lost.”

Even as the Panic of 1873 continued to grip the U.S., Grant and others from various backgrounds still believed in the basic precepts of Reconstruction.

Yet, as the various newspaper accounts from outside of the South show, along with personal letters and the like, the U.S. remained divided in 1874, particularly in regard to racial inequality. President Grant’s administration, riddled with scandals in his second term, faced overwhelming problems as he tried to prop up the Republicans in Louisiana while Democrats “redeemed” one southern state after another. For white supremacists in Louisiana the Battle of Liberty Place served as a crowning achievement for decades to come. As more work is done on cataloging the various reactions to the battle, it might very well reveal as much support for the White League outside of the South as in it.

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67 Grant, Papers of Ulysses S. Grant 1875, 24-26.
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