
Horrific Displays of Violence In American History About Politics & Race "The Colfax Massacre"

Is racial violence really about race? Or is it about politics? One of the most horrific displays of violence without cause, in American history was most undoubtedly about politics and race, the Colfax Massacre. Before we get into the details of the massacre, let us take a look a little farther back. The Reconstruction period that took place after the Civil War was meant to be a time of great change and prosperity. It was meant to correct failings in American politics and society. Sadly, however "one of the worst, most violent eras in American history. During that time, thousands of African-Americans were killed by domestic terrorists like the Ku Klux Klan who tried to reinforce antebellum policies of white supremacy" (Lewis) In this paper we will be exploring the events and policies leading up to and following the Colfax massacre as well as what the events that transpired say about that time period.

The precursor to the Reconstruction period was undoubtedly the Civil War in which Southern states attempted to secede the Union. The Union (Northerners) prevailed and the Reconstruction period began. It started out extremely positive. Southern laws and policies were "reconstructed" in favor of equality. "The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments were designed to ensure equality for recently emancipated slaves." (Boundless) These amendments were essential to protect African American Rights. Another leap forward for the Black community was the power to hold office and they used this new found power to hold office. "Sixteen African Americans served in Congress during Reconstruction, and at least 600 served in state legislatures, with hundreds more in local offices."

This beautiful start to Reconstruction was crushed by white Southern Democrats. Groups like the Ku Klux Klan started emerging to terrorize and "disfranchise and restrict the rights of former slaves." (Lewis) The Democrats not only had a problem with African Americans, but also with "carpetbag" Republicans. These events climaxed in Colfax, Louisiana in April 1873. The African American community feared the hateful white leaders would attempt to take over the Grant Parish, a local courthouse for the regional government. "An all-black militia took control of the local courthouse in April 1873. Soon after, a mob of more than 150 white men, most former Confederate soldiers and members of the Ku Klux Klan and the White League arrived and surrounded the courthouse."

The Black defenders surrendered after a few days of fighting, however instead of taking prisoners or arresting the former slaves, "the white mob murdered many of the Black men, shooting at them and hanging some." This particular event seems to many to be, pardon the

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phrasing, black and white in that white democrats were using violence to bully their opponents into submission. Surprisingly or maybe not depending on how much you know about southern hate the plaque that commemorates the colfax massacre reads as follows “On this site occurred the Colfax riot in which three white men and 150 negroes were slain. This event on April 13th, 1873 marks the end of carpetbag misrule in the south.” (Lewis) This plaque seems to celebrate the event in question.

If we look at the colfax massacre or the colfax riot as they call it from the viewpoint of the southern, white democrat attackers. They simply see this event as a defence against criminals, rapists, and treacherous villains. Instead of the black men taking up residence in the court house as they did. These white oppressors seem to remember it as the black community was making “open threats to the effect that they would kill all the white men and appropriate the women and girls to fiendish desires....then the negroes broke open stores and residences and took everything of value away....They threw a baby from a coffin into the yard face down. Besides this, they committed robbery, rape and other crimes that have escaped my memory.” (Rubin) This particular recountance of the event even goes as far to say that the whites tried to send offers to end the battle with no bloodshed!

There is also a claim that the white men tried to broker peace during the battle but “When [the white attackers] got close to the door of the building, a volley was fired at them from inside, ...the negroes attempted to escape in the confusion that followed. The whites were confounded at this treachery, and as the negroes rushed out of the building, they were shot down in their tracks”(Rubin) This account of the “riot” makes it seem as though the whites were correct and justified in their actions. Another interview garnered a different remembering. This interview is in fact from the mayor of colfax! First is that the story about the blacks starting the whole thing by throwing out that baby in the coffin is just pure nonsense. That never happened. The second is that the next day the whites went to the blacks and said that if they had participated in the riot and if they stepped forward now, they would be granted pardons. So a bunch of the blacks came forward—I don't know how many, maybe a hundred—and the whites shot them instead.”(Rubin) So it seems like many other instances in history of wrongdoing the attackers in this instance are grasping at nonexistent straws to try and back up their hate.

The aftermath of the Colfax Massacre and as we have confirmed it was indeed a massacre not a riot. Unfortunately this event gave way to the era of Jim Crow Laws. Pushing america back into ignorance,hate, and looking the other way. Reconstruction was not unfinished, but destroyed. Events in history like this are horrific yes, but they need to be remembered to prevent history from repeating itself. History has a tendency to repeat itself when it is forgotten. Hate cannot be stopped by looking the other way, by ignoring it. Hate can only be remedied by taking the necessary steps -no matter how painful- to enforce equality. To hold america up to the standards she has set for herself,Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Which can only be

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