

Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War

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Review

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Lemann, Nicholas *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War*. Farrar, Straus, Giroux, \$24.00 cloth ISBN 374248559

The Battle after the War

Understanding Reconstruction and Redemption

In *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War*, Columbia University journalism professor Nicholas Lemann recounts the brutal campaign of violence and fraud during the mid-1870s that eventually led to the restoration of conservative, white governments in several southern states. This process of intimidation took several years to take full effect in the South but reached its climax in Mississippi in 1875 when White Line militias instituted the Mississippi Plan to disfranchise a majority black Republican electorate through the violent intimidation of politically active blacks who were attempting to exercise their new rights of citizenship received under the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Central to Lemann's argument is that the political effort to reinstate conservative, white governments in Mississippi and Louisiana was closely aligned with an extralegal terrorist campaign that intimidated black and white Republicans and ultimately led to their widespread disfranchisement. Lemann clearly believes that this White Liner activity is a continuation of the American Civil War, and constitutes a final battle that ex-Confederates won. Lemann asserts that the Federal government's retreat in the face of the challenge to black political rights in the South decided this important political question left unsettled by the Civil War in the South's favor.

Lemann begins his engaging narrative with an account of the 1873 Colfax, Louisiana massacre where a White League militia comprised of former Confederate soldiers killed scores of black Republican voters. The author views this event as a harbinger of what would happen later in Mississippi and other areas of the South if Federal troops did not proactively defend black voters. Lemann lays much of the blame for not stopping the White Line activity in

Mississippi and Louisiana on the Ulysses S. Grant administration, particularly Grant's obstructionist Secretary of War William W. Belknap. Grant had worked diligently to stop the activities of the highly secretive Ku Klux Klan in the early 1870s with Congress passing legislation and Federal troops putting down Klan activity. The white militias of the mid-1870s, however, maintained a more public presence, had broader support from the white community, and therefore, constituted an even greater threat. Lemann sees this inability to aid Republican governments in the South with Federal troops as the principle failure of Grant's administration.

While much of this story will sound familiar to those who have read George C. Rable's *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (1984), Lemann's book offers more depth for the Mississippi story of Redemption than Rable's fine overview of the entire South. Perhaps Lemann's most important contribution to the Reconstruction field is his account of General Adelbert Ames's struggle to preserve black rights in Mississippi. Lemann devotes an entire chapter to the Mississippi governor's relationship with his wife. Blanche Butler, the daughter of influential Massachusetts politician Benjamin Butler, had an immense influence on Ames's political aspirations, encouraging him to strive for greater political position and power at every turn. Scholars interested in the history of family, marriage, and gender relations will find this chapter engaging. The Butlers worked diligently in Washington, D.C. to support Ames's attempt to govern Mississippi in the face of growing opposition from conservative, white Democrats, especially men like former Confederates Ethlebert Barksdale (brother of General William Barksdale) and L.Q.C. Lamar, who coordinated the eventual overthrow of Ames's progressive Republican government during the 1875 election.

Scholars teaching Civil War and Reconstruction era courses will find this book of particular interest since it offers informative, fast-paced reading that is accessible to undergraduates. Lemann's overview of Reconstruction historiography at the end of his volume would make an excellent introduction to this literature for upper-level undergraduates. In sum, those interested in the political side of Reconstruction and Redemption will find Lemann's work a provocative addition to existing literature on this turbulent period.

Barton A. Myers is a doctoral candidate in Southern history at the University of Georgia. He is currently working on two books that focus on guerrilla violence, political dissent, and military policy in Civil War-era North

Carolina.