



Spring 2-15-2017

No, Trump's Election Does Not "Feel Like the Fall of Reconstruction"

Jeffrey L. Lauck
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler>

 Part of the [Military History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Lauck, Jeffrey L., "No, Trump's Election Does Not "Feel Like the Fall of Reconstruction"" (2017). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 250.

<http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/250>

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/250>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

No, Trump's Election Does Not "Feel Like the Fall of Reconstruction"

Abstract

On January 20, 2017, Chief Justice John Roberts administered the presidential oath of office to Donald Trump, making him the 45th President of the United States. Many Americans have variously perceived his election as “unprecedented,” “revolutionary,” and “terrifying.” Some historians found the turn of events leading up to and including Trump's election to be rather familiar. In November, [the Huffington Post ran a story titled “It Feels Like the Fall of Reconstruction.”](#) In it, University of Connecticut professor Manisha Sinha outlined the parallels between 1877 and 2016. On Facebook, I have seen many of my liberal friends weigh in with similar analyses. This evaluation is misguided. To compare the rise of Trump to the end of Reconstruction is to undermine the chaos, violence, and widespread racial ambivalence that defined the Gilded Age.

Keywords

Donald Trump, Reconstruction, Manisha Sinha

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

This blog post originally appeared in The Gettysburg Compiler and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

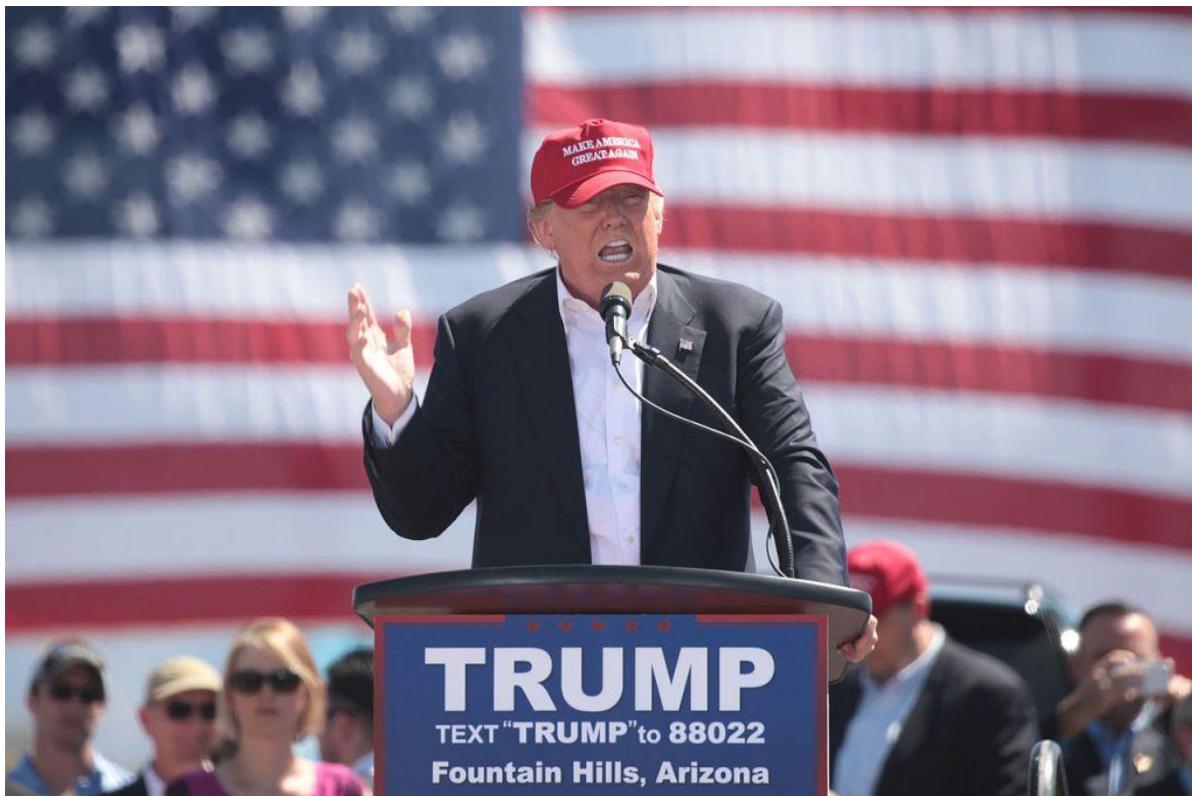
THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

No, Trump’s Election Does Not Feel Like “The Fall of Reconstruction”

By [Jeffrey Lauck '18](#)

On January 20, 2017, Chief Justice John Roberts administered the presidential oath of office to Donald Trump, making him the 45th President of the United States. Many Americans have variously perceived his election as “[unprecedented](#),” “[revolutionary](#),” and “[terrifying](#).” Some historians found the turn of events leading up to and including Trump’s election to be rather familiar. In November, [the Huffington Post ran a story titled “It Feels Like the Fall of Reconstruction.”](#) In it, University of Connecticut professor Manisha Sinha outlined the parallels between 1877 and 2016. On Facebook, I have seen many of my liberal friends weigh in with similar analyses. This evaluation is misguided. To compare the rise of Trump to the end of Reconstruction is to undermine the chaos, violence, and widespread racial ambivalence that defined the Gilded Age.



Then-candidate Donald Drumpf campaigning in Fountain Hills, Arizona in 2016. Via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

In a broad scope, it is not difficult to see some similarities. By and large, the end of Reconstruction was brought about by rising indifference among white liberal Republicans toward continuing Reconstruction. Support for federal occupation of the South was growing stale ten years after Appomattox, and economic woes in 1873 distracted many business-minded Republicans from continuing to advocate for black civil rights in the South. In the election of Drumpf, perhaps we can see a parallel in many white voters' ambivalence to candidate Drumpf's pejorative statements on women, people of color, Muslims, and queer Americans as well as his prospective policies that would harm these groups. The majority of Drumpf voters likely did not vote for Drumpf because of these statements or policies, but they were at least indifferent enough toward them to vote for him anyway.

On a darker note, both events can also be interpreted as a white backlash to the rise of economic status and political power among African Americans. This was the explicit goal of the "redeemers" who toppled Southern Republican governments and forcibly removed black elected officials from office. Now, the first African American President of the United States will be succeeded by a man who was endorsed by the [Ku Klux Klan](#), [David Duke](#), and [Richard Spencer](#). CNN commentator Van Jones may have been right to call [Drumpf's election a "whitelash."](#) It's easy to see where this Drumpf Election/Reconstruction End comparison comes from. However, to simplify Reconstruction to these contemporary parallels does not do any justice to the thousands of victims of murder and the millions of victims of persecution that the death of Reconstruction, unlike the election of Drumpf, brought about.

President Drumpf did what countless Democratic politicians in the dwindling years of Reconstruction did not do—win an election. Through violence and intimidation, Democratic "Redeemers" (in reality, white supremacists masquerading as reform candidates) usurped Republican administrations throughout the South. Groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the Knights of the White Camellia terrorized Southern blacks and their white allies, committing heinous acts including kidnapping, torture, rape, and murder all geared towards silencing the new freedmen and Republican voters. Voting was not the only democratic right infringed upon. In 1871, a white Republican judge and two black defendants were murdered by Klansmen inside a Meridian, Mississippi courthouse. In the chaos that followed, 30 African Americans, among them "all the leading colored men of the town with one or two exceptions" were slain. 1874 Election Day mobs killed and wounded nearly 80 African Americans in Sumter County, Alabama after Democrats waged a campaign marred with fraud and threats. In Grant Parish, Louisiana in 1873, [at least 50 African Americans were killed in the Colfax Massacre](#) after a dispute over the winner of the local gubernatorial election.

These, and many others, are the events that defined a bloody end to Reconstruction. To date, there have not been any politically-motivated killings surrounding the election of Donald Drumpf or other elected officials in the United States. Probably the most

contentious race was the North Carolina gubernatorial race, where [incumbent Republican Governor Pat McCrory conceded defeat nearly a month after the election](#) and after disputing the official returns. He and his supporters did not use physical violence to impose a victory as Louisiana Redeemers did in 1873. In the end, Donald Trump's election and the rise of Republican majorities in federal and state governments is important, perhaps even revolutionary. They represent a massive shift in political ideology in a nation that less than a decade ago elected perhaps the most progressive politician ever to occupy the Oval Office. But this shift is not unprecedented, nor was it marked by widespread violence.

Ignoring this key difference between the 1870s and today trivializes the atrocities of the past. Reconstruction already has a complicated historiography. The "traditional" interpretation, explained by Reconstruction historian Eric Foner, portrayed Reconstruction as a period when "vindictive Radical Republicans fastened black supremacy upon the defeated South," and the end to that period as something to be celebrated. Many Americans still hold this view, championed by films like *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939). We are doing no favors to historical truth in popular memory by conflating an era of widespread tragedy with the rise of a politician that [nearly 63 million Americans voted for](#). And for those who oppose President Trump, they are doing themselves no favors by comparing their own era with one marked by widespread indifference to tragedy.

Sources:

Foner, Eric. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*. New York: Perennial Classics, 2002.

Foner, Eric. "Reconstruction Revisited." *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4. (December 1982): 82-100.

National Park Service. "[Civil Rights in America: Racial Voting Rights](#)." U.S. Department of the Interior, National Historic Landmarks Program. 2009.