Historicizing Fear

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Toward a Post-Racial Society, or a “Rebirth” of a Nation?

White Anxiety and Fear of Black Equality in the United States

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February 8, 2015, marked the 100th anniversary of the release of D. W. Griffith’s controversial film The Birth of a Nation. Although the opening credits note “this is an historical presentation of the Civil War and Reconstruction Period, and is not meant to reflect on any race or people of today,”1 the reality was that the film heightened preexisting racial, social, and political tensions in a country that was already structured around the dominant ideology that blacks are inferior. Since its debut, this film has served as a glaring illustration of the country’s white anxiety rooted in the fear of black equality. The film was well received by the US mainstream (including US president Woodrow Wilson) as a cinematic masterpiece; sadly, Ku Klux Klan (KKK) membership skyrocketed under its anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, anti-black, and anti-Catholic agenda, which appealed to the white, Protestant mainstream.2 In 2007, film historian Melvyn Stokes noted that The Birth of a Nation “functioned as a propaganda and recruitment film.”3 For example, in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1915, the Klan printed advertisements of Birth in local newspapers and held public meetings with cross burnings in the days leading up to the opening of the movie in their members’ cities.4 The use of Birth as a recruitment tool for the Klan continued into the late twentieth century. Most notably, white
supremacist David Duke (b. 1950), a Louisiana state legislator and candidate for US Senate who also ran for the presidency of the United States, used this film and even narrated it to prospective supporters during the 1970s.

*The Birth of a Nation*, based on Thomas F. Dixon Jr.’s 1905 novel *The Clansman*, is a fictional account of the US Civil War. It features a prominent family in South Carolina before, during, and after the Civil War. While the family is prosperous and optimistic before the war (and even partially during the war), its members (along with the entire white South) experience social, political, and economic hardship during Reconstruction under black American rule. The film’s protagonist, Ben Cameron, is credited with organizing the Ku Klux Klan after witnessing two white children dressed in white sheets (while at play), scaring a group of their African American peers. Thus Cameron makes it his duty to save the South from Radical Reconstruction. His goal was to defend white womanhood and facilitate white masculinity (such as carrying firearms and voting). His agenda includes a paternalistic/racial supremacist sense of entitlement to govern oneself and the “Other.”

Thomas Dixon (1864–1946) and David Llewelyn Wark “D.W.” Griffith (1875–1948), both southerners, had influential patriarchal figures (Dixon’s uncle and Griffith’s father, respectively) who fought for the Confederacy. Thus Dixon and Griffith sought to construct a skewed narrative of Reconstruction drawn from the perspective of the “Redeemers” (ex-Confederates who aligned with the Democrats and sought to overthrow the Racial Republican agenda). The Redeemers asserted that African Americans were inferior and thus not capable of self-rule. As a result, they sought to regain what they perceived as their political birthright. In the wake of the fall of Reconstruction, J. R. Ralls states:

> The brief political history of the Negro at the South has brought out two important facts that may be useful in the future in solve [sic] the political problem that presents itself in connection with this race. One of these facts is that he has no affinity for the white race in politics, as well as in social life and religion, and as soon as all extraneous force is removed, he will become isolated, and independent, as far he can, of the control and contact of the white man. The other important fact disclosed by his brief political career is, that he, though possessed of a clannish spirit in a high degree, is incapable of organization, and if left to himself, without the leadership and drilling tact of the white man, must, irrespective of numerical power, yield political control to the superior race.

The Redeemers’ perspective on Reconstruction is firmly grounded in the ideology of anti-black thought as espoused by the likes of J. R. Ralls. Redeemers’ politics used similar rhetoric during and after Reconstruction to both suppress black American political enfranchisement and enhance their own political careers. They
instigated a sense of anxiety and fear of black political empowerment. Benjamin “Pitchfork” Tillman (1847–1918) exemplifies the use of these fear tactics in his political campaigns. Tillman rose to political relevancy in the 1880s on the political rhetoric of populism. He was South Carolina’s governor from 1890 to 1894, as well as a US senator from 1895 until his death in 1918. He posited that Radical Reconstruction was a complete failure under black rule in South Carolina politics. Tillman forcefully advocated white patriarchal rule and welcomed violence against African Americans who sought political enfranchisement as well as social and economic equality.10 In July 1876, he was involved in a particularly tragic event in Hamburg, South Carolina (the town is now defunct). An all-black militia, after a drill, refused to yield to two white farmers passing by. The white farmers subsequently complained to a local judge. The farmers’ attorney demanded that the militia disband and relinquish their arms, which they refused to do. Over 100 white men with weapons and a cannon brought from neighboring Augusta, Georgia, convened on the town.11 They captured 20 African Americans and brutally executed 5 others. This disastrous event, known as the Hamburg Massacre, was one of many racially violent outrages that occurred during the Reconstruction period.12 Tillman, who said he had been one of the rioters, used his participation in these shocking murders to enhance his political career.13

In Birth, African Americans in the South were depicted as powerful enough to gain control of the political economy, but they were simultaneously portrayed as buffoons—uppity and incapable of self-rule. Even more dangerous, the film portrayed blacks as violent and as rapists. Much of this rhetoric came from Harvard-educated historian William Garrott Brown (1868–1913), who defended whites’ reaction to the evils of Reconstruction in a 1901 article. Brown also noted that this reaction should have been expected in light of interference from the North. In addition, he stressed that the Klan was fighting with a moral goal in mind. Similarly, in 1914, Walter Henry Cook addressed the Faculty of Friends at Western Reserve University, Ohio, where he gave an overwhelming defense of racism and the Klan. What is the point of negative rhetoric? Speech professor Cal M. Logue (b. 1935), in a 1977 article, dissects how newspapers and speeches in the South employed negative language in their discussion of blacks. Their goal was to frame blacks as lazy and a threat to whiteness. Logue notes that these frames are still used today. For example, history professor emeritus Jack Maddex Jr., in a 1974 publication, defends slavery and the Confederacy on the notion that blacks are inferior. Claude H. Nolen’s 1967 book addresses the vigorous defense of white supremacy by southern whites during Reconstruction. This rhetoric was used to disenfranchise blacks.14

The movie Birth of a Nation showed the Ku Klux Klan as the gallant heroes who ultimately saved the South from black rule, protecting white womanhood and
reaffirming white masculinity. Thus the movie reinforced anti-black scholarship and political rhetoric that had emerged after Reconstruction and particularly during the early twentieth century. Consequently, anti-black rhetoric as well as the film served as a parading of dominant ideas as truth rather than as an opinion. As the first major motion picture of its kind, Birth used a race-based narrative that hinged on black violence to reorganize racial politics. Birth focused the gaze of white anxiety on blacks as violent and reminded its white viewers that black equality was to be feared.

Birth left an immediate and lasting legacy pertaining to both film studies and race relations in the United States. From a cinematic perspective, Griffith believed motion pictures could reach out to a larger, more mainstream audience than the small audience gained by professional historians. Today, the “movie version” of period pieces can overpower or replace actual historical fact. For example, the Civil War film Glory features recruits who had been former southern slaves. In fact, the regiment had been mostly freemen from the North. Although Birth is deemed one of the most controversial films in US cinematic history, it continues to be cited by film schools and historians as a good example for its “aesthetic and technical qualities.” Griffith and his team recruited individuals who were surveyors and engineers with military experience to create exact replicas of battlefield scenes—particularly the critical Battle of Petersburg. Moreover, the media praised Griffith for the historical accuracy of the scene in which Lee surrenders at the Appomattox Courthouse, a scene in which General Ulysses S. Grant was correctly represented wearing a muddy uniform and boots.

Despite the film’s cinematic achievements, the immediate and lasting legacies of its construction of black bodies as a violent force that must be opposed by a state-supported mechanism of social control such as laws and public policy continue to mar the film. Upon its release in 1915, progressive organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) staged protests across the country. The people who opposed Birth achieved small victories. Parts of the film were censored or banned in some cities. But it was overwhelmingly well received by the US mainstream and served as a catalyst for the revival of the Ku Klux Klan. More important, it was screened at a private showing at the White House as well as before members of the US Supreme Court and Congress, who lauded the film.

Of course, the movie Birth is not the only cause of the long-term perpetuation of institutional racism in the United States. Rather, it is merely a reflection of the country’s racial divide, which is fundamentally grounded in white anxiety and fear of black equality. Both implicitly and explicitly, millions of white viewers in 1915 were reminded by Birth to fear black equality (because of the supposed
vulnerability of white women, the possibility of black-on-white violence, and the peril of black elected officials). Subsequent generations also received that message: black men are rapists, former slaves are fundamentally violent, and blacks need to stay in their place, particularly out of politics. Therefore, it was considered the duty of mainstream institutions to suppress black equality.

This suppression of black equality was evident in the fearful rhetoric that was espoused during the 2008 election and 2012 reelection of President Barack H. Obama. Obama’s election ushered in a new century, one in which many people hoped race would no longer influence social and economic equality. However, race-based assaults against the Obama presidency worsened. In fact, the United States continues to experience a “rebirth” of a nation grounded in the fears of black equality. Specifically, anti-black rhetoric portraying blacks as rapists, violent, and incapable of self-rule continues to be spread by white pundits or politicians who seem motivated to fight for every inch of black equality.

Using select themes and scenes of the film The Birth of a Nation, this chapter presents current and historical events to examine the use of fear tactics (fearful framing) against black equality. On its 100th anniversary, we are putting forth a “re-birth” of Birth. We are examining Birth as a historical piece to help make sense of the present. Birth is also a truncated version of a history that we should not forget. Birth is a historical and contemporary construction of oppression. It is also important to situate our analysis and resistance in history. However, examining Birth of a Nation as a purely historic piece without contemporary political reflection and dialectic tensions would be to take a linear view of the film. How do the fears shown in Birth of a Nation apply to today’s political culture? This chapter will examine the fearful framing through construction of the fictive Black Beast and the use of public policy/law as a means of controlling the demonized black body. The chapter will conclude with an examination of the construction of fear through black militancy, including when black men are armed. A discussion of black elected officials includes the reaction of the mainstream during both Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction to expound a contemporary interpretation of Birth and illustrate how US society continues to be enmeshed in the problems shown in D. W. Griffith’s controversial film.

FEAR THE BLACK BEAST

On December 26, 1908, Jack Johnson (1878–1946) was crowned the first black American heavyweight boxing champion of the world. He had successfully defeated Tommy Burns, a Canadian national, in a rough fight. After fourteen rounds in which Burns took a severe beating from Johnson, local police intervened and stopped the match.
The fight took place in Sydney, Australia. Although the match was not in the United States, where Johnson had faced intense discrimination, he was met with an equally hostile Australian crowd that hurled racial epithets at him during the bout. Johnson ignored the crowd and at times smiled and chatted with fans or taunted hecklers near ringside before defeating Burns. Conveniently, a camera crew stopped rolling before Johnson’s climatic punch that knocked out Burns.

Johnson’s seven-year reign as champion of the world vexed whites everywhere but especially in his home nation, the United States. Although boxing was illegal in the majority of states in the early twentieth century, it still represented the essence of white masculinity. Black athletes, compared to white athletes, were generally viewed as weak cowards who lacked strategic intellectual capacity. The implication of Johnson’s reign was much bigger than the sport itself. His athletic prowess revealed the vulnerability of white supremacist ideology. Johnson, in effect, embodied social equality, which was reflected outside the boxing ring.

“The Galveston Giant” (as he was called) wore expensive tailored clothes, drove fast cars, and lived in predominately white or all-white neighborhoods.

But this blurring of the lines that separated blacks and whites in the early twentieth century was minor compared to Johnson’s ultimate transgression: three marriages to white women. Only one generation prior, the white mainstream/Redeemer contingent had created a narrative to overturn Reconstruction and justify the lynching of black men (to protect white womanhood) through the Black Beast image. In Johnson’s case, the press focused particularly on this issue and framed him as the “menacing, lustful black male [whites] had to come to fear.” Johnson, in effect, was constructed as a Black Beast. During his championship years, countless images were printed in newspapers depicting him as an extremely dark-skinned man with ape-like traits.

The construction of the Black Beast in Birth serves as a framework for understanding the use of the law to control Johnson. In the film, after the South has been controlled politically and militarily by black Republican rule, the viewer is introduced to Gus, a soldier. Like Johnson, Gus embodies the spirit of social equality. He is an officer in the US Army (a captain), and his promotion reflected the unlimited possibilities for blacks who sought equality. In one scene, Gus and his soldiers are seen pushing whites from the sidewalk. They have a brief confrontation with the film’s white protagonist, Ben Cameron. Gus later develops an attraction to Ben’s sister, Flora. Eventually, Gus encounters Flora alone, and she flees. He chases her to the edge of a cliff, and she jumps to her death rather than give in to his advances. Ben Cameron and the Klan capture Gus, execute him, and leave his body at the door of Lt. Governor Silas Lynch (a corrupt, biracial politician). The narrative surrounding Gus is made clear to the audience: black
men are hyper-sexual and will prey on white women. White womanhood has to be protected at all costs.

The white mainstream was determined to curtail the access to white women that Johnson’s fame afforded him. They worked under the banner of white supremacy with the aims of protecting the color line and white womanhood. This they achieved through the law and public policy—specifically, the 1910 White Slave Traffic Act, also known as the Mann Act. Named after its author, Rep. James R. Mann (R-IL), the law was originally intended to combat forced prostitution.

In 2013, history professor Theresa Runstedtler provided a compelling documentation of Johnson’s case. In 1913, Johnson was convicted of transporting a prostitute from Pittsburgh to Chicago. However, the so-called prostitute was actually Johnson’s white girlfriend. No force was involved—the couple simply took a trip together over a state boundary. Nevertheless, the championship boxer was convicted and given the maximum sentence: one year and one day. Sojourner says that the rhetoric of the law was rooted in black migration to the North and its concurrence with the rising number of young, single white women in urban areas.

The case against Johnson became a full-fledged, racist moral panic. One Democratic congressman attempted to add an anti-miscegenation clause to the US Constitution. Bills were later passed to ban black-white marriage in some northern states. In addition, there was a sharp increase in police clampdowns on interracial social gathering areas. Consequently, there was widespread public condemnation of Johnson for openly engaging in sexual relationships with white women. It is against this background that the Mann Act was conceptualized as a legal means to police black bodies.

After Johnson defeated a series of boxers considered “Great White Hopes” (along with surviving a series of controversies in his personal life that were enthusiastically covered by the media), he lost the championship on April 5, 1915, to a white man, Jess Willard. The match happened about three months after the release of The Birth of a Nation. The Black Beast had been destroyed. Ironically, the most controversial and lauded part of Birth centered on interracial sexual politics and glorified the destroying of the Black Beast.

Groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, the White League in Louisiana, and the Knights of the White Camelia obstructed, assassinated, and intimidated black and white Republican officials. They engaged in violence as a means of voter suppression. Fundamentally, they were determined to restore white supremacy. However, lynching remains the most disturbing form of intimidation from this period. As Jessie Parkhurst Guzman (1898–1996) makes clear in a 1952 black history yearbook with sociologist Lewis Ward Jones (1910–1979), “not only [was] the act itself [horrifying], but [it was] the impunity with which it was used as an instrument of terror
and subjugation throughout the South. Thousands of black people were tortured, branded, mutilated, dismembered, and finally hanged or burned by mobs who knew their mode of ‘justice’ would go unpunished.” 27 Guzman, a historian with the Tuskegee Institute, explains that although anti-lynching bills were submitted, neither Congress nor US presidents at the time made any effort to engage in serious consideration of these bills.

While blacks were lynched for committing various infractions, both written and unwritten, many of these lynchings were conducted for the alleged rape of white women. 28 The media exaggerated these fears and conversely reinforced the image of the Black Beast. Despite the pleas for anti-lynching laws by the NAACP in the 1920s, the practice continued. There was even an insistence by southern civic leaders to curb lynchings out of economic interest for their respective cities. Yet lynchings continued with a rape narrative as a justification well into the 1930s (when lynchings surged). 29 Perhaps one of the best-known lynchings occurred in August 7, 1930, in Marion, Indiana. Three black teens (Tom Shipp, Abe Smith, and James Cameron) were accused of murdering a white man (Claude Deeter) and raping a white woman (Mary Ball). The Marion Chronicle essentially tried and condemned the young men. A mob broke into the teens’ jail cells, brutally beating and murdering Shipp and Smith. Cameron, the youngest of the three, was spared. Shipp and Smith were hanged and mutilated in front of thousands, and the scene was captured by a local photographer. That photograph became the iconic image of US lynching. 30 The idea of the Black Beast and the preservation of white womanhood remained fixed in the minds of the white US mainstream. This myth perpetuated itself in many forms outside the realm of the hanging tree.

According to Guzman’s 1952 account, of the three major sources of lynching statistics—the Chicago Tribune, the Tuskegee Institute, and the NAACP—none captures the complete history of lynching in America. Although the numbers of lynchings listed in each source varies slightly, according to the Tuskegee Institute figures, between the years 1882 and 1951, 4,730 people were lynched in the United States.

THE BLACK BEAST IN THE WORKPLACE

On December 22, 1955, almost forty years after the release of Birth, the fear of the Black Beast resulted in the dismissal of a black worker (James Major) at a Detroit Dodge plant. As noted by historian Kevin Boyle (b. 1960), the culture in these car plants at the time was grounded in white supremacy. 31 Boyle, who researches class and race in the workplace, says that white male workers used their racial and gender identity as a tool to control that arena. Skilled positions and foreman spots were
reserved for white men. Black men and white women were relegated to menial and gender-specific tasks. Assigning black men to tedious but dangerous jobs was justified by whites, who viewed black men as physically strong but lacking intelligence and skill. As for access to women, there was a double standard. White men openly sexually pursued white women at work. But white men demonized black men who dated white women.

However, after World War II, technological advancement brought new social customs to the workplace. Skilled employers were losing ground. For example, departments at Dodge in Detroit that were historically reserved for white men were now employing black men and white women. Unfortunately, James Major entered the trim department during an extreme volatile time. Major, a black man, and colleague Leona Hunt, a white woman, had shared a celebratory kiss to usher in the Christmas holidays. Immediately, Hunt was confronted by two white male colleagues who berated her for the kiss. Although the Supreme Court had recently ruled that racial segregation was unconstitutional (*Brown v. Board of Education*), black equality was still viewed as a threat at the Dodge plant in Detroit. The kiss that occurred on December 22, 1955, gave Major’s white colleagues the justification to do something to get him fired. Perhaps they saw Major as a Black Beast who had assaulted a white woman. At the least, they must have felt his job was historically reserved for white men. Hunt likely began to fear her white male colleagues and the possibility that she could be fired. She told management that Major had “come up behind her, put his arm around her, spun her around, then kissed her.” She claimed she was anxious that Major would hurt her if she protested the kiss. Her testimony reinforced the white male automobile workers’ prejudicial views of black men. Major was subsequently terminated. The white workers may have felt vindicated in using fear to restore the racial order of white supremacy.

This incident demonstrates that although some progress (with regard to racial equality) had been made in the United States forty years after the release of *Birth*, the “rebirth of a nation” mentality still promoted the fear of black equality. In this scenario, it was the duty of whites to tame and destroy the Black Beast. While interracial sexual politics within the context of black equality was pivotal in Griffith’s *Birth*, the film also illustrated other aspects that reinforced white fear and anxiety of blacks seeking equality. The next section will explore the construction of fear through black militancy, including when black men are armed, as well as the fear of black elected officials during both Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction to expound a contemporary interpretation of *Birth* and illustrate how US society continues to be enmeshed in the problems shown in D. W. Griffith’s controversial film.
FEAR OF BLACK ARMED MILITANCY (OR BLACK CRIMINALITY)

History professor Carole Emberton (b. 1975) astutely observed, “Loaded or not, guns symbolize freedom in profound ways.” After the Civil War, many southern whites feared black independence. The idea that blacks could own guns was very unsettling to southern whites. What if there were an insurrection? In 1866, in Walton County, Georgia, the Ku Klux Klan attacked Charles Smith, an African American, and broke his gun into several pieces as a reminder of how they regarded his independence and manhood. During the Reconstruction era, one of the fears surrounding African American masculinity and citizenship was blacks’ right to bear arms. Although it was mostly whites who perpetuated crimes against blacks, the white public imagined armed black men committing violence. Just after the war, Nevada senator James Nye (1815–1876) stated, “We have gone on . . . wisely or unwisely, converting the colored population into beings of power through military discipline . . . We have taught one hundred and sixty thousand of them in the art of killing . . . It must be a poor observer of human nature who does not realize that the colored people [of the] South can be goaded into desperation.” While African Americans did engage in combat against paramilitary insurgents such as the Ku Klux Klan, blacks were not the aggressors. Nevertheless, Democratic politicians, ex-Confederates, or anyone who opposed black independence claimed there were armed blacks who were aggressive and hostile. This claim translated years later into scenes in D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation.

In Birth, viewers are presented with multiple scenes of an occupied South both before (briefly) and during Reconstruction under black Republican rule. Armed African Americans are depicted as violent and criminal. One scene in Birth depicts a predominately African American federal army invading Piedmont, South Carolina, and attacking the Cameron residence. They injure the elder Dr. Cameron as he defends his home; white women and children take refuge in the basement. Although a local Confederate regiment comes to the Camerons’ assistance and drives off the federal troops, Piedmont is devastated from the attack. The Cameron home is set on fire. Further examples occur in subsequent scenes in Birth. At the point in the movie where the South is officially under African American Republican rule, viewers see African American soldiers pushing whites off the street when they cross paths, intimidating them at the polls on Election Day, and beating and murdering ex-slaves who remained loyal to their former masters. African Americans dressed in federal blue uniforms and armed with rifles represent the fear not only of black equality but also of black criminality.

Highly telling of this fear is an 1876 editorial cartoon by Thomas Nast (1840–1902) published in Harper’s Weekly. Titled “He Wants Change Too,” the cartoon indicts the white South for its paramilitary violence against blacks—particularly in wake of
the recent Hamburg Massacre, in which the federal government did not intervene. However, as Emberton points out, this cartoon from Nast, as well as his critiques of Democratic paramilitary activities, had the opposite effect in the South. There, the image gave white paramilitary groups a degree of respectability and legitimacy. In the cartoon, they saw a black, shirtless, gun-toting figure. Southern Democrats in states such as South Carolina rallied around this cause under the banner of US nationalism, linking the 100th anniversary of the War for American Independence from Britain with an 1876 War of Southern Independence from black Republican rule. By the end of Reconstruction, sympathy from white northerners had waned for African American rights and Republican rule in the South. They began to view their southern counterparts’ violent, revolutionary activities as noble and aligned with the aims of the nation’s founding fathers against the British.39

In *The Birth of a Nation*, the fear of black armed militancy was captured in the climatic standoff between the African American federal troops and the Ku Klux Klan. After an altercation in Piedmont, the Cameron family is pursued by the African American federal troops. Ironically, two white soldiers who fought for the Union offer the family refuge in their cabin. Intertitles appear, asserting that “the former enemies of North and South are united again in common defense of their Aryan birthright (shot 1287).”40 This scene is clearly a message to the audience about North and South reconciliation based on the need for white nationalism to suppress African American criminality. Subsequently, in the movie, a furious battle erupts among the encamped Camerons, the two white Union soldiers, and the African American federal army. Ben Cameron and the Ku Klux Klan ride off to defeat federal soldiers. African American soldiers are disarmed in Piedmont. In most scenes in *Birth*, armed African American federal troops are portrayed as criminals because they attack civilians. Thus the Klan (both in *Birth* as well as in reality during the era of Reconstruction) felt justified to use any means necessary (even violence) to defeat black Republican rule and return to the white-dominated social, economic, and political order of the antebellum South.

Although the film portrays African Americans during Reconstruction as the aggressors, in reality, the problem at the time was overwhelming white-on-black violence. Historian Kenneth W. Howell notes, for example, that in Texas, whites instigated the majority of violent racial incidents during the Reconstruction era.41 Fearing social change and promoting hatred toward blacks, white southerners organized paramilitary organizations and rifle clubs such as the Ku Klux Klan, the Red Shirts, and the White League, among others (many connected to the Democratic Party). The goal of these groups was to intimidate, assault, and murder African Americans and white Republicans who challenged the antebellum status quo. In 1868 in Arkansas, there were over 200 such politically connected murders. The
media in Alabama (such as the Selma Times and the Mobile Register) encouraged whites to overthrow Reconstruction through violence. A tragic illustration of such violence occurred on Easter Sunday in 1873 in Colfax, Louisiana. There had recently been a disputed gubernatorial election. On that Sunday, 150 African Americans were killed after a standoff against over 300 white paramilitary insurgents. The federal government ultimately intervened, declaring the Republican candidate the winner. So while southern blacks during Reconstruction affirmed the right to bear firearms with independence and masculinity, whites saw armed black men as a threat and went on a rhetorical and violent campaign to disarm and disenfranchise blacks.

Griffith’s 1915 portrayal of armed blacks in Birth, based on his viewpoint of the Reconstruction era, left a lasting impression on its white viewers. The movie’s image of armed black militants played on the fears of the white mainstream and justified racist violence.

Another half-century did little to change the mind of the mainstream. In 1966, Stokely Carmichael (1941–1998) popularized the phrase “Black Power.” He was president of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and had participated with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the March against Fear. The media subsequently juxtaposed the Black Power slogan against King’s philosophy of nonviolent resistance. Although Carmichael clearly articulated the philosophy of Black Power as political and economic self-sufficiency and self-defense, the white mainstream imagined Black Power as violent and criminal.

Although Carmichael coined the term Black Power in 1966, armed self-defense was not a new concept to American blacks. In 1964, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, residents (primarily World War II veterans) organized a gun club and effectively protected themselves against police and Ku Klux Klan violence and intimidation in the wake of a nonviolent protest that went amok. While their defense went relatively unnoticed by the national media and politicians, local whites (particularly the police and the Klan) were shocked that blacks had stepped out of the conventional model of social protest by successfully organizing armed defense groups (and thus were left alone).

Similarly, in 1957, in Monroe, North Carolina, Robert Franklin Williams (1925–1996) organized a rifle club to protect the black community against Baptist evangelist and veteran James Cole (1924–1967) and Klan violence. Cole served as grand dragon of the KKK. Under his leadership, the Klan unleashed a series of rallies that attracted thousands of supporters. Speakers at the rallies employed rhetoric to incite fear of blacks. This incendiary speech resulted in numerous bombings of black homes and schools. Cole and his KKK members decided to target Dr. Albert Perry (1921–1972), a black doctor and veteran who they suspected was providing financial support to the NAACP, of which Perry was vice president in the late 1950s.
As a result, Perry received numerous death threats, which prompted the president of the local chapter of the NAACP, activist Robert Williams, to organize a Black Armed Guard that protected Dr. Perry’s house. Williams, a US Army and Marine veteran who also served in leadership roles with the local NAACP, understood the strategic aspects of nonviolent protest. However, Williams was a realist and a pragmatist. He came to the conclusion that the power structure in Monroe would not negotiate and that it was up to black people to protect themselves against white-on-black violence. In October 1957, following a Klan rally, a motorcade attacked Perry’s house. However, when they arrived there, the Black Armed Guard returned fire and the Klan members dispersed in shock. This event led the city government of Monroe to ban Klan motorcades. In his book *Negroes with Guns*, Williams spoke forcefully of the need for black people to protect themselves because government was failing them. The rhetoric of the Klan framed blacks as violent people who should be feared, yet as Williams shows, the violence they witnessed came from whites who were able to “practice violence with impunity.” When Williams assumed the presidency of the local branch of the NAACP in the late 1950s, he was rejected by the national leaders such as Roy Wilkins, Daisy Bates, and Thurgood Marshall. Moreover, New York governor Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller (1908–1979), seeking to discredit Williams and armed black militancy, addressed delegates at the 1959 NAACP national convention by congratulating them for “rejecting retaliation against terror.” Williams continued to practice armed self-defense and published his ideologies in the newspaper he edited, *The Crusader*. This forthrightness caught the attention of people in the mainstream Civil Rights movement, who pitted him against Martin Luther King Jr. Later, Williams and his revolutionary activities also caught the attention of the FBI, which ultimately discredited him as a criminal. He and his family fled the country after Williams was falsely accused of kidnapping in the wake of a 1961 civil rights protest in Monroe that went wrong. The CIA credited Williams for being the ideological leader of the Black Panther Party. *Life* magazine reported that Williams’s picture was “prominently displayed in extremist haunts in the big city ghetto.”

The vilification of Williams and others who have advocated for armed self-defense represents in many respects the “rebirth” of a nation in which a white mainstream maintains that armed self-defense by African Americans is the same as criminality.

**FEAR OF BLACK ELECTED OFFICIALS**

Perhaps the most significant legacy of the Reconstruction era was the enfranchisement and unprecedented election of African Americans to public office. From 1865 to 1877, approximately 2,000 African Americans were elected to state and
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federal office. Moreover, 21 African Americans were elected to the US Congress from 1870 to 1891. Despite these monumental achievements, which created the potential for the nation to reach racial equality, there were groups that engaged in fear mongering in an effort to undermine these achievements. As mentioned earlier, African American elected officials were vilified as incompetent, corrupt, and incapable of self-rule. Many whites held that it was their birthright to rule and govern the Republic. They feared there would be black oppression of whites if African Americans were elected to public office. Furthermore, African Americans, in the eyes of many whites during the Reconstruction era, were viewed as inferior. Some whites even thought that if black people were granted the opportunity to govern, chaos and disaster would result.

Those whites who used political mudslinging and smear campaigns sought to discredit African American elected officials. The media also discredited black elected officials during and after Reconstruction. One Maine journalist of that era, James S. Pike, questioned the behavior of African American elected officials and would go on to blame them (along with the Republican Party) for the failure of Reconstruction.

In addition, political scientist John William Burgess (1844–1931) argued that the federal government made a grave error in enacting Reconstruction policies. Linking black skin with inferiority, Burgess suggested that African Americans derived from a race that had not made any contributions to civilization; thus they should never have been granted enfranchisement and the opportunity to govern. Likewise, politicians such as US senator Benjamin Tillman sought to misrepresent black elected officials as corrupt and greedy. At the 1895 South Carolina Constitutional Convention (which overturned Reconstruction and disenfranchised African Americans), Tillman alleged that “black members of the Reconstruction state legislature had indulged in expensive and needless articles, such as 40 cent spittoons, 25 cent hat pegs, $4 looking glasses, $200 crimson plush sofas, champagne, $6,000 mirrors, in addition to defrauding the people with extravagant printing costs.”

South Carolina congressman Thomas Miller (1890–1891) responded to Tillman in 1895, providing a more accurate representation of black elected officials during Reconstruction. Miller stated, “We were eight years in power . . . We had built school houses, established charitable institutions, built and maintained the penitentiary system . . . rebuilt bridges, and reestablished the ferries. In short we had reconstructed the state and placed it on the road to prosperity.”

Despite political and personal danger, many African American elected officials in federal, state, and local offices made major contributions to this nation, served honorably, and used their influence to challenge white supremacy. In fact, African American elected officials in the state of South Carolina established a universal
public school system. Unbeknownst to their enemies, many black elected officials understood the political system and operated within it with diplomacy and effectiveness. For example, South Carolina congressman Joseph Hayne Rainey (1870–1879) supported a poll tax that generated funding that supported public education. Most important, Rainey’s first major speech on the floor of Congress addressed Klan and paramilitary terrorism against African Americans and their Republican allies in the South. Unfortunately, the passage of the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871 was watered down and did not prevent Klan and paramilitary violence. Because of Rainey’s outspoken condemnation of racist terrorism, he became a target of the Klan during his tenure in Congress.

The contributions of African American elected officials would remain in the margins of history, overshadowed by racist rhetoric. Misrepresentation of their work was perpetuated by historians, politicians, and the media. In fact, D. W. Griffith’s view of history was grounded in the literature of such scholars. The common view of the time was sympathetic to the “Lost Cause” and demonized African Americans and their Republican allies.

What was Griffith’s answer to the controversy about racist propaganda in his film? Griffith said, “I gave to my best knowledge the proven facts, and presented the known truth about the Reconstruction period in the America South. These facts are based on an overwhelming compilation of authentic evidence and testimony.” His movie offered “proof” to a new generation of viewers that black citizens should not be elected to public office. Instead of pioneering black legislators who were trying to put their states back together after a devastating war, he showed viewers the fictitious character of Silas Lynch, a corrupt African American lieutenant governor in Reconstruction-era South Carolina. In the film, black elected officials are seen desecrating the US political system by passing controversial laws (such as those that permit miscegenation). They are also shown eating watermelon, drinking whiskey, taking off their shoes, and propping their feet up on their desks. Of course, Griffith’s film has long been lambasted for its stereotypes. Yet racist propaganda and personal attacks against the nation’s first African American president, Barack Hussein Obama, suggest that there are still many Americans who believe black people have no place in this country’s government.

THE BLACK BEAST BARACK

On June 3, 2008, Barack Obama (b. 1961) secured enough delegate votes to be announced the presumptive nominee for the presidency on the Democratic Party ticket. One month later the New Yorker, a popular national magazine, published a
controversial cartoon by Barry Blitt. Blitt depicted the future president as a Muslim in the Oval Office, “fist bumping” the first lady, who is sporting an afro and camouflage military pants while she carries an AK-47 over her shoulder. Her style is reminiscent of the stereotypical image of the female Black Power activist of the 1960s. Behind them is a portrait of Osama bin Laden, while the US flag is burning in the Oval Office’s fireplace. This controversial editorial cartoon, known as “The Politics of Fear,” brilliantly juxtaposes America’s historical record of racism, xenophobia, and nationalism within the context of the twenty-first century. It reflects mainstream Americans’ fear of blacks in public office—especially managing the highest office in the land.

In Obama’s victory speech in Chicago in November 2008, he addressed the existence of such fears when he stressed that he did not intend to govern by aligning with any particular race or party. Instead, he wanted to be the president of all Americans. One could argue that in spite of the racial discourse and false narratives during the 2008 election, the engagement of young people in the electoral process should have resulted in a de-escalation of racial fear mongering. Yet that phenomenon did not take place. Instead of reducing fears of black public officials as a threat, it seemed that the country was enacting “Rebirth of a Nation,” an updated version of the old movie that played on the fear of a black president. Obama won the election. However, he did not secure a majority white electorate.

An examination of the 2012 presidential election results reveals that Republican challenger Mitt Romney (b. 1947) won three out of five white votes. He won among white men and white women. Geographically, Romney did better in the South, but he also won a majority of white voters in forty-six of fifty states. Although Obama was credited with energizing young people to participate in the electoral process, Romney still won a majority of the white vote in every age cohort, including the very youngest.67

Law professor Ian Haney-López writes about the concept of “dog whistle politics,” which are racially coded messages used by politicians to build on underlying racial tensions. In an interview with journalist Bill Moyers, Haney-López states, “On one level, like a dog whistle, it’s silent. Silent about race—it seems race-neutral. But on another, it has a shrill blast, like a dog whistle, that can be heard by certain folks. And what the blast is, is a warning about race and a warning, in particular, about threatening minorities.” He notes that some white politicians warn the public about the dangers minorities pose and that whites should fear a federal government that is de-centering whites. Haney-López locates Romney’s significant advantage among whites as an example of a “dog whistle” narrative.68

Enter the character of Silas Lynch. In Birth of a Nation, Lynch (the mulatto leader of the blacks, a “symbol of his race”) delivers a pronouncement that blacks shall
have full equality. *Birth* then portrays whites being disenfranchised on Election Day. At the polling stations, signs that say “Equality” and “Forty Acres and a Mule” are strategically placed. Blacks vote in overwhelming numbers, win the election, and Lynch is elected lieutenant governor. With the black party in control of the state house, the black politicians are seen triumphantly drinking alcohol and eating fried chicken.

Although this film addresses a larger social issue within a historical time frame, it nevertheless sets the foundation for today’s dog whistle narrative about race and race in politics. Who is trustworthy, who is decent, and who is law-abiding? In contrast, who is loathsome, who is diseased, and who is dangerous? The notions persist that blacks prefer welfare to work and that the federal government is using taxpayers’ money to pander to blacks so their votes will keep their allies in power. Haney-López explains that while there are different cultural ideas that are expressed in dog whistle terms (such as the idea that Hispanics are dirty or the stereotype that undocumented immigrants breed crime), the primary cultural idea is race: “It’s the primary cultural provocation that has been used by conservatives over the last fifty years. Race is special because it does so much damage not only to people of color, but in the way it restructures our society as a whole.”

Who is the contemporary representation of the film’s Silas Lynch? In *Birth of a Nation*, there was a Black Party celebration, inducing black people to quit work. The implicit message was that black politicians such as Lynch would use taxpayers’ money to take care of blacks who were not working. In contemporary America, Obama is called the “food stamp president.” The message today is that white Americans should fear a president who takes their hard-earned money and gives it to healthy blacks who could work but choose not to because they are lazy. This construct was reiterated by Tom Coburn (b. 1948), then-senator from Oklahoma, who responded to a question about whether Obama wanted to destroy the United States. Coburn acceded that Obama is bright but that he had created more societal dependency on the government because it had worked for him as a black male. Coburn stressed that this philosophy of dependency drives Obama’s views on social policy. Likewise, Romney stated that 47 percent of the people would have voted for the former president (Obama) no matter what and that this percentage included people who are dependent on government, who believe they are victims, and who believe that government has a responsibility to care for them. Haney-López explains Romney’s framing of this issue: “It’s a dog whistle on one level because he’s seeming to use the terms that are typically associated with minorities and he’s attaching them to half the country. So in a way, you’re getting the poor being racialized. So even when they’re white, even when it’s half the country, and he’s talking about people who don’t pay income tax, he’s saying, these people are like
minorities.” Haney-López states that after the election, Romney held a conference call to explain to his major donors why he lost. His analysis was centered on Obama promising “gifts” to poor, young, black, and Hispanic people. Haney-López summarizes this tactic as “racism as a strategy. It’s cold, it’s calculating, it’s considered, it’s the decision to achieve one’s own ends—here winning votes—by stirring racial animosity. And that’s the decision that George Wallace made, that’s the decision that Ronald Reagan made, that’s the decision that Mitt Romney made. Modern society is structured around race, so race becomes the category through which people do a lot of their automatic thinking. The environment continually tells people that race is relevant.”

The contention about societal dependency of blacks generates considerable anxiety among whites and is meant to stoke fear in white taxpayers. Birth portrayed Lynch as a traitor who would build himself a throne. Similarly, Obama was framed as setting up an imperial presidency. Media host Glenn Beck (b. 1964) went so far as to say that Obama has a “deep-seated hatred for white people or the white culture.” A 2011 Tufts University study by Michael I. Norton and Samuel R. Sommers found that whites see racism as a zero-sum game. Revealed in this study was the public’s belief that while discrimination against blacks has decreased, this change has increased discrimination against whites. The study participants believed that whites are now more discriminated against than blacks. According to journalist Paul Rosenberg, “This perception is not simply mistaken, it’s downright delusional, flying in the face of mountains of objective data.” After an extensive examination of social science data, Rosenberg concluded that blaming blacks for being poor, uneducated, and outside mainstream society remains a consistent narrative—with discrimination left out of that narrative. White privilege is never acknowledged as a factor that stacks the deck against African Americans and other people of color.

THE BLACK BEAST (IS A MUSLIM)

There is an explicit promotion of Christian ideology in Birth. For example, film scholar Clyde Taylor (b. 1968) highlights the film’s theme of the loss and restoration of Eden, which “rehearses Christian eschatology in national terms.” Taylor’s analysis of the movie has an apocalyptic dimension, complete with a dark angel (Stoneman), martyrs (soldiers, Lincoln, Flora, and the South), Redeemers (Ben and the Klan), and a New Jerusalem (in the closing sequence). Griffith assumed that his audience would be Christian, so he used Christian symbolism both to evoke distinctions between good and evil and also to illustrate the working out of retributive justice. Griffith clearly viewed the United States as a Christian nation. The audience
is meant to identify with the heroic Redeemer figures of the narrative—the Klan, whose symbols include the cross and their pure-white, priest-like robes.74

History professor Eric R. Schlereth explains that in the early United States, there were contentions regarding the role of diverse religious beliefs in politics; but eventually a compromise was reached, and “religious conflict became safe for American politics.”75 Was Griffith correct when he considered the country’s religion to be Christian? According to former US Associate Supreme Court Justice David Brewer (1837–1910), the nation is Christian. In a college lecture devoted to the question, he asserted that the United States is “classified among the Christian nations of the world. It was so formally declared by the Supreme Court of the United States.” (He was referring to the case of Holy Trinity Church v. United States, 143 US 471 (1892).) Brewer’s lecture was printed in 1905 (around the time of the film). Brewer later clarified that Christianity is not the country’s established religion, that its citizens are not compelled to support it, and that Americans are not all Christians or all named Christian. He said the country welcomed people of all religions; furthermore, “a profession of Christianity is not a condition of holding office or otherwise engaging in the public service, or essential to recognition either politically or socially.”76

Nevertheless, the United States is often referred to as a leading Christian nation, based on its history. As Brewer notes, in 1606, the charter of Virginia vowed to profess the Christian religion. In 1620, the Pilgrims on the Mayflower made a compact to advance the Christian faith. The charters of New England, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Carolina, and Pennsylvania had explicit references to Christianity, Jesus, or God. Brewer stressed that although Vermont’s 1777 constitution granted people freedom to worship all forms of religion, Vermont still demanded that everyone observe the Sabbath. He observed, “It is not an exaggeration to say that Christianity in some of its creed was the principal cause of the settlement of many of the colonies, and cooperated with business hopes and purposes in the settlement of the others.” In some of the colonies (for example, Maryland), a tax was levied for support of the Christian religion. In addition, the first colleges established in the colonies (Harvard, Yale, and William and Mary) all mentioned God.77

Brewer points out that in the US government, “whenever there is a declaration in favor of any religion, it is of the Christian.”78 Mohammad, Confucius, Buddha, and Judaism are not mentioned at government functions. For example, today, at the end of presidential inaugurations, the president is not obliged to say “so help me God” but usually does. In other examples, court witnesses swear their testimony by God, and an immigrant’s acceptance of citizenship is an appeal to God. Brewer mentions that the 1890 Census showed that the majority of the organizations and buildings in the country had some connection to the church and that the majority of citizens had some connection to Christianity. Of course, not all citizens are active
in a church. Nevertheless, at the turn of the twentieth century, the vast majority of the population still had some connection to Christianity. Thus Brewer maintained that calling the United States *a Christian nation* “is a recognition of a historical, legal, and social truth.”

Prior to Brewer, many other historians arrived at the same conclusion. Political economist and attorney Stephen A. Colwell (1800–1872) examined the constitutional provisions, judicial decisions, social bearings, and Christian education in public schools and advised that “it is not safe for Christians to infer that Christianity and Politics have no mutual relations. Ours are Christian political institutions.” In 1835, French political analyst Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) observed that for Americans, Christianity and liberty operate in tandem: “There is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America; and there can be no greater proof of its utility and of its conformity to human nature than that its influence is powerfully felt over the most enlightened and free nation of the earth . . . The Americans combine the notions of Christianity and of liberty so intimately in their minds that it is impossible to make them conceive [of] the one without the other.”

Because religion is political, it is central to the discourse of this chapter. In the 2008 presidential election, fearmongers were able to build panic and hatred around Obama’s supposed Islamic religion. It is not that all citizens were Christian, but the majority were. For example, in that year, a Pew survey showed that 78.4 percent of adults followed a form of Christianity. In 2012 (Obama’s second election), the Pew Research Center noted that the religious composition of the electorate was similar to that of 2008. During these elections, some of Obama’s opponents attempted to plant fear in the voting public by implying (using the aforementioned dog whistle technique) that he is Muslim. The September 11, 2001, attacks in New York City and Washington, DC, had heightened citizens’ apprehension about Muslims. The religion had become inseparable with terrorism in many people’s minds. British public relations expert Martin A. Parlett (b. 1988) stressed that locating Obama within this Muslim frame was meant to generate profound anxiety among some American voters. In 2014, law professor Ian Haney-López made this observation about racial fear within the political group called the Tea Party: “They’re obsessed about Muslims and Islam. And they really see this sort of threatening, this external threat in the form of the Middle East, but also ostensibly an internal threat of Muslims coming into the United States. For example, this is Kansas passing its law that there shan’t be Sharia law in the courts of Kansas. Absurd, except that it triggers this racial fear.”

So, in comparison, did the public care about Romney’s faith, which is Mormon? Not much. Although most Americans know little about the Mormon religion,
voters in 2012 said they had limited interest in learning about Romney’s faith. The vast majority of those who were aware of his faith said it did not concern them. According to a Pew survey, “Eight-in-ten voters who know Romney is Mormon say they are either comfortable with his faith (60%) or that it doesn’t matter to them (21%).” Mormons overwhelmingly describe themselves as Christian, although half of non-Mormons do not describe them as such. Nearly half of all Mormons polled say they face discrimination because of their Mormon faith and that Americans do not see them as a part of the mainstream.  

Social scientist Jeffrey C. Alexander (b. 1947) contends that being successful in US politics is about being a member of the correct religion, class, and race. Although Romney received twice as much religion-related coverage as Obama, 82 percent of Americans said they learned “little or nothing” about the Mormon religion during Romney’s presidential campaign. Despite the public’s lack of knowledge about Mormonism, the Pew survey showed that public attitudes toward Mormons were positive and that participants surveyed used words such as “good people, honest, and dedicated” to describe Mormons.  

During the 2008 election, many Americans were convinced that Obama was Muslim. By July 2012, a Pew survey showed that even more Americans thought he was Muslim than thought so in 2008. One example of this type of thinking is represented by the public statements of Pastor Franklin Graham (b. 1952) in his efforts to create a moral panic that would sway people away from supporting Obama. Graham is a son of Billy Graham (1918–2018), the famous religious mentor of several sitting US presidents. In August 2010 the younger Franklin said, “We’re going to see persecution, I believe, in this country, because our president is very sympathetic to Islam . . . because his father was a Muslim, gave him a Muslim name, Barack Hussein Obama, his mother married another Muslim man, they moved to Indonesia, he went to Indonesian schools. So, growing up, his frame of reference and his influence as a young man was Islam. It wasn’t Christianity, it was Islam.” Graham went on to say that Obama had hired Muslims in high-level government positions; as a result, Muslims were influencing America’s foreign policy. By February 2012, Franklin did concede to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) that Obama had said his faith was Christian; but Graham added that Obama’s policies did not follow God’s standards, implying that Obama did not follow biblical scripture.  

Because Obama has made it clear that his faith is Christian, why do these fear tactics persist, and who believes them? Journalism professor Barry A. Hollander’s 2008 study (published in 2010) explored the factors that could predict who would maintain this misperception. The results showed that political and religious conservative views predicted a belief in Obama as a Muslim. Examples of these tactics...
abound even beyond presidential campaigns. For example, in 2013, at a Phoenix, Arizona, appearance by Obama, there were signs saying “Impeach the Half-White Muslim.” A fall 2014 survey conducted by the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (of Harvard University) showed that 54 percent of Republicans believed Obama is a Muslim (i.e., this is what he believes deep down). In another example, in 2015, former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani (b. 1944) chided Obama for not loving America. Giuliani (who withstood, with his city, the terrorist attacks of 9/11) called into question Obama’s foreign policy decisions when confronting terrorists; furthermore, he accused Obama on the one hand of chastising Christianity while on the other hand of refusing to say that some aspects of Islam are barbaric. In 2016, Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump made covert statements regarding Obama being a secret Muslim. In the past, the film Birth used the incorporation of Christian symbolism to evoke distinctions between good and evil (which was also white dominance versus greater freedom for black Americans). Likewise, today, people still use religion to portray good and evil. Birth of a Nation’s symbolic language of racist fear, supposedly justified by God, has spawned propaganda down to the present day. There are clear links between Griffith’s film and the moral panic surrounding Obama’s campaign for public office and his presidential tenure in our present era.

CONCLUSION

There are several obstacles to transforming racial discourse. Many scholars contend that it is hard to find one generalized cause of racial conflict because racial feelings tend to be deep-rooted in a society. However, what is clear is that racial conflicts tend to be a result of systemic obstacles. Such conflicts are both state and local, and they require leadership and human agency. The systemic obstacles can be economic, social, and territorial.

Social obstacles are crucial to transforming racial conflict. One of most important social factors to consider is identity. Blacks are fighting to protect what they see as a loss of their identity as a result of continuous violence. They believe their very existence is at stake, and some even see themselves as victims.

During Reconstruction, African Americans were concerned about violence against themselves, their families and friends, and their communities. There was also a higher level of violence committed, threats piling up against a dream of social change that might make their lives less difficult and give them greater access to opportunities such as education, better-paying careers, property ownership, voting rights, and public office. Blacks went to work fearing that they might be lynched. During Obama’s tenure and beyond more than a century later, black people are still apprehensive about violence in their communities. They drive to work fearing they
will be harmed by police during a traffic stop. They are concerned about substandard schools and poor public service from fire-fighters and police departments in their neighborhoods. They are anxious about structural disenfranchisement at the local, state, and federal levels. What is the basis of their oppression? History professor Charles Pete T. Banner-Haley (b. 1948) defines black people’s issues succinctly: “The most tenacious, and many would say most pernicious, is race.”

In a 2014 interview Bill Moyers (b. 1934) conducted with social justice advocate Angela Blackwell Glover, she had these insights into the results of racism: “Race has become so embedded, and baked in, that people can walk around feeling that they’re not carrying racism in their hearts. But so long as they’re okay with disproportionate incarceration, communities being left behind, children given no chance, this continues to be a society that is plagued by the legacy of the continuing impact of racism, right into today.”

The breadth of this critique defies easy summary. The existential challenges surrounding the creation of fear around race cannot be divorced from the epistemological and ontological understanding of the history of the United States. Several policies have been put in place to address the legacies of exclusion created by fear. It is clear that while policy prescriptions have “saved” the black community from social, economic, and political exclusion, blacks still lack agency because the cultural de-centering of whiteness and the intellectual unlearning of fear have yet to take place. As a result, the fearful rhetoric in *Birth* persists throughout the presidency of Barack Obama and beyond, although as Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Nicholas D. Kristof (b. 1959) observed: “Barack Obama’s political success could change global perceptions of the United States, redefining the American ‘brand’ to be less about Guantanamo and more about equality.” In the United States as well as in Europe, the notion of a post-racial country as a result of Obama’s election was a popular narrative. Sadly, US society is still mired in the message of D. W. Griffith’s controversial film.

Today, the world is like a giant sailing ship, facing immediate global problems. All hands are needed on deck. The ship’s sails are unfurled. What is ahead—our failure or our success—cannot be known. Whether the world makes headway or not is up to us, the crew. This is no time to be in competition with or fearful of each other. Only with everyone’s smarts, working together, can we slice through the rough seas that confront us all.

NOTES

2. Stokes, *D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation*. 
4. Barret, *Shooting the Civil War*, 129
5. “100 Years Later,” narrated by Arun Ruth.
15. Anti-black political rhetoric by politicians and scholars such as Senator Benjamin Tillman and J. R. Ralls was reinforced by the surge of scientifc racist scholarship in the early twentieth century. Lothrop Stoddard’s 1920 *The Rising Tide of Color against White World Supremacy* and Madison Grant’s 1922 *The Passing of the Great Race* were in line with scientific racism of the day. Both pieces emphasized white supremacy, the need for institutionalized racism, and, most important, the justification for the eugenics movement. D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* reflected the socio-political issues of the day.
17. Stokes, *D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation*, 5. Also see “100 Years Later,” narrated by Arun Ruth.
21. Wise, *Between Barack and a Hard Place*.
23. Romero, “There Are Only White Champions.”
24. Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 4–5; also see Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*.
36. Emberton, Beyond Redemption, 149.
37. Emberton, Beyond Redemption, 149–150.
40. Stokes, D. W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation, 209.
41. Howell, Still the Arena of Civil War, 19.
42. Barnes and Connolly, “Repression, the Judicial System, and Political Opportunities,” 331.
44. Emberton, Beyond Redemption, 150.
46. Jeffries, Bloody Lowndes, 189.
47. Hamilton and Carmichael, Black Power.
49. Wendt, “God, Gandhi, and Guns,” 47.
50. Dickson and Roberts, Negroes with Guns.
51. Dickson and Roberts, Negroes with Guns.
52. Williams, Negroes with Guns.
54. Tyson, “Robert F. Williams,” 559–567. Also see Dickson and Roberts, Negroes with Guns.
57. Dean and Smith, Reconstruction.
59. Burgess, Reconstruction and the Constitution, 133.
60. Quoted in Dray, Capitol Men, 339–340.
61. Hahn, A Nation under Our Feet, 448.
62. Quoted in Hahn, A Nation under Our Feet, 448. Also see Boyce and Chunnu-Brayda, “I Shall Not Be Muffled Here.”
63. Du Bois, Black Reconstruction.
66. Barret, Shooting the Civil War, 130–131.
74. Taylor, “The Rebirth of the Aesthetic.”
75. Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels*.
76. Brewer, *The United States*.
85. Hollander, “Persistence in the Perception of Barack Obama,” 55; Wáng, “Obama Protesters Sing”; Samuelsohn, “Rudy Giuliani”; Alex Theodoridis, “Poll on Obama’s Religion.” The survey was part of the 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Study by Harvard University, conducted by the survey firm YouGov in October and November. The sample size for this particular question about Obama’s religion was 1,000. Respondents were interviewed online. http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cces/home.
87. Glover, “Is America a Post Racial Society?”
88. Kristof, “Rebranding the US with Obama.”

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