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Donald Trump and Reconstruction-Era Politics

By Brent Staples

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Donald Trump's flirtation with the Ku Klux Klan should come as no surprise. He has functioned for years as a rallying point for "birthers," conspiracy theorists, extremists and racists who are apoplectic about the fact that the country elected a black man president. These groups have driven the Republican Party steadily rightward, helping to create a national discourse that now permits a presidential candidate to court racist support without paying a political price.

Every era of racial progress engenders a racist backlash. The one that is still unfolding in the wake of Barack Obama's presidency bears a striking resemblance in tone to the reaction that swept the South after Reconstruction, the period after the Civil War when former slaves were granted constitutional rights and black Americans served in interracial governments that came to power in the former Confederacy.

The sight of former slaves eagerly lining up to vote and electing their fellow citizens to public offices was anathema to Southerners who had justified slavery, and believed that Negroes were not fit to govern because they were not actually persons. And early historians of this period embraced the Southern view that Reconstruction governments were corrupt and incompetently run.

But as the historian Eric Foner [has written](#), Reconstruction was doomed by two developments: Washington's decision to no longer enforce the rights of African-Americans in the South, and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and related white supremacist groups that brought to bear "a campaign of murder, assault and arson that can only be described as homegrown American terrorism."

The Southern states subsequently wrote black citizens out of their constitutions and erected a system of civic apartheid, enforced by mob rule. The Southern fixation on denying African-Americans the right to vote was a direct response to the rise of black political power during Reconstruction. A similar backlash erupted during the modern civil rights movement.

Reconstruction-era talk re-emerged after Mr. Obama was elected in 2008. Tea Party supporters and others responded to the extraordinary turnout among black voters by contending that the election had been "stolen." Since then, most of the states that had the highest levels of black turnout have passed laws making it more difficult to vote. A 2013 study from The University of Massachusetts Boston concluded that these laws were debated and enacted in a "highly partisan, strategic and racialized" process.

Antigovernment and militia groups have grown rapidly since 2008. Shortly after Mr. Obama's election, the Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors extremist groups, [reported](#) that the antigovernment militia movement had undergone a resurgence, fueled partly "by fears of a black

man in the White House.” And for proof of violence like that of the Reconstruction era, look no further than the young white supremacist who is charged with murdering nine African-Americans at a church in Charleston, S.C., last summer.

This is the backdrop against which Donald Trump blew a kiss to the white supremacist movement during a television interview by [refusing to disavow](#) the support of the white nationalist and former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke. Republican Party leaders in Congress wagged their fingers and delivered pro forma denunciations. What they need to understand is this: Racial hatred is a threat to the country and their party’s leading candidate is doing everything he can to profit from it.

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