Twitter Thread by David Neiwert

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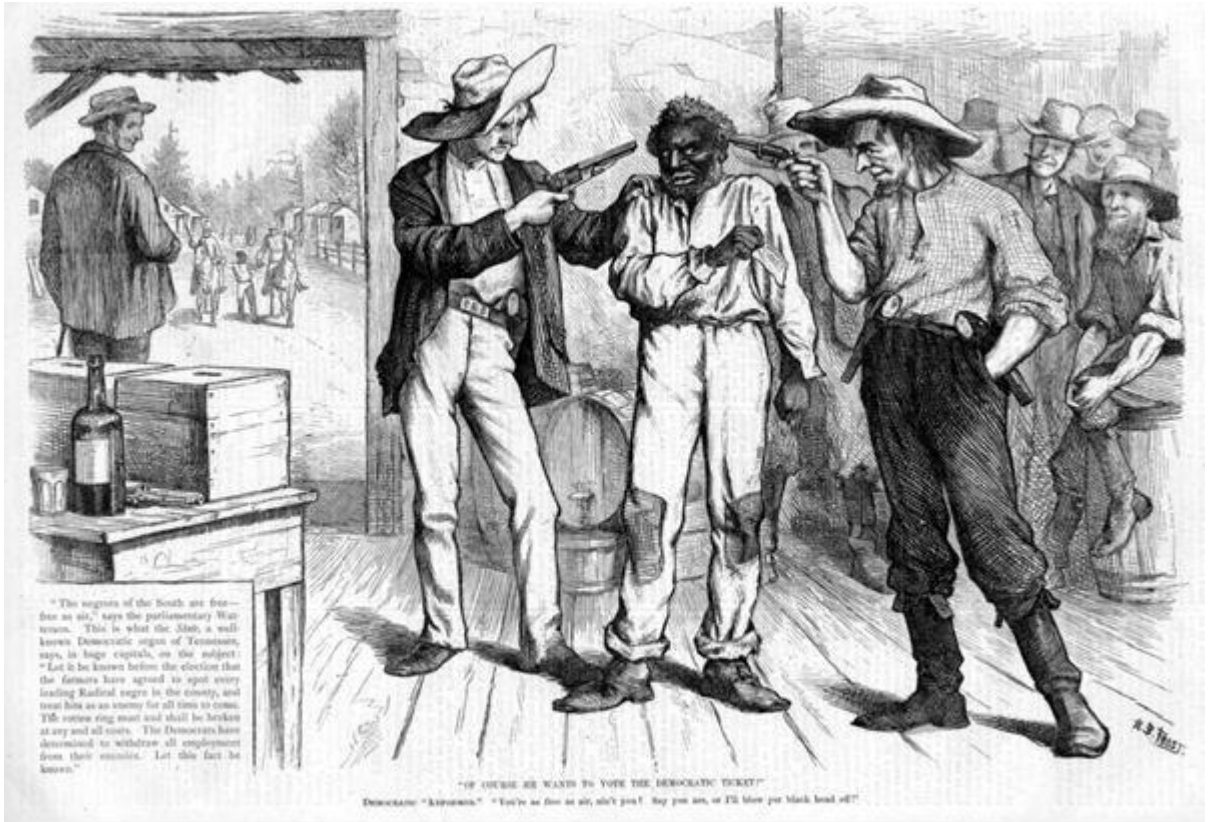
I've been watching the right-wing narrative regarding the Jan. 6 insurrection with keen interest, and realizing that the American right again intends to resort to its well-worn "waving the bloody shirt" gambit. A thread about what that will mean.

> Turn on the Sunday shows and this is what you get\u2014
>
> ABC: The election was stolen
> NBC: The election was stolen
> CBS: The election was stolen
> Fox: The election was stolen pic.twitter.com/A9cCRHvyz3
>
> — Matt Negrin, HOST OF HARDBALL AT 7PM ON MSNBC (@MattNegrin) February 21, 2021

We all know the phrase and its meaning: Someone who "waves the bloody shirt" is a demagogue whose rhetoric callously recalls violent incidents for the purpose of scoring cheap political points. /2

The phrase originated during the Reconstruction era following the Civil War. In the early years, white terrorists from armed paramilitary groups like the Ku Klux Klan roamed the Southern countryside intent on terrorizing black people and anyone assisting them. /3

Preventing blacks from voting was the primary focus of the terrorists. Their reputation for threatening people at the polls themselves was well established. /4



During this period, some 3,000 black freedmen would be murdered in the South. The majority were people lethally attacked at their homes—shot through windows and doors, and at other times lynched. /5

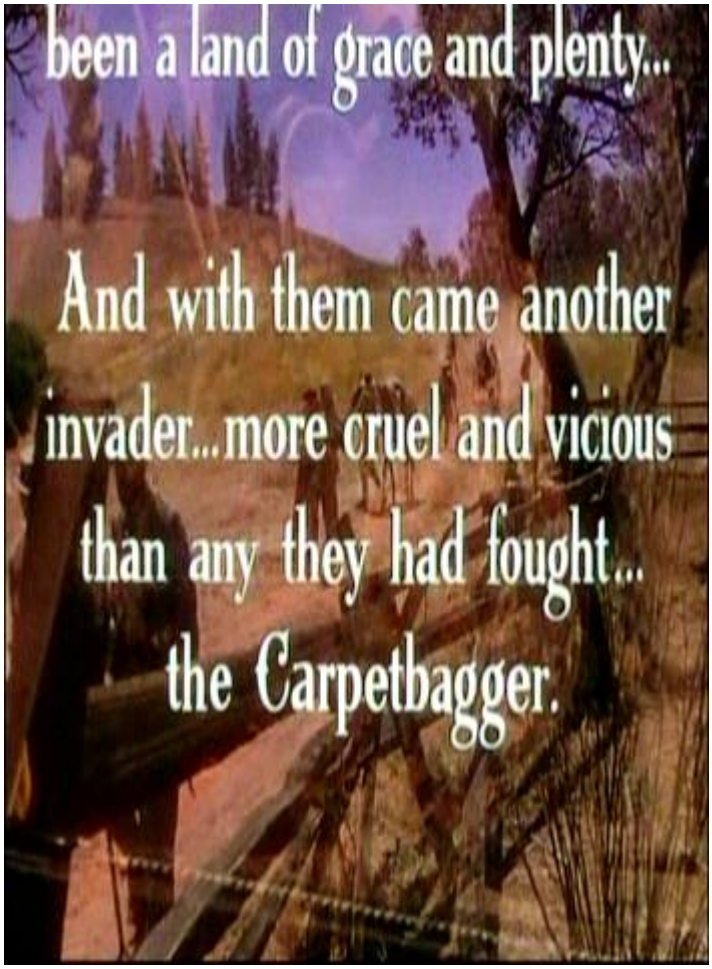
Most of these attacks took place at night. Black people lived in constant fear of having nighttime visitors. /6

The terrorists' wrath was also directed at certain white people—namely, Southerners who sympathized with the Union, called "scalawags"; and Northerners who usually came to the postwar South with altruistic intentions but were hated as exploitative "carpetbaggers." /7

THE MAN WITH THE (CARPET) BAGS

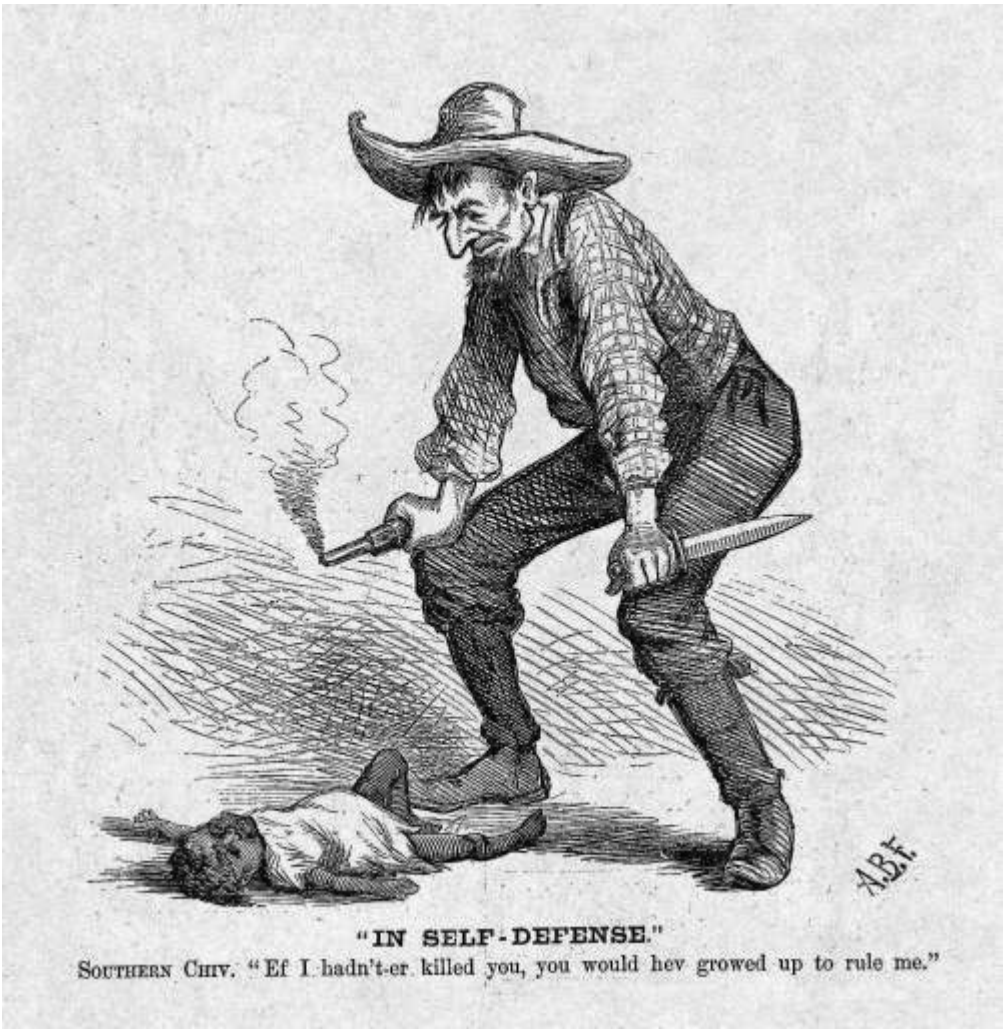
The bag in front of him, filled with others' faults, he always sees. The one behind him, filled with his own faults, he never sees.

These are phrases whose meanings remain with us, thanks to their enduring repetition over the decades. You'll recall how the carpetbagger is the chief villain of "Gone With the Wind." /8



In reality, they often were educators who were helping to open schools for black children and promoting literacy in the adult population too. This was seen as a threat to white supremacy and its rule, especially since it enhanced their ability to vote. /9

Schooling black children threatened to overturn one of the core myths of white supremacists—namely, that blacks were naturally too ignorant and stupid to be teachable, which is why they need to be under the control of their white masters. /10



"IN SELF-DEFENSE."

SOUTHERN CHIV. "Ef I hadn't-er killed you, you would hev growed up to rule me."

So teachers were flogged and lynched, and schoolhouses burned to the ground, as the first wave of terrorism struck the newly freed ex-slave community and their helpers. /11

SCENES IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE, DURING THE RIOT—BURNING A FREEDMEN'S SCHOOL-HOUSE.

[SKETCHED BY A. R. W.]

Some of the Klan's most prominent white victims were schoolteachers. However, since they were white, they often were simply flogged or beaten and threatened with lynching. /12

This is where the phrase “waving the bloody shirt” originates, as explained by historian Stephen Budiansky in his terrific history, “The Bloody Shirt: Terror After Appomatox.” /13

https://t.co/7h5ss629DE

As he explains, the phrase arises from an incident in which 120 night-riding Klansmen descended on a home at which a local school superintendent was spending the night. /14

In some ways the small incident in question was no different from thousands of others like it that took place in those years. At ten o'clock on the night of March 9, 1871, a band of one hundred and twenty men on horseback, disguised, heavily armed, even their horses cloaked in white sheets to conceal any identifiable markings, surrounded the house of one George R. Ross deep in the river-cut country southeast of the town of Aberdeen in Monroe County, Mississippi. Allen P. Huggins, a Northern man who had settled in Mississippi after the war, was staying the night there, and he was awakened by a loud voice calling upon Ross to bring out "the man who was in the house."

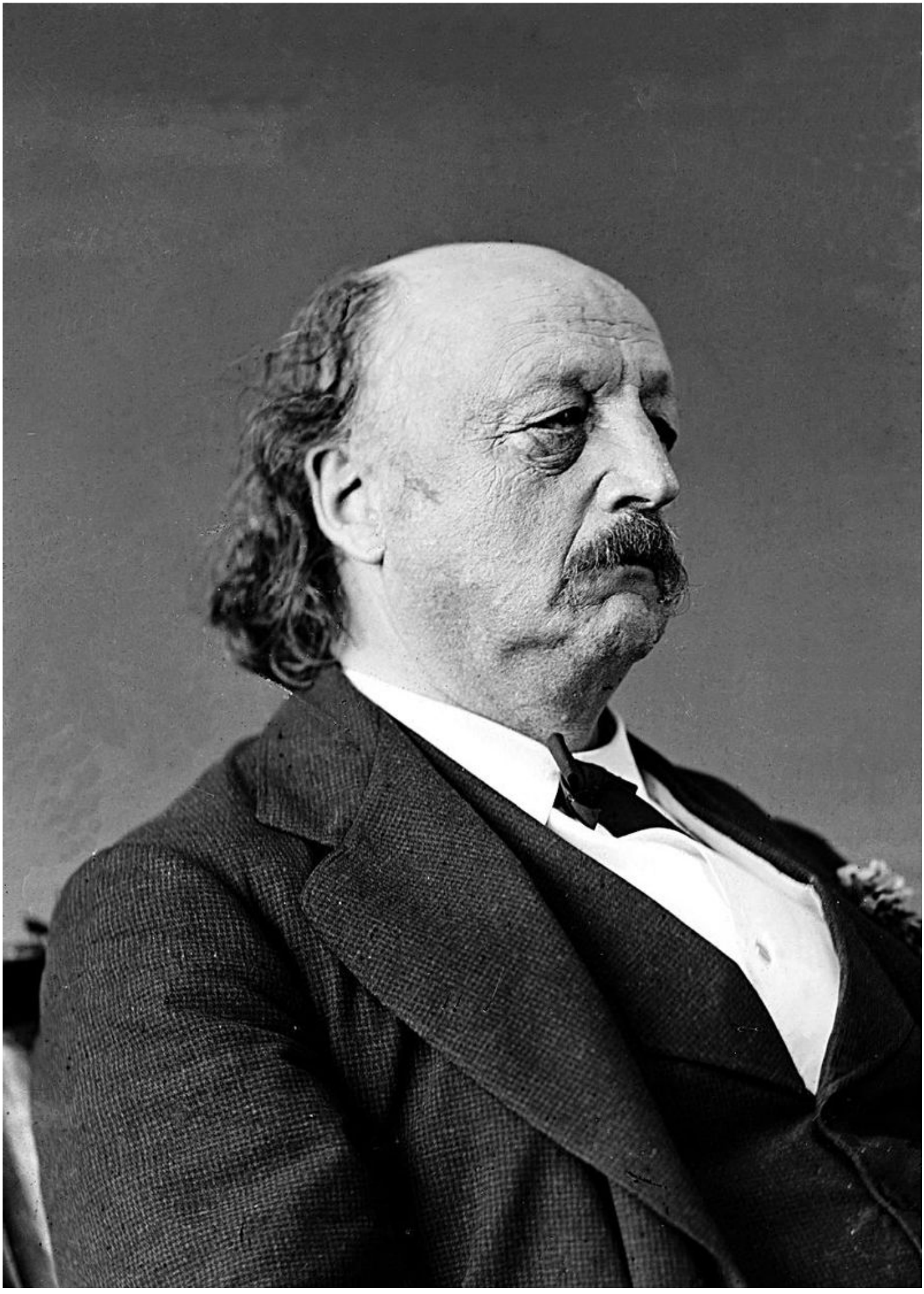
Huggins looked out the window and, by the bright moonlight, saw the porch crowded with men in white hoods and robes. They told him that, unless he came out to receive their "warning," they would burn the place down.

Ross—"a good, respectable Democrat"—pleaded with Huggins to do as they asked and spare his frightened wife and children. So after securing a promise that "not a hair of your head shall be injured," Huggins agreed to go down to the gate to hear what the men had come to tell him. It was just this. The men—whom Huggins would later describe as "gentlemanly fellows, men of cultivation, well educated, a much different class of men than I ever supposed I would meet in a Ku-Klux gang"—did not like his "radical ways," they said. As superintendent of schools for the county, Huggins had instituted public schooling, was trying to "educate the negroes," they said. They had stood it just as long as they were going to. Now he had ten days to leave—leave the county, leave the state altogether—or be killed.

Huggins replied that he would go when he was good and ready to go.

So the men marched him down the road, and when they reached a small hill a quarter of a mile away, one of them came toward him from where the horses were being held, and in his hand was a stout stirrup leather. And without any further ceremony, he began beating Huggins with the stirrup, with all his might.

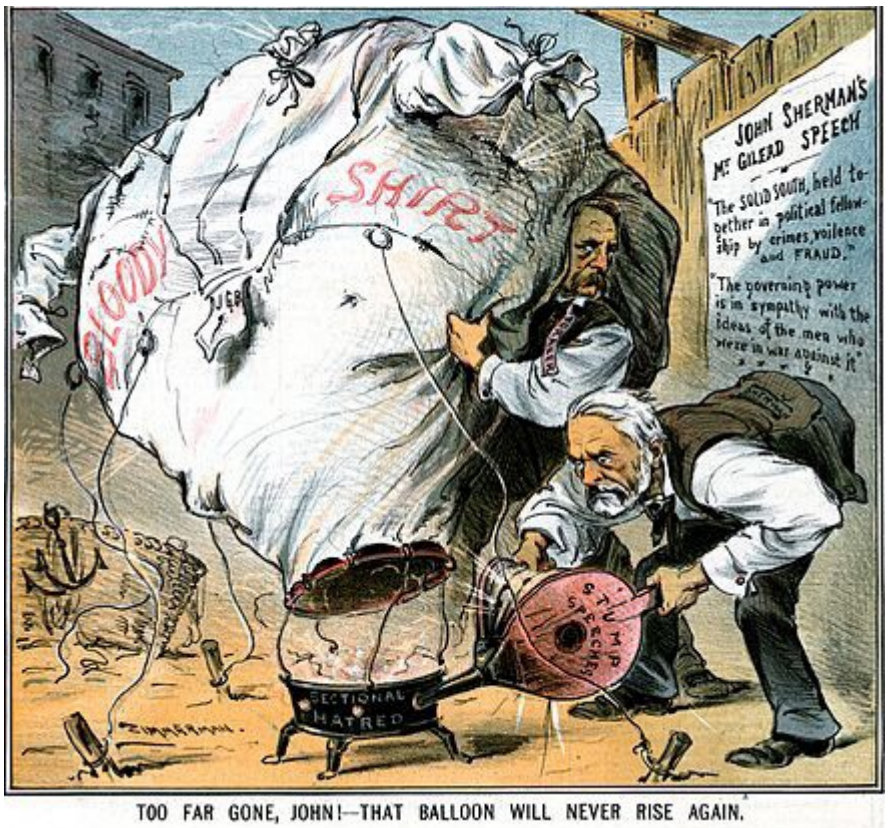
According to the legend that then became conventional wisdom in the South, the shirt from Huggins' beating was delivered to Rep. Benjamin Butler of Massachusetts, who then waved it about as he ranted at length about the evils of the Ku Klux Klan. /15



But while Butler did deliver such a speech, at no time did he ever wave any bloody shirt in the House. /16

Nonetheless, the legend became a sneer: If any Northerner should happen to bring up the campaign of lethal terror being waged against blacks in the South in any political context, he would be dismissed as “waving the bloody shirt.” It became a common cartoon trope. /17

Soon enough, the conventional wisdom became that this very real violence was not the problem, but rather the demagogues who dared reference it, “exploiting” the tragedy for political purposes. /18



TOO FAR GONE, JOHN!—THAT BALLOON WILL NEVER RISE AGAIN.

Budiansky describes the rhetorical outcome of this gambit: “The way it made a victim of the bully and a bully of the victim… the real story was never the atrocities white Southerners committed but only the attempt by their political enemies to make political hay out of it.” /19

A footnote, but a telling one: To white conservative Southerners, the outrage was never the acts they committed, only the effrontery of having those acts held against them. The outrage was never the “manly” inflicting of “well-deserved” punishment on poltroons, only the craven and sniveling whines of the recipients of their wrath. And the outrage was never the violent defense of “honor” by the aristocrat, only the vulgar rabble-rousing by his social inferior. “The only article the North can retain for herself is that white feather which she has won in every skirmish,” declared one Southerner, speaking of the Sumner–Brooks affair. Only a coward would revel in a token of his own defeat.

The bloody shirt captured the inversion of truth that would characterize the distorted memories of Reconstruction that the nation would hold for generations after. The way it made a victim of the bully and a bully of the victim, turned the very blood of their African American victims into an affront against Southern white decency, turned the very act of Southern white violence into wounded Southern innocence; the way it suggested that the real story was never the atrocities white Southerners committed but only the attempt by their political enemies to make political hay out of it. The mere suggestion that a partisan motive was behind the telling of these tales was enough to satisfy most white Southerners that the events never happened, or were exaggerated, or even that they had been conspiratorially engineered by the victims themselves to gain sympathy or political advantage.

The use of this rhetorical twist by conservatives, especially those who wish to whitewash the reality of far-right violence, has never ceased. In the 1920s, it was a common reference among defenders of the revived Klan. /20

10,000,000 KLANSMEN BY JULY 4, 1924

★ THE CALL of the NORTH ★

"Eternal Vigilance is the Price of Liberty"

KU KLUX FOES SHOW THEIR DIRTY HANDS

AMERICAN LEGION RESOLUTION READS LIKE SECTION FROM KLAN RITUAL.

Walton in Mell of A Hess

22 Charges of Indictment of Oklahoma Governor.

Newspaper and Independence

More recently, you could hear versions of it whenever right-wing extremists would act out violently, often following the on-air urgings of right-wing pundits—who would then complain bitterly about anyone daring to connect them to the violence. /21

The most striking example—mainly because of its real-world effects—came in 2009, when the Department of Homeland Security issued a bulletin to law enforcement warning that right-wing extremists were becoming more active and recruiting veterans. /22

https://t.co/oazIaqOkme

Conservatives essentially did a kind of self-own in this instance, openly identifying with the terrorist factions identified in the report and defending them on the basis that they appeared to be normal “conservatives.” It worked. /23

https://t.co/G4sQ0H0iEV

Fox News seized on the issue, running multiple segments on virtually every news show discussing the DHS bulletin. /24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DOW WATCH
DEVELOPING
FOX NEWS
FOX NEWS .COM
GOV'T REPORT SINGLES OUT VETS AS A POTENTIAL TERROR THREAT
Your World
JOURNALIST ACCUSED OF SPYING FOR
DOW UTL 327.19