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## Racial Terror and Citizenship

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of complex memories and histories, a place that growing numbers of Asian Americans are calling home.

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*University of Washington*

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## Racial Terror and Citizenship

“There is a perfect reign of terror existing in the several counties, so much so that I cannot do justice to the subject,” wrote an official with the U.S. Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands in 1866. The phrase this superintendent chose to characterize the late-night home invasions, plunder, murder, and rape being carried out by a vigilante gang of white men against former slaves in his region of Tennessee — “a perfect reign of terror” — appeared repeatedly in official descriptions of similar white-on-black violence that occurred across the South after the Civil War. This violence was generally well planned and carried a clear political message: regardless of their new status as free people, African Americans would not be permitted to exercise the rights of citizenship. It also initiated patterns of racial and political violence that endured across the South well into the 20th century.

During Reconstruction, former slaves seized opportunities for political participation, while the federal government — through legislation and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments — recognized them as citizens and guaranteed the right to vote without regard to race. Active black citizenship, though, upended a southern antebellum political culture wherein a voice in public affairs had been the exclusive privilege of white men. Black male suffrage threatened not only white men’s control over politics but also the significance of their whiteness, which had previously depended on a clear distinction between white “freemen” and black slaves. Violent white reactions to the challenges

posed by emancipation began immediately after the war, when bands of white men roamed rural areas of the South, disarming black Union soldiers, stealing freedpeople's property, and threatening and often killing black community leaders. The "reign of terror" also included "riots"—in fact, premeditated massacres of freedpeople—in cities such as Memphis and New Orleans. It was repeated scenes of such violence in the former Confederacy that convinced many northern white Republicans to support federal protection of black rights in the South, and specifically suffrage. Yet as the resultant federal law took effect in the late 1860s, white-on-black violence only spread into widening realms.

At this time, vigilante gangs began wearing disguises and calling themselves the Ku Klux Klan. The Reconstruction-era Klan, though, was far less a centralized organization than a label used by disparate white gangs across the South who sought the anonymity offered by Klan-style practices. Attacks by these disguised bands followed a common pattern. Late at night, masked men surrounded freedpeople's homes, dragged their victims outside, plundered their belongings, and stripped, beat, whipped, raped, or murdered them. White vigilantes also subjected many to scenes of racial and sexual submission. Through their words and deeds, assailants compelled their victims to enact a return to a pre-emancipation racial order, that is, one in which black men were rendered incapable of protecting their families and black women were obliged to provide white men with sex on demand. In effect, assailants attempted to impose upon black men and women their putative unsuitability for citizenship by forcing them to perform dishonorable masculine and feminine roles.

Many African Americans responded to Klanlike attacks by participating in local militias to protect their communities from violence. Especially in rural areas where African Americans were in the minority, though, the power of terrorist gangs frequently overwhelmed local law enforcement. Indeed, some gangs included police officials as members. Some Reconstruction-era governors imposed martial law to put down the Klan, but in most states only federal action was effective in stopping the violence. In 1870–71, the Enforcement Acts made violence or intimidation with the intent of impeding voting a federal offense, allowing the federal government to oversee elections and to arrest Klan members. Under these acts, hundreds were prosecuted. Although few served significant jail time, Klanlike vigilante terrorist groups were effectively ended for the time being. Suppressing the violence led to an impressive expansion of black political participation between 1872 and 1874.

This high point in black political power, though, also marked the beginning of the next round of terrorist violence in the South, as armed auxiliaries of the Democratic Party mounted new campaigns to push African Americans out

of the political process. African Americans organized in self-defense but were usually out-armed and out-numbered, and hundreds were killed in clashes during the mid-1870s. In summer 1876, a federal official again used the familiar phrase “a perfect reign of terror” to describe the violence in one region of South Carolina. But this time attackers operated in the open, emboldened by an apparent federal retreat from backing African Americans’ rights in the South. This retreat was evident when, in *United States v. Cruikshank et al.* (1876), the Supreme Court overturned convictions under the Enforcement Acts, arguing that the federal government had authority only over actions taken by states, not individuals. Thereafter, the power to police vigilante violence returned to state governments, which were now all under Democratic control and often complicit in terror.

With the alliance between African Americans and northern white political leaders that had made possible the Reconstruction era’s dramatic revolution in citizenship now ended, the threat of violence rather than the force of law would regulate the exercise of political power in the South for decades to come. Not until the 1960s did renewed federal attention drive white terror underground, from where assailants nonetheless carried out plans to bomb black churches and to kidnap and murder civil rights activists. White violence thus effectively barred African Americans from the citizenship they had sought, and had momentarily enjoyed, after emancipation until the civil rights movement’s successes a century later.

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## Racial Uplift

Racial uplift is an African American ideology that had its greatest impact in response to the increasing oppression blacks faced between 1880 and World War I. Earlier versions of its concern for achieving social respectability in the