

# Digital History

[www.digitalhistory.uh.edu](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu)

## Chapter 5

### The Red Shirt Election in South Carolina

By 1876, Southern whites had regained control of the government in all Southern states except for South Carolina, Louisiana and Florida. Their methods of restoring white rule included violence and intimidation. Sometimes, Federal troops were sent South to protect the freedman and his supporters. But, as time went on, Congress became less and less willing to protect the rights freedmen were guaranteed by the 14th Amendment.

Eleven years after the Civil War, the freedmen still had a major influence in the government of South Carolina. Opposition to their rule, however, had become more and more open. With the election of 1876, a determined effort was made to stop their participation in politics. Congress would have to decide whether it wished to continue supporting the freedmen, or whether to call an end to its Reconstruction policy, and allow white Southerners to once again rule the people of South Carolina. This chapter tells that story and asks the reader to decide whether or not ending Reconstruction was the best move for the South and for the country.

By 1876, the opposition to Congressional Reconstruction in South Carolina was open and bold. Encouraged by the success of whites in other states and the increasing timidity of Congress in upholding rights of the freedmen, Democrats began to organize. Under the leadership of Civil War General, Martin Gary, Democratic Military Clubs were formed. The orders issued by the General left no doubt of his intentions:

- That the Democratic Military Clubs are to be armed with rifles and pistols, and such other arms as they may command each Captain is to see that his men are well armed and provided with at least thirty rounds of ammunition...
- We must attend every Radical (Republican) meeting that we hear of. Democrats must go in large numbers and well armed ... and as soon as their leaders begin to speak tell them then and there that they are liars, thieves and rascals, and are only trying to mislead the ignorant Negroes, and if you get a chance get upon the platform and address the Negroes.
- In speeches to Negroes you must remember that argument has no effect upon them. ... Prove to them that, if they cooperate with us, it will benefit them. Treat them as to show them, you are the superior race. Never threaten a man individually if he deserves
- to be threatened ... he should die. A dead Radical is very harmless – a threatened Radical...is often very troublesome.<sup>15</sup>

#### Intimidation by the Redshirts

Both of the following accounts tell similar stories of what happened to freedmen who attempted to campaign or vote for the Republican Governor, Chamberlain. The first was told by Professor Greener to a Congressional Committee investigating voting abuses. The second is a drawing of an incident reported by the wife of a murdered Republican activist. The third is in a letter to President Grant written by a freedman.

---

15. Quoted in and adapted from Francis B. Simkins and R.H. Woody, *South Carolina During Reconstruction*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1932), p. 564–68

# Digital History

[www.digitalhistory.uh.edu](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu)

I spoke first at this meeting; and I had spoken about five minutes ... when we heard a yelling and a number of mounted men came galloping up. At their head was Mr. Bowen, the State senator from that county.

Q. (Question) Were you speaking at this time?

A. (Answer) Yes sir ... I waited till they came up and they drew up in a semi-circle three or four deep right about us solidly, completely hemming in the colored people. There were three or four men with pistols. One fellow directly in front of me had his pistol out....I was interrupted and was called everything

*I was called a "dammed nigger" and was told to "shut up;" that these were "dam radical lies.' and that it was "no use to come up there, and talk for Chamberlain and the Republican ticket ...<sup>16</sup>*



## Letter from a Poor Freedman

### Kluxmen about to shoot into freedman's home

Charleston, Nov. 29th, 1876

President Grant:

Honored sir, this Letter is from a Poor freedman. I write to Let you 'no about times down this way the rebels are outrageous In our city they Have about fifteen Hundred Riffles scattered about in different Houses & they sit up every nigh to watch them they say the first chance they get they are going to kill the dam Leaders of the republican party & all the dam Yankees & niggers & that is just what they are doing they tried to kill Mr. Mackey the day after the election & they are shooting the negroes every night from secret places in the city & most every night some poor collored man Is shoot by some unknown Person. We collored citizens are suffering dreadful from the democrats my God President stand by us & protect us. If you don't see to It we cannot support the republican party Because the democrats will kill us.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup>South Carolina in 1876, 42nd Cong., 2nd Sess., Miscellaneous Document # 48, Vol. I. pp. 30-31..

# Digital History

[www.digitalhistory.uh.edu](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu)

## The Disputed Election

With 74,199 eligible white voters and 110,744 eligible black voters, the results of the election in 1876 were close, closer than they had been for many years:

Election Year	Democratic Votes	Republican Votes
1870	51,537	85,071
1872	36,533	69,838
1874	68,818	80,403

Republicans and Democrats both claimed victory in 1876. Each claimed that the other side had cheated. Both claimed their candidates as governor and set up an office in the state's capital. Republican governor Daniel H. Chamberlain and Democratic governor Wade Hampton each gave inaugural speeches. Hampton had the support of the Democratic clubs and influential white people. Chamberlain had the support of South Carolina's black people and depended on Federal troops to keep him in office. If the President were to withdraw the troops, his government would collapse. Read the advice given to the President in the letter below.

*We have tried for eight years to uphold Negro rule in the South officered by carpetbaggers, but without exception it has resulted in failure and almost ruin to our party. Statesmanship consists of making the best use of the means at command and of producing popular contentment.<sup>18</sup>*

## Senator Tillman Justifies Violence Against Black Americans

Some thirty years after the disputed election of 1876, Senator Ben Tillman of South Carolina actually stood up on the floor of the U.S. Senate and bragged about the methods used to end Congressional Reconstruction. Read the following and determine for yourself what conclusions can be drawn from this speech.

*It was in 1876, thirty years ago and the people of South Carolina had been living under negro rule for eight years. There was a condition of complete break down of government. The people's money was being stolen, our legislature was made up of a majority of negroes, most of whom could neither read nor write. They were as dirty a band of robbers that ever disgraced state government. There were wild orgies going on in the state house about every night. We set up the Democratic party with one plank only, "that this is white man's country and white men must govern it. Under that banner we went to battle.*

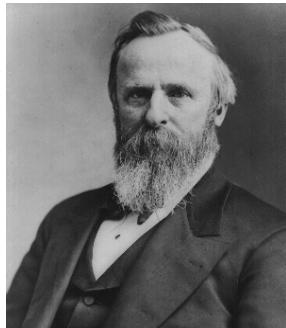
*It was then that "we shot them." It was then that "we killed them." It was then that "we stuffed ballot boxes." After the troops came and told us, "you must stop this rioting," we had decided to take the government away from men so low as the negroes. We saw the evil of giving the vote to creatures of this kind, and saying their vote is worth as much as the vote of a white man. Then it was that we stuffed the ballot boxes, because this disease needed a strong remedy. Once we decided to take the state away from them, we stopped at nothing.*

17Quoted in South Carolina in 1876, p. 99

18Quoted in Richard Current, Reconstruction, 1865-77., p.163

# Digital History

[www.digitalhistory.uh.edu](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu)



Rutherford Hayes

*I do not ask anybody to apologize for it. I am only explaining why we did it. I want to say now, that we have not shot any negroes in South Carolina on account of politics since 1876. We have not found it necessary. 1876 happens to be the hundredth year since the Declaration of Independence. This action of white men of South Carolina taking the State away from the negroes we see as the second declaration of independence by the white race from ignorant and uncivilized Africans.<sup>19</sup>*

### Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Briefly explain how the Red Shirts planned to win the election and show how the plan was put into effect.
2. Assume the role of one of the following and advise President Grant and your class what should be done concerning the election of 1876.
  - a. Freedman
  - b. White southerner
  - c. Republican in the North
  - d. Patriotic American
3. Read the epilogue and comment on the outcome of the election and its significance in America's history.

### Epilogue: The Disputed Election of 1876, and the Restoration of White Rule to the South

The President's decision to send more troops to South Carolina was complicated by the fact that 1876 was a presidential election year. In that election the Republican, Rutherford Hayes had received 165 electoral votes, while the Democrat, Samuel Tilden had received 184. Twenty votes were disputed between Democrats and Republicans because two separate sets of returns were sent to Washington from Louisiana, Florida, and South Carolina. If all disputed votes were awarded to Hayes, the Republican would become President; if but one of these votes went to Tilden, the Democrats would win the election.

To resolve this dispute, an electoral vote commission was assembled which, because of a last minute resignation of the only independent, consisted of seven Democrats and eight Republicans. The commission voted strictly along party lines, and awarded all 20 of the disputed votes, along with the election, to Hayes.

In his groundbreaking book, *Reunion and Reaction*, noted historian C. Vann Woodward argues that the real issue of 1877 was not merely who would occupy the White House. It was whether the party of Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner would remain loyal to its ideals or, if the conservative Republicans would abandon the freedmen in order to form an alliance with their former owners.

---

<sup>19</sup>Freely adopted from: Congressional Record, 59th Cong. 2nd Sess., Vol XLI (Jan. 21)

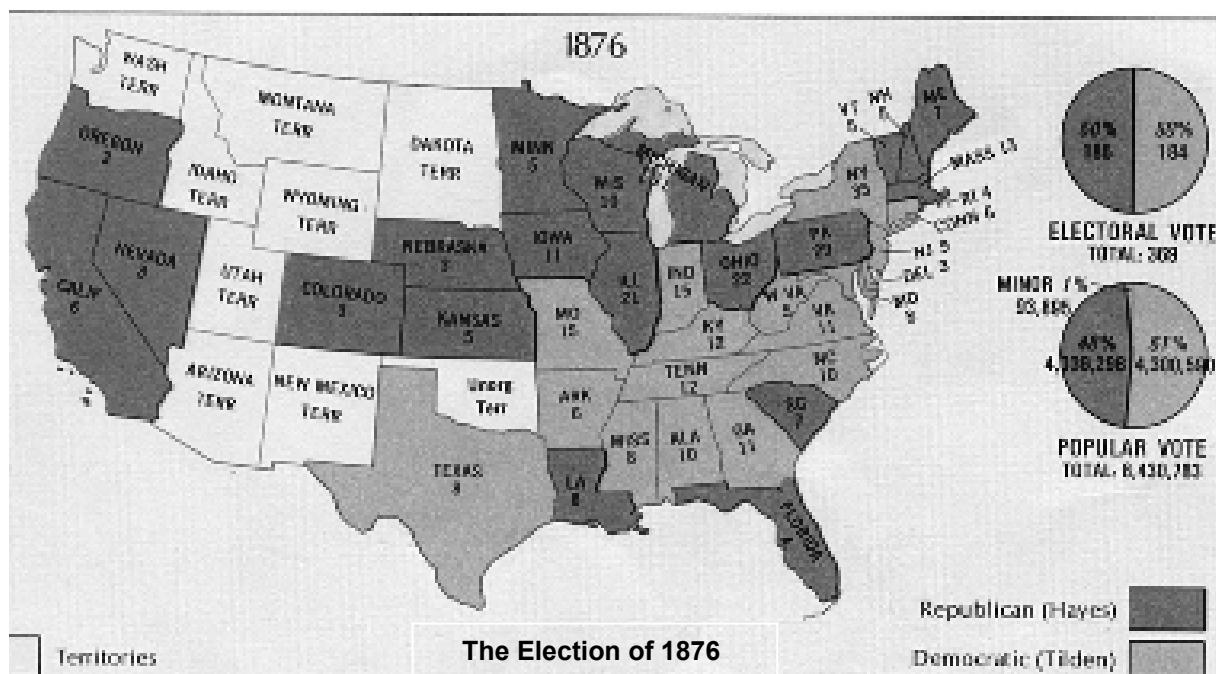
# Digital History

[www.digitalhistory.uh.edu](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu)

Woodward claims that many conservative Southerners were willing to make alliances with conservative Republicans. Both feared the mounting political unrest in the country, which was expressed in the desire for unlimited coinage of inflationary paper money or silver and in the numerous strikes by workingmen.

The Conservatives, on the other hand, wanted to have the money spent on internal improvements and to subsidize railroads in the North, matched with expenditures in the South. The question was whether the southerners could be lured into an alliance with these Republicans. In exchange for their support for more internal improvements, safe and non-inflationary money, continued high tariffs and an open immigration policy, the Republicans could offer them a free hand in racial matters and Federal subsidies. Thus, according to Woodward, the hidden issue was: would the South support the old Hamiltonian program that later emerged as Clay's American system and was finally incorporated by the Republican party platform of 1860.

Woodward claims that the deal was struck — the Democrats supported Hayes, and the Republicans abandoned the freedmen. This compromise which he calls the Compromise of 1877, differs from the Missouri and California compromises because it was made secretly and behind closed doors. It brought the South back into the Union with white rule restored, continued support for the new industrial order, and abandoned almost all efforts to help African-Americans secure their civil rights for more than 80 years.



Election results after decision by Electoral College Commission of 1877 awarded all 20 contested electoral votes by an 8-7 margin to Hayes and the Republican Party. Note similarities to results of year 2000 election in which George W. Bush, the Republican candidate beat Albert Gore, the Democrat. Gore won the popular vote but lost Florida when the Supreme Court in a split decision stopped a recount in which the Democrats challenged Florida's disputed popular votes. The Republican candidate carried Florida by approximately 500 votes and the country by 4 electoral votes.