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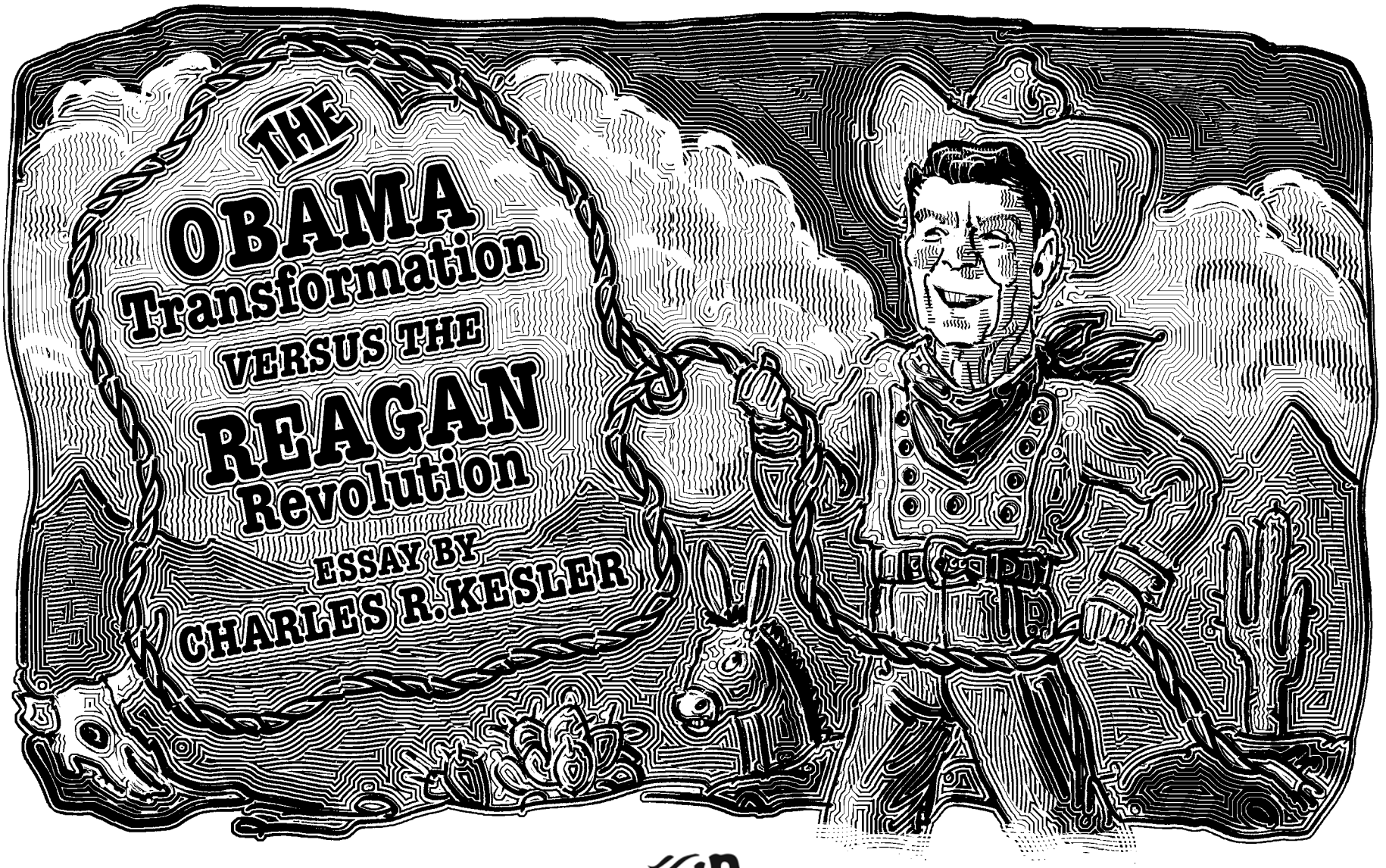

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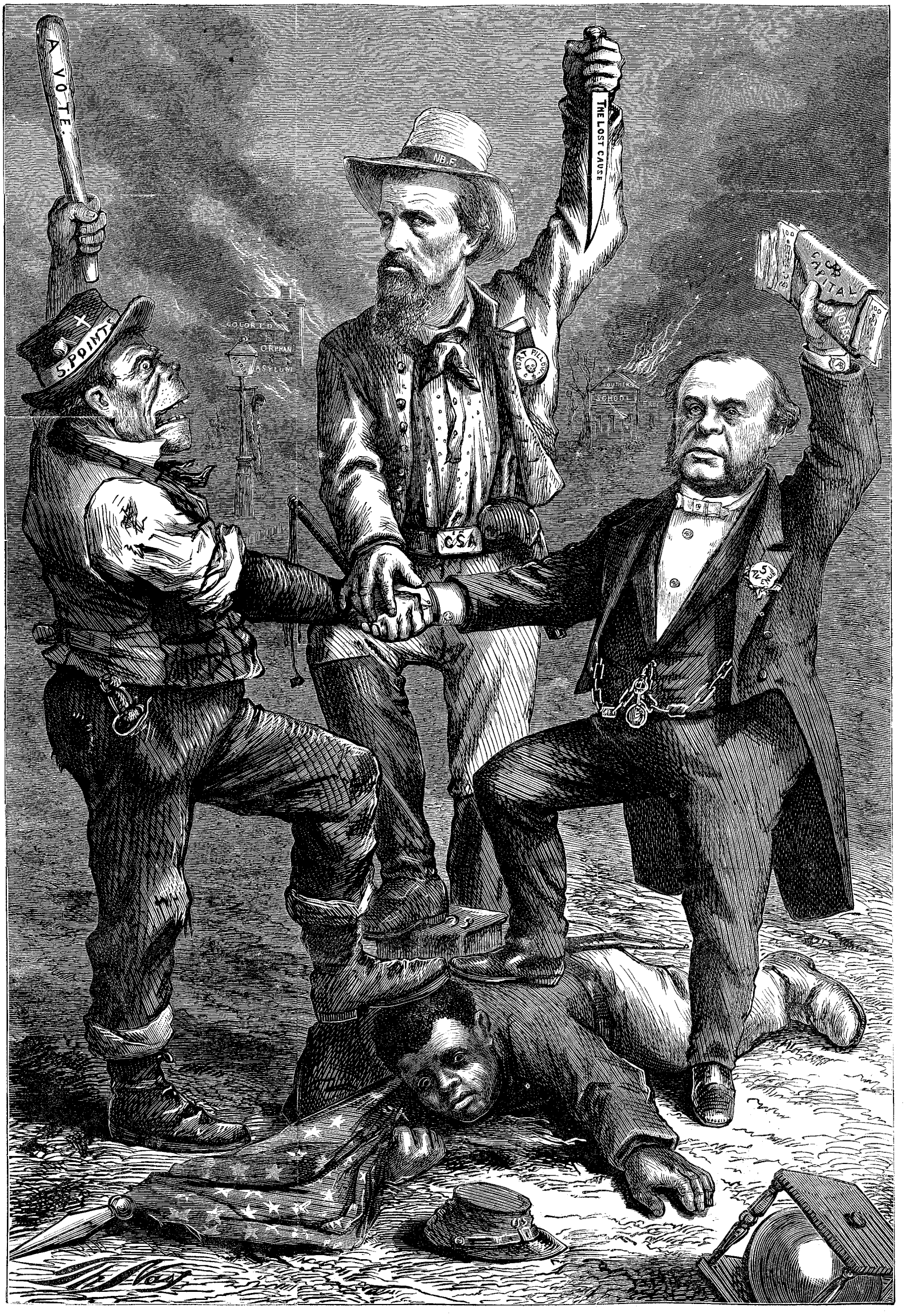
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5 POINTS

Book Review by Michael P. Zuckert

A More Perfect Union

The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era, by Douglas R. Egerton.
Bloomsbury Press, 352 pages, $29.99

After Lincoln: How the North Won the Civil War and Lost the Peace, by A.J. Langguth.
Simon & Schuster, 464 pages, $28

Statesmanship and Reconstruction: Moderate versus Radical Republicans on Restoring the Union after the Civil War, by Philip B. Lyons.
Lexington Books, 368 pages, $110

D.W. Griffith, once a famous film pioneer, is remembered for just one thing today: his notorious 1915 movie, *Birth of a Nation*. Celebrating the Ku Klux Klan and disparaging blacks, the film's racial attitudes were controversial a century ago, and have become reviled anachronisms since the civil rights movement's mid-century victories.

In 1930 Griffith released *Abraham Lincoln*, his first and now forgotten "talkie." Far from portraying the Confederacy's nemesis as a villain, however, the film celebrates him. (John Wilkes Booth, by contrast, is a crazed, vainglorious fool, unable to appreciate Lincoln's gentle, generous spirit.) The movie closes with a swelling chorus of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," while the statue in the Lincoln Memorial glows with celestial light. For Julia Ward Howe, "His truth is marching on" referred to God; Griffith all but deifies Lincoln.

Upon closer inspection, however, *Abraham Lincoln* affirms rather than repudiates *Birth of a Nation*. Late in the film we hear Lincoln declare, "We're going to take them [the Southern states] back as though they'd never been away." And the very last words he speaks—at Ford's Theatre just prior to Booth's appearance in the presidential box—are a pastiche of the Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural: "With malice toward none, with charity for all…let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds…and cherish a just and lasting peace." Griffith's Lincoln sought not the South's punishment but the Union's reconciliation—whether it would have included meaningful emancipation or not.

Griffith did not simply invent this Lincoln. According to historian Douglas R. Egerton, in the 1905 Thomas Dixon, Jr., novel, *The Clansman*, on which *Birth of a Nation* was based, Lincoln "wished only to restore the South as it had been." If he had lived, the aftermath of the war would have been far different from the tyrannical occupation that Dixon and Griffith's heroic Klan heroically resisted.

Nor was the Dixon-Griffith view simply a literary construct. It reflected a newly emerging historical consensus about Reconstruction. In 1901 the *Atlantic Monthly* published historian and political scientist William A. Dunning's "The Undoing of Reconstruction." That influential article was followed six years later by Dunning's *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865–1877*, which established a framework—propagated by the "Dunning School"—that would guide scholarly and popular thinking about Reconstruction for many years. Dunning's Reconstruction highlighted "Scalawags" and "Carpet-baggers," freedmen's corruption and incompetence, Republican venality and self-serving, errors of judgment and of malevolence. Reconstruction stood out as "the most soul-sickening spectacle that Americans have ever been called upon to behold," declared Columbia University political scientist John W. Burgess, a representative of the Dunning School.

In retreat since the 1950s, the Dunning School hardly exists any longer. Perhaps the high point of its repudiation is Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (1988). A.J. Langguth, Philip B. Lyons, and especially Egerton work within the framework Foner explicated. Their three books share many qualities, including an overriding interest in the theme announced in Langguth's subtitle: *How the North Won the Civil War and Lost the Peace*. Egerton raises the same question in a yet more pointed way: "why did this period of progressive reform end?" Reconstruction, in their view, did not fail because of its inherent vices, nor did Radical Republicans embody political malice, though Lyons expresses serious reservations about some of their policy choices.

The Dunning School looked at Reconstruction from the perspective of the South and the Democrats. Egerton, like Foner, champions the Radical Republicans, whom he most often calls "progressives." Though Langguth's perspective on the factions of the day is murky, the moderate Republican viewpoint is articulated and defended in Lyons's *Statesmanship and Reconstruction*.

Despite sharing a common theme, therefore, the three books differ a great deal. Egerton's *The Wars of Reconstruction* not only clearly conveys where he stands, but answers the questions he and Langguth share. A professor at Le Moyne College, and an accomplished scholar of the period surrounding the Civil War and of antebellum African-American history, Egerton attributes Reconstruction's failure to the fact that it was "far from radical." Its demise was not the inevitable result of a "solid South," unalterably opposed from the start to African-American freedom. Rather, he claims the white "accord" in the South "grew only slowly." In fact, he holds that "in the spring of 1865, as exhausted and starving soldiers came straggling home…a majority [of Southerners] were prepared to accept whatever terms Lincoln's government planned to impose." That spring "presented…[t]he nation… with a window of enormous opportunity, however brief." In an almost mirror-image reversal of Griffith and Dixon, Egerton says the window would "begin to close" with Lincoln's assassination.

Opposite:
"This Is a White Man's Government," political cartoon by Thomas Nast, published in Harper's Weekly, *September 5, 1868. Depicted standing atop a black Civil War veteran are a "Five Points Irish-man," Ku Klux Klan founder Nathan Bedford Forrest, and Wall Street financier and Democrat August Belmont.*

Egerton differs from Langguth and Lyons, however, by arguing it was the ascent of Andrew Johnson to the presidency, not the radicals' eventual empowerment, that doomed Reconstruction. Instead of exploiting the opportunity presented by the South's defeat and demoralization, as Egerton implies Lincoln would have done, Johnson dismantled as much as he could of the Reconstruction Lincoln already had in place or was planning. The new president did press states to ratify the 13th Amendment—not yet part of the Constitution at the time of Lincoln's death—but opposed all the remainder of the 1866 moderate Republican agenda, which Lincoln might well have supported. Johnson vetoed the renewal of the Freedmen's Bureau as well as the Civil Rights Act of 1866, and he opposed the 14th Amendment, managing in the process to alienate more or less every Republican in Congress, including important moderates like Senator Lyman Trumbull (Illinois) and Representative John Bingham (Ohio). Johnson not only refused to support congressional efforts to protect freedmen's rights in the South from the emerging Black Codes, he pardoned Confederate sympathizers and agents, restoring *their* rights and property, except for their slaveholdings.

Johnson's actions, "[f]rom his first moments in office…signaled his fellow white southerners that he would demand almost nothing of them," writes Egerton. Once it became clear he would curtail Reconstruction, Southerners concluded that resisting what remained of it held few risks and promised many benefits. The worst such resistance involved "targeted violence" against the freed slaves and the black and white activists assisting them. "[S]mall-scale but highly lethal violence" by the Ku Klux Klan and others "began as early as 1866."

"Reconstruction did not fail," according to Egerton; "in regions where it collapsed it was violently overthrown by men who had fought for slavery during the Civil War and continued that battle as guerrilla partisans over the next decade."

Though the late A.J. Langguth wrote many books of history and several novels, he was originally a journalist; he served as Saigon bureau chief for the *New York Times*. *After Lincoln* is the last of four books in his series on American history from the Revolution to Reconstruction. It is a very different book from Egerton's—less professorial, for one thing, and more readable. But unlike *The Wars of Reconstruction*, it lacks a central thesis, since Langguth offers historical characters and narratives rather than a clear argument.

Indeed, almost all the 20 chapters of Langguth's book are named for men who played some part in Reconstruction. The typical chapter supplies a sketch of its subject's life prior to the point in the Reconstruction story where he appears. More than half of Senator Charles Sumner's chapter, for example, describes his career before Lincoln's election to the presidency. Though interesting and occasionally dramatic, that story is not obviously germane to the allegedly central theme of "how the North won the Civil War and lost the peace." Though Langguth provides a narrative of some of the main events of Reconstruction, he hardly addresses, much less answers, the question raised by his book's provocative subtitle.

Langguth's volume relies almost entirely on secondary sources, while Egerton's *Wars of Reconstruction* contains a good deal of original research, focused on what one might call Reconstruction "on the ground." He directs our attention away from "high politics" in Washington to developments in the states, among black veterans, or in Freedmen's Bureau schools, which helps to elucidate some of the important successes of Reconstruction, including the impressive growth in black literacy and the Freedmen's Bureau's achievements in feeding so many displaced persons after the war.

For all that, Egerton's verdict on Reconstruction is persuasive only up to a point. For one thing, he overstates Andrew Johnson's role because he understates white resistance to the integration of the freedmen into American society. Perhaps the exhaustion of the South made it amenable to reshaping, but underlying racial attitudes would have asserted themselves the moment that exhaustion abated, Andrew Johnson or not.

Nor does Egerton see the radicals and their policies as any part of the problem. To note a vicious political dynamic that made a successful Reconstruction unlikely requires no partiality to the Dunning School. As President Johnson resisted the gentler measures promoted by the moderates and worked to restore the old Southern elite's political power, the GOP radicals demanded harshly punitive measures, including a greater militarization of the entire process. Since these steps had no chance of gaining the white South's consent—and there was no constituency on either side of the Mason-Dixon line for a permanent occupying army—it became only a matter of time until Union troops withdrew and the freedmen's fate was determined, once more, by their former masters.

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Though Philip Lyons is by training a political scientist, he spent most of his career not in the academy but in government, including many years at the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. His professional life afforded many opportunities to reflect on how Reconstruction affected America. Apart from a much greater emphasis on politics per se, *Statesmanship and Reconstruction* differs from the other two books in a number of ways. Unlike Egerton and Langguth, Lyons sympathizes most strongly with the moderates. Though both he and Egerton devote attention to developments outside Washington, Lyons concentrates not on social history but on the decisions of the men who held or sought power in Southern state politics, including their alliances, and their instances and failures of statesmanship. Lincoln, in all three books, is a touchstone for understanding a Reconstruction that might have gone better than it did, but Lyons devotes more systematic attention to him. He discusses those features of Lincoln's approach to reconstructing the South that appealed so much to D.W. Griffith, but insists on Lincoln's resolve to protect and further the fortunes of the freedmen.

Two features of the book are especially valuable. First, Lyons focuses on the aims and actions of political men with an eye to the question of what they should have done and how their actions achieved or fell short of wise action. He posits the criteria for what counts as statesmanship in terms of the dual requirements in the Declaration of Independence: protection of rights, and consent of the governed. In the context of Reconstruction, these translated into protection of the freedmen's rights with the consent of the Southerners themselves. Given the feelings between the races and the dynamics of national politics, this combination was inherently difficult to achieve. But the author tries to show how first Lincoln, and then the moderate Republicans (to a degree), and then various leaders in the states moved in the direction of policies that had some promise of simultaneously advancing both imperatives. These efforts were thwarted, however, sometimes by indigenous forces in the states, sometimes by unwise interventions by federal authorities, especially by President Johnson and then by President Ulysses S. Grant, and more generally by radical Republicans in Congress and the states.

Lyons's second great contribution is demonstrating that Reconstruction was not one thing, but quite different experiences in different states. He identifies three patterns that emerged, including one that really did promise success had President Grant not made some very poor decisions. Lyons uses his typology to organize and neatly capture what could otherwise be a sprawling mass of detail about the experiences of the 11 formerly seceded states. The three patterns reflect different kinds of effects the 1867 Congressional Reconstruction Act (CRA) had in the various states. That act provided for military reconstruction and gave military commanders in the states much power over local political outcomes. The Act also enabled the people of a state to come out from under military occupation by ratifying the 14th Amendment, conforming their state constitution to it, and mandating universal male suffrage. In some of the states, the CRA gave governors false confidence that their administrations could survive without significant white support. This was the case in Mississippi, where the radical Republican governor, a man genuinely devoted to black rights, neglected legitimate local white grievances over taxes. When he had a good opportunity to accommodate these concerns, he didn't, and a racial massacre occurred. Because no whites were punished for the murder of 300 blacks, Democratic hardliners were able to convince Democratic moderates that they had found a way, which they called the Mississippi Plan, to overthrow Republican governments—keep the violence low enough to avoid federal intervention and engage in threats and intimidation to keep blacks from voting. The same mistaken confidence led to the demise of Republican administrations in North Carolina and Georgia.

In a second pattern, the CRA left the moderate Republicans little leverage in dealing with their states' Democrats. For example, two moderate Republican governors of Alabama were so pressured by competing demands of radical Republicans on the one hand and hardliner Democrats on the other that their attempts at political balance proved futile. Both governors yielded power to the Democrats after trying to survive by abandoning their black constituents. Because of the same weakness, Democrats "redeemed" South Carolina and Tennessee.

The third, and potentially most promising pattern, was seen in those moderate Republican governments that overcame the bias of the CRA and had a chance of surviving. The only governor to succeed was the one who followed most closely in Lincoln's footsteps, Ossian Bingley Hart in Florida, who died after 16 months in office. By securing a constitution that favored moderate Republicanism and measures that brought economic stability where there had been none, he won a significant following from Republicans and Democrats. Extremists of both parties were sidelined and Democrats were persuaded to support a strong civil rights measure. A similarly statesmanlike effort by a moderate Virginia Republican leader to unite the radical and moderate wings of his party so that they could negotiate with the Democrats from a position of strength was defeated by the radicals' intransigence.

According to Lyons, President Grant, who, as General of the Army, had advised Congress on drafting the CRA, did not appreciate the value of the moderate Republican approach. Thus, his Southern Policy was marked by the rise of extremism dominating Reconstruction politics. This happened, for example, in three states where his backing would determine which Republican candidate won the governor's chair. Although the moderate candidates in two of these states had the greater promise of surviving politically, he chose the radical. For example, in Louisiana the president destroyed the only hope for the Republicans—an alliance between a moderate Republican governor and a statesmanlike black leader that could have bargained from a position of strength with the Democrats. Similarly, in Texas Grant backed the radical over the moderate for governor. The radical who won caused such opposition that he resigned before the end of his term. By following the advice of the radical Republican governor of Arkansas, Grant backed the wrong man for governor.

These three books show very persuasively that Reconstruction was not "the most soul-sickening spectacle" of American history. It doesn't necessarily follow, however, that the Dunning School was wrong about everything. Foolish, corrupt, and venal men were a significant part of the Reconstruction story. What's more, the division between Northern and Southern opinion made it very difficult to avoid a resolution like the one that finally took hold after 1876. This is not to say that the tragedies and disappointments of post-Civil War history were inevitable. We are left to ponder the possibility Lyons, especially, raises: how different would it have been had Lincoln (the real Lincoln; not the one of Griffith's biopic) and the moderate Republicans—rather than Johnson and the radical Republicans—vied for common ground on Reconstruction, marginalizing the radicals on both sides?

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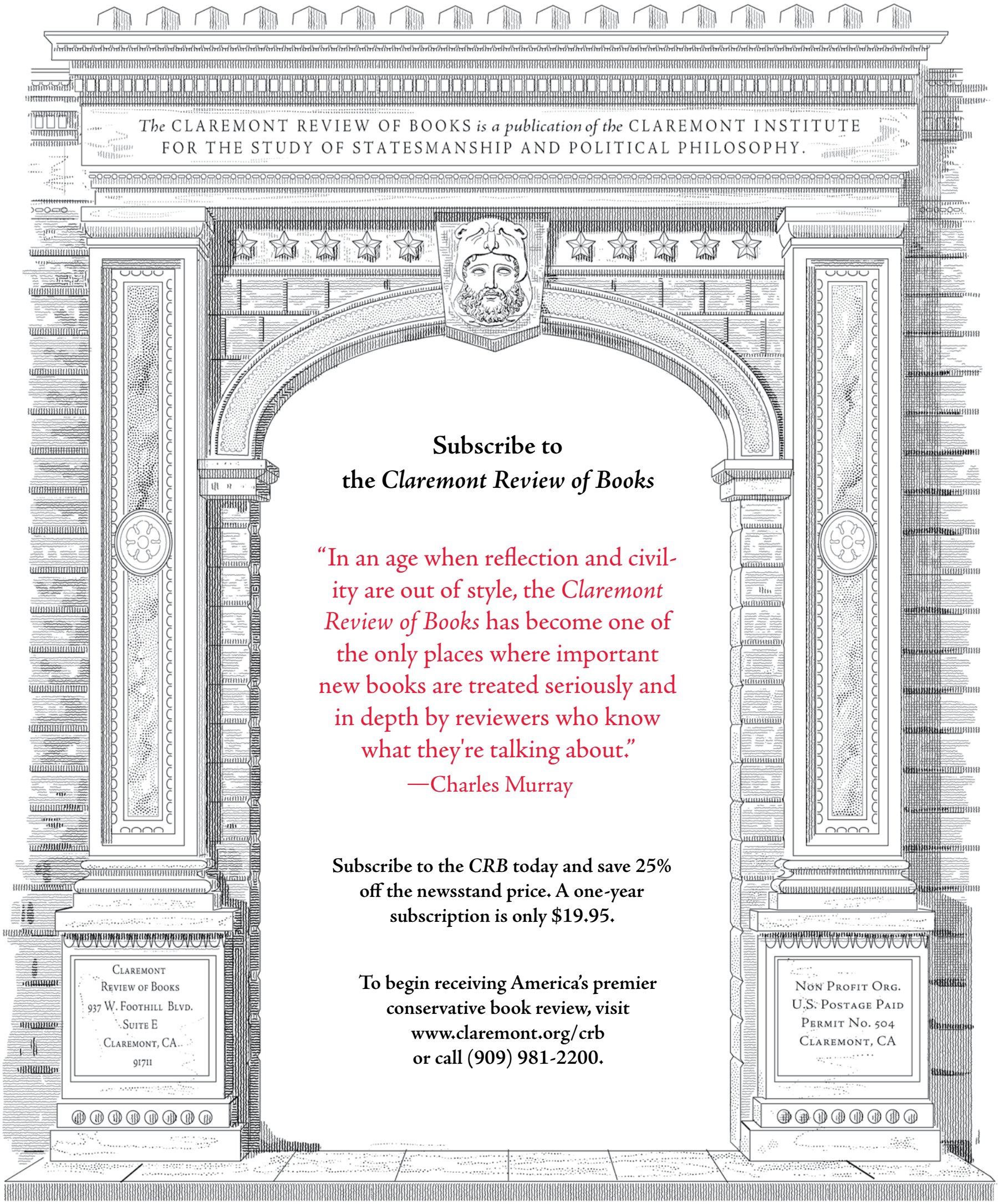

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