

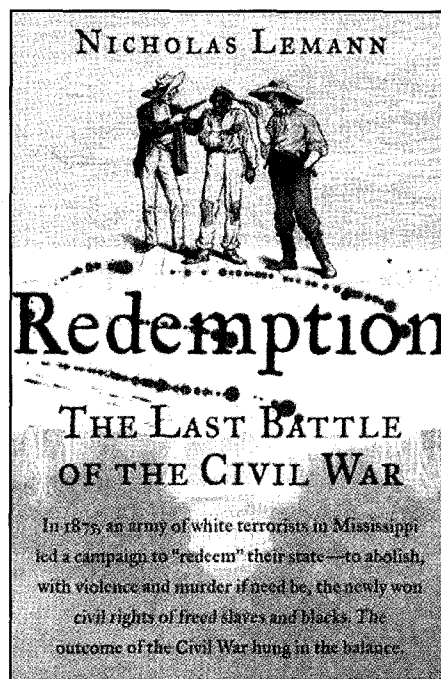
The Savage South

Lessons of an American insurgency.

By Jon Meacham

Albert T. Morgan was desperate and on the run. A Radical Republican in Reconstruction-era Yazoo City, Miss., he had managed to get elected sheriff in 1873—briefly, and only after great trouble from local whites who for a time refused to vacate the courthouse. Now, on Sept. 1, 1875, Morgan, who was white himself, was under assault from the White Leagues, armed groups dedicated to overturning the Southern military defeat in the Civil War by campaigns of violence and intimidation. At a public meeting in Yazoo, a town at the edge of the Mississippi Delta, a defiant white opened fire on Morgan, a veteran of the Union army, as he was making a campaign speech. To strike Morgan was to strike a blow against black voting and civil rights. As a bloody melee unfolded, Morgan slipped through a window and, from hiding, wrote the Reconstruction governor of the state, Adelbert Ames. “We must have U.S. troops,” Morgan wrote. “Can’t we get help from somewhere?” A follow-up letter was even more urgent: “Can nothing be done? I am in great danger of losing my life.... My friend, I fought four years; was wounded several times; suffered in hospitals, and as a prisoner; was in twenty-seven different engagements to free the slave and save our glorious Union—to save such a country as this!”

The ultimate answer from President Grant’s Washington about whether federal troops could establish order and enforce the laws—laws that would have allowed blacks to vote—was depressing and epochal: No. As usual, politics was paramount: Grant later recalled that Ohio Republicans prevailed on him to hold off from intervening in state affairs



Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War

By Nicholas Lemann
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$24.00

to placate national Republican sentiment for a limited national government. And so the terrorists—the word is chosen with care—won.

Tragically, of course, Morgan’s plea for help from the federal government to right racial wrongs in the South was one that would be repeated for nearly a century. The cry from the darkness of Yazoo would be most fully answered, I suppose, 90 years later, when, in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday, President Lyndon B. Johnson told Congress that God would favor the undertaking he proposed: a federal Voting Rights Act. While the story of Selma is well known—and 1965 is

rightly celebrated as a high-water mark of American liberty—1875 never makes the roll call of crucial years in the American story. (It is, to say the least, no 1776 or 1865.)

With the arrival of Nicholas Lemann’s brilliant new book, *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War*, however, both the year and its larger meaning stand a fine chance of receiving the notice and study they deserve. Lemann tells the riveting and largely unknown story of how the white South mounted a successful insurgency in the wake of Lee’s surrender, winning by terror and murder in the shadows what could not be won on the field. (The account of Morgan’s horrific experience in Yazoo is drawn from Lemann’s telling.) At a brisk 212 pages, *Redemption* is accessible and important, and we cannot really understand race or political power in modern America without understanding what happened in the South a decade after Appomattox. “Once the federal government had made it clear, most dramatically in Mississippi in 1875, that it would not enforce black people’s constitutional right to vote,” writes Lemann, who is now the dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University, “it left the way clear for the Southern states, after a time, to take that right away explicitly.” In this light, it is clear that the dark spirit of the South did not die in April 1865—and one large lesson of Lemann’s book, a lesson with deep resonance today, is that wars can be won or lost in the aftermath almost as completely as they can be in the pitch of organized battle.

A significant disclosure to the reader: I am not an objective reviewer of this book. A contributing editor of this magazine, Lemann was a generous counselor to me when I was an editor of *The Washington*

Monthly in the early 1990s, and I consider him a friend. I am also an unabashed admirer of his earlier work; I believe that his 1991 account of the black migration to the North, *The Promised Land*, is one of the finest books of the second half of the 20th century, and, like so many others, I have learned much from his *New Yorker* pieces on the people and culture of Washington. My opinion of *Redemption*, while not objective, is genuine.

At the heart of Lemann's new book stands Adelbert Ames, an engaging character whose ambition, good intentions, and ultimate failure seem to mirror that of many whites of the time, North and South. Born in 1835 in Rockland, Maine, Ames graduated from West Point in 1861, was wounded at Bull Run and went on to fight at Chancellorsville, Fredericksburg, Petersburg, Gettysburg, and Antietam. He led the capture of Fort Fisher, won the Medal of Honor, and was posted to South Carolina after the war to help restore order and enforce the peace.

On the simplest human level, Ames was horrified by what he found in the defeated South. His time was spent, he wrote his parents, "in trying white men for killing negroes, of which work we have more than we can well do." White Southerners, he said, "think about as much of taking the life of a Freedman as I would that of a dog." In March 1869, under Grant, Ames became the provisional governor of Mississippi. The work at hand was enormous, but it was the work for which the Civil War had been fought. In Lemann's words, Ames's "main assignment was to supervise—with the backing of a new president who seemed prepared to be much tougher on the former Confederates than his predecessor, Andrew Johnson, had been—a fall election in which Mississippi would approve the new state constitution, accept the new federal Fourteenth and Fifteenth constitutional amendments, which guaranteed Negroes civil and voting rights, and elect state officials, after which it would, at last, be readmitted to the United States."

The world Ames was entering was one of black hopes and virulent white resentment—a virulence that, in the early 1870s, turned repulsively violent. Lemann opens the book with a detailed account of a massacre at Colfax, La., in 1873. It was Easter morning, and local

whites rebelled against the workings of an actual democracy in which blacks could vote, hold office, and—worst of all from the white point of view—wield authority over their former masters. After a stand-off, blacks holed up in the courthouse offered their surrender to an armed force of Confederate veterans. Whites claimed the blacks fired upon them as they made their way to accept the surrender; blacks denied it, but, as Lemann notes, there is no dispute about what happened next. "The whites slaughtered them," Lemann writes. "Burning Negroes jumped from the second-story window or ran out the front door 'only to meet a savage and hellish butchery'" as T. Chester Morris, the noted black Civil War correspondent, reported. Lemann picks up the story: "Inside the building they pried up floorboards and tried, unsuccessfully, to hide beneath them. They were all killed, unarmed, at close range, while begging for mercy....What was happening now was not a hard military fight but a killing frenzy after the battle was over, after the outcome had been clearly settled, and with [the whites'] opponents unarmed."

Such was the Southern way of death on the holiest day of the Christian year. As Morris put it in New Orleans after Colfax: "On Easter Sunday, when the Christian world was chanting anthems in commemoration of the resurrection of the world's Redeemer, when from every sanctuary the gospel of love and peace was proclaimed, it was then that angels veiled their faces, and devils howled at the bloody and revolting scenes that were enacted on the banks of the Red River."

There were many Colfaxes throughout the Reconstruction South, particularly in Ames's Mississippi. A rising man—he married the beautiful daughter of Congressman Benjamin Butler, the ferocious Union man who actually waved the bloody shirt of a murdered federal official on the floor of the House to underscore the depth of Southern depravity—Ames was nevertheless defeated by the relentlessness of white resistance to conform to the law of the land. Often rebuffed by the federal government, surrounded by whites who either actively or implicitly supported violent defiance, Ames gloomily retired to the governor's mansion in Jackson in the mid-1870s, reading Trollope's *The*

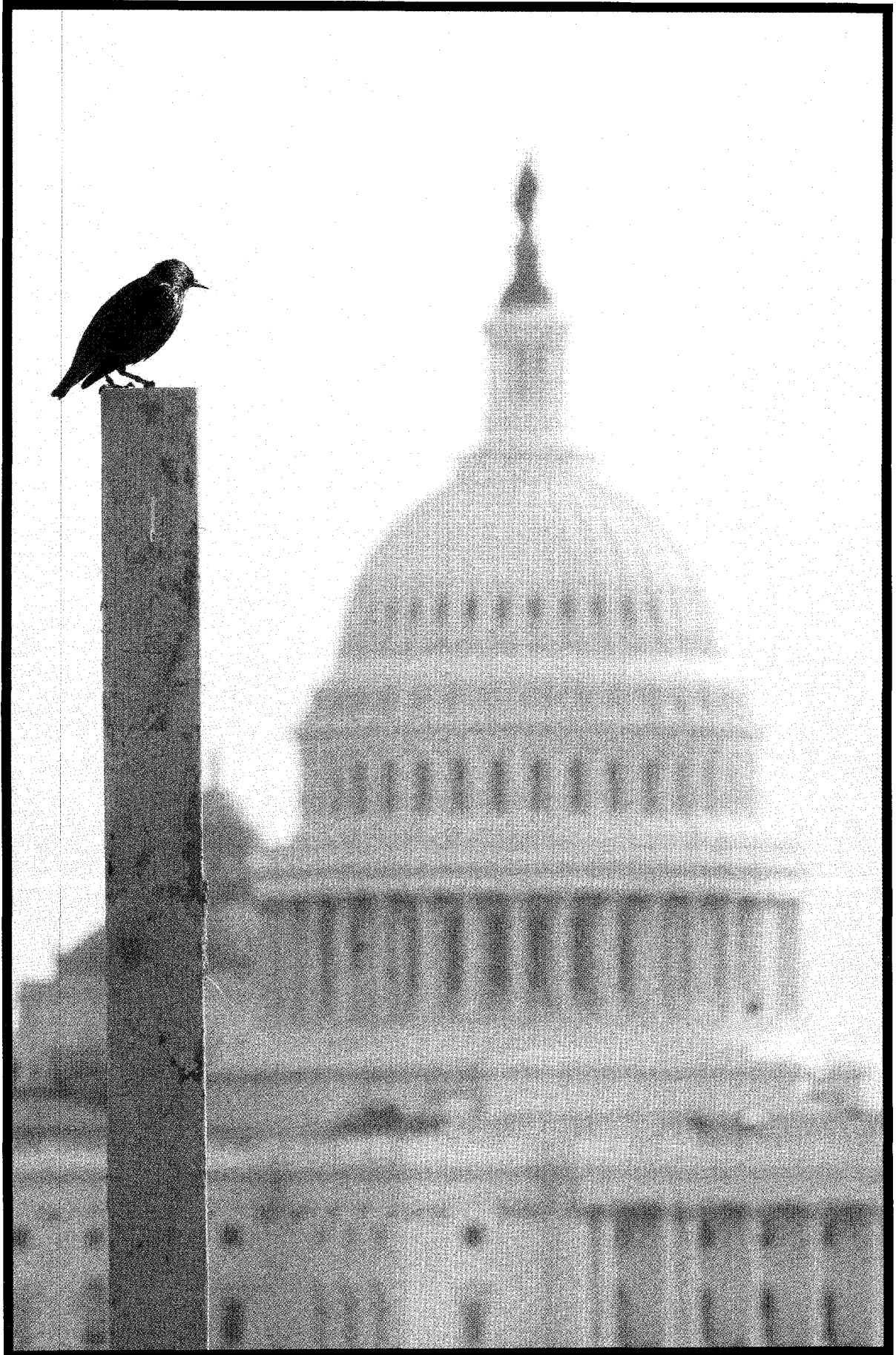
Way We Live Now and mulling whether he could invent a new kind of ladder.

Meanwhile, outside the mansion, the state was descending into tyranny. Gen. Philip Sheridan thought that much of the region was in the grip of "terrorism," and Ames's father, reading accounts of the white violence against blacks and those who defended their rights, wrote his son to tell him things one suspects Ames already knew well: "I fear that Congress will not give the President power to put down the White Leaguers of the South. If not, there can be nothing but a reign of terror in the South until the nation is involved in a Civil War from one end of the land to the other of which the last war is a mere trifle compared to it."

Ames's father was correct in the broadest sense: The war over civil and voting rights would last another hundred years or so, and the rise of Jim Crow in the years after the battles of the 1870s was itself a reign of terror. The "Redemption" of Lemann's title is the Southern version of postwar history—the old Confederacy was "redeemed" from the Civil War by standing up for itself in the years afterward. Lemann brilliantly describes how the traditional story of Reconstruction—that the South was treated brutally by politically corrupt carpetbaggers who forced the enfranchisement of supposedly inferior blacks—took shape in the racist ethos of the late nineteenth century. This skewed version of history endured, however, and, excepting the more overt racism, even now remains prevalent in the popular imagination. Lemann has corrected the record, and we owe him a great debt.

On that long-ago night in Yazoo City, Albert Morgan, the sheriff who was driven into hiding by angry whites, struck an important note in one of his anxious letters to Ames. "I have some love left for my country, but what is [a] country" that fails to "protect...its defenders?" It is a question that echoes down the decades, and should remind all of us who love our country that the defense and projection of her true values require much—on the field of battle, and far beyond.

Jon Meacham, the managing editor of *Newsweek*, is the author of *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of America*.



Washington, DC, photographed by Sam Kittner

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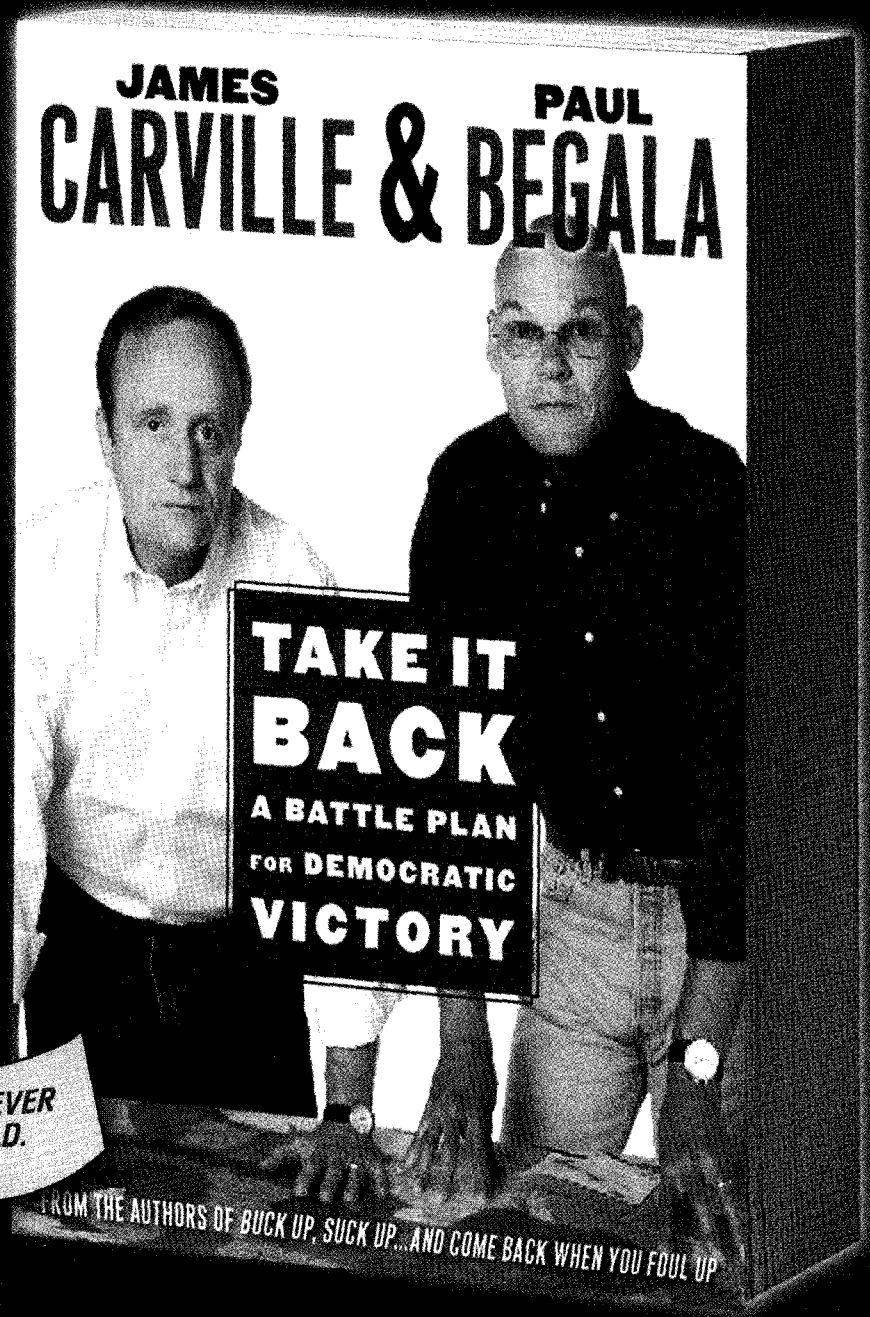
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