



# ***The Union League***

## ***Forgotten Scourge of Reconstruction***

Principal credit to John Chodes, “The Union League: Washington’s Klan”, copyright 1999, League of the South paper no. 3, as presented at the Southern Heritage Conference, Monroe, Louisiana, May 2006.

*“... it is your duty to see that the true history of the South is presented to future Generations.”*

*General S.D. Lee*



## ***Its Role in the South***

**“To understand fully the almost absolute control exercised over the blacks in 1867-68 by alien adventurers, one must examine the workings of an oath-bound society known as the Union or Loyal League. It was this order, dominated by a few radical whites, which organized, disciplined, and controlled the ignorant Negro masses and paralyzed the influence of the conservative whites.”**



## ***A Tale of Travesty***

- **To the Union League and its antecedents and descendants, a variety of ills past and present can be attributed:**
  - Federal control of the school system, and its attendant propagandizing of the Northern cause
  - Gross injustices of the “Reconstruction” era
  - Motivation of establishment of the Ku Klux Klan, the distortion of its deeds, and the consequent further injustices wrought by Northern tyranny over the South
  - Systematic destruction of relations between white and black Southron, which continues to this day
- **That the Union League remains essentially unremembered, even in the South, is a measure of Northern propaganda**



# ***Union League Origins***

- **One of several organizations, also known as Loyal Leagues, founded in 1862 to promote the Union cause and the radical Republican Party**
  - Notoriety of the League lies not in its accomplishments during the war, or even its heavy-handed support of the radical Republican Party in the North afterwards, but in its activities in the South during its military occupation and the political wasteland of “Reconstruction”
- **Generally thought to descend from the U.S. Sanitary Commission**
  - The Commission purported to form and guide organizations to help treat wounded soldiers after the battle had ended



# ***U.S. Sanitary Commission***

- **Brainchild of Dr Henry Bellows**
  - Originally “Women’s Central Association of Relief”
  - Proposed to Lincoln, rebuffed. Accepted by Medical Bureau.
- **Coordinated efforts of 7000 aid societies**
  - Food and aid to convalescing soldiers
  - Evolved into American Red Cross
- **Key executive, Secretary General Frederick Olmsted**
  - Political fanatic, abolitionist, rabidly anti-Southern
  - Believed central government to be a positive moral force
- **Bellows and Olmsted created the Union Leagues to advocate “Unconditional Loyalty” to an indivisible union**
  - Philosophy paralleled the centralized state of the Republican Party; opposed the federal model of the Democratic Party



# ***Union League Founding***

- **References conflicting, but the “Union League of America” founded in Ohio or Illinois in summer or fall of 1862**
  - Motivation popularly credited to the low ebb of Union fortunes in the war, to counter growing sentiment to cease aggression
- **A convention in Cleveland in May 1863, provided for a national headquarters of the Union League in Washington**
  - The clubs were originally formed to distribute war literature, raise money for soldier relief, and recruit both white and black volunteers for the army.
- **By the end of 1863, it claimed nearly a million members.**



## *During the WBTS*

- **Helped form military units**
  - E.g.: 214th Pennsylvania Regiment (“Union League Regiment”)
- **Helped rally allegiance in the North**
  - Most cities had an active club
  - Membership and allegiance were often coerced
- **Consistent with Sanitary Commission origin, agents purported to “care for Negro refugees”**
  - Cooperating with the Freedmen's Aid Societies, Department of Negro Affairs, Freedmen's Bureau
- **Real role to distribute political literature propagandizing the Republican Party, disenfranchise white Confederates**



## ***During “Reconstruction”***

- **Union League organizations formed throughout the South as working arms of the Republican Party. Objectives:**
  - Get and control the black vote
  - Keep the Republican Party in power
  - Disenfranchise and control the white populace
- **The League played key roles in many locales into the 1870’s.**
  - Much energy was spent on rivalries within the League and Republican Party, and the League generally petered out as an effective political force in the South around 1873.
- **Strong force against moderation and attempts to return to Constitutional government**
  - “Bureau of Freedmen, Abandoned Lands and Refugees” enjoyed unlimited power in the South, and the League became synonymous with it



# ***Martial Law***

- **After the war, the Union standing army was reduced to 48,000 men; far too few to occupy the South**
  - Local “militia” were raised
  - Alabama Governor organized 137 companies of militia
- **Governor was commander in chief**
  - Empower the Republican carpetbagger government
  - Paid from “sale of contraband and captured property seized or captured by the militia” and taxes assessed by the governor
- **Militia forces, ~1/4 million strong, soon consisted of only black troops who were all members of the Union League**
  - Existing white militia disbanded by an unconstitutional law passed the same day as the first Reconstruction Act



## *Post-War Composition of the League*

- **Led by “...officials of the Freedmen's Bureau, carpetbaggers, and scalawags.”**
  - Many all-black leagues were led by Northern black activists
  - Early white members were Unionists and political opportunists
  - White membership declined as carpetbaggers found they could control the organization without the scalawags
  - "Worse instructors for men emerging from slavery and coming for the first time face to face with the problems of free life than the radical agitators who have undertaken the political guidance of the blacks it would be hard to meet with."
- **Allure among blacks sometimes attributed to mysticism of secrecy, initiation rites, ritual and song**
- **Peer power, fines, intimidation and outright force insured nearly universal black participation**



# *Political Machine*

- **State-by-State success of Grant in the 1868 election correlates well to the power of the Union League militia**
  - Governor Holden of North Carolina boasted he had at his control 80,000 men, and that Grant desired Holden to be “emperor” and his son to succeed him
- **Militias used in intra-Party wars**
  - "Brooks-Baxter War" for governorship of Arkansas, 1872
  - Radical vs. Liberal Republicans Mississippi, 1872-1875
  - Texas governor used militia to obtain, later contest election
- **Black militia versus peaceful black Democrats**
  - Black Democrats subject to intimidation and violence
  - Early convictions under the Ku Klux Klan laws were of blacks assaulting other blacks voting conservative Democratic



## ***Excesses During Reconstruction***

- **Negroes were taught by the League that the only way to have peace and plenty was to kill some of the leading whites in each community as a warning to others**
  - Matches were routinely handed out at meetings. In North Carolina, 28 barns were burned on League orders one night.
  - In Tusculumbia, use of the torch on the town was ordered. By intervention of individual peaceful blacks, residences were spared, but the Female Academy was burned.
- **The Bureau operated its own military court system**
  - Presumed guilty, no writ of habeas corpus, no jury, no records
  - Mass confiscation of private property
  - Compelled tax-supported schools controlled by Washington
- **Ku Klux Klan was formed because of the League's and Bureau's excesses**



## ***Crimes leading to the KKK***

- **Blacks were armed and empowered to give wholesale pardons; whites were disarmed and disenfranchised**
  - Black militia murdered a crippled Confederate veteran in South Carolina. Five militia members were arrested. When the militia tried to move them to another county for pardon, a white armed band executed the law on the spot.
- **Property burnings rampant in North Carolina, often on direct orders from League leader Governor Holden.**
  - Holden's henchman Senator Stephens attended League meetings and handed out matches.
  - When Stephens was executed by the KKK, Holden enacted anti-Klan law and declared martial law, provoking atrocities.
  - "a disgrace to the nineteenth century" *New York World*



# *More Crimes*

- **Arkansas**

- Governor declared martial law two days before the 1868 general election, leading to four months of terrorism.

- **Georgia**

- Large armed black militia group led by carpetbagger whites tried to enter a town. Repulsed by legitimate white posse, but northern press characterized it as a “massacre.”

- **Alabama**

- Even Republican carpetbagger Nicholas Davis bemoaned in Huntsville that the black Leaguers “forbade me to speak on the street.”
- Union League militia in Huntsville was “constantly parading the streets with guns on their shoulders.” Dogs and cows were favorite targets.



## ***Reaction to KKK***

- **Rise of the Klan prompted another round of federal usurpation of rights, imposition of martial law and atrocities**
  - League groups often posed as Klan, committing crimes that resulting in even more strict Klan laws
- **1870 Congressional committee to investigate the Klan resulted in the “Enforcement Act” and “Force Laws”**
  - Yet non-radical committee members found that the Klan arose as an “inescapable consequence” of the League’s brutality
- **League/Republican propaganda machine very effective at convincing the general northern populace and the outside world of the righteousness of the federal terror**
  - Yet many observers, north and south, denounced the laws, general corruption, oppression in the South, and further precedent of centralized government ascendancy



# ***After Reconstruction***

- **Union League clubs existed in many northern cities into the twentieth century**
  - Evolved into gentlemen's private social clubs, with less overt exercise of political power
  - Remnants also remain as a retirement home in Brooklyn and a café in New Haven
- **Elite social clubs in New York, Philadelphia and Chicago**
  - Sometimes they claim no connection to the infamous Union League Clubs of the Reconstruction era
  - Union League Club of New York founded the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1870), helped found the *American Red Cross*, raise the Statue of Liberty and Grant's Tomb
  - Philadelphia and Chicago clubs are socially active and philanthropic



## ***Conclusion***

- **The League's history is now either neglected, sugar-coated, or simply misrepresented in a politically correct form.**
  - Compare the wildly-divergent Encyclopedia Britannica articles of 1954 and 2007.
  - Recent academic treatments have appeared that tell the story in terms of a grand political emancipation of the negro, rather than as a story of his exploitation
  - League excesses are excused in this spin as being a *reaction* to the Ku Klux Klan activity, rather than the Klan's appearance resulting from the League's misdeeds
- **But most dangerously, the League's history and its lessons are simply forgotten by the people it most harmed**