

**RACE AND THE REVOLUTIONARIES: HOW RACIAL IDENTITY HAS
DETERMINED THE LEGACY OF NAT TURNER AND JOHN BROWN**

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The use of violence to obtain freedom has always been recognized as a means to an end in United States history. The thirteen colonies fought against the imperial force of Great Britain because they had been oppressed for years and deserved their independence. During this time, the white landowners, in what became the United States, had slaves and as they wrote the Declaration of Independence and proclaimed “All men are created equal” the black citizens remained property of these newly independent people. This inconsistency reiterated the theme that slaves were not people deserving of any recognition, and even free people of color were not equal with land owning white men. As slavery continued over the years, people began to speak out against slavery and between 1780 and 1804 it was abolished in all Northern states. This was done through protesting, lettering writing, and revealing of the evils of slavery to and by some white people. Decades went by and though abolitionist continued to fight against slavery in the South no changes were made. Generations of slaves began to understand that passive actions were not creating the social change they needed, and that perhaps violence was the next step. This need for violence was increased in the 1857 Supreme Court decision which declared that blacks- free or slave- would never be equal to white people. This law of the land made clear to abolitionists that there was nothing that passive resistance could do to abolish slavery and establish equality for African Americans. John Brown and Nat Turner epitomized the theme that violence was the only means of destroying slavery and are viewed unequal and different historically because specifically because of each man’s racial identity.

Frederick Douglass

One of the best known abolitionists and former slaves is Frederick Douglass. When he escaped slavery and began working with abolitionists, he felt that passive resistance was the best course of actions for attaining freedom for the slaves. He disagreed strongly with Gerritt Smith's idea that if governments "have a constitution under which it cannot abolish slavery, then it must override the constitution and abolish slavery," (Goldstein). Douglass was also not completely passive in that he supported the use of force in situations of self-defense and self-assertion. In his early life he was against a large scale violent slave revolt and was against the use of warfare as a means to end slavery. Leslie Friedman Goldstein writes, "He (Douglass) preferred to try and avoid the bloody horrors that these two alternatives entailed, and he was endeavoring to go about abolition by peaceful means," (64). But he, like his enslaved people, could not see the end in sight and came to reform his ideas. This continued when he met with John Brown in 1847. His ideas shifted and his reasoning regarding violence changed radically. He wrote in 1854, "violent resistance to would-be slave catchers was wise as well as just," (66). Goldstein continues, "Douglass simply picked up this argument of the slaves' right to revolt and lent it increasing emphasis, while he eventually dropped his counsels against violence," (67). He even went as far as to insist that slaves had a right to kill all who would keep them in slavery. Douglass knew that slaves had rights that were not being acknowledged and that someone had to physically fight for them. Douglass states, "Slave holders have no rights more than any other thief or pirate. They have forfeited even the right to live, and if the slave should put every one of them to the sword tomorrow, who dare pronounce the penalty disproportioned to the crime?" (Life and Times 359). Douglass' opinion on violence and slavery is vital in the understanding of the historical views of Brown and Turner, along with the white community and black leaders. He was a leader and

speaker who reached groups that very few blacks did. The mainstream white community understood that he was the spokesman for the escaped slave, and if he condoned violence in response to slavery, numerous people heard about this. He affected the ideals and moral of several abolitionists, and his insistence on freedom for slaves scared slaveholders in the South. Douglass knew that violence was the only way to achieve freedom for black slaves, and two very famous and infamous men lived by this exact same principle.

Turner was not influenced by Douglass in that he led his rebellion seven years before Douglass even escaped slavery, but Turner's revolt influenced Douglass's views on violence. Douglass wrote a novella in 1853 called "The Heroic Slave" about a slave named Madison Washington, who escaped slavery in Virginia to Canada. Washington then returned and led a revolt in order to rescue his wife and children, and he only killed two people. At first the white community saw this as a criticism of Turner, in that he writes of a man who achieved what he wanted without mass murder. Instead, Douglass links these two men in a speech in Ireland. He says, "there are many Madison Washingtons and Nathaniel Turners in the South, who would assert their right to liberty, if you would take your feet from their necks," (Douglass, Farewell speech to British People). Ellen Weinauer writes, "More Strikingly, in 1848 Douglass dares to link Washington and Nat Turner in a genealogy of resistance...In this speech Douglass seems to have cast aside the need for a domesticated Washington who serves as a reassuring foil for Turner," (195). Along with Turner, Brown strongly influenced Douglass and his views on violent resistance. Brown met and stayed with Douglass just months before his revolt at Harpers Ferry. Both of these men, Turner and Brown, used violence as a means of ending slavery, and Douglass, a great influence on all abolitionists and the greater white community, was inspired by

these men. There is a universal recognition of Douglass, and because Brown and Turner are vital to him, they are also to American history.

Introduction

John Brown and Nat Turner are both known for their violent attacks against slavery; John Brown's 1856 Pottawatomie Massacre and 1859 attack on Harpers Ferry and Nat Turner's slave rebellion nearly 30 years earlier in South Hampton County, Virginia in August of 1831. Brown, a white man of Puritan heritage, and Turner, a preaching slave, were led by deep religious conviction and commitment to doing right by the Lord. Paul Finkelman, editor of *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the Harpers Ferry Raid*, calls Brown a "symbol of the emerging holy crusade against slavery" (5). Turner considered himself the leader, called by God, of the crusade against slavery. The similarities between these men are numerous and vital to the recognition of their accomplishments. One obvious difference between these two men is that one, Brown, was a middle class white man who fought injustice towards black slaves, and the other, Turner, was a black slave who sought freedom for himself and his people. Race has significantly influenced both men's legacy. Brown is regarded by some as a crazy terrorist because he betrayed his own race to help people who weren't like him, while Turner is considered a hero who fought to free his own people. On the other hand there are biographies, articles, and books directed at the impact Brown made on American history. There are sketches, paintings, and drawings dedicated to him. Whether the conversation about Brown is good or bad, people talk and write about his impact on history. Because Turner was a black slave, his story is not as well known, and history tried mercilessly to cover up what he did. Kenneth S. Greenberg explains:

We have always been, and we remain today, a nation deeply divided over how to remember slavery and slave rebellions. One symptom of our division is evidenced by the

almost total absence of public historical monuments to commemorate slave rebels like Turner. Another symptom is embodied in the deep and bitter interpretive debates that divide the scholarly community (3).

Brown has a memorial, monument, and museum. There is no known place where Turner was buried. It is rumored that his body was torn apart and his skin was used to make purses. Both men's legacies are affected greatly by race and identity politics.

John Brown

John Brown was born in Torrington, Connecticut on May 9, 1800. His interaction with abolition began at the age of five when his family moved to Hudson, Ohio and became affiliated with the Oberlin Institute. This later became Oberlin College, the first institute of higher education to admit black students. His father, Owen Brown, was a devout Calvinist and taught Brown about a strong belief in the Golden Rule and human rights. Along with this came a strong belief that God was “absolutely sovereign and humans were absolutely helpless in the face of God’s powers,” as David S. Reynolds explains in his biography *John Brown, Abolitionist*. For Brown there was no grey area in matters of morality, and he would use this idea years later to fight against Christian slave owners. Scott John Hammond explains, “Brown appears to have been a practitioner of the Christian ethic framed by the imperative of universal love and compassion for others, especially those who suffer under the yoke of oppression and injustice” (62). Brown was always driven by his need for justice, and especially after the trial of Dred Scott, where there was no choice but to act in violence. Hammond continues,

For Brown, unlike most of his fellow Americans, the only solution was an obvious one--brook no sympathy for or concession to the minions of evil, and unconditionally submit without hesitation or diffidence to the Higher Authority, never relenting until total emancipation was achieved or sublime retribution judiciously dispensed. (63)

John Brown, who had lived with abolitionist ideals since his birth, felt he had to resort to violence because of the Supreme Court's decision in *Dred Scott v. Sanford*. William Lloyd

Garrison, an abolitionist and supporter of Brown, explained, “I say, in accordance to the principles of peace, that I do not believe the sword should be unsheathed, I do not believe the dagger should be drawn, until there is in the system to be assailed such terrible evidences of its corruption, that it becomes the *dernier resort*” (Reynolds 70). This corruption is the 1857 decision, in *Dred Scott v. Sanford*, that determined African American slaves and their decedents are not citizens and are not protected by the constitution. Brown could no longer petition, write letters, or talk about freeing the slaves because the law had been settled and given him no other choice. This legal conclusion turned the abolition movement from an organization that wanted change through passive resistance and demonstration to a group that had no hope. Because there was no longer any hope in the legal system Brown had come to the “dernier resort” and used violence to achieve his goals.

This violence, or last resort, culminated in the form of two different attacks. The first was the Pottawatomie Massacre on May 24 and 25 of 1856. In response to the sacking of Lawrence, Kansas, an anti-slavery establishment, Brown and a group of abolitionist settlers violently killed five pro-slavery settlers. These people were stabbed, shot, and chopped up with swords. The second was an attack on one of the United States Southern arsenals, Harpers Ferry in Virginia. Browns attack on Harpers Ferry began years before all plans physically manifested on October 16, 1859. As early as 1854, Brown was considering an attack on the slavery system in Virginia. His focus from the beginning was on the American arsenal and armory station Harpers Ferry, and he knew that he wanted this attack to include not only white men who were strong in their moral convictions against slavery but also slaves who wanted to rise up and fight for their own freedom. In March of 1857, he contacted a forge master in Connecticut to begin crafting a thousand pikes to be given to the slaves who would come to his side during his attack. He spent a

month in the home of Frederick Douglass during January and February of the next year, writing up a provisional constitution for the revolutionary state and planning his raid. Douglass agreed that actions needed to be taken, but as Paul Finkelman explains, called it a “suicide mission,” (Finkelman 6). A year later on February 22, 1858, Brown revealed his plan to Gerrit Smith and Franklin Sanborn who, along with Reverend Thomas Wentworth Higgins, Theodore Parker, George Sterns, and Samuel Gridley Howe, became known as the “Secret Six” and would back Brown’s raid financially. These men were wealthy businessmen, ministers, educators, but more importantly abolitionists living on the East coast. Brown began to travel west to gather more funds and followers. As he continued to recruit raiders, a friend and fellow abolitionist John E. Cook moved to Harpers Ferry and found work. He surveyed the town, gained important insight into the white people, but also the ideals and attitudes of the slaves. Cook also sought insight into the armory and the lay of the land.

Brown continued to travel and preach to people the importance of fighting back against the evils of slavery. In December of 1858 he invaded a plantation in Missouri, killed a slave owner, and liberated 11 slaves. Though he was heavily pursued by law enforcement, he escaped and led all 11 slaves to freedom in Canada. Even with a \$250 reward for his capture, Brown returned to the United States and spoke in Ohio, New York, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. At this point all of his planning was coming to an end and he was ready to act. He spoke with the “Secret Six” about the final plan, and then headed back to North Alba to say his final goodbyes to his family. Finkle explains, “Brown probably knew that he was unlikely to see his family again, something he stoically accepted as a cost of his crusade against slavery” (7). He and his sons Oliver and Owen arrived in Harpers Ferry with an original plan of attacking on the 82nd anniversary of Americans’ Independence. This plan was changed quickly when Brown

discovered that no slaves or free blacks had signed up for his army. By early October, the total number of men ready to fight for him had reached a measly 21, but on Sunday, October 16 Brown and his men began their raid. The eclectic group of rebels ranged in age from Oberlin College students in their early twenties, to Brown at the age of 59. Three men stayed back and guarded their armory at a barn located seven miles from Harpers Ferry and the remaining 18-13 whites and 5 blacks, began their attack.

Brown's plan was to cut the telegraph wires to the armory, seize it, and wait for slaves to revolt and come to his side. Because they never joined him, he was quickly surrounded by townspeople and farmers. Brown's faith in the slaves of the community was evident in that he was in a position to overtake the armory when he first approached. He and his men had surrounded the armory, and as Finkelman explains, "might have easily seized the weapons in the town, and taken to the hills," (7). Instead he waited and was quickly overpowered. By morning, eight of Brown's men were either dead or captured, and that day militia from Virginia and Maryland arrived to take Brown away. By October 18, Brown was captured and a few of his remaining men were shot. Ten of Brown's 21 men, including two of his sons, were dead, five were captured, and seven had escaped but were later captured. Brown, severely wounded, was brought in for trial just a week later, and was sentenced and hanged five weeks after that.

Nat Turner

Brown was well aware that his attack would lead to his death, but he was driven to attack Harpers Ferry and liberate the slaves in Virginia. The driving force behind both Brown and Turner's actions was a sense of obligation and being left with no other choice. Nat Turner had been a slave since his birth and had no reason to believe that freedom was soon approaching. He knew he was the divine one called by God, and as detailed in Thomas Grey's *Confessions of Nat*

Turner, “would never be of any use to anyone as a slave.” Turner was sure that slavery was not an option for him under any circumstances and that he needed to help his people. Turner was born October 2, 1800, slave to Benjamin Turner, in South Hampton, Virginia. He was raised by his mother and grandmother, who taught him a deep hatred for slavery. He was taught to read at a young age, some by his master’s son, but learning mostly on his own. He quickly learned, as most slaves do, that there was more to life than living below the white people who owned him. Frederick Douglass famously explains the moment he learned to read: “From that moment I understood the direct pathway from slavery to freedom” (Narrative 65). When Turner could, he would read the bible and developed deep religious beliefs which were fostered by his mother and grandmother. He soon came to believe that he was chosen by God to lead his people to freedom. He explained to Thomas Grey in his *Confessions of Nat Turner* that he knew his path from an early age:

Being at play with other children, when three or four years old, I was telling them something, which my mother overhearing, said it had happened before I was I born—I stuck to my story, however, and related somethings which went, in her opinion, to confirm it—others being called on were greatly astonished, knowing that these things had happened, and caused them to say in my hearing, I surely would be a prophet, as the Lord had shewn me things that had happened before my birth. (7)

Turner was greatly moved by this calling and continued to cultivate these religious ideas and grow closer to God. Historically he has been referred to as “Prophet Nat” and was frequently seen praying and fasting. He was known throughout the plantation for his visions and communication with God. He explained to Grey, “the spirit spoke to me, saying ‘Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you’” (8). Grey asked what spirit, and Turner replied,

The Spirit that spoke to the prophets in former days—and I was greatly astonished, and for two years prayed continually, whenever my duty would permit—and then again I had the same revelation, which fully confirmed me in the impression that I was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty (9).

Turner heard a voice and continued to hear it in his life as a slave. At one point, as he grew older, Turner ran away successfully from the plantation and the shackles of slavery, but returned because of the voice of this spirit. He heard that he must return to his Earthly master, for that was the only way that he could be used for his true purpose which was, as Turner explains, “the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent” (11). He preached to the slaves, and to a handful of white people, about his prophecy and being chosen. People began to listen and he quickly gained many followers. Finally, in February of 1831, Turner saw the ultimate sign of the “darkened sun”: the solar eclipse. He details:

And by signs in the heavens that it would make known to me when I should commence the great work—and until the first sign appeared, I should conceal it from the knowledge of men—And on the appearance of the sign, (the eclipse of the sun last February) I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons (11).

This sign disappeared as soon as he mentioned to his followers that the time had come, but reappeared again on the evening of Saturday, August 20. As soon as this sign appeared once again, Turner gathered six men he trusted deeply for a large meal and final planning. They ate dinner in the woods and set off towards Turner’s Master, Joseph Travis, to carry out the task laid out for them by God. Though Turner recounted his spiritual experience to Thomas Grey with assuredness and confidence he knew that he was speaking for God and that that would be dangerous to misconstrue. Patrick Breen, in his article *A Prophet in his Own Land: Support for Nat Turner and His Rebellion Within South Hampton’s Black Community*, explains; “Turner admitted to spending two years praying feverishly, wanting to make sure that the voice he heard was authentic, not simply a delusion” (687). There is a sense of irony that lies in the fact that the exact same book, the Bible, was being used to enforce the ideals of slavery among whites and slaves, “For he who knoweth his Master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many

stripes” (Luke 12:47) and inspire a slave revolt as vicious as what Turner was about to do. Unlike slave revolts that occurred in the decades before and after Turner’s rebellion of 1830, Turner was able to detail the activities leading up to, during and following the attack through his confession to Thomas Grey. Turner enumerates the actions that took place directly after the meal and meeting with his troop. Turner explained,

Hark got a ladder and set it against the chimney, on which I ascended...entered and came down stairs, unbarred the door, and removed the guns from their places. It was then observed that I must spill the first blood. On which, armed with a hatchet, and accompanied by Will, I entered my master’s chamber, it being dark, I could not give a death blow, the hatchet glanced from his head, he sprang from the bed and called his wife, it was his last word, Will laid him dead, with a blow of his axe, and Mrs. Travis shared the same fate, as she lay in bed (12).

Turner’s retelling of this story is matter of fact, and lends to the idea that he was vicious and mad. On the contrary though, he was carrying out his life’s destiny. He knew, from years of prayer and fasting, that this was his only choice in life and the only way to change the ideas of slavery in the South. Just as John Brown was left with no choice but violence after the final decision made in *Dred Scott*, Turner was left with no option but to fulfill his prophecy and slay the white people with their own weapons. Turner and his group continued to kill whites on nearby plantations and enlist more slaves and by the late afternoon they had a small army of over 60 and had killed 61 whites. Turner’s rebellion incited fear throughout the South and slave owners everywhere were afraid that slaves would hear about Turner’s violence and follow suit. Eventually Turner and his men were met by a white militia and were attacked. Turner got away and hid for six weeks under a fence outside of the Travis plantation. While Turner was in hiding the white community panicked and killed hundreds of blacks, free and enslaved. Turner was eventually found and ten weeks after his initial attack was tried, found guilty, and hanged.

Legacy of Brown

John Brown's legacy has been directly affected by his race. Soon after Brown was executed, people began writing and talking about him as an insane man who betrayed his race. The first response to Harpers Ferry was confusion, because many people could not believe that a white abolitionist would attack a town to free slaves. Once the facts of the event were revealed both Southern and Northern newspapers attacked him, calling his charge a "fanatical enterprise", a "stark mad enterprise" and calling Brown a "madman" and "addle brained." According to David S. Reynolds' biography, the Chicago Press and Tribune wrote,

A squad of fanatics whose zeal is wonderfully disproportioned to their sense...commanded by a man who has, for years been as mad as a March hare, unite in making an insurrection at Harper's Ferry. They are guilty of the most incomprehensible stupidity and folly as well as unpardonable criminality in all these acts...There is not a public journal of any party...found to approve their means or justify their end. (339)

These nicknames and this concentrated disapproval is a result of the people Brown helped. He killed white people and freed black slaves. The slave issue was one between blacks and whites and Brown had chosen the wrong side. He had become a race traitor because of his actions were not only violent but illogical. For Brown race was not a factor as much as moral right and wrong, and this was not easily understood by many.

Though he was viewed as insane by many people after his two violent attacks he was allowed a burial and numerous monuments were dedicated to him, and this is a direct result of his race. Despite his bloody and violent attacks, on the day of his scheduled hanging, Brown was allowed to read his bible and given paper and pencil to write his last words. He was offered a minister but refused to speak with a minister from a slave holding state. Had he been a rebel slave like Turner he would have received none of these things. He was hanged and his body sent to his family where he was buried on the Brown farm in North Elba, New York. His sons who were killed in the attack on Harper's Ferry were buried near him. There is a large engraved

boulder that marks the burial place of Brown. There is the John Brown Memorial in Jefferson County, West Virginia and a seven foot statue in Quindaro, Kansas along with a memorial plaque. A family on vacation can even visit the John Brown Museum in Topeka, Kansas. John Brown's Fort still stands in Harpers Ferry and "serves as a symbol of changing cultural attitudes about race, slavery, and the causes of the American Civil War," according to Paul Shackel, author of "John Brown's Fort: A Contested National Symbol". These symbols, monuments and museums say volumes about Brown's impact on history. Even though at the time of his attacks he was viewed as fanatical, he was still given the respect that a white man deserved. History acknowledged his attacks and did not bury and hide them. Because he was white, history respects him and gives him credit for bringing light to the horrors of racism and inspiring the Civil War. Brown is recognized in both American and African American history in a way that Turner never has been.

Legacy of Turner

Like Brown, Turner's legacy has been heavily influenced by his racial identity. When Brown was hanged, his body was sent back to his wife and surviving son Owen. When Turner was hanged, his body was mutilated and he was never laid to rest. James Horton, professor and historian, details, "A huge crowd gathered to witness the hanging, after which surgeons skinned and dissected his body, parceling out portions as souvenirs of the occasion" (115). Because Turner was a slave who rebelled against the people who owned him, he was made into an example. To this day there is still no burial place for Turner's remains and there are no monuments to his sacrifice. Kenneth S. Greenburg explains,

It should come as no surprise to discover that if you visit South Hampton County today you will not be able to visit the grave of Nat Turner. Local historians, both African American and white, can point out the general area of the abandoned lot and paved-over

roadway where the rebels, and perhaps parts of Nat Turner, may once have been buried. (22)

Turner led a group of slaves to kill the white slave owner just as Brown did, and does not even have a marker where he has died, and this is a direct result of Turner being a slave. He has never been remembered in the way that Brown has because he was a black slave and the United States did not want him remembered. The country, especially the South knew that Turner was dangerous and would force people to consider the risk of slavery, and if the risk was greater than what was gained. Turner's life and rebellion was quickly "swept under the rug" and hidden from history, because of its success and potential to inspire other slave rebellions.

On the other hand, because of his race he was sympathized with much easier than Brown was. Abolitionist and Northerners could understand why a slave would want to rebel and fight the people who had suppressed him for his entire life. Though they did not always agree with the degree of violence, the motive was understood. This, also, is a direct result of Turner's race. A black slave could fight against the white people because they represented the oppressor and were different than him.

These sympathies and understandings for Turner were only from the North and were not stated outright. *The Richmond Enquirer* stated, on August 30, 1831 just over one week after the insurrection, "What strikes us as the most remarkable thing in this matter is the horrible ferocity of these monsters. They remind one of a parcel of blood thirsty wolves rushing down from the Alps; or rather like a former incursion of Indians upon the white settlements" (Reynolds 43). This view of the ferocious blood thirsty slave is reiterated in the mass number of slaves and freed blacks that were killed in the days and weeks following the mutiny. The white community felt the need to make a statement to all people of color that they were still in control that Turner's rebellion was not going to incite any more riots. The Northern newspapers detailed a different

point of view. *The Liberator*, of Boston, on September 3, 1831 explains, “What we have long predicted,-at the peril of being stigmatized as an alarmist and disclaimer,- has commenced its fulfillment. The first step of the earthquake, which is ultimately to shake down the fabric of oppression, leaving not one stone upon the other, has been made. The first drops of blood, which are but the prelude to a deluge from gathering clouds, have fallen” (Reynolds 63). The perspective of some Northerners was that the South should have expected such a violent response to enslaving thousands for so many years. Blood has been shed, but only because the slaves were fighting back.

Brown was seen as a terrorist and even the Northern press denounced his actions because of the racial identity of the people he was helping. He was killing white men, with whom he identified with racially, to free black slaves with whom he had little to no similarities. Turner’s actions were accepted, understood, and even supported by some Northerners because he was fighting for his own people and led them against the immense opposition that is slavery and white slave owners. Both Brown and Turner were seen as heroes by the black community because they made impacts that others were unable to make.

Historical Impact

John Brown is best known for a revolt that incited the Civil War. He was a pious white man who led a group of slaves in a rebellion. His impact is undeniable but he has been historically impacted because of his race. He led a rebellion in the name of God just as Nat Turner did, but because of white privilege is given more pages in history books. As a white man he was seen as a race traitor by some but even the lowest of the white race earned more respect than the black slave rebel. Slaves were seen as inherently and biologically below white people so Turner’s revolt and impact on history has been disregarded. The fact that Brown influenced

something as significant as the Civil War is because he was a white man and had the power to influence. Turner was lynched and quartered and his actions were downplayed and hidden out of a fear of further insurrections. His revolt and blatant dismissal of social constraints is diminished because he is an archetype for everything that Southern slave holders fear.

Brown has also been allowed recognition that Turner has never received. Brown has monuments, museums, and statues that are used to remember and exemplify the sacrifice he made for slaves and the morality of the United States. Turner, who was inspired in the same way Brown was, was vilified and his bones never laid to rest. Because Turner was a black slave he has never been revered like Brown and this is a direct result of identity politics and racial dissension.

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