# Politics and the American Press

*The Rise of Objectivity, 1865–1920*

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# Contents

# 1 Partisan news in the early Reconstruction Era: African-Americans in the vortex of political publicity

What was the essence of nineteenth-century press partisanship? Was it a political philosophy, or an especially opinionated and virulent form of journalism? Was it a particular relationship between writers and readers as members of a shared political community, or an economic strategy for increasing profits in a limited market? Was it a literary formula in which reporters could parade their biases as a matter of collective sentiment, or a public ritual designed to signal members' commitment to a political organization?

Partisanship certainly constituted a theory of journalism's proper public mission in American democracy. At times, Detroit's newspapers expounded upon their philosophy of partisanship and the duties appropriate to a daily paper. For instance, most journals published an annual prospectus publicizing their merits to potential subscribers. In 1872, as the election season opened, the Detroit *Post* issued a typical prospectus explaining its political mission. Hoping to capture all potential readers, the advertisement appeared in its columns every day throughout July and August:

> For Grant and Wilson
>
> To meet the demands of the Republicans of Michigan and to advance their cause, the WEEKLY POST will be sent to subscribers until after the election at the rates given below.
>
> The Post has no sympathy with the sickly inanity that the Republican Party has accomplished its mission. No party has ceased to be useful while it retained the vitality which initiates all the practical reforms of its age and it is the crowning glory of the organization which has done so much for the country . . .
>
> With these convictions . . . [etc.] the POST proposes to utter no uncertain sound during the canvass just now opening . . . and it depends upon those who are Republicans . . . to aid in extending its circulation.[1]

In this election-season publicity, the *Post* pledged to advocate the views of the Republican party, "to advance their cause," and to give the political community of Republicans a prominent public forum. It also argued that the ideal newspaper should be "a faithful organ" and

"represent the [group's] sentiments during the campaign." In turn, the *Post*'s local rival, the *Detroit Free Press*, asserted that it would provide proper ideological guidance to all Democrats. If any Democrats were confused by the debates and news of the day, they could find clarification in its pages. In its prospectus for the 1868 campaign, Michigan's leading Democratic organ assured its readers:

> The Free Press alone in this State is able to combine a Democratic point of view of our state politics and local issues with those of national importance . . . [It] will combine political news with a cool and dispassionate discussion of principles and men in such a manner as will afford to the people means of the best judgments as to the truth.[2]

As these public statements of principle suggest, newspaper partisanship was a public normative role. In professing allegiance to a party, the Detroit press assumed specific obligations, and in turn gained special privileges. The relationship between subscribers and journal did not consist in just an anonymous exchange of money for product in the market but, rather, a mutual vowing of commitments and duties as members of a political community. The individual journal was the organ of the political community, and commissioned with the task of expressing the group's ideas and its interests. Ties of solidarity and identification bound readers to their papers.

In return for the newspapers' service to the party, the readers–party members were obliged to support their party organ. Quoting again the *Post*'s 1872 overture to likely subscribers: "[The *Post*] depends upon those who are Republicans . . . to aid in extending its circulation." Similarly, the Democratic *Free Press* declared in its campaign prospectus of May 1868: "We urge the people of Michigan to continue to act and judge for themselves. Subscribe to your county papers. Sustain and maintain them first. They look out for your local interests, and they give a warm support to our national principles."[3]

At times a newspaper might betray the trust of the political community. In the summer of 1872, the Republican *Post* contended that the Democratic *Free Press* had violated the ethics proper to a political organ. The *Free Press* had tricked its subscribers when it abruptly shifted from opposing to supporting the candidacy of Horace Greeley as presidential nominee of the Democratic Party.

> The Free Press' advocacy [of an anti-Greeley position] was designed to be a pledge and an inducement to all anti-Greeley Democrats to subscribe for that paper and rely upon it as a faithful organ to represent their sentiments during the campaign. Many of them did subscribe . . . in full faith that it would continue to be their organ and advocate their faith and policy. But the Free

Press has hoisted the [pro-Greeley] ticket and deceived and betrayed all those who trusted in its pledge.[4]

As the *Post* insisted, the daily paper was beholden to a community. The nineteenth-century newspaper properly functioned as an expressive organ of a pre-existing political community.

What accounts for the prominence of parties in public life and, in turn, the newspapers' unswerving political devotion? Throughout most of the nineteenth century, political parties strode triumphantly across the American political landscape. Historians describe the nineteenth-century polity as a government of "parties and courts." The United States peculiarly lacked any effective executive leader or disciplined bureaucratic administration. In the face of governmental fragmentation, these two political agencies – parties and courts – gave shape and coordination to federal policy-making and its implementation.[5] Several resources especially enhanced the power of parties to dictate the terms of American public debate. In addition to control over access to elected office, and conversion of governmental administrative positions into patronage jobs for loyal party workers, the party commanded the overwhelming support of the voting population. Parties demonstrated their ability to inspire citizen loyalty by record levels of voter turnout. In the late nineteenth century, electoral participation climbed to heights that the US has never again obtained – an average of 78.5 percent among the eligible male voters in presidential elections, 84 percent if one excludes the South.[6] Partisan identification was so pervasive that political independents were likened to some impossible third sex, a hermaphrodite species.[7] Because of their control over political resources and their legitimacy as the public representative of the people, the two parties spoke as the dominant, if not exclusive, voices on all issues of national importance.

In this context of the overweening power of parties, newspapers publicly pledged their allegiance to either the Democrats or their nineteenth-century opponent, be it Whig or Republican. The nineteenth-century press openly paraded its partisanship.[8] This display of bias and partiality was taken as a proper and natural facet of American political life. As Michael Schudson and Michael McGerr have persuasively argued, this explicit avowal of sympathies was part and parcel of the ritual political culture of the nineteenth century. Because of the US's heritage of republican culture with its emphasis on citizenship as central to the individual's identity, and because of popular attachment to the visible local community, American politics entailed ceremonial displays of one's place in the local political order. It demanded a demonstration of commitment to a political party.[9]

## Press, politics and the construction of the public domain

In our contemporary era, the mass media poses as impartial supplier of authoritative news accounts to readers for their private scrutiny and use. The press denies that it serves any specific group's interests, and rejects the idea that its rhetoric and interpretations influence the political opinions of its audience. Journalism stands above the disputes and interests of contending political groups. Furthermore, as an independent medium of information, the daily press works to insure that the news is not subject to the manipulations and demagogic efforts of groups striving to mold public opinion.[10] In general, the news is intended neither as a political stratagem nor as public dialogue, but as impartial document of the day's most important words and deeds.

Such a perspective, no matter how questionable for our era, distinctly hinders our comprehension of the workings of the nineteenth-century press. In the practices of the nineteenth century's partisanship, our contemporary journalism would only see a violation of its ideals of objectivity and independence: politically biased story selection and illicit editorializing by news reporters. Crucial dimensions of nineteenth-century journalism as an organ of a political community would be neglected. News as a ritual of group solidarity, as a tool for highlighting policy positions and their social consequences, and as an arena of public debate and dialogue – all central dimensions of nineteenth-century newspaper politics – would be obscured.

The Gilded Age's political notion of the news suggests that the distinctions that underpin journalism's modern ideals cannot be so easily maintained. Nineteenth-century news calls into question a series of separations sharply dividing an impartial journalism from the strategic conflicts of government and the impassioned deliberations of citizens. The press of today asserts that it is merely a neutral instrument in politics' dialogues and disputes.The nineteenth century's press, far from being merely an external observer, was centrally implicated in the construction of the parties' issue agendas and in the formation of the citizenry's political preferences. In fact, newspapers were esteemed on the basis of their "influence" – their persuasiveness and political authority.

Furthermore, a consideration of nineteenth-century newspapers in their close allegiance to formal political organizations reveals a special affinity between the press and polity. News and politics both rest upon an operation of publicity. In constructing their narratives, in elaborating their policy positions, media and government pierce the dusky shadows of everyday life. They function as a spotlight or "signal," to use the metaphor of news commentator Walter Lippmann.[11] Journalists and

political leaders selectively illuminate social issues for public attention, extracting them from what society either accepts as consensual or simply ignores as natural. These glimmering facets of social life, refracted through the dramatizations of news crews and the pontifications of politicians, become recognized as problems of collective significance, potential matters of governmental action, and issues for social deliberation and dispute.[12]

Modern journalism pretends to register impartially social issues as if they were already given, natural topics of political dispute.[13] But the press, in fact, is crucial to the social construction and demarcation of this contentious public arena. Its coverage defines and sanctions or, in the phrase of Pierre Bourdieu, "performatively constructs" which issues and which views should properly enter into the public sphere.[14]

A closer examination of the functioning of the partisan press – their bitter polemics, their biased news, their proud public loyalties – will reveal the pervasively political dimensions of journalism. It will show the media's active hand in guiding the public's political deliberations; reveal their prominent participation in the construction of the parties' political agendas; and expose the press's role in the altogether more affective, public, and ritualistic political culture of the nineteenth century. In sum, it will demonstrate how the press expressed, reinforced, and defined the central institutional and cultural dimensions of democracy's public sphere.

In what follows, I detail the workings of the partisan press in the national Reconstruction Era that followed the war between the North and the South, 1865–76. The chapter melds a quantitative measure of political bias to a qualitative analysis of the underlying ideological themes of press advocacy. A particular issue that preoccupied the two parties and will occupy this chapter was the set of symbols, associations, and political discourses surrounding the African-American in the post-war period. Chapter 4 will then extend the content analysis into the final years of the century, and alter its focus by scrutinizing the political rites and aesthetic style of the partisan paper.

## A measure of gilded age partisanship

The political biases of Detroit's newspapers can be tracked in both the news stories and opinion pieces across the span of the late nineteenth century.[15] In the early Reconstruction Era, 1865–76, the overwhelming preponderance of the editorials and a persistent share of the news filling up the columns of Detroit's dailies were slanted in favor of the preferred party.

Editorials are the genre in which newspapers most directly pronounce their views. In the nineteenth-century paper, they occupied a particularly prominent place. Their heavier weight in the total make-up of the journal was a matter of placement, space, and emphasis. Typically appearing on the inside page of a four- or eight-page paper, opinion columns filled approximately 20 percent of the journal's news space. In the 1880s and 1890s, as daily papers ballooned in size, editorials correspondingly fell as a proportion of the overall content. The post-bellum era was still an age of "personal journalism" when the public often identified papers with their proprietors. Newspapers amplified famous editorial voices onto the national stage, turning the likes of Greeley, Bowles, and Watterson into celebrities of the Victorian world. As chapter 2 argues, Detroit's journals too were most typically vehicles of political ambition and personal expression. Ownership of a paper was the *sine qua non* for speaking authoritatively within the councils of the state party. Even the placement of the editorials attests to the paper's openly avowed voice. Detroit's dailies typically printed their opinion pieces directly beneath the masthead's listing of owner and chief editor.

Throughout the nineteenth century's election seasons, the majority of the sampled editorials were partisan, evidently and explicitly. The newspaper posed forthrightly as the spokesperson for its party. Sometimes shrilly, sometimes sententiously, the press instructed the populace on the moral rightness of its party's policies and the corruptness, even criminality, of its foe. Outside of the campaign seasons, with election passions temporarily stilled, the percentage of editorials that were partisan fluctuated erratically. The numbers declined over the course of the late nineteenth century from 40 to 60 percent partisan in the 1860s and 1870s, to 18 to 34 percent in the 1880s and 1890s.

The Detroit press typically filled about one fourth of its news space with partisan stories during presidential election campaigns. In non-election seasons, biased stories occupied less than 10 percent of the news space. Editors introduced a political slant into their stories in two essential manners, which we might call "manifest" and "latent" partisanship, or "overt" and "covert."[16] In manifest bias, articles contained statements of evaluations and preference by the reporter–writer. In the second type of bias – latent partisanship – a story can support the interests and policies of the party even when a journalist makes no evident political evaluation. For example, without adding its own explicit judgments, the journal may devote a disproportionate attention to the favored politicians' words and deeds, while slighting the views of their opponents. Whereas such political preferences could be veiled, at a certain point the grossly unequal amount of space devoted to one party

Table 1.1. *Editorials in presidential election seasons*

| | 1868 | 1872 | 1876 | 1880 | 1884 | 1888 | 1892 | 1896 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Partisanship as a percentage of editorials* | 81 | 81 | 78 | 75 | 62 | 65 | 39 | 85 |

* In the sampled issues all editorials were coded for their political bias and their length was measured. The percentage is a percentage of the paper's space devoted to editorials.

Table 1.2. *Editorials in non-election seasons*

| | 1867 | 1871 | 1875 | 1879 | 1883 | 1887 | 1891 | 1895 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Partisanship as a percentage of editorials | 54 | 50 | 40 | 74 | 18 | 32 | 34 | 13 |

Table 1.3. *News in presidential election years*

| | 1868 | 1872 | 1876 | 1880 | 1884 | 1888 | 1892 | 1896 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Manifest bias (%) | 6 | 5 | 9 | 26 | 22 | 3 | 7 | 10 |
| Latent bias (%) | 9 | 18 | 12 | 14 | 17 | 23 | 9 | 30 |
| Total Partisan News (%) | 15 | 23 | 21 | 40 | 39 | 26 | 16 | 40 |

Table 1.4. *News in non-election years*

| | 1867 | 1871 | 1875 | 1879 | 1883 | 1887 | 1891 | 1895 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Manifest bias (%) | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 8 |
| Latent bias (%) | 16 | 4 | 7 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Total Partisan News (%) | 18 | 4 | 7 | 4 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 9 |

over the other becomes evident. The bias, then, is no longer hidden but proclaimed and even required in an organ which is supposed to publicize the triumphs and philosophy of its party. This evident bias amounts to a proudly displayed badge of party loyalty by the newspaper.

What was the nature of the partisanship behind these numbers? What politics lay behind the press's overwhelming if not exhaustive partisan "bias"?[17]

### The partisan news agenda: African-Americans in Reconstruction Era rhetoric

On April 9, 1865, General Robert E. Lee, commanding officer of the Southern army, signed a treaty of surrender for the Confederate forces.

With the war's conclusion, the combatants laid down their guns only to pick up their pens. Democrat and Republican, Rebel and Union sympathizer, Boys in Blue and Copperheads, carried on their battles in the pages of the press. Partisan journalism in the Reconstruction Era turned out to be merely the continuation of war by other means.

A consideration of the divisive issues of the Reconstruction Era will demonstrate the extent to which partisan interests permeated journalistic practices. Newspapers, in their robust alliances with political organizations, imported into the realm of print the issues and strategic calculations of the formal polity. By and large, partisan interests set the news agenda. The daily news did not simply reflect the existing balance of political forces, nor did it only reproduce society's prior principles of political (di)vision. Instead, partisan journalism played an essentially creative role in the depiction of political reality. Detroit's dailies labored shoulder to shoulder with the parties to construct those primordial cultural categories through which society perceived itself as split into friend and foe.[18]

In the years 1865–76, Civil War issues remained paramount in the press and the polity, but the two parties defined them differently. As political scientist E. E. Schattschneider explains, "[A]ntagonists can rarely agree on what the issues are . . . because the definition of the alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power."[19] For the Republicans the issues, of course, were the national union and the outrage of Southern treason. They persistently tried to depict the Democrats as the party of the Confederacy, Southern secession, and war for which the citizens of the North had paid dearly with the blood of their boys. In reply, the Democrats redefined the terms of the conflict, repainting the same issue cleavage in different colors, mostly black. Democrats insinuated that the war with its goal of union and abolition of slavery had a secret motive: the establishment of a despotic government by the Republicans, a centralized military state resting upon the support of "ignorant negro" voters. Tainted by their less than enthusiastic support for the Union in the Civil War, Democrats tried to mobilize a persistent popular racism against the Republican party's policies for reconstructing Southern society and government. Democrats, in part, appropriated their racist rhetoric from a commercial popular culture. In addition, the party of Jefferson and Jackson produced their own derogatory stereotypes of Black Americans. The Democratic press, embroiled in the bitter partisan battles, promulgated these harshly negative depictions in both their news stories and their fiction columns. As the Detroit *Free Press* editorialized,

The Radical [Republican] party, claiming to be the party of pure morality, religion, liberty and progress, has been in power only about seven years, and yet has crowded into that short period instances enough of oppression, violence, fraud, immorality, public robbery and corruption to utterly destroy any government but ours . . . Its next step may be to proclaim a dictator and openly set aside the constitutional government. In view of the character of the leaders of the party and the alarming outrages already committed by it, we have reason to fear they may resort to any measures no matter how desperate rather than relinquish power and plunder. . . . To secure power in the South they have disfranchised great numbers of white men and given the ballot to four millions of ignorant, incompetent negroes, led on by a few of the meanest white men . . . [etc., etc.][20]

These were the policy views repetitiously (and repulsively) advocated by Detroit's Democratic dailies. The excerpt parades some of the most prominent themes of Democratic editorials in the early Reconstruction Era, 1865–72. As the quantitative longitudinal measure indicated, the majority of newspaper editorials throughout the late nineteenth century pushed partisan themes (see tables 1. ). While they repeatedly reiterated the central policy stands of the two parties, newspapers veered between bitter, vicious diatribes and beseeching pleas for reasoned discussion. Taking for example the *Free Press*'s editorials in the week surrounding the longitudinal sample date of February 15, 1867, one finds several issues consistently invoked.

Not just a melange of policy planks in a ramshackle political edifice, these Democratic issues formed a remarkably unified political ideology. And the editorial motifs most commonly dovetailed around one object of contempt and contention: the emancipated African-American. Indeed, Democrats and Republicans most often waged their political conflicts upon the terrain of the newly freed Black slave.[21] The rights and duties of the ex-slaves, their social situation and economic disabilities, even their physical nature and capacities, all formed grist for partisan polemics. Moreover, partisan news of the Reconstruction Era did not stop with the advocacy of national congressional policies for Southern Blacks, nor with criticism of the terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan. It encompassed more than views on the proper economic and political relations between the races in the South and on the role of federal troops in unreformed Southern state governments. In fact, journalists transformed the very physical body of the African-American into a charged symbolic nexus for the depiction of the nature, disorders, and promises of American society.[22]

Images of Blacks pervaded the Democratic newspapers and were not confined to any single journalistic genre, whether editorial, fiction, or telegraphic news dispatch. For example, the *Daily Union*, Detroit's

Table 1.5. *Major editorial themes*⋆

| | Total number of editorials in which theme occurs | Number of days theme appears | Average number of appearances of theme per day |
|---|---|---|---|
| Total of Editorials | 103 | | 14.7 |
| Partisan Editorials | 89 | | 12.7 |
| Republican policies are guided only by power interests, not principles | 27 | 7 | 3.9 |
| Republican party is | | | |
| • Despotic and anti-constitutional | 15 | 7 | 2.1 |
| • Immoral | 14 | 6 | 2 |
| Against Republican Southern Reconstruction policies | 27 | 7 | 3.9 |
| Against African-Americans | 19 | 5 | 2.7 |
| Against Black voting | 7 | 3 | 1 |
| On Blacks' social capacities | 4 | 3 | 0.6 |
| Vs. Republican tariff policy | 7 | 5 | 1 |
| Vs. Detroit's Republican city council as derelict in its duties | 6 | 4 | 0.9 |

⋆ *Detroit Free Press*, February 12–21, 1876. The themes are not exclusive; more than one theme may appear in an editorial.

junior Democratic daily, published the following array of articles in the sampled issue for October 15, 1868:

- a local crime story headlined "Brutal Murder by Negroes"
- a celebration of a local boy claiming affiliation with the Ku Klux Klan
- an editorial referring to the Republican goal of "the political supremacy of the negro"
- an editorial attacking Republican presidential nominee Grant for his views on negro suffrage
- an anecdote caricaturing a wedding of African-Americans replete with dialect speech
- a letter to the editor attacking Republican newspapers' distortion of the "temper, desires and views of southern Whites"
- a reprinted article from the South entitled "Beauties of Jacobinism" which impugns Southern Blacks and "Yankee carpetbaggers"
- a reprinted letter to the editor which discusses "indolent negroes" and the election

The issue of Blacks came up repeatedly in local political conflicts from the Civil War until the end of Reconstruction, and not only in

relation to Southern policies. Michigan, like other Northern states, had to confront the possibility of enfranchising their local Black population. Such inhabitants, however minimal in size (1–2 percent), seemed to stimulate the active animus of a majority of Whites. Between the war's end and the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in April 1870, Northern states repeatedly rejected extending the franchise to their native Black populations. In the spring of 1868, Michigan, an overwhelmingly Republican state, defeated a state constitutional charter amendment that promised to remove racial restrictions from the electorate. The measure polled 39.3 percent in favor and 60.7 percent opposed. Such defeats, along with the resurgence of the Democrats in the 1867 elections, motivated "the Democracy" to play the race card again in 1868.[23] The Michigan Democratic platform for the fall 1868 campaign vowed "to keep this country as our fathers made it, a white man's government."[24] But national and state-wide Democratic losses in 1868 and the *de facto* establishment of Black suffrage through the Fifteenth Amendment convinced Michigan Democrats to acquiesce to the Black vote. In 1870, a state charter amendment to bring the state constitution in line with national law (as embodied in the Fifteenth Amendment) drew little partisan attention and fewer votes.[25]

Detroiters contested the status of African-Americans in a second local issue: the integration of Detroit's public schools. Between 1867 when the state legislature ruled segregation illegal and 1871 when the Detroit School board finally capitulated, school segregation simmered as an issue. Democratic newspapers repeatedly editorialized upon the topic, while Democratic city officials defied the legal enactments of Republican state authorities.[26]

Despite these local and the national conflicts, the Democratic odium directed towards Blacks did not derive from the actual threat of Black suffrage. True, congressional Republicans used the South's continuing failure to grant Blacks political rights as justification for excluding Southern states and their likely Democratic votes from national elections. But in Michigan, the small Black population was not large enough to decide any state contest. Electoral power cannot explain the obsessive reference to African-Americans in Michigan politics.

Apparently, the Democrats believed that the Republicans and their Reconstruction policies were darkly stained by a too close proximity to the Black man. (The *San Francisco Examiner*, a Democrat journal, labeled its political adversaries, "the chocolate papers.") Indeed, since the origination of the Republican party, the expression "black Republican" performed as standard Democratic invective. For example, Wilbur Storey, editor of the main Michigan Democratic organ, the *Detroit Free Press*, from 1853 to 1861 and later owner-editor of the

important partisan and sensationalist journal the *Chicago Times*, "insisted that the Republican Party was always to be referred to as 'Black Republican' Party" in the columns of his paper.[27] The expression, because of its polemical edge, implied a measure of political orthodoxy whether pronounced by a Democrat or a Republican. Thus, *Free Press*'s managing editor William Quinby, upon hiring future Detroit mayor John Lodge in 1883, invoked this cliché of partisan rhetoric to communicate clearly to Lodge the political rules of the newspaper game.[28] "This is the Democratic state organ. Your father is one of the leading Republicans of the state, and of course you are a Republican also. I want you to see to it that you do not inject any of your Black Republican principles into what you write for the paper."[29]

References to Blacks pervaded the discourse of the Democratic party and its affiliated journals. As Jean Baker says: "[N]o matter where they began, Democratic set speeches invariably ended with blacks as the reason for higher taxes and tariff, the impeachment of Andrew Johnson, inflationary greenbacks, and Republican corruption. The Democrats looked at currency and saw the Negro, reviewed the impeachment and ended with the Negro, debated the purchase of Alaska and concluded with the Negro."[30] Blacks were thus central to a convoluted set of ideological representations elaborated by the Democratic party.

Let us untangle some of this imagery. According to Democrats, the project to free the Negro was illegitimate, and to grant him the right to vote an absurd endeavor. On the basis of his racial–biological nature the Negro was a foolish, superstitious child. He lacked the reason and the self-control necessary to participate in the White man's republican government. As the *Free Press* intoned, "this inferior race is [not] capable of managing affairs of state." African-Americans were "a degraded race of ignorant semi-savages."[31] Such partisan sentiments were reinforced by a hammering repetition. On subsequent days the *Free Press* editorialized:

"[the Republicans] have given the ballot to 4 million of ignorant, incompetent negroes" (May 10, 1868)

"an ignorant population" (May 12)

"ignorance and the most inferior of all races" (May 12, a reprinted editorial)

"ignorant negroes" (May 14)

"ignorance and vice are placed over intelligence and virtue – the inferior race is made the superior" (May 14)

"the white men of the South were deprived of all voice in public affairs while ignorant blacks, fresh from the field . . ." (May 20)

"It has placed the ballot in the hands of those negroes, ignorant and unfit as they are" (May 23)

"the salvation of the blacks depends upon the infamy of putting the Southern whites under the rule of ignorant blacks . . ." (May 25)

And on the day from the longitudinal sample:

"the semi-barbarous African" (October 15, 1868)

"an inferior and uneducated people, who know nothing of their own, let alone the rights and wants of their fellow man." (October 15, p. 4)

To remove the Black from the natural hierarchy of races – to remove the slave from the master's control – was to permit license by those incapable of the self-restraint necessary for liberty. The natural outcome of such a lack of internal or external control was, in the jargon of the day, "outrages": Black attacks on Whites, specifically White women. Such outrages were repeatedly described in the Democratic press and were a politically motivated news selection, part of the partisan-driven news agenda. Thus, for example, our sampled issue of the *Detroit Union* of October 15, 1868 reports a local crime headed "Brutal Murder by Negroes." And, on January 1, 1868 the *Union* reprinted this story from the Democratic *New York Times*:

Outrage By A Negro In Maryland Upon A White Woman

Late on Sunday afternoon a most violent outrage was committed by a negro man on a most estimable married lady, in Hartford County, Maryland . . . This is the fourth or fifth affair of this kind which has happened in this county within the past year, in which negroes have been the actors and white women the sufferers.

Meanwhile, throughout May 1868, the *Free Press* publicized "depredations" occurring in the South, news of which was transmitted to them via the wire service and Southern Democratic newspapers.

THE SOUTH.
Official Report of the Florida Elections
. . . TERRIBLE TRAGEDY IN ARKANSAS
A MAN AND FOUR CHILDREN MURDERED BY A NEGRO . . .

At a small town called Lincoln . . . which was settled by freedmen, a negro named Cochrane was detected by another named Wm. Babcock in illicit intercourse with his wife and attacked him. Cochrane killed Babcock in the encounter and immediately took up with Babcock's wife who had four children. Next day all the children were found in the swamp with their throats cut . . . Ike Martin . . . informed the civil authorities who have laid the matter before the military. Cochrane is not yet arrested.

NEGRO SHOT AND ARRESTED . . . [etc.]
THE STORM . . . [etc.]
DEPREDATIONS COMMITTED BY NEGROES

Seven negroes attempted to enter [a] cotton shed on Washington street last night. They were fired upon by the watchmen . . . [etc.][32]

The editorial page spelled out in repetitious detail the not-so-veiled logic informing these news selections.[33]

In the month of May, the problem of "negro outrages" is invoked in editorials on the 9th and 10th but the fullest statement of the logic appears on the 31st in the following fantasy/editorial.[34]

THE TRUE CONDITION OF THE AFRICANIZED SOUTH

The effect of the policy pursued by the Congressional majority in the South can be seen by the condition of that section. In all the late [state constitutional] conventions negro delegations were admitted, and their action has brought disgrace and ridicule upon the nation. Propositions of the most indefensible and monstrous character have been submitted and argued by these men . . . Two ideas seemed to control the negroes. One was hatred of the white people among whom they reside; the other, to obtain a living without labor . . . [I]n the constitutions framed by them it is the vital element, in every day life they carry out this platform. Outrages upon white men, women and children are now common occurrences. Scarce a paper comes from that section without containing accounts of offenses committed by negroes at which the heart sickens and blood runs cold. Lesser crimes . . . are multiplied ten fold since the inauguration of negro equality. Bands of idle and worthless blacks pass through all the country plundering, destroying and burning . . . Behind these lawless blacks stand the Loyal Leagues [a governmental agency to insure for Blacks the right to vote], and then comes Congress and the Radical party . . . [etc.][35]

Such Democratic anti-Black rhetoric had a long history, dating back to the origins of the American abolition movement and later the emergence of the Republican party.[36] Much earlier, for example in 1863, the *Free Press* had publicized the accusations against a local Black man, on trial for "outraging" a young White woman. Years later all the major witnesses to the attack recanted their testimony, but at the time, the *Free Press* saw fit to headline its article "Horrible Outrage . . . A negro entraps a little girl into his room and commits fiendish crime upon her person . . . Full history of the shocking event."[37] Once the defendant was pronounced guilty, Detroit's White community rioted. The rampage was described in the pitiful 1863 account: "A Thrilling Narrative from the Lips of the Sufferers of the Late Detroit Riot, March 6, 1863." In the course of the riot several of Detroit's Blacks died, many were beaten, and hundreds were left homeless.[38] Commenting on the violence the *Free Press* remarked, "We regret the mob. If our voice could have controlled it, it never should have occurred; but what could Democrats do when the Abolition press were raising heaven and earth to claim the rights of white men to the experiment of nigger liberty."[39]

The Detroit riot was a pale echo of other Northern anti-draft riots of 1863, such as the New York City riot which claimed over one hundred

lives. Such riots were triggered by popular resentment over the draft, high taxes to support the war, and the (largely mythical) threat of Black economic competition in hard financial times. As Jean Baker notes, Northern anti-draft riots quickly turned into mob attacks on Blacks. Rioters took African-Americans as the hidden hand operating behind governmental Civil War policies. Such popular mob action was fueled by the overheated rhetoric of Democrat newspapers and orators, which portrayed Blacks as malignant creatures – a threat to the social, political, and economic foundations of the social order.[40]

The political consequences of this selection of the news and its rhetorical treatment were hardly hidden for the Democratic editors and readers. As the *Union*'s weekly "Letter from New York" makes plain: "The constantly recurring intelligence of NEGRO OUTRAGES in the South does a great deal towards strengthening the Democracy in this section of the country."[41] Such stories, as the *Union* suggested, were important for deepening the political cleavages that defined the two parties, and for consolidating the partisan loyalties of Democrats and Republicans. Democrats publicized such news partly to emphasize Black Americans' incapacity for self-rule, and partly to counter the massive Republican production of news reports of Ku Klux Klan terror in the South.[42]

Democrats argued that, given the biological and cultural deficit that precluded Blacks from exercising self-control and autonomous reason, Black participation as equals in republican government would fail. Moreover, the Democratic papers suggested that this crippling of political democracy constituted the secret goal of the Radical Republicans in Congress. Blacks, as necessarily dependent, would require the perpetual help of the Republican party and the permanent tutelage of governmental agencies. Under the control and direction of the Republicans, they would surely vote for this despotic Radical government.

Blacks were part of a deliberate plan to despoil republican government and the natural rights of free-born Whites. Thus, the Detroit *Free Press* drew the invidious, but not coincidental, comparison between Republican policies in the South and North. "The party that demands that the elective franchise shall be extended to the ignorant negroes of the South, stands equally ready to disfranchise the intelligent voter of a city of the North."[43] Democratic newspapers asserted over and over again that the Republican goal was not negro equality but superiority in the South. As the *Union* explained, if General Grant won the presidential election in 1868, Republicans would be sure to take his victory as proof "that the people demand Reconstruction upon the basis of a

military dictatorship under congress and the political supremacy of the Negro."[44] And, more generally, says Alexander Saxton, the moralistic claims of abolitionists had long been regarded with suspicion.[45] White workers feared that abolitionists and Republicans actually wished to deprive the White working-class of their "most scared rights," "the dearest privileges of freemen," as the *Free Press* repeatedly insisted.[46] They saw the granting of rights to Blacks as a loss of rights for White men. How can one explain this zero-sum equation? According to labor historian David Roediger, nineteenth-century White workers had been paid a "psychological, public wage" for accepting their dependent place in the American economy. These "wages" included political recognition and social prestige for all White males as free and equal political citizens endowed with inalienable rights. This status, central to White workers' identity, rested upon the deference and inequality of those who were not White and not male. From this perspective, Blacks could be made free only if White workers were made slaves.[47]

For Democrats, this violation of the two races' proper social roles could only have been accomplished by a force from outside civil society, by an excessive political power. Therefore, the *Free Press* equated the Congressional Republicans with French Jacobins and suggested: "Is it not strange that an influence so terribly destructive of sound morality as the rule of Radicalism has not broken up the foundation of civil society."[48] And the Detroit *Union* in publishing its annual proclamation of principles or "prospectus" linked governmental despotism to Black civil rights: "The Union opposes the centralization of governmental power; Opposes the supremacy of the military over the civic jurisdiction; Opposes the enfranchisement and social equality of the black race by Congressional activity."[49] Thus were linked what one historian of the *Free Press* calls editor Storey's central political tenets – "racism and states rights."[50]

Imagery of the childlike, permanent dependency of Blacks pervaded Democratic accounts, including their criticism of any governmental help to newly independent African-Americans starting out without land, tools, or capital. African-Americans were seen as seeking to "obtain a living without labor." In this context, the Democrats launched an attack on the Freedmen's Bureau, a government agency in charge of distributing aid to newly freed Southern Blacks and some Whites.[51] The *Free Press* editorialized on May 10, 1868: "They feel certain that with the help of the entire treasury . . . the army, the Freedman's Bureau and 4 million of negroes they can perpetuate their power indefinitely." On May 31 it opined: "Behind these lawless blacks stand the Loyal League and then comes Congress. Clothing and food are supplied them by the

Freedmen's Bureau and thus equipped [the Blacks] are prepared to act as the ready and willing tools of the conspirators at Washington." During the same time, the Democratic journal presented a front-page, verbatim account of the Michigan State Democratic Convention and detailed the indictments brought against the Republicans. "[The Republicans] declared white men disloyal until the contrary was proved, and declared all black men loyal without proof; it used federal power to control suffrage in the states; it established a Freedmen's Bureau to feed and clothe the blacks as pensioners on the national bounty."[52] Such rhetoric drew on the classical Jacksonian cultural repertoire that attacked both "corrupt" governmental institutions and indolent people of color using familial imagery.[53] Democrats wished to separate Negroes in the South from the too easy support of the maternal government and subject them again to the harsh discipline of their paternalistic master – the Southern White elite.

According to Democrats, Republicans desired to disrupt the natural laws governing the social order by placing Blacks in a position of superiority for which they were racially unfit. Blacks, as Jean Baker expounds, bore through the physical attribute of their skin color the visible sign of their inferiority. Black skin as a natural trait pointed to Blacks' natural, immutable social position as inferior to Whites.[54] Thus the epithet "Black Republican" and the continual recourse to the Negro in Democratic stump speeches emphasized the disorder being introduced into society's natural constitution by the Radical Republicans' political reign.

As mentioned previously, the *Free Press*'s owner Storey had ordered his editorial staff always to refer to the opposed party as the Black Republican party. About Storey, one historian writes, "His vitriol was unequaled . . . when he turned his attention to the Republicans and the abolitionist movement. He called the Republican party 'this monster of frightful mien – this party made up of white abolitionists, black abolitionists, and fugitives from slavery – this rabble of discord and destruction.'"[55] Storey's use of the expression "monster" in this context is doubtless not accidental. For monster refers to "any animal or plant that is out of the usual course of nature" and the word derives from the Latin for divine warning against the violation of God-given natural law.[56] Here we see the imagery of boundary mixing, a disordering of natural categories that consequently results in the creation of a monster, a Frankenstein.

This preoccupation with the violation of natural categories perhaps explains why Democrats and the Detroit *Free Press* obsessively returned again and again to the issue of Black–White "amalgamation," and why

Democrats equated the granting of political and civil rights to African-Americans with "an indiscriminate, unnatural, loathsome and hated sexual union of the races."[57] The fear of miscegenation in part revealed anxieties over the blurring of sharply defined, supposedly natural, racial differences. The hysteria pointed to the shakiness of the socially erected edifice of a Black–White racial dichotomy. This racial system smoothly classified individuals into categories, defined their place in the social hierarchy, and justified White power over Blacks, as well as securing the identity of White males in opposition to Blacks.[58]

The normally vitriolic rhetoric of the *Free Press* reached new extremes in this news story in which there is a double violation of the *Free Press*'s ideological premises: first, improper Black–White sex, and secondly a White woman freely consenting to wed an avaricious Black. Reporting on the elopement of a "white girl with a negro," the *Free Press* reporter added this observation: "[T]he girl is forever lost to decency and respect. Even should her separation from her negro paramou[r] be eternal, the finger of scorn would be pointed to her, to her dying day, as a white woman who disgraced her sex and common decency by consenting to become the wife of a black, ugly looking, disgusting negro."[59]

### Republicans wave the "bloody shirt"

To this extended racist onslaught from the Democratic newspapers, the Republicans responded as best they could. On the one hand, the Republican journals, the Detroit *Post* and the Detroit *Advertiser and Tribune* stood forthrightly for human equality. The *Post*, the more orthodoxly Republican of the two journals, declared in its Prospectus for 1867 that, "[The *Post*'s] principles are based upon the immortal truths of the Declaration of Independence and the Divine Laws of the Universal Brotherhood of Man. Hence its motto is Equal Rights, Equal Justice for all Men."[60] The *Advertiser and Tribune*, too, repeatedly advocated political rights for the freed slaves.[61] Across the country, in San Francisco as in Detroit, Republican journals attempted to rebut the Democrats' racism, to denounce "the ineffable meanness which . . . [a Democratic journal] is capable [of] in its demagogical appeals to the despicable prejudice of castes and color."[62]

Beyond mere assertions of Black–White equality, the Republican papers mocked the Democrats' assumptions of the absolute superiority of all Whites by virtue of their blood. In the weekly letter from Washington, the correspondent for the Republican *Advertiser and Tribune* wrote:

Our Washington Letter

Saulsbury as a White Man of Intelligence . . .

From Our Own Correspondent Washington, D.C., Jan. 8, 1867

Coming down from the Capitol last evening . . . I had a fine illustration of the character of some of the gentlemen . . . [defending President Andrew Johnson] I had just been listening to the solemn warnings of Cowan and Saulsbury against the frightful excesses of the [Republican] "Radicals," till I almost doubted the propriety of going forward quite so fast. Saulsbury . . . was positive on one point – the total unfitness of the colored race for elective franchise . . . When he was speaking I did not notice anything out of the way in his manner, but set him down, as I have one hundred times before, as one honest political bigot. I started home two or three hours afterwards, and to my disgust a drunken man was reeling to and fro on the sidewalk . . . To my horror as I came up with him I discovered the drunken man was the gentleman in the Senate who warned [Congress] of the unfitness of the negroes for the ballot![63]

Other news articles from the South helped to shore up Northern support for the civil rights of African-Americans. The papers reported the violence of Southern Whites against the freedmen, particularly in the context of a burgeoning Ku Klux Klan. Here, Republican papers worked hand-in-hand with Republican politicians in the production of partisan news as they published the results of Congressional investigations into Southern acts of intimidation and terror. For example, the *Post* devoted eight columns (or 24 percent of its news space) to the verbatim publication of the government's inquest into a Klan massacre in New Orleans.[64] From the Democratic point of view, Republican press accounts of Ku Klux Klan crimes were so much distorted party propaganda. The *Free Press* declared:

[Republican press] organs have undertaken once more to fire the Northern heart, and the consequence is that the columns of those sheets are again filled with police report editorials concerning the alleged lawlessness of the Southern States, especially as regards . . . the cruel treatment of negroes . . . Those who desire to test the truth of our remarks need only consult the Detroit *Post* of yesterday morning whose pages fairly reek with that kind of nauseous stuff.[65]

The wave of both Southern legislation and violence against Blacks and the resultant publicity helped to destroy any Northern support for President Andrew Johnson and his union party of moderate Republicans in 1866–67.[66] The *Advertiser and Tribune* itself turned from lukewarm to ardent supporter of Reconstruction measures.

Despite this strong response to Democratic racism, Republican defense of the besieged Southern Black was more often camouflaged in the rhetoric of Southern disloyalty than straight-forward support for equal rights. Republicans focused on the South's continued recalcitrance and the seditious support they received from "Copperhead"

Democrats. Republicans so often invoked the treason of the South that Democrats came to label this standard rhetorical move "waving the bloody shirt." The "bloody shirt" referred to the blood-soaked garments of the Northern soldier who had sacrificed his life to preserve the country. Simple strategic reasons guided the Republicans in their attempt to shift the definition of the Democrat–Republican conflict. The historian David Montgomery explains: "More Americans identified the cause of the Republican party with the cause of the Union than wanted Negroes to vote. It was for this latter reason that the Democrats were the party that talked incessantly of blacks."[67] Even Southern outrages were said to be aimed at Union soldiers and to demonstrate continued Southern rebellion against the Union. For example, the *Post*, in the sampled edition of 1867, editorialized against the "Rebel Democrats in Tennessee." The paper attacked Southerners who had entered into a "conspiracy to assassinate Union men and freedmen, particularly soldiers who had served in the United States Army."[68] And, in the edition sampled for 1868 the *Post* polemicized against belligerent Southerners. "North Carolina papers state that the rebels in that State are arming themselves with improved breach loading . . . rifles in expectation of a new rebellion in case [Democratic Presidential nominee and Vice President] Seymour and Blair are successful, for the purpose of trampling the reconstructed state governments into dust."[69]

As already noted, Detroit's two Republican dailies did not always see eye to eye on the proper Reconstruction policies. The *Advertiser and Tribune* was less inclined to support Black rights and punitive reconstruction measures against White Southerners, supporting the policies of President Andrew Johnson until late 1866. They also abandoned Reconstruction before the *Post*. In 1872 the *Advertiser and Tribune* flirted with the Liberal Republican party which announced as a plank in its party platform the speedy rehabilitation of the South and an abolition of Reconstruction measures. These policy differences reflected in part the natural competition of two newspapers aimed at the same market segment, but also party factional antagonisms. The *Post* stood with long-time state Republican leader, Senator Zachariah Chandler, while the *Advertiser and Tribune* was allied with Chandler's bitterest enemies.[70] Richard Slotkin, looking at the journals of New York City in 1874–77, has shown how each daily paper expressed the views of a party faction and, in turn, the interests of different elite economic groups.[71] Thus, competing party factions amplified, multiplied and muddied the two parties' debates in the public sphere.

To summarize, the Democratic party through the vehicle of its loyal press organs and speeches "on the stump" offered the voters a complex