



SMALL WARS

JOURNAL

Rethinking Revolution: Reconstruction as an Insurgency

An Interview with Mark Grimsley

By *Mike Few and Mark Grimsley*

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Editor's Note: Mike Few continues his investigative series, "Rethinking Revolution" with a look at reconstruction as insurgency conducted as an interview with civil war historian Dr. Mark Grimsley of The Ohio State University.

The Civil War did not end when the guns fell silent at Appomattox and Durham Station. It continued, in a different guise, for another decade. True, white southerners had abandoned their attempt to sustain an independent Confederacy, but the Confederacy had been only marginally the creature of a preexisting southern nationalism. Its component states separated from the Union primarily to protect themselves from northern encroachments, especially those that threatened the institution of slavery. The Confederacy was therefore just one of several mechanisms by which white southerners, at various times in the American experience, sought to enact what **historian Ulrich B. Phillips would later term** “the central theme of Southern history”: “that it shall be and remain a white man’s country.” Earlier attempts to maintain the South as a “white man’s country” had played out politically in efforts to shield slavery from challenge—in the debates on the Constitution, in the attempt to balance slave and free states, in efforts to create a selective, self-serving theory of states’ rights, and most dramatically in secession. If the Confederacy perished, the determination to maintain white supremacy did not. It would survive for at least another century. Vestiges of that determination linger even to this day.

The following is an interview with Dr. Mark Grimsley to discuss his research into examining the Civil Rights Movement and Southern Conservative Whites Movement as insurgencies. He explores this in greater detail in the forthcoming article “Wars for the American South: The First and Second Reconstructions Considered as Insurgencies” in the March 2012 issue of *Civil War History*.

Mike Few: Traditionally, social scientists, viewing conflict through the lens of the state, prefer to quantify wars as resulting in a win, loss, or tie; however, history shows that the construction, reconstruction, or deconstruction of the state following a conflict is often a long process with mixed results. Why did the Civil War not end after Confederate Gen. Joseph E. Johnston surrendered to Union Gen. William T. Sherman at Bennett Place, Durham, NC and General Robert E. Lee surrendered the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia to Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, at the home of Wilmer and Virginia McLean in the rural town of Appomattox Court House, Virginia?

Mark Grimsley: It’s important to acknowledge that in an important sense, the war did end in 1865, because the federal government’s two goals—the restoration of the Union and the destruction of slavery—had both been achieved. White southerners gave up the idea of an independent Confederacy,

and they showed every sign of accepting the lenient terms for return to the Union offered by the administration of Andrew Johnson. The Republican-controlled Congress, however, believed that more stringent terms were necessary to achieve the fruits of victory. In the words of Richard Henry Dana, a prominent Republican, they insisted on holding the former Confederate states in “the grasp of war” until the political dominance of the Southern elite was eliminated. A key component of their plan to accomplish this involved the imposition of universal male suffrage for African Americans. Essentially, the Reconstruction insurgency was a successful effort to break the grasp of war and restore what Southern conservatives termed “Home Rule.”

A more clunky response, since you mention social scientists, would be to point to the Correlates of War Study, which defines a war as any event that results in a thousand or more battlefield deaths each year. If you substitute “deaths from political violence” for “battlefield deaths,” then several years during Reconstruction would come close to meeting this standard. In Louisiana alone, for example, an estimated 2,500 people perished between 1865 and 1876.

MF: How did the United States Government attempt to reestablish control in the South at the conclusion of the Civil War?

MG: To repeat, the most important component was to require the former Confederate states to give African Americans the vote. This allowed them to play a major role in sustaining the Republican state governments created throughout the former Confederacy. In this task they were joined by Southern Unionists—whites who had militantly opposed secession—and Southern businessmen attracted to the Republican party because of its support for business, the creation of infrastructure, etc. A secondary component was the disfranchisement of high-ranking politicians and officers who had supported the Confederacy. The U.S. Government—which for all practical purposes meant the Republican party—sought to sustain these governments. A third component was the prohibition of any attempt by Southern states to repay creditors who had supported the Confederate war effort.

To ensure compliance with these requirements, Congress divided the former Confederate states (except Tennessee) into five military districts, each commanded by a major general, but essentially these generals monitored the Southern political process. They had neither the authority, the inclination, nor the troops to conduct a military occupation. In October 1868, for example, U.S. Army strength in the former Confederacy stood at just 17,657, of which 4,612 were in Texas, mostly to watch the Mexican border. That number dwindled sharply in the years that followed, averaging about 8,000, half of them in Texas.

MF: Did the Southern Conservative Whites from the dissolved Confederate States of America covertly form an insurgency to resist Northern Occupation?

MG: That’s right. However, it was not necessary to do this in every Southern state. In some states, such as Virginia, Southern conservatives regained control within a year of readmission to the Union, and were able to do so through the normal political process, but on average, it required four and a half years to regain Home Rule. The more difficult it was to achieve Home Rule through politics, the more political efforts were supplemented by violence. In three states—Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina—violence was the predominant tool by which Home Rule was achieved.

MF: How were the Southern Whites organized and structured, and what was their modus operandi?

MG: Southern whites never created an insurgency in the Maoist sense of a centrally directed people’s war. The Invisible Empire of the Ku Klux Klan was a myth. What you had instead was a complex insurgency of local groups who conducted terrorist campaigns of intimidation and assassination. These

efforts were uncoordinated but had the effect of undermining the Republican state governments.

Some of these groups operated under the guise of the Ku Klux Klan, but in most instances the Klansmen were effective only in curtailing attempts by African American families to assert some degree of economic independence. Only in South Carolina did the Klan become a major threat to the state government. The largest and best organized of these groups were the White Leagues in Louisiana, the Rifle Clubs in Mississippi, and the Redshirts in South Carolina. The latter two succeeded in “redeeming” their respective states. The first came close to doing so, and would have succeeded had the U.S. government rendered their efforts unnecessary, by abandoning Reconstruction and simply handing them Home Rule.

MF: During the Reconstruction Period, did the United States Government have a monopoly on the use of violence?

MG: Never. For one thing, it did not disarm white Southerners, most of whom owned at least one firearm. For another, it expected state governments to defend themselves using militia. However, these militias were seldom up to the job, and their widespread employment would have exacerbated rather than reduced the hostility of Southern conservatives.

MF: How did Southern Whites use violence to achieve their political goals?

MG: The pattern of the Reconstruction insurgency closely corresponds with *dau tranh*, a Vietnamese term that literally means “the struggle” but has a much richer connotation. *Dau tranh* rejects the idea that insurgency should be confined to guerrilla warfare. Instead it prescribes the exploitation of any and all means to achieve the desired objective. If given access to the political process by the targeted government—as occurred during Reconstruction—an insurgency following the tenets of *dau tranh* does not accept the legitimacy of that process (as the targeted government hopes it will), but simply regards such access as an additional tool by which to undermine and overthrow the government. *Dau tranh* employs social measures (in the context of Reconstruction, the ostracism of white southerners who supported or tolerated the Republican order), economic measures (the discharge of black laborers and boycotts aimed at uncooperative white merchants and planters), agitation and propaganda (the Democratic press), and paramilitary measures (intimidation and violence). As one of its foremost interpreters has explained, “the basic objective in *dau tranh* strategy is to put armed conflict into the context of political dissidence. Thus, while armed and political *dau tranh* may designate separate clusters of activities, conceptually they cannot be separated. *Dau tranh* is a seamless web.”

MF: What was the impact of lawfare or forced government intervention through the judicial system during this conflict?

MG: Lawfare was not a major factor and indeed, one might almost say it worked in reverse. The striking thing about Reconstruction was how fidelity to the Constitution and a belief in limited government restricted the federal government’s freedom of action. The U.S. Supreme Court handed down several decisions that emasculated the bases for enforcement of Reconstruction.

Moreover, the federal government became less and less interested in the enforcement of Reconstruction as time went on. One reason for this is that the Democratic party in the North, which looked askance at Reconstruction, grew in power over time and gained control of the U.S. House of Representatives in 1874. Another is that the Republican party increasingly viewed conservative control of the South as a non-problem and turned its attention to other concerns. One of these was control over a restive labor force as the country began to industrialize. This made many Republicans sympathetic to the desire of Southern conservatives to control their own labor force.

MF: What was the impact of Plessy v. Ferguson?

MG: Plessy v. Ferguson gave a green light to legal segregation. However, the most significant development was a wave of disfranchisement laws that swept the South at the turn of the century. These laws got around the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments by imposing measures such as poll taxes and literacy tests designed to remove African Americans from meaningful access to political power. The successful Reconstruction insurgencies provided the opening for such laws, but for several decades white conservatives had utilized voter fraud to control election outcomes. Ironically, the disfranchisement laws were an attempt to restore honest elections by eliminating the need for dishonest elections.

Between them, legal segregation and disfranchisement created a totalitarian order in the American South, enforced by lynchings, mob violence, and in several instances the use of the National Guard to crush African American efforts to unionize or attempt to achieve a degree of economic independence. This order persisted for a half century, until it was destroyed by a second insurgency: the nonviolent resistance and African American self-defense groups that comprised the modern Civil Rights Movement. But that's another story.

About the Authors



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Michael Few is a retired military officer who served multiple combat tours to Iraq including the Thunder Runs and The Surge, and he currently serves as the editor of Small Wars Journal. He is a graduate of the United States Military Academy and studied small wars at the Defense Analysis Department at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA



Mark Grimsley

Dr. Mark Grimsley is a Research Affiliate at the Mershon Center for International Security Studies for THE Ohio State University. He is a renowned Civil War historian and author of [The Hard Hand of War, And Keep Moving On: The Virginia Campaign, May-June 1864 \(Great Campaigns of the Civil War\)](#), and [Civilians in the Path of War \(Studies in War, Society, and the Military\)](#). Currently, he is examining both the Civil Rights Movement and Southern Conservative Whites Movement as insurgencies.

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