

The Bloody Shirt: Terror After Appomattox

Michael B. Ballard

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Ballard, Michael B. (2008) "The Bloody Shirt: Terror After Appomattox," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss4/24>

Review

Ballard, Michael B.

Fall 2008

Budiansky, Stephen *The Bloody Shirt: Terror After Appomattox*. Viking, \$27.95 hardcover ISBN 9780670018406

The Battlefield of Reconstruction

Published on the heels of Nicholas Lemann's *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* (2006), Stephen Budiansky reinforces the sad story of the so-called Redemption movement in the South toward the end of Reconstruction. Redemption sounds better, but Budiansky's subtitle places the period in much better perspective. Southern political leaders used terror tactics to intimidate and murder black citizens and Republican office holders to the point that black voting rights became practically nonexistent, and the Democratic Party took power in all the old Confederate states. The tragedy was even more so because there was no cry of protest, either by President Ulysses S. Grant's administration or people of the North in general. The reaction to what happened in the South, especially in 1875, appears to underscore one interpretation of why the North fought the Civil War. Northerners were much more interested in saving the Union than in freeing slaves and giving the freedman full citizenship rights. Whatever emotional responses there were to Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation were largely forgotten when Reconstruction ended.

Budiansky's focuses on the experiences of James Longstreet, who he thinks is, or was, the Confederacy's greatest general (many would disagree), Lewis Merrill and Prince Rivers, who struggled against Redemption in South Carolina, and Adelbert Ames, who fought a losing battle to keep Mississippi fully democratic after Grant refused to send military aid.

The strength of the book is the primary source material that the author includes, which consists of newspaper articles, circulars, letters, state and federal government reports, and published contemporary articles. The scattering of this material throughout the book provides a sense of immediacy, and the reader

sometimes will get the feeling that the tragic drama unfolding in the South is being covered live by television. Budiansky's narrative is well written, and he, rightly, has little sympathy with Southern terrorists who turned the close of Reconstruction into a bloodbath. He also includes at the end of the book a "whatever happened to" discussion of survivors of the violence, and how events have since been ignored in the South.

The book's weakness is its lack of analysis. Even popular books published for general readers anticipate how the author explains all he has placed in his work. Budiansky leaves out historical analysis and context. He could have done much more with how Southerners sugar-coated the Redemption period, both at the time and for many decades thereafter. The dead clearly died in vain, for they were quickly forgotten by all sections of the country. And why did Grant show no inclination to stop the violence? He did not seem like the kind of man who would turn his back on rampant injustice, on cold-blooded murder. Budiansky also ignores the impact of the Dunning school of Reconstruction, which emphasized corruption in Southern states by Republicans and blacks during the post-war period. This interpretation has since been rejected by historians. How many native whites opposed the violence? They tend to be as ignored as those who opposed the Confederacy. In effect, this book is fine for those readers who know nothing at all about the period of Redemption. For those who want to know more and understand more about what happened and why it happened, Lemann's book is much the superior work.

Michael B. Ballard is coordinator of the Congressional and Political Research Center and University Archivist at Mississippi State University.