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The United States is inexorably linked to the stain of white supremacy. It is a stain that has been difficult to erase despite multiple inflection points and opportunities to reckon with America’s racist past. The Reconstruction Era of 1865 to 1877 that followed the Civil War provided the first opportunity for the United States to achieve some semblance of racial equality, and witnessed the adoption of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. The passage of these amendments, on paper, banned slavery and gave citizenship and the right to vote to Black Americans. Other important laws were also adopted, such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) Act of 1871, which were deemed necessary by Congress given that the KKK was carrying out wanton acts of brutality to stifle measures to provide civil and political rights to Blacks. Vigilantism and acts of terrorism perpetrated upon the Black population that killed thousands in the United States post-Civil War made the paper advances, in the form of the Reconstruction Era Amendments and other laws (like the KKK Act), seem aspirational.

These aspirations of the Reconstruction Era were not achieved, as terrorism scholar Daniel Byman recently noted in *International Security*. Byman argues that “Reconstruction failed because white supremacists reversed Black political gains after the Civil War through violence and that the federal government was unable, and at times, unwilling to stop them” (56). By offering a comparative perspective to political violence during the Reconstruction Era, the article explains why racist white Southerners were able to delay the constitutional advances that were designed to provide political and social equality to Black Americans. The author of multiple books on insurgencies and terrorism, Byman is well positioned to examine America’s Reconstruction missteps. In large part, this is because the Reconstruction Era was pock-marked with acts of terrorism that are of equal horror as those that have been observed in the recent conflicts of Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, and Yemen.

Byman’s analysis contains five sections but this review will focus on two primary components. The first section evaluated in this review is an assessment of the primary factors that explains the failures of the Reconstruction Era. In this regard, Byman examines structural and policy issues that may have contributed to the failures. The second portion evaluated in this review is Byman’s counterfactual analysis of key structural challenges and the missteps made by policymakers during the post-Reconstruction era. Byman’s article also includes a short history of the Reconstruction period; a section on lessons that can be derived from studying Reconstruction; and, a section that looks at historical hypotheses that attempt to explain why efforts to reshape society after civil catastrophes often fail.

Byman explains that structural challenges, such as geography, economic status or other immutable factors can doom counterinsurgency initiatives no matter the policy or leadership choices made by policy-makers (59). In making this point he points to the structural strengths that may have contributed to Germany and Japan's ability to create conditions inhospitable to insurgencies. In contrast, citing terrorism scholar Seth Jones, groups like al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) have been able to take advantage of structural and governmental weaknesses to foment violence (60). Yet, in comparing these factors to policy factors, it is clear that Reconstruction largely failed due to policies (or absence thereof) made at the federal, state, or local levels. It is also at these three governmental levels where Byman's counterfactual analysis is instrumental to understanding why and how white supremacy was able to thrive in the aftermath of the Civil War.

Among the key counterfactuals Byman explores is the decision by the federal government to pull troops from the southern states as part of an 1877 compromise – resulting in fewer troops that were dedicated to protecting the civil rights of Black Americans (84). This was one of many promises and compromises left unfilled and Byman ponders how the course of U.S. history would have change if the federal government had maintained a longer-term troop deployment. He readily acknowledges that doing so could have extended deadly exchanges and eroded wavering public support, citing specifically President Ulysses Grant's reluctance to reject the popular sentiment of the time in the North for an indefinite troop presence (90). Decades later such reluctance to use federal troops would become an enduring feature of U.S. political responses even in the face of violent upheaval, including the staged coup by white supremacists in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1898 as brilliantly told by David Zucchino in his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Wilmington's Lie*. Zucchino explains that when President William McKinley, who was raised an abolitionist, was apprised of the November coup in Wilmington that resulted in the extrajudicial deaths of Black Americans and the rise of a white supremacist-led government, he did nothing (292-293).¹ Further, in examining the Reconstruction Era troop deployment level counterfactual, Byman's also draws useful contemporary parallels that document the quickly diminishing American appetite for using troops in counterinsurgencies overseas, such as in Iraq. Byman does this in part to document how critical support is to any counterinsurgency effort – whether at home, as during the post-Civil War period, or abroad. Byman's other counterfactuals, such as the need to thwart cleavages leveraged by white supremacists to sow discontent, ramping up economic pressure, and empowering Black Americans are important "what-if" questions within the context of the Reconstruction Era, but the lessons learned from thinking about these questions arguably holds even greater value within the current American political landscape.

Byman's analysis is relevant to contemporary policymakers who now must grapple with a rise of white supremacy in the United States. This may not seem intuitive given that more than 150 years has passed since Reconstruction. Yet, some of the proximate challenges that faced decisionmakers in the years following the Reconstruction Era remain omnipresent today. Several academic institutions, like the University of Maryland,² and think tanks like New America,³ have documented that right-wing ideologically motivated acts of violence have increased significantly over the past two decades. White supremacy falls within that category. A 2021 Anti-Defamation League report highlighted that the year

¹ David Zucchino, *Wilmington's Lie: The Murderous Coup of 1898 and the Rise of White Supremacy* (New York: Grove Press, 2020).

² *Countering Domestic Terrorism: Examining the Evolving Threat, Before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs United States Senate*, 116th Congress, page 5 (2020) (William Braniff, Director, Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) And Professor of Practice, University of Maryland). Also see the University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database at <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>.

³ Peter Bergen and David Sterman. "Terrorism in America After 9/11," *New America*, September 10, 2021, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/terrorism-in-america/>.

2020 witnessed a significant spike in neo-Nazi graffiti and deployment of other white supremacist hate symbols.⁴ At the same time, media outlets like One America News Network provide platforms for conspiracy theorists to perpetuate toxic notions. Others, like Fox News pundit Tucker Carlson attempt to normalize white supremacist theories like the Great Replacement in order to stoke fear. This is not new and is emulative of newspaper reporting following the Reconstruction Era. In 1898, the Wilmington newspaper, the *Messenger*, celebrated the white “master race” deposing of Black lawmakers while another local paper, the *Morning Star* claimed that no Black people had been harmed in the Wilmington coup. These outlets, and larger ones with statewide reach like the *News and Observer*, spread disinformation, perpetuated white supremacy ideas, and engaged in race-baiting (265-273). Just as in the Reconstruction Era, today’s politicians, like Republican Members of Congress, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Lauren Boebert, Paul Gosar, and many others have resorted to demagoguery to incite the masses to impede the democratic transfer of power. Indeed, the 6 January 2021 insurrection’s similarity to local coups d’état of the Reconstruction Era merit mention. For example, Zucchini’s *Wilmington’s Lie* outlines how Colonel Waddell’s rhetorical powers inspired and, worse, provided the bases for Red Shirts (a white supremacist group similar to the KKK) to terrorize Blacks and Republican politicians who were duly elected officials (3-352). The same ingredients of the 1898 Wilmington coup – problematic media, white supremacy violence, and political demagoguery was of course also present, albeit not at the same scale, on 6 January 2021.

In sum, Byman’s analysis is inventive and draws upon a diverse array of scholarship, to include the work of historians, military historians, political scientists, and counterterrorism and insurgency experts. His research reflects an understanding of the Reconstruction Era, citing the works of renowned historians like Eric Foner. At the same time, counterinsurgency experts like Seth Jones, Ben Connable, Martin Libicki, Mark Moyar,⁵ and many others have shaped Byman’s insights. While Byman’s narrative could benefit from a few modestly more detailed discussions regarding specific incidents (e.g., Wilmington coup, Colfax massacre) that occurred during the Reconstruction or post-Reconstruction Era to provide more color to his narrative, this is a quibble.

To conclude, one of Byman’s primary lessons from his review of Reconstruction Era missteps is that while compromise may be expedient, it is often unsatisfying and can create entrenched problems (103). This lesson is an important one that today’s policymakers would do well to heed. On 15 June 2021 the Biden administration released the first-ever National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism. The strategy acknowledges that, “violent white supremacy...and anti-government ideologies are responsible for a substantial portion of today’s domestic terrorism” (27). As the administration begins to implement the four pillars of the strategy designed to counter white supremacy and other forms of racially and ethnically motivated extremism, it would do well to consider the lessons learned that are identified by Byman and to think carefully about pursuing half-measures based on compromise.

Jason Blazakis is a professor of practice at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies where he also serves as the director of the Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism. He is working on a forthcoming book, tentatively titled, “Counterterrorism Finance: Follow the Money,” to be published by Cambridge University Press.

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⁴ Anti-Defamation League. “White Supremacist Propaganda Spikes in 2020,” Anti-Defamation League, 2021, <https://www.adl.org/white-supremacist-propaganda-spikes-2020>.

⁵ For instance, see Seth Jones’ *In the Graveyard of Empires*, Mark Moyar’s *Strategic Failure*, and Ben Connable and Martin Libicki’s *How Insurgencies End*.