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Class Conflict and Black Enfranchisement in Alabama

NATHAN L. BROOKS was a substantial planter in Lowndes County, in Alabama's Black Belt; in 1860, he had owned fifty-four slaves. In 1859 he had been elected as one of Lowndes's members of the state house of representatives, and he had been re-elected in 1861. In 1865 he was chosen for a third term. In the Presidential Reconstruction legislature, Representative Brooks became the principal proponent of the enfranchisement of the freedmen, offering first an amendment to the state constitution to grant the vote to literate black males, and when that failed, pressing a resolution to call a referendum on holding a new state constitutional convention. The enfranchising amendment had drawn the support of only twelve representatives—six former large slaveholders from the Black Belt and six former small or non-slaveholders. The resolution for a new constitutional convention had done considerably better, getting the support of thirty representatives on Brooks's first effort and thirty-four on his second one. Again, the coalition of supporters appears anomalous. On the first roll call, for instance, twelve of the thirty supporters came from plantation counties and eighteen from small-farming counties; eleven had been large slaveholders, five middling slaveholders, ten small slaveholders, and four non-slaveholders.

The voting on Brooks's various proposals indicates the complexity of the issue. Alabama's antebellum Constitution of 1819 had provided for

the apportionment of seats in both houses of the state legislature on the basis only of the counties' white population. As a result of the use of this "white basis," the small-farming counties of the state's hill country and of the wiregrass region in its southeast dominated the legislature throughout the antebellum era—to the great aggravation of the plantation counties, who persistently saw their whiggish economic and social reform proposals voted down by Jacksonian small-farmer members. In 1842 the Jacksonians had extended the white basis to congressional districting as well, over fierce Whig and Black Belt resistance.

The emancipation of the slaves, however, allowed Black Belters to reopen this question. When the new constitutional convention mandated by Presidential Reconstruction met in September 1865, the Black Belt delegates maintained that, now that the slaves were free men, the legislature should be apportioned on the basis of the total population. Delegates from the small-farming counties succeeded in defeating this claim, though, by noting that, since the constitution they were drafting barred the freedmen from voting, the white basis actually correctly reflected the geographical distribution of the electorate. And so the Constitution of 1865 retained the white basis provisions of the Constitution of 1819. It was in this context that Representative Brooks and a group of his Black Belt colleagues set out to alter the new constitution's suffrage and apportionment provisions once the legislature convened.

As the legislators considered Brooks's proposals, the overruling question for all of them was how enfranchised blacks would behave. The difficulty that Representative Brooks faced in building a legislative majority was that members of all backgrounds were deeply divided on this mystery. Brooks and the five to ten other former planters who supported his efforts were convinced that they could control the blacks, either through the economic dependency of the freedmen or, if necessary, through coercion. If so, black enfranchisement and apportionment on the basis of total population would produce both Black Belt control of the legislature and strengthened statewide electoral support for their whiggish perspectives. But the former planters in the House were by no means united in their conviction that the blacks were controllable. Whereas eleven former large slaveholders voted with Brooks

for a new constitutional convention on the initial roll call, eight voted to table the resolution.

At the same time, the representatives of the white small farmers would not support black enfranchisement unless they could be convinced that the black voters would have the capacity to resist planter intimidation or blandishments. If so, it seemed possible that black voters would join poorer whites in voting against planter hegemony and in defense of democratic and egalitarian convictions. But the fears felt by many planters of the enmity of their former slaves were exceeded only by the small farmers' quite general feeling that the planters would be able to manipulate the votes of their black subordinates, just as Brooks believed. Thus, while fourteen of the members who supported Brooks on this roll call had been small or non-slaveholders, seventeen of those voting to table his resolution had been non-slaveholders and eighteen more had been small slaveholders.

The same doubts are apparent in the second roll call on Brooks's proposal, a motion to reconsider the earlier vote. By this time, late in the legislative session, the first Military Reconstruction Act was making its way through Congress. This indication that the federal government might be willing to protect the independence of the black vote with military power had exactly the effect one might have predicted. The number of former large slaveholders who supported Brooks's position fell from eleven to seven while the number of former non-slaveholders who voted with him rose from four to ten. Apparently the growing strength of Radical sentiment in the North had increased both planters' alarm at an independent black electorate and at least some small farmers' confidence in the prospects for it.

There can be no doubt that the Radicals in Congress had very little real understanding of the subtleties of social conflict in the former slave South. A great many of them seem to have been afflicted with a romantic faith in democracy that led them to believe that black enfranchisement would solve the region's problems at a single stroke. Virtually none of them appreciated that the addition of blacks to the electorate would represent, for a state like Alabama, a significant intrastate sectional shift in legislative and political influence, from the small-farming to the plantation counties. Indeed, almost all Radicals thought that planters controlled southern politics

already, and understood themselves to be attacking, rather than threatening to strengthen, planter influence. But in the Presidential Reconstruction legislature's debates of Nathan Brooks's various proposals, that was the all-important consideration at every stage. Far from opposing black enfranchisement, the former large slaveholders were enthusiastic about it, so long as they could be confident that they could control the freedmen's votes. Far from opposing black enfranchisement simply on racial grounds, most white small-farmer representatives were doubtful because they believed—and the future would confirm their analysis—that neither federal nor state government would be capable of protecting the freedmen from the planters' manipulation.

Adam Fairclough argues that black enfranchisement inevitably plunged the Black Belt into class warfare between the landless black labor force and the white landowners. But the class conflict that shaped the debate in Alabama's Presidential Reconstruction legislature was the one that had dominated the state throughout the antebellum era, and would dominate it for the rest of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries—the one between the Black Belt grandees and the white small farmers in the hill counties and the wiregrass.

Once the Black Belt planters had succeeded in gaining the control of the black vote in their counties, which many of them had assumed they would have at the outset, they proceeded to use it, in effect, to rule the state. It was the mechanism through which they suppressed the repeated recrudescences of small-farmer Jacksonianism, first in the form of the Greenbackers and subsequently as the Populists. And when, following the Populist Revolt with its demand for "a free ballot and a fair count," the Black Belters became convinced that the eventual emergence of an independent black vote was a risk too great to accept, the black vote was, in the supreme irony of the experiment in black enfranchisement, the mechanism through which the Black Belters accomplished its elimination. In the referendum on the ratification of the disfranchising Constitution of 1901, the fifty-four counties outside the Black Belt rejected ratification by some 76,000 to 72,000. But such was the purported enthusiasm of black voters in the Black Belt for their own disfranchisement that the constitution swept the twelve Black Belt

counties by some 36,000 to 5,500; the black vote in these twelve counties thus carried the constitution to victory.

It would appear at first glance, of course, that with this result, the Black Belt regency had deprived itself of its means of domination. But in fact, at the constitutional convention of 1901, just as at the convention of 1865, the critical question was the basis of legislative apportionment. The small-farming counties pressed for apportionment based on the number of registered voters—with disfranchisement, effectively a restoration of the white basis that had been eliminated in the Constitution of 1867. The 1901 convention itself, however, was apportioned on total population and with this apportionment, after a bitter struggle, the Black Belters were able to secure the retention of total population for the legislature. The consequence was a legislature in which a very small electorate in the Black Belt counties sent large numbers of members—and often the same members—to each house, session after session. In Nathan Brooks's Lowndes County, for instance, after disfranchisement had done its work by 1904, there were 1,142 registered voters; these 1,142 voters (or the portion of them who paid their poll tax each January) elected their own state senator and two state representatives, based on the county's total population in 1900 of 35,651. Such grossly disproportionate representation was sufficient to allow Black Belt whites to defend their interests from virtually all of the white counties' assaults throughout the first half of the twentieth century—interests that included freezing into place the 1901 apportionment, despite vast population changes, until the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the Alabama reapportionment case, *Reynolds v. Sims*, in 1964. In the century-long struggle between the small-farming and plantation counties, then, the actual effect of the disfranchisement of 1901 was to allow the white counties the opportunity to win elections for statewide offices, while at the same time delivering to the Black Belt nearly impregnable control of the legislature.

Adam Fairclough, whose fine work has taught us so much about the civil rights movement, knows as well as anyone the many and complicated interactions between race and power in the South. Yet his portrait of Reconstruction depicts its conflicts as limited to the freedmen and their former owners, as if the vast mass of formerly non-slaveholding white small farmers

who were the bulk of the southern population were mere spectators at the main event. The truth, of course, is that emancipation and black enfranchisement altered the status of every Southerner, of every race and class. The initial advocates of black enfranchisement were planters who wished to use the black vote for their own purposes. The Republicans who actually accomplished the reform sought to use the black vote for very different purposes. The freedmen tried, in the end unsuccessfully, to exercise their franchise to defend their own interests. The planters eventually won this battle. But at every point along the way, the white small farmers understood that their Jacksonian aspirations were vitally at stake, and their response to black suffrage is a central and inescapable part of the story.