

**Honors Proposal**  
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Between May 1 and May 3, 1866, racial violence and terrorism descended upon the city of Memphis, Tennessee. A white mob attacked city's black community—including many ex-soldiers—leaving forty-six people dead, more than seventy people wounded, five women raped, hundreds of homes robbed, and dozens of black churches and schools burned to the ground.<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, I propose to place the Memphis massacre of 1866 into two distinct contexts. First, I will look beyond the local effects and investigate the extent to which the event shaped the national politics of Reconstruction. In a larger sense, moreover, this project will illuminate the connections between racial violence and politics in the period between 1863 and 1866. For many Americans, both northerners and southerners, the war continued beyond the formal ceasing of hostilities in April 1865. The events in Memphis the following year might be understood as one of the last battles of the Civil War.

### **Review of the Literature**

Existing historical scholarship on the Memphis Massacre (or the Memphis Riot, as it has been known) focuses on the solely on the city and divides into three distinct categories. Originating in the 1930s, the first group of scholars to study the massacre describes the event as a violation of racial norms by African Americans and placed fault on the black soldiers and former slaves rather than the other major players in the tragedy: Irish immigrants and disenfranchised former-Confederates. Historian Gerald M. Capers, writing in 1939, for example, describes the

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. 39th Cong., 1st Sess., House Report No. 101, *Memphis Riots and Massacres* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1866), 7, hereafter cited as *Memphis Riots and Massacres*; James Gilbert Ryan, "The Memphis Riot of 1866: Terror in a Black Community During Reconstruction," *Journal of Negro History* 62, no. 3 (July 1977): 243; Kevin Hardwick, "'Your Old Father Abe Lincoln is Dead and Damned': Black Soldiers and the Memphis Race Riot of 1866," *Journal of Social History* 27, no. 1 (Fall 1993): 109.

city's post-Civil War period: "Socially the war was catastrophic, for it accentuated all of the vicious characteristics of Memphis. By converting the Negro into a free man it brought him into the city in vast numbers, to be a perennial burden as well as a disrupting force in the community."<sup>2</sup> Capers also explores the origins of the massacre: "Racial relations reached a boiling point in 1866. . . . Encouraged by Radical agitators, upon occasion the Negroes attempted to attain social equality. . . . The spark which started the actual conflagration was the discharge in the spring of four thousand black troops."<sup>3</sup> This scholarship largely blames African Americans and carpetbaggers (Northerners who moved to the South at the end of the war) for the violence.

During the 1960s and 1970s, scholars challenged Capers' interpretations. Historian Jack Holmes and James Ryan, for example, challenged the racist conclusions of Capers and acknowledged the highly complex social, economic, and political factors contributing to the tragedy.<sup>4</sup> Holmes identifies a list of factors contributing to the increased tension in Memphis, claiming "[white Memphians] needed only a small incident, a minor spark, to ignite a full-scale riot. That spark was provided on the evening of April 30, 1866, when police attempted to arrest several of the more boisterous, intoxicated Negroes at [a local saloon]."<sup>5</sup> Ryan characterizes the black soldiers as foolish and impulsive, but hardly violent. Conversely, he portrays the white mob as ruthless, attacking soldiers and civilians indiscriminately, and antagonistic. Furthermore, Ryan harshly criticized the city government as racist, inept, and lazy. While the shift from Capers to Holmes and Ryan was significant, the subsequent shift was more nuanced. In the 1990s and 2000s, historians focused on specific social groups within the conflict: Marius

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<sup>2</sup> Gerald M. Capers Jr., *The Biography of a River Town; Memphis: Its Heroic Age* (New Orleans: Tulane University Press, 1939), 163.

<sup>3</sup> Capers, *The Biography of a River Town*, 177.

<sup>4</sup> Jack D.L. Holmes, "The Underlying Causes of the Memphis Race Riot of 1866," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (March 1958): 221; James Gilbert Ryan, "The Memphis Riot of 1866: Terror in a Black Community During Reconstruction," *Journal of Negro History* 62, no. 3 (July 1977) 244.

<sup>5</sup> Jack D.L. Holmes, "The Underlying Causes of the Memphis Race Riot of 1866," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (March 1958): 220.

Carriere investigated the actions of the Memphis press before, during, and after the massacre; Brian Page researched the role of Irish-Americans and the impact of race; Kevin Hardwick examined the behavior of black troops.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, brief discussions of the massacre appear in non-Memphis specific texts, particularly works on the Civil War and Reconstruction.<sup>7</sup>

While the majority of these articles and books are highly informative and well written, all focus exclusively on Memphis local politics and fails to explain the impact of the event on national politics. Some scholars acknowledge the connection between the local and the national, but few develop this idea. Holmes comments, “Because [the massacre] occurred during the mid-term congressional election year, the Memphis riot played into the hands of Radical Republicans seeking to discredit the president’s reconstruction policy toward the South” and in another article he explains, “. . . of greater [impact] than [the loss of life or destruction of property] were the riot’s effects on political, social, and economic developments in Memphis, in Tennessee, and throughout the nation.”<sup>8</sup> The relationship between the event in Memphis and the development of national Reconstruction policy deserves further study.

## Primary Sources

Primary resources documenting the results of the Memphis massacre are well-preserved and ready for examination. The best resource is a report published by United States Congress,

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<sup>6</sup> Marius Carriere, “An Irresponsible Press: Memphis Newspapers and the 1866 Riot,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (Spring 2001); Brian Page, “‘An Unholy Alliance’: Irish Americans and the Political Construction of Whiteness in Memphis, Tennessee, 1866-1879” *Left History* 8, no. 1, (2002); Kevin Hardwick, “‘Your Old Father Abe Lincoln is Dead and Damned’: Black Soldiers and the Memphis Race Riot of 1866,” *Journal of Social History* 27, no. 1 (Fall 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York : Harper & Row, 1988), 261-263; Albert Castel, *The Presidency of Andrew Johnson* (Lawrence, KS: Regents Press of Kansas, 1979) 73-74; Howard K. Beale, *The Critical Year: A Study of Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (New York, F. Ungar Pub. Co., 1958), 343-345.

<sup>8</sup> Holmes, “The Underlying Causes of the Memphis Race Riot of 1866,” 195; Jack D.L. Holmes, “The Effects of the Memphis Race Riot of 1866,” *The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers* 1, no. 12 (1958): 58.

available at the Rhodes College Barrett Library. When news of the riots reached Washington D.C., Republican leaders ordered an investigation. Three Congressmen traveled to Memphis in the Select Congressional committee: Elihu Washburne, of Illinois; John Broomall, of Illinois; and George Shanklin, of Kentucky. Washburne and Broomall represented the majority Republican Party and Shanklin the minority Democratic Party. Five days after leaving the Capital, the committee reached Memphis on May 22 and, lodged in the Gayoso House, proceeded to interview 170 witnesses. At the conclusion of the hearings, Washburne composed the majority report, while Shanklin penned the minority report. The majority summed up the massacre thusly: “The outbreak of the disturbance resulting from collision between some policemen and discharged colored soldiers was seized upon as a pretext for an organized and bloody massacre of the colored people of Memphis, regardless of age, sex or condition . . . and led on by sworn officers of the law composing the city government, and others.”<sup>9</sup> Washburne emphasized the importance of city officials in the violence: “The mob, finding itself under the protection and guidance of official authority . . . proceeded with the deliberation to commission of crimes and perpetration of horrors which can scarcely find a parallel in the history of civilized or barbarous people, and must inspire the most profound emotions of horror among all civilized people.”<sup>10</sup> Shanklin’s minority report accepted most of the facts presented by his Republican colleague, but placed the blame for the riots on the rabble of immigrants empowered by the Disenfranchisement Act rather than former-Confederates. This act, passed on June 5, 1865, restricted voting to men loyal to the Union and disenfranchised any man who directly or indirectly aided the Confederacy for a minimum of fifteen years. The act, as Holmes denotes, was less unintended: “The result of this situation was the transfer of political control of the newly-arrived immigrants, especially the

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<sup>9</sup> U.S. 39th Cong., 1st Sess., House Report No. 101, *Memphis Riots and Massacres* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1866), 5 hereafter cited as *Memphis Riots and Massacres*.

<sup>10</sup> Majority Report in *Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 5.

Irish. These took an active interest in Memphis politics, and by May 1866, virtually dominated city government.”<sup>11</sup> Shanklin insinuated that if Southern elites controlled the city, rather than immigrants Mayor John Park and Judge John Creighton, the riots would not have happened.<sup>12</sup>

Before most of the representatives even read the report, the implications of the event were evident. Democrats categorized the violence as merely a riot, not a massacre. In their opinion, this “riot” necessitated attention from local and state officials, not Congressmen; Irishmen, not southern elites, caused the trouble. Certainly the violence in Memphis was not a southern epidemic, but rather an expected pain of reunification. Republicans interpreted the event differently. One part an earnest attempt to alert Americans to the state of affairs in the formerly-rebellious states and one part political spin on a tragedy, the Republicans wanted the report disseminated to the public because it, with the exception of the brief minority report, backed their agenda for the upcoming election. Both the majority and minority sections of the report disclose more than just the specifics about the massacre; the anecdotes and tone more importantly reveal the particular agendas of the major American political parties. By examining the details of the outrages, the majority call to action, and the majority summary, historians can more clearly comprehend the Republican political agenda.

In addition to the Congressional report, northern newspapers contribute to our understanding of post-war politics. Nineteenth-century newspapers openly identified with either the Democratic or Republican Party. The New York *Times* and *Daily Tribune*, the Chicago *Tribune*, the Brooklyn *Eagle*, *Harper’s Weekly*—some of the leading Republican publications of the day—printed numerous stories about the Memphis massacre, which certainly influenced

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<sup>11</sup> Jack D.L. Holmes, “The Underlying Causes of the Memphis Race Riot of 1866,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (March 1958): 198-199.

<sup>12</sup> Jack D.L. Holmes, “The Effects of the Memphis Race Riot of 1866,” 59-60; Minority Report in *Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 41-44; Majority Report in *Memphis Riots and Massacres*, 22-23, 24

Reconstruction politics. Most newspapers wrote about the massacre within the first few days, but a few continued printing stories into the fall, clearly intending to impact the November election.<sup>13</sup>

The most provocative articles appeared in the *Tribune* written by a correspondent with the moniker “Battle-Axe.” The author wrote about a number of uncorroborated anecdotes, stories absent from the Congressional testimony. The author wrote about an on-going disagreement between the police and the “old families” of the city as to which group killed more blacks. Furthermore, according to the anonymous writer, the fireman contented themselves with “the glory of having burned to the ground, all the ‘nigger’ churches and school-houses with a vast number of ‘nigger tenements.’”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the author claimed the scourge broke into the city arsenal, stole ten thousand firearms, and planned to murder as many Northern men as possible. Also included in the editorial were two grizzly murders, both absent in the Select Committee report. First, the author retold the murder of an old black man by the rabble; the mob smashed the man’s face with a stick, shot him in the stomach, and finally cut out his tongue. Battle-Axe wrote of another chilling tale, the victim a five-year-old mulatto girl. The girl refused to divulge the location of a young man who hid from the horde. Someone in the crowd cut out her eyes and tossed to her into the suspected shanty as the rest of the group fired upon the building. No witness testified to the Select Committee testimony corroborating any portion of Battle Axe’s account. Considering the large amount of northern sympathizer and unionist testimony, the absence of this version certainly seems suspect.<sup>15</sup> These newspapers were the

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<sup>13</sup> These newspapers are readily available in online archives, including *Chicago Tribune Web Edition*, *Historical New York Times Project*, *Northern New York Historical Newspapers Archive*, *Pennsylvania Civil War Newspapers Archive*, and the *Harper’s Weekly Civil War-era Archives*.

<sup>14</sup> “The Memphis Riots,” *Chicago Tribune*, 8 May 1866, 2; Holmes, “The Effects of the Memphis Race Riot of 1866,” 60.

<sup>15</sup> “The Memphis Riots,” *Chicago Tribune*, 8 May 1866, 2.

voice of the parties; by better understanding this bank of resources, we may better understand American politics, Reconstruction, and the Memphis violence.

In addition to the news and editorials, these publications printed sketches and cartoons that portrayed the massacre in Memphis. Alfred Waud, a Civil War correspondent, drew both of the sketches that appeared on the front cover of the *Harper's Weekly*, a prominent Northern, Republican mouthpiece. The magazine hired him to travel throughout the South to document the hardships of Reconstruction.<sup>16</sup> During his stay in Memphis, he wrote, “[This city] now has the unenviable reputation of being the worst behaved city in the Union. There is a floating population here, made up . . . dregs . . . which would be the curse to any city.”<sup>17</sup> His sketches display whites violently destroying buildings and beating African Americans. In addition to Waud's sketches, *Harper's Weekly* hired Thomas Nast, a German immigrant, to cartoon the incident. One of the most famous artists of his time, Nast aligned himself politically with the radical element of the Republican Party and his work reflected that sentiment. He believed the North, particularly the United States Congress, needed to dictate the terms of reunification; he ardently opposed President Andrew Johnson and the Democratic Party.<sup>18</sup> He drew two cartoons involving the Memphis massacre and both lambasted the Executive branch and emphasized the importance of the Republican Congress controlling the Reconstruction process. With a circulation of over 200,000 readers, *Harper's Weekly*, and the provoking sketches and cartoons relating to the Memphis massacre therein, certainly impacted national politics.<sup>19</sup> Today, these cartoons appear both in online art archives and in readily-available books.

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<sup>16</sup> E. Ray, *Alfred R. Waud, Civil War Artist* (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), 12-13.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Ray, *Alfred R. Waud*, 52-53.

<sup>18</sup> Morton Keller and Thomas Nast, *The Art and Politics of Thomas Nast* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 13, 42-43.

<sup>19</sup> Keller, *The Art and Politics of Thomas Nast* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 54-55.

The speeches, diaries, and correspondence of political leaders during Reconstruction will also prove useful. Congressional leaders such as Thaddeus Stevens, Charles Sumner, Benjamin Wade, Henry Wilson, George Julian, and James Ashley—all Radicals—certainly understood the importance of Memphis within the scope national politics. Additionally, the papers of representatives Washburne, Broomall, and George Shanklin could provide new insight into the relationship between Memphis and Washington, D.C. politics. Unlike the newspapers and cartoons, these documents provide an insider—rather than an outsider—perspective into the strategies of the Republican Party.<sup>20</sup>

The voting records in Congress by all United States Congressmen, not just Radical Republicans, are also relevant to this study. Understanding how Congressmen voted during the first decade of Reconstruction will further develop our understanding of the effects of the Memphis massacre on Congressional policy-making. Historian Michael Les Benedict's *A Compromise of Principle: Congressional Republicans and Reconstruction, 1863-1869* contains a thorough examination of voting records.<sup>21</sup>

## Research Questions

This study hopes to expand understanding of the Memphis massacre from two distinct perspectives. First, I will examine the massacre within the context of post-Civil War American politics. The Memphis massacre seems inextricably linked to the election of 1866, won overwhelmingly by Republicans, characterized by many as “radical.” But just exactly who were these radicals and what made them radical? Civil War historian Eric Foner describes the Radical

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<sup>20</sup> The papers of Thaddeus Stevens, Charles Sumner, Benjamin Wade, George Julian, and Elihu Washburne are offered in microfilm and will be obtained through interlibrary loan.

<sup>21</sup> Benedict's analysis is widely available. Copies exist at both University of Memphis Ned R. McWherter Library in Memphis, Tennessee and The Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library also in Memphis, Tennessee.



Republicans as a “self-conscious political generation with a common set of experiences and commitments, a grass-roots constituency, a moral sensibility, and a program for Reconstruction” with a particular penchant for abolitionism and equal rights between whites and blacks.<sup>22</sup>

Benedict echoes this sentiment: “Measured against the antebellum, proslavery Constitution, the Republican effort to reshape southern society and protect the rights of Americans citizens—indeed recognizing African Americans as citizens—was radical.”<sup>23</sup> Despite decisive election margins in the fall of 1866—just six months after the Memphis massacre—within two years the Radicals were already losing power. Yet in such a short lifespan the Radicals pushed an abundance of legislation through Congress with the assistance of moderate and conservative Republicans. In the framework of Reconstruction, the study of the Memphis massacre begs certain questions: How did the Radical element of the Republican Party gain the favor of the American electorate in the aftermath of the Civil War? How did Congressmen, not just Radicals, perceive the massacre in Memphis and use it to their advantage? What factors contributed to the fall of Radicalism in Reconstruction politics? What does this short-lived political movement tell us about the importance of the Memphis massacre?

Secondly, I will examine the massacre within the context of similar racial and politicized violent episodes in the 1860s: New York City Draft Riots of July 13-16, 1863; the Fort Pillow Massacre of April 12, 1864; and the New Orleans Race Riots of July 30, 1866.<sup>24</sup> These events share many similarities with the Memphis Massacre. All these episodes involved whites killing African Americans, including women and children, and all affected national events. It is hardly

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<sup>22</sup> Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, 228-229.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Les Benedict, *A Compromise of Principle: Congressional Republicans and Reconstruction, 1863-1869* (New York: Norton, 1974), 6.

<sup>24</sup> These events have been studied in the following sources: Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance for American Society and Politics in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Andrew Ward, *River Run Red: The Fort Pillow Massacre in the American Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2005); James G Hollandsworth, *An Absolute Massacre: The New Orleans Race Riot of July 30, 1866* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

a coincidence these tragedies occurred within a three-year period. How does the Memphis Massacre contribute to the understanding of collisions between three powerful forces: politics, race, and mob violence?

In the first three days of May, 1866, an impassioned white mob besieged the African American community of Memphis, leaving nothing but death and destruction in its path. While current scholarship properly identifies the perpetrators, it fails to adequately place Memphis within contexts of national politics and other episodes of racial mob violence. I propose to investigate the Memphis Massacre of 1866 within these two contexts.

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