Will the Black Soldier Fight?

One of the most effective scenes in the movie depicts the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts marching proudly through Boston, having completed its training in May 1863. About the same time, the New York Tribune, the leading northern newspaper and a supporter of arming blacks to fight, observed that most Yankees, while endorsing the policy, still wondered whether blacks would make good soldiers. A war correspondent for the Tribune soon answered those doubts when he vividly described the assault on Fort Wagner. "Who asks now in doubt and derision, 'Will the Negro fight?'" commented one abolitionist. "The answer is spoken from the cannons's mouth... it comes to us from... those graves beneath Fort Wagner's walls, which the American people will surely never forget."

GLORY

Can movies teach history? For GLORY, the answer is yes. Not only is it the first feature film to treat the role of black soldiers in the American Civil War, but it is also one of the most powerful and historically accurate movies ever made about that war. After more than fifty years on the screen, Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler are still teaching false and stereotyped lessons about slavery. Perhaps GLORY can restore the image of courageous black soldiers that prevailed in the North during the latter war years, before the process of romanticizing the Old South obscured it.

GLORY tells the story of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry from its organization during the winter of 1862-1863 to its climactic assault the following summer against Fort Wagner, a massive earthworks guarding the approach to Charleston harbor. The Union’s naval effort to capture Charleston failed earlier in 1863—and so did the assault on Fort Wagner led by the Fifty-fourth, which suffered nearly fifty percent casualties. Among those killed was Col. Robert Gould Shaw, GLORY’s protagonist, who died leading his men over the parapet.

However, if in this sense the attack was a failure, in a more profound sense it was a success of historic proportions. The unflinching behavior of the regiment in the face of an overwhelming hail of lead and iron answered the skeptic’s question, Will the Negro fight? It demonstrated the courage of the race to millions of white people in both the North and the South who had doubted whether black men would stand in combat against soldiers of the self-styled master race.

The recruitment of black combat troops was still regarded as a risky experiment when the Fifty-fourth’s six hundred men moved out at dusk on July 18 to attack Fort Wagner. During the next few hours they more than justified that experiment. Forced by the ocean on one side and swamps on the other to approach the fort along several hundred yards of narrow, exposed beach, the regiment moved steadily forward through bursting shells and murderous musketry. Losing men every step of the way, they nevertheless continued right up the ramparts and breached the parapet before the immense strength of the works stopped them. The portrayal of this attack in GLORY is the most realistic combat footage in any Civil War movie.

The white officers of the Fifty-fourth represented the elite of New England society. Some, including Shaw, were Harvard alumni and sons of prominent families. Several, also including Shaw, had already fought with white regiments during the first two years of the war. Antislavery in con-

CAST

Robert Gould Shaw (Matthew Broderick)
Trip (Nelson Washington)
Cabot Forbes (Cary Elwes)
Rawlins (Morgan Freeman)

James M. McPherson

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The Case of Black Soldiers

The events that led to the action on Fort Wagner, an epochal moment in African-American history, represented a radical evolution of the scope and purpose of the Civil War. The original war aims of Abraham Lincoln’s administration had been to suppress an insurrection in eleven southern states and restore them to their place in the Union. The North conceived of this war as a limited one that would not fundamentally alter the American polity or society—including slavery. The four slave states that remained loyal to the Union would not have supported a war in 1861 to abolish slavery. Neither would have the Democrats, who constituted nearly half the northern electorate. Furthermore, the Constitution that the North was fighting to defend guaranteed the protection of slavery in states that wanted it.

Therefore, despite Lincoln’s personal abhorrence of slavery, he could not willfully turn this war for the Union into a war against slavery. Nor could his War Department in 1861 accept black volunteers in the Union army, for to do so would have sent the signal that this was to be an abolitionist’s war.

By 1862, though, the conflict was becoming just such a war. It was a total war now, not merely a militia action to suppress an insurrection. And when northern troops invaded portions of the South, thousands of slaves flocked to Union army posts. Abolitionists and Radical Republicans insisted that these slaves must be granted freedom. At the same time, the success of Confederate military offensives in 1862 convinced Republicans, including Lincoln, that the North could not win the war without mobilizing all of its resources. They also concluded that they would have to strike against every southern resource used to sustain the Confederate war effort.

The most important of the South’s resources was slavery, since slaves constituted the majority of the southern labor force. In the summer of 1862, Congress enacted legislation confiscating the property of Confederates, including slaves. Lincoln followed this with the Emancipation Proclamation to free the slaves.

The Emancipation Proclamation also stated that blacks would be “received into the armed services of the United States.” These events underlay the decision of Gov. John Andrew of Massachusetts to organize a black regiment, which became the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts. A bold experiment, black soldiers could be made acceptable in the context of the time only if they were commanded by white officers. Andrew was determined to appoint officers “of firm anti-slavery principles... superior to a vulgar contempt for color.” In Robert Gould Shaw, son of a prominent abolitionist family, he found his man. As black volunteers came into the training camp near Boston during the spring of 1863, Shaw shaped them into a high-morale outfit eager to prove their mettle.
The First Black Regiments

The Fifty-fourth was neither the first black regiment organized nor the first to see combat. To test the waters, the War Department had quietly aligned Union commanders of forces occupying portions of the lower Mississippi Valley, the Kansas-Missouri border, and the South Carolina sea islands to begin organizing black regiments in the fall of 1862. Four of these regiments fought in actions connected with the Vicksburg campaign during May and June 1863, winning plaudits for their performance. However, these episodes received little publicity in the northern press.

The Draft Riots

The Fort Wagner attack came just days after terrible draft riots shook New York City. The July 13-16 riots were fueled in part by the racism of Irish Americans who wanted no part of a war to free slaves. Black New Yorkers were the chief victims of the rioters, who feared freed slaves would come North to compete for jobs and social space. On July 15, a mob beat to death the nephew of Robert Simmons, a sergeant in the Fifty-fourth; three days later, Simmons was mortally wounded in the assault on Fort Wagner.

The draft riots occurred within the context of northern Democratic opposition to the Lincoln administration’s war policies, including emancipation, the enlistment of black soldiers, and the draft. Democrats had done much to stir up the rabid hatreds manifested by the rioters, who chanted the antwar and antiblack slogans of the Copperhead wing of the party. In the aftermath, few Republican commentators missed the opportunity to juxtapose the draft riots with the heroic conduct of the Fifty-fourth at Fort Wagner, and to point out the moral: Black men who fought for the Union deserved more respect than white men who voted against it.

The performance of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts at Fort Wagner not only advanced the liberation of slaves but also helped to liberate President Lincoln from certain constitutional and political constraints. These restraints had earlier inhibited the president from making this war for the Union a war against slavery, an institution that Lincoln had often branded a “monstrous injustice.”

If it is not literally true, as the movie’s final caption claims, that the bravery of the Fifty-fourth at Fort Wagner caused Congress to authorize more black regiments—this had happened months earlier—the example set by the Fifty-fourth did help transform potential into policy. However, Glory does not go into detail about the impact of the battle on northern opinion, nor does it provide much political context for the black soldier issue. In fact, the movie ends with the attack on Fort Wagner, although the Fifty-fourth continued to serve throughout the war, fighting in several more battles and skirmishes.

Except for Shaw, the principal characters in the film are fictional: There was no real Maj. Cabot Forbes; no Emerson-quoting black boyhood friend of Shaw’s named Thomas Searles; no tough Irish Sgt. Maj. Mulcahy; no black Sgt. (and father figure) John Rawlins; no brash, hardened Private Trip. Indeed, there is a larger fiction involved here. The movie gives the impression that most of the Fifty-fourth’s soldiers were former slaves. In fact, this atypical regiment was recruited mainly in the North, so most of the men had always been free. Some came from prominent northern black families; two of Frederick Douglass’s sons were among the first to sign up. The older son was sergeant major of the regiment from the start. (The regiment’s young adjutant, wounded in the Fort Wagner assault, was Garth Wilkinson James, brother of William and Henry James.)

Real historical figures such as these could have provided the framework for a dramatic and important story about the relationship of northern blacks to slavery and the war—and about the wartime ideals of New England culture. But the story that producer Freddie Fields, director Edward Zwick, and screenwriter Kevin Jarre chose to tell is not simply about the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts but about blacks in the Civil War.

“Forward, my brave boys!”

Col. Robert Gould Shaw
Most of the 178,000 black soldiers (and 10,000 sailors) were slaves until a few months, even days, before they joined up. They fought for their freedom and for the freedom of their families and their people. This was the most revolutionary feature of a war that wrought a revolution in America by freeing four million slaves and uprooting the social structure of half the country. Arms in the hands of slaves had been the nightmare of southern whites for generations. At Fort Wagner, the nightmare came true. Fighting for the Union bestowed upon former slaves a new dignity, self-respect, and militancy, which helped them achieve equal citizenship and political rights—for a time—after the war.

Many of the events described in Glory are also fictional: the incident of the racist quartermaster who initially refuses to distribute shoes to Shaw's men; the whipping Trip receives as punishment for going AWOL; the regiment's dramatic refusal on principle to accept less pay than white soldiers, which shames Congress into equalizing the pay of black soldiers (this actually happened, but at Shaw's initiative, not Trip's); the religious meeting the night before the assault on Fort Wagner. However, there is a larger truth. Glory's point is made symbolically in one of its most surreal and, at first glance, irrelevant scenes. During a training exercise, Shaw gallops his horse along a path flanked by stakes, each holding aloft a watermelon (in February in Massachusetts?). Shaw slashes right and left with his sword, slicing and smashing every watermelon. The point becomes clear when we recall the identification of watermelons with the "darky" stereotype. If the image of smashed watermelons in Glory can replace that of moonlight and magnolias in Gone with the Wind as America's cinematic version of the Civil War, it will be a great gain for truth.

**Equal Pay**

The federal government promised the black soldiers of the Fifty-fourth the same pay as their white counterparts: thirteen dollars a month. However, they received only ten; three dollars was docked from each of their salaries, supposedly to pay for their uniforms. The soldiers refused to accept these terms and campaigners for eighteen months until the government finally granted them equal pay.

**Background Reading**


1989/USA/Color

**DIRECTOR:** Edward Zwick; **PRODUCER:** Freddie Fields; **SCREENPLAY:** Kevin Jarre; **STUDIO:** Tri-Star; **VIDEO:** Columbia TriStar; **RUNNING TIME:** 122 min.

**Later...**

The death of Robert Gould Shaw made a deeper impression on Yankee culture than that of any other New Englander killed in the Civil War. Clergyman Henry Ward Beecher wrote that Shaw's martyrdom had regenerated Boston's past glory: America's cradle of freedom: "Our young men seemed ignoble; the faith of old heroic times had died ... but the trumpet of this war sounded the call and Oh! how joyful has been the sight of such unexpected nobleness in our young men." Both Ralph Waldo Emerson and James Russell Lowell extolled Shaw in verse. Lowell wrote:

Right in the van,
On the red rampart's slippery swell, he fell
With heart that beat a charge, he fell
Forward, as fits a man;
But the high soul burns an to light men's feet
Where death for noble ends makes dying sweet.
THE BIRTH OF A NATION

Leon F. Litwack

With the release of The Birth of a Nation in 1915, the motion picture as art, propaganda, and entertainment came of age! Reviewers were ecstatic in their praise, audiences unrestrained in their enthusiasm. This was the movie everyone had to see, a unique and awesome experience for Americans, the first film spectacular, technically and artistically superior to anything they had ever viewed on the screen. Employing a multiplicity of cinematic techniques, director D. W. Griffith profoundly influenced filmmaking throughout the world. His epic film proved to be an extraordinary success, the first—and one of the greatest—box-office attractions in the history of motion pictures. From 1915 to 1946, some two hundred million people viewed the film in the United States and overseas, where it scored particularly impressive triumphs in Germany and South Africa. President Woodrow Wilson had a private showing of The Birth of a Nation in the White House. It was the first feature film shown there and an appropriate one for a president who embraced the ideology of racial segregation and maintained a discreet silence on the triumph of white terrorism in his native South. "It is like writing history in lightning," he reportedly said of the film. "My only regret is that it is all so terribly true." (Some years later, after the film had inflamed racial tensions, Wilson called it an "unfortunate production.")

From the very outset, the film mesmerized and misled Americans, revealing the extraordinary power of the cinema to "teach" history and to reflect and shape popular attitudes and stereotypes. Earlier public entertainment—such as minstrel shows, "coon" songs, and vaudeville—depicted blacks as clowns and buffoons, as essentially passive objects. The Birth of a Nation, however, introduced still another dimension: The grinning and obsequious demeanor of black men often masks a vicious bestiality, at no time more vividly manifested than after emancipation. The film is based on The Clansman, a novel by Thomas Dixon, Jr., a native of North Carolina and popular Baptist preacher who wanted to awaken the American people to the nature of the Black Peril. To Dixon, this was a national problem. The Presence of the Negro, North and South, endangered American civilization and the sanctity of white womanhood, and it posed as great a threat in 1900 as it did in 1868. "There is enough negro blood here," a Dixon character warns, "to make mulatto the whole Republic." That obsession consumed Dixon, and the film—true to his intentions—plays on the presumed primitive sexuality of the subhuman black man and its implications for the survival of the

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On the night of April 14, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln attended a performance of the play Our American Cousin at Ford's Theater in downtown Washington. During the third act, actor John Wilkes Booth entered the presidential box (he had earlier tampered with the door) and shot the unguarded president through the back of the head. Grappling briefly with an audience member, Booth swung himself over the balustrade and leaped onto the stage shouting, "Sic semper tyrannis! The South is avenged!"

The adoring son of a former lieutenant colonel in the Confederate cavalry, David Wark Griffith (1875–1948) was born on a farm in Oldham County, Kentucky. His films reflected a special fondness for rural life, and he clearly identified with southern attitudes toward the proper places of whites and blacks. But if Griffith was a racist, he was also a populist, suspicious of big business and meddlesome government, as A Corner in Wheat (1910), adapted from Frank Norris's The Pit, brilliantly confirmed. After six frantic years as a staff director, mostly for Biograph, averaging two films a week, Griffith shot The Birth of a Nation over the final six months of 1914, at a cost of more than one hundred thousand dollars, which the director had to hustle to raise.
Radical Reconstruction

None of the Reconstruction governments was completely dominated by blacks. Even where blacks comprised a majority of the voters, the number of black officeholders was never commensurate with their electoral strength. Only in South Carolina did black legislators outnumber whites (eighty-eight to sixty-seven), but in no state did blacks control the executive mansion. The Birth of a Nation makes much of the black-dominated South Carolina legislature that abolished the ban on interracial marriages. However, black legislators emphasized that they were only purging the statute books of all racial distinctions. This was a sensitive subject, and whites perceived it as an open invitation to interracial liaisons. But blacks sometimes used the issue to underscore white hypocrisy: When a white Republican in Alabama proposed an ordinance banning racial intermarriage, a black legislator moved an amendment that stipulated imprisonment for any white man found living with a black woman. The convention chose to drop the issue altogether.

Censorship

The opening frame of The Birth of a Nation anticipated much of the controversy over censorship that the film would precipitate:

A PLEA FOR THE ART OF THE MOTION PICTURE

we do not fear censorship for we have no work to offend with impurities or obscenities, but we do demand, as a right, the liberty to show the dark side of wrong, that we may illustrate the right side of virtue, and the same liberty that is conceded to the art of the written word—that art to which we owe the Bible and the works of Shakespeare.

This was the America The Birth of a Nation explained, vindicated, and celebrated. What more effective way to awaken the American people to the nature of the Black Peril and justify their racial atrocities than to remind them of what had happened during Reconstruction? Through the lives and relationships of two families—the Camerons of South Carolina (the plantation ideal) and the Stonemans of Pennsylvania (the abolitionist Radical Republican impulse), The Birth of a Nation depicts a tragic era in the history of "the Aryan race," when a misguided North, under the spell of radical zealots like Austin Stoneman (a thinly disguised Thaddeus Stevens) and mulatto demagogues like Silas Lynch (Stonemans's protégé), along with their carpetbag and scalawag colleagues, used the votes of duped and ignorant newly freed slaves to fasten a black despotism onto the South.

Through its vivid and unforgettable images, the film impressed on Americans a certain version of reality. Reconstruction, proclaimed one of the intertitles, was "the agony which the South endured that a nation..."
might be born.” The camera graphically captures the lurid details of that “agony”: Impudent, ungrateful, venal black men, their ambitions bloated by emancipation and civil rights, terrorize helpless whites, shoving them off the sidewalks, blocking their access to the ballot boxes, and leering at their women. Blacks brandish signs reading, “Equal Rights, Equal Politics, Equal Marriage.” They ridicule and chain their old masters. They abuse those “faithful souls” (the Cameron servants) who still take pride in their white folks. They make a mockery of democratic government, sitting shoeless in legislative chambers, drinking whiskey from bottles, and eating chicken off the bone while enacting a statute legitimizing interracial marriage. Finally and inevitably, maddened by power and lust, blacks strike out at the most valued possessions of white men—their women. Gus, a depraved “renegade Negro” and former Cameron slave, forces a white girl (the Cameron’s youngest daughter) to leap to her death in order to preserve her purity. And Silas Lynch, whose election as lieutenant governor only heightens his lust, seeks to force marriage on a virginal, hijap, gagged, and helpless young white woman (none other than Austin Stoneman’s daughter). “I will build a Black Empire,” he tells her, “and you as my queen shall rule by my side.”

 Barely suppressing a nostalgia for slavery, The Birth of a Nation paints its black characters literally and figuratively. While exploiting every traditional racial stereotype, most of them passive and unthreatening, the film introduces the relatively new image of the Negro as aggressor (“the bad nigger”), assuming in this picture the guises of revolutionist (Lynch) and sexual brute (Gus). No matter whether black people are depicted as evil or sympathetic, they are all dehumanized, from the blindly faithful, submissive, and pampered house servants to the wretched, dim-witted, insolent, and brutish mass of newly freed slaves. Yet the ultimate and most dangerous villain is unmistakably the mulatto (Silas Lynch), who combines the sexuality and lust of the savage Negro with the intellectual and organizing prowess that could be explained only by his white blood.

Like an “Anglo-Saxon Niagara” (as Vachel Lindsay called it), the Ku Klux Klan (the freedom fighters of the 1870s) mobilize and pour down the road to rescue the South from the “anarchy of black rule” and to reestablish white supremacy. Clearly, this film suggests, only the end of Reconstruction deserves to be commemorated—a triumphant redemption of honor, virtue, and race, when, in the words of Woodrow Wilson, “Negro rule under unscrupulous adventurers was finally lended, and the natural, inevitable ascendancy of the whites, the responsible class, established.”

Evoking the film’s spirit and principal theme, the beleaguered Cameron family finds refuge in a log cabin occupied by two Union veterans, and they join forces to resist pursuing black soldiers. The intertitle says it all: “The former enemies of North and South are united again in

**NAACP Protest**

Despite its enormous popularity, The Birth of a Nation aroused controversy from the very outset. An outraged NAACP, for example, was galvanized into action. Protesting the film’s intolerance, it established picket lines outside theaters and petitioned legislators and city officials to ban the film as an incitement to violence. (The film was said to have inspired the revival of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s.) The protests did result in the deletion of some particularly objectionable footage, including a rape scene, but efforts to ban the film itself generally failed. D.W. Griffith defended himself against the NAACP’s charges of racism and accused the organization of threatening his freedom of speech. After all, he noted, if such protests succeeded, Indians would claim that films also defamed them, “for in most Western pictures they are depicted killing white men.”

**The Progressive Era**

That The Birth of a Nation coincided with the Progressive Era should be no way surprising. Even as the South sought to resolve the “Negro problem,” the North confronted waves of strange-looking immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, and the West tried to deal with the growing presence of unwanted Asians. Many who called themselves Progressives expressed deep concern over inferior racial groups whose very presence posed grave dangers to the social and political order. Blacks and “new” immigrants were said to be particularly susceptible to political corruption. Both groups challenged the idea of the United States as a predominantly Anglo-Saxon nation, and by the early twentieth century the growing presence of such marginal and allegedly inferior groups suggested to many whites intellectual, spiritual, and racial decline and degradation. To press their case, in fact, immigration restrictionists constructed a racist ideology based on various stereotypes of immigrant groups that resembled the stereotypes southern whites had drawn of blacks. Appreciating that similarity, a Mississippi Democrat could declare with absolute confidence on the floor of the Senate, “I stand with the State of California in opposition to mixed schools. I stand with Californians in favor of the proposition that we want a homogeneous and easily assimilated population of white people in the Republic.”
The Use of Blackface

The principal "black" performers in The Birth of a Nation were black-faced whites; actual African Americans appear mostly in the crowd scenes. After "careful weighing of every detail concerned," Griffith later remarked, "the decision was to have no black blood among the principals." Some were to argue, in defense of Griffith, that he was the first director to employ Negro extras. (He housed them in segregated barracks near the Griffith lot.) The use of these extras did pose some problems, however. In one of the fight sequences involving both blacks and blackfaced white players, the combat became so realistic that several actors had to be hospitalized.

Gone with the Wind Reconstructed

The portrayal of history in Gone with the Wind was so more enlightened than that in The Birth of a Nation, but Hollywood made it more acceptable to modern audiences and the characterizations of blacks were thought to be less racially offensive in her novel, Margaret Mitchell reiterated a perverted version of Reconstruction that compared the freed slaves to "monkeys or small children turned loose among treasured objects whose value is beyond their comprehension. . . . Here was the astonishing spectacle of half a nation attempting, at the point of a bayonet, to force upon the other half the rule of negroes, many of them scarcely one generation out of the African jungles." Such passages did not appear in the film, but they accorded fully with the popular version of Reconstruction.

common defense of their Aryan birthright." By the conclusion of the film, even those naive and misled northerners (the Stonemans) who had initially embraced Reconstruction come to see their folly. The redemption of the South—and the nation—is given a biblical sanction as well, with Jesus Christ in the "halls of brotherly love" overseeing (or so it seems) the glorious triumph of the Ku Klux Klan and white supremacy. In this redemption, according to Dixon and Griffith, the American nation is truly born: that is, only after whites regained absolute supremacy on the basis of a nationalized racial consciousness, and only after the North acquiesced in the South's "final solution" to the "race problem."

S

tripped of complexity, the history reenacted in The Birth of a Nation is easy and simpleminded. It took another generation to expose the myths, falsehoods, and fantasies on which the film is based. Few historians still accept the perverse view of Radical Reconstruction as an unrelieved orgy of black misrule. The motives and conduct of the much-reviled carpetbaggers and scalawags were as varied as their social make-up. The much-publicized corruption of the era was biracial and bipartisan, polluting politics in both the North and the South, and the principal beneficiaries everywhere were businessmen and speculators, among them members of some of the South's most distinguished families. While in power, the Radical state governments, even those tainted with corruption, enacted much needed democratic reforms, including universal manhood suffrage, equal access to the courts, and the first public school systems. The black legislators and officeholders, although initiated into the political process during a period of corruption, learned the uses of political power and ruled as competently—and, in some instances, as incompetently—as their white counterparts. The Radical governments were overthrown not because they were corrupt but because the reforms they instituted threatened the supremacy of whites and the subordination of black labor.

Few if any films in the history of the cinema had such tragic and far-reaching consequences. "Chicago went wild," one observer wrote. "It started people to thinking. . . . The people of Chicago saw more in The Birth of a Nation than a tremendous dramatic spectacle. They saw in it the reason the South wants to 'keep the Negro in his place.' They saw in it a new conception of southern problems." More than any historian or textbook, the vivid images conveyed by The Birth of a Nation shaped American attitudes toward Reconstruction and the "Negro problem." With that version of history firmly fixed in their minds, most Americans could readily understand why black southerners were unfit to exercise political rights and why the white South had to go to such extraordinary lengths to control and contain its black population. And for much of the twentieth century, The Birth of a Nation molded and reinforced racial stereotypes, distorting the physical appearance of black men and women, making a mockery of their lives and aspirations, and fixing in the public mind the image of a race of inferiors—sometimes amusing
and comical, sometimes brutal and subhuman, but in either case less than white men and women.

"Art is always revolutionary," D.W. Griffith remarked in 1915, "always explosive and sensational." He left his generation with a classic example. Yet for African Americans, the film remains one of the principal artifacts of a racial ideology that denied them their very humanity. With *The Birth of a Nation*, Ralph Ellison wrote, "the propagation of subhuman images of Negroes, became financially and dramatically profitable. The Negro as a scapegoat could be sold as entertainment, could even be exported. If the film became the main manipulator of the American dream, for Negroes that dream contained a strong dose of such stuff as nightmares are made of."

Later...

The consequences of *The Birth of a Nation* endured for nearly half a century. The controversy over the film, kept alive by NAACP protests, no doubt influenced the Motion Picture Association of America in the early 1920s and again in 1933 when it adopted a production code prohibiting negative depictions of black people. But even as the film industry abandoned the image of African Americans as sexual and political monsters, it proceeded to entertain generations of Americans with degrading portraits of black men and women as clowns, buffoons, and nitwits, often listing them in the screen credits only by some demeaning first name, such as Napoleon or Flossie. During the 1920s and 1930s, for example, Stepin Fetchit (Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry) became the first black actor to be accorded featured billing, appearing as the slow-witted, lazy caricature of a black man, shuffling and stammering and rolling his eyes through a host of films. He would later defend these roles: "I went and kicked open the door in Hollywood. I went in the back door so now Sidney Poitier can come in the front door."

After World War II, virtually any showing of *The Birth of a Nation* encountered organized resistance. The Museum of Modern Art withdrew the film in 1946, at least temporarily, because of "the potency of its anti-Negro bias." In 1992, the Library of Congress placed *The Birth of a Nation* on the National Film Registry, certifying it as a classic. The NAACP protested the action, but Librarian of Congress James H. Billington defended the decision while acknowledging the explosive nature of the film. "Bigoted and racist as its treatment is of African Americans, *The Birth of a Nation* is an inescapable part of our history... The inclusion of the film in the National Film Registry, he added, should not be interpreted as "some kind of national honor" but rather as a necessary action to preserve the film.

Background Reading
Seymour Stern, "The Birth of a Nation," in *Film Culture, 36* (Spring-Summer 1965)

1915/USA/B&W
CAST

Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner)
Liz Garrison (Sissy Spacek)
David Ferrie (Joe Pesci)
Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones)
Lee Harvey Oswald (Gary Oldman)

The "magic bullet"

Garrison and the Media

In JFK, Jim Garrison shows his indignation at an NBC News report attacking his investigation. The actual report aired June 19, 1967, and accused Garrison of trying to bribe witnesses. The film does not show, however, Garrison's own manipulation of the media. Between Clay Shaw's arrest on March 1, 1967, and the opening of his trial on January 21, 1969, the New Orleans district attorney conducted his own publicity campaign. On Johnny Carson's "Tonight Show" and in Playboy magazine, Garrison implicated Lyndon Johnson, the CIA, and the FBI, as well as unnamed neo-Nazis. He told Jim Phelan of the Saturday Evening Post that the Kennedy assassination was "a homosexual thrill-killing" concocted by David Ferrie, Shaw, Jack Ruby (whose gay name Garrison claimed was "Pinkie"), and Lee Harvey Oswald ("a switch-hitter who couldn't satisfy his wife," Garrison told Phelan).

Stanley K Karnow

Since its birth, the movie industry has spawned evangelists of nearly every stripe. D.W. Griffith asserted that he had been ordained by Christ to produce pictures exalting the "brotherhood of man." Chaplin's later films preached world peace, Louis B. Mayer celebrated middle-class virtue, and John Wayne personified patriotism. Oliver Stone's lofty purpose, he has asserted, is to "start to change things" by "looking at the '60s not as history but as a seminal decade for the post-war generation coming into power in the '90s." Without crediting either, he cites Shakespeare and George Santayana to punctuate his point: "What is past is prologue. To forget that past is to be condemned to relive it." Yet Stone's cinematic crusade often borders on the zany.

His defining moment was Vietnam, where he served as an infantryman. He won Academy Awards for directing two fine war pictures, Platoon and Born on the Fourth of July, but flopped with Heaven and Earth, a commendable attempt to recapture the ordeal of a Vietnamese woman trapped in the conflict. In between he made JFK, which deals with Vietnam as well. Stone based JFK on the book On the Trail of the Assassins by Jim Garrison, who also features as the movie's hero. A controversial former New Orleans district attorney, Garrison had a checkered career debunking the Warren Commission's version of the Kennedy assassination. The film, embracing his interpretation, indicts a cabal of high-level hawks for covertly engineering Kennedy's murder to prevent him from pulling out of Southeast Asia after his 1964 reelection. The culprits supposedly responsible for this "coup d'état" range from the military and the Dallas police to the intelligence community and multinational corporations, with Lyndon Johnson and J. Edgar Hoover "accomplices after the fact."

Released in 1991, the movie was widely excoriated by politicians, commentators, and scholars as a preposterous, even alarming, deformation of reality. The outcry boosted Stone's stature in Hollywood, which thrives on publicity. But Stone isn't gratified by mere attention. Far more than his show-business colleagues, many of whom believe fame makes them experts on everything from health care to arms control, Stone desperately yearns to be respected. He went ballistic over a piece in the Washington Post by George Lardner, who referred to JFK as "the edge of paranoia." Such attacks seem to confirm Stone's view of himself as a victim of the entrenched Establishment. In a furious response to Lardner, he evoked the campaign by the Hearst newspapers to suppress Citizen Kane. By implication, the same demons who plotted Kennedy's death are out to demolish him.
Six-foot, seven-inch Earling Carothers "Jim" Garrison served in the National Guard during World War II before entering Tulane Law School in the fall of 1946. After graduation, he worked as an FBI agent for two years until, bored with routine loyalty checks, he returned to active service with the Guard. In October 1952, army doctors relieved him of duty after they diagnosed a "severe and disabling psychoneurosis." Garrison later claimed he had been sick with amoebic dysentery, which the doctors mistook for acute anxiety.

In 1954, Garrison joined the staff of New Orleans district attorney Richard Dowling. He served as an assistant DA until 1958, when he returned to private practice. In 1961, after failing to win a criminal court judgeship, Garrison beat Dowling in a four-way race for district attorney. Once in office, he quickly established a reputation for bringing sensational charges—and winning front-page headlines—although these cases rarely produced convictions.

Although JFK focuses on the investigation conducted by Jim Garrison (played by Kevin Costner), the film also includes numerous flashbacks. For his reenactment of the Kennedy assassination, director Oliver Stone placed a gunman behind the stockade fence on the famous "grassy knoll" in Dealey Plaza. Railway signalman Sam Holland had told the Warren Commission of "a puff of smoke" he had seen there just after the shots. Many conspiracy theorists believe Holland's story to be evidence of a second assassin. While filming the scene, however, Stone had difficulty finding a rifle that would produce enough smoke for a puff to be seen on film. To produce the necessary visual effect, Stone had a props man pump smoke from a bellows.
I lack the credentials to judge Stone as a filmmaker—though many critics, including some who regard its thesis as repugnant, applaud JFK as a technical masterpiece. Nor am I competent to assess the picture’s rendition of the Kennedy assassination, which has been scrutinized and debated again and again, yet still perplexes most Americans. However, I feel qualified to comment on the movie’s Vietnam perspective, having covered the wars there for more than forty years—from France’s futile struggle to retrieve its Asian empire to the helicopters frantically lifting off the roof of the U.S. embassy in Saigon. I reexamined the subject in depth while preparing my book Vietnam: A History, as well as for the PBS documentary series “Vietnam: A Television History.”

Central to JFK is Stone’s premise that Kennedy, had he lived, would have abandoned Vietnam. As evidence he cites a Kennedy plan to repatriate one thousand U.S. advisers by the end of 1963 as the prelude to a complete withdrawal. But Johnson, he alleges, was determined to intensify the war and, shortly after taking office, countermanded the order. I appreciate the difficulty of coping with complicated situations on the screen. Yet Stone, to buttress his proposition, twists the episode out of all recognition.

Early in 1963, South Vietnam’s rigid President Ngo Dinh Diem was cracking down on internal dissidents, throwing the country into chaos. Fearing that the turmoil would benefit the Communist insurgents, Kennedy conceived of bringing home one thousand of the sixteen thousand American military advisers as a way of prodding Diem into behaving more leniently. Kennedy’s decision was codified in National Security Action Memorandum, or NSAM, 263. Its aim was to “indicate our displeasure” with Diem and “create significant uncertainty” in him “as to future intentions of the United States.” Kennedy hoped that the scheme, which also scheduled a reduction of the U.S. force over the next two years, would give the South Vietnamese the chance to strengthen themselves.

Nothing in Kennedy’s public utterances, however, suggested that he even remotely envisioned scuttling Vietnam. During an interview with Walter Cronkite in early September 1963, he affirmed his faith in the domino theory, adding, “I don’t agree with those who say we should withdraw.” He echoed that line in a talk with Chet Huntley: “We are not there to see a war lost.” Had he delivered the address he was slated to give in Dallas, he would have declared that the involvement in Southeast Asia might be “painful, risky, and costly . . . but we dare not weary of the task.” Robert Kennedy repeated the same thesis in an oral history interview, saying that the president “felt that he had a strong, overwhelming reason for being in Vietnam, and that we should win the war . . .” When asked if his brother ever contemplated “pulling out,” Bobby replied, “No.”

Three days after Kennedy’s assassination, the Johnson administration issued its initial Vietnam directive, NSAM 273. With slight modifications, it perpetuated the Kennedy policy. A six-second bit in JFK shows the two
documents—an effort by Stone to dramatize Johnson’s switch to a new, more belligerent approach. But Professor Larry Berman of the University of California at Davis, an assiduous student of the war, has tapped virtually every available source on the period without discovering any evidence of a real change.

President Kennedy had made it plain that the repatriation of the U.S. advisers depended on the performance of the South Vietnamese troops; unless they were trained to take over, the Americans would stay. Johnson carried out the U.S. withdrawal, though it was essentially an accounting exercise. As one thousand men returned home, another thousand arrived; by December 1963, the force was the same as it had been.

In one of JFK’s most pivotal scenes, a secret agent tells Garrison about a late 1963 White House reception at which Johnson told the joint chiefs of staff, “Just let me get elected, and then you can have your war.” Stone, by his own admission, borrowed the anecdote from my book, and I am convinced of its accuracy, having heard it from Gen. Harold K. Johnson, then the army chief of staff and a guest at the party. I used the story to illustrate Lyndon Johnson’s practice of making different promises to different factions. In this instance, he estimated that by placating the brass he could rally their conservative allies on Capitol Hill behind his liberal social agenda. At the same time, as I wrote, he confided to members of Congress who had qualms about Vietnam that he had no intention of getting immersed in that “damn pissant little country.” However, Stone, to depict Johnson as a warmonger, lifted the story out of context.

Quite apart from JFK, there remains the question of what Kennedy would have done had he lived. Would he have pulled out of Vietnam or, as Johnson did, escalated the war? Nobody will ever know. My guess is that he would have behaved just as Johnson did, given the Cold War climate of the time. But Stone may have the final word. Friends who teach high school and college courses on Vietnam tell me that, for most of their students, JFK is the truth.

“**You Can Have Your War**

Johnson subscribed to the adage that “wars are too serious to be entrusted to generals.” He knew, as he once put it, that armed forces “need battles and bombs and bullets in order to be heroic” and that they would drag him into a military conflict if they could. But he also knew that Pentagon lobbyists, among the best in the business, could persuade conservatives in Congress to sabotage his social legislation unless he satisfied their demands. As he girded himself for the 1964 presidential campaign, he was especially sensitive to the jingoists who might brand him “soft on Communism” were he to back away from the challenge in Vietnam. So, politician that he was, he assured the brass and the braid with promises he may never have intended to keep. At a White House reception on Christmas Eve 1963, for example, he told the joint chiefs of staff, “Just let me get elected, and then you can have your war.”

![From Stanley Karnow’s Vietnam: A History](https://example.com/image)

**“Later...”**

Once it came to trial, Jim Garrison’s case against Clay Shaw quickly fell apart. A late addition to Garrison’s witness list, New York accountant Charles Spiegel, testified that he had attended a 1963 party at which Ferrie, Shaw, and Oswald had discussed plans to kill Kennedy. Under cross-examination, however, Spiegel also revealed that his psychiatrist and the police were concerned to interfere with his thought processes and that he fingerprinted his daughter each time she returned from college to confirm her identity.

Although many assassination researchers distanced themselves from Garrison after the trial, they benefited greatly from the new material his subpoena power had shaken loose—most notably the eight-millimeter film shot by Abraham Zapruder, shown publicly for the first time at the Shaw trial. For five years, Time-Life had jealously guarded Zapruder’s film of the assassination, fighting Garrison’s subpoena all the way to the Supreme Court before surrendering the film. It was quickly bootlegged.

**Background Reading**


**1991/USA/Color**

DIRECTOR: Oliver Stone; PRODUCER: A. Kitman Ho, Oliver Stone; SCREENPLAY: Oliver Stone, Zachary Sklar; STUDIO: Warner; VIDEO: Warner; RUNNING TIME: 189 min.
In the history of America since World War II, few events loom larger than the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Seeking finally to implement the century-old promises of equality guaranteed by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, the movement galvanized the nation as it created a new pantheon of heroes and heroines. Martin Luther King, Jr., became a household name—yet he was the product, not the cause, of a movement that was created for the most part by ordinary people.

It was the “local heroes” who made it all possible. Rosa Parks, the seamstress who refused to give up her seat to a white person on a Montgomery bus in 1955; the four black freshmen from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College who sat down at a Woolworth’s lunch counter to demand the same service granted to white people; the Freedom Riders who endured beatings and abuse to secure equal treatment in bus terminals; and the countless thousands of black Americans, joined by some whites, who risked their lives by registering to vote so they could end the iniquities of second-class citizenship and Jim Crow segregation.

Nowhere was this struggle more dramatic than in the state of Mississippi, a place that one activist called “as bad as—maybe worse than—South Africa.” Between 1880 and 1940, nearly six hundred black people were lynched in Mississippi without a single person’s being jailed for any one of the murders. In 1944, the Reverend Isaac Simmons of Amite County refused to sell a piece of land that a white person wanted to buy. After Simmons consulted a lawyer, he was ambushed on the road: As his son looked on, he was shot three times in the back and his tongue was cut out. None of the accused was found guilty. In 1955, the Reverend George Lee led a voter-registration rally in Belzoni. Later, as he drove along the main street of the town, white men in a convertible blew away his jaw and lower face. The governor refused to investigate, saying he never responded to NAACP requests.

Despite such systemic terror, black citizens continued to demand their rights. World War II veterans such as Amzie Moore, Medgar Evers, and Vernando Collier courageously went to local courthouses to insist on their right to vote. In retaliation, Mississippi’s White Citizens Council arranged for local bankers to call in the mortgages of black citizens who sought to protest. Similarly, insurance policies were canceled, and other forms of credit cut off. Still, ten thousand blacks gathered in Mound Bayou in 1955 to declare their determination to vote.

The struggle for Mississippi reached a cusp during the summer of 1964, when nearly a thousand volunteers, most of them white, joined with
Fannie Lou Hamer

Fannie Lou Hamer was a sharecropper in Sunflower County, Mississippi, the youngest of twenty children. Growing up, she had never known that African Americans had the right to vote. In 1962, she attended a SNCC meeting at a church in Ruleville, where she learned of her right to register; immediately, she volunteered to exercise that right. "The only thing they could do to me was kill me," she said, "and it seemed like they'd been trying to do that a little bit at a time ever since I could remember." When Mrs. Hamer went to register at the courthouse, she was arrested and jailed. The next day her landlord told her to withdraw her request to vote or she would be forced off the land she farmed. She moved out, joined the SNCC staff, and became one of the most venerated and beloved freedom fighters in the state, known everywhere for her warmth of spirit and her ability to inspire with her speechmaking and singing.

Anne Moody

As a high school student in 1950s Mississippi, Anne Moody performed day work for several white families, learning through overheard conversations of the emergence of the White Citizens Councils and their determination to resist desegregation at all costs. The lynching of Emmett Till, a black teenager, for allegedly leering at a white woman crystallized her own determination to fight against racism. Moody was a brilliant student and a fine athlete. She learned about the NAACP from a brave schoolteacher. Insistent on not allowing her own life to be circumscribed by the racial status quo, she took jobs in New Orleans; went to college in Natchez, Mississippi; and soon joined a chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality in Canton, Mississippi. There she carried on her part of the struggle for voter registration and freedom. Her book about these years, Coming of Age in Mississippi (1968), has become a classic recounting of the horrors of white racism in Mississippi and the courage of those local people who went to war against it.
Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney

Twenty-year-old volunteer Andrew Goodman left the Freedom Summer training center at Oxford, Ohio, on June 20, 1964, in the company of Mickey Schwerner, twenty-four, and James Chaney, twenty-one. Early the next morning, after a sixteen-hour drive, the three of them arrived in Meridian, Mississippi. Schwerner was, like Goodman, a white New Yorker; Chaney, a black Mississippian. Both Schwerner and Chaney were experienced field workers for the Congress of Racial Equality.

Later that afternoon, the three young men traveled in their blue Ford station wagon to Neshoba County, where they visited a black church that had been burned; the church had lately been used as a Freedom School. On their way back, their car was stopped at about 3:00 p.m. by Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price. (Four black witnesses later testified that Price shot out the station wagon’s right front tire.) Price later testified that he released Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney about 10:30 p.m. after fining them twenty dollars for speeding. They were never seen alive again. (Although they are never mentioned by name, the three missing civil rights workers in Mississippi Burning are clearly Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney.)

Because field workers were required to phone in at regular intervals, the CORE staff in Meridian knew by late afternoon that something was wrong. At 6:00 p.m., SNCC state headquarters in Jackson notified the FBI and the Mississippi Highway Patrol. For the next six weeks, while newspapers carried daily reports of the search, four hundred sailors from the Meridian naval air station joined FBI agents in dragging swamps and combing the countryside. They found a number of bodies, belonging to long-missing lynching victims, but not those of the three civil rights workers. Finally, the offer of a twenty-five-thousand-dollar reward produced information that led to the discovery of their bodies in an earthen dam near Philadelphia, Mississippi.

Mississippi Burning represents one of Hollywood’s few attempts to tell the story of what took place during the civil rights years. Using the murder of these three young men as its departure point, the film effectively and accurately depicts the reign of supremacist terror that permeated Mississippi’s white community and enlisted its police chiefs, mayors, and prominent citizens. Understandably, perhaps, the filmmakers seem to believe they need the dramatic tension of the murder case to keep up audience interest in the story. Yet the story they tell is an atrocious distortion of history. As Mississippi Burning would have it, the only thing happening in that state during the summer of 1964 was, on the one hand, a fight between local white racists and, on the other, heroic FBI agents sent to the rescue of submissive, illiterate, quaking black people unable and unwilling to stand up for themselves.

The movie’s two chief protagonists are both FBI men. Gene Hackman plays a former southern sheriff now working for the feds; he is folksy and sympathetic. Willem Dafoe is a young northern agent. Kennedyesque in his moralism and arrogance, the conflict between them is the real nub of the movie. Dafoe is a stick figure who utters platitudes of the “some things are worth dying for” sort. Early on, he puts his moral politics on display when he insists on sitting next to a young black man at a restaurant lunch counter (the young man is later beaten by the Klan). In contrast, Hackman is the ethnographer, making small talk with his fellow southerners and trying to show Dafoe—at one point actually described in the dialogue as a “Kennedy boy”—how a good white southern law officer goes about finding criminals. In this case, while Dafoe follows procedure, Hackman seduces the deputy sheriff’s wife, his relationship with her producing the crucial information that Dafoe’s investigative methods do not.

At one point, an FBI agent remarks that there “was a war [going on] long before we got here.” But the only war we see is between white people. That, of course, is the problem. How can a movie about Freedom
Summer feature no black protagonists? In 1963, eighty-five thousand black Mississippians cast “freedom ballots” to show their determination and prove, contrary to white declarations, that they were quite serious about voting. A year later, despite the church burnings, arrests, and murders, Mississippi blacks met at local Freedom Schools all summer long. They voted for Freedom Democratic party delegates to represent them at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City and created an autonomous social movement. They showed they would not be terrorized into silence. Eventually, they prevailed.

But where are these activists in the film? The blacks in Mississippi Burning tremble in fear of whites, disband their conversations whenever whites approach, and retreat in mute submission. There is one brave black child who stands up, but no one else. The only anger expressed comes at the end of the film, when a black minister declares at the funeral of a black lynching victim that he is “sick and tired of going to the funerals of black men who have been murdered by white men.” But where are the Fannie Lou Hamers, the Anne Moodys, the Amzie Moores, and the other local people who heroically sustained and built the movement in defiance of white terror? In Mississippi Burning, black people are even more like stick figures than Willem Dafoe. They sing movement spirituals like “Precious Lord” (at the beginning) and “Walk On” (at the end), but otherwise they don’t count.

Robert Moses

“Mississippi is unreal when you’re not there, and the rest of the country is unreal when you are.”

Background Reading
Clayborne Carson, In Struggle: The History of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (Harvard University Press, 1984)
John Dittmer, Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi (University of Illinois Press, 1994)

1988/USA/Color
DIRECTOR: Alan Parker; PRODUCER: Frederick Zollo, Robert E. Colesberry; SCREENPLAY: Chris Gerolme; STUDIO: Orion; VIDEO: Orion; RUNNING TIME: 127 min.