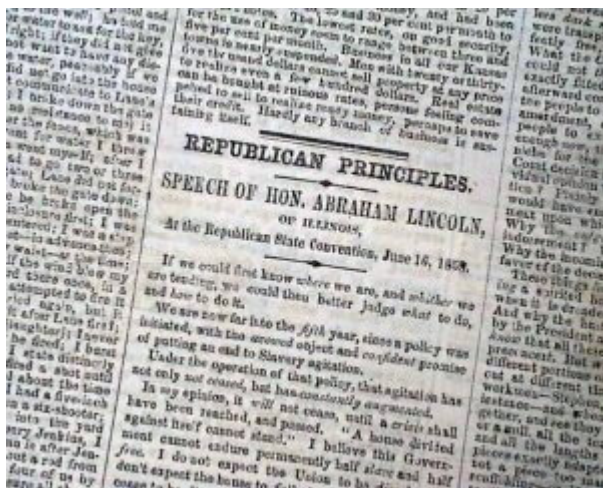


The South has Risen Again

Posted on April 14, 2017 by Daniel Graff

Over 150 years ago Abraham Lincoln warned northerners that southern slaveowners and their advocates hoped to do more than expand slavery westward — they would settle for nothing less than making “the peculiar institution” no longer peculiar by legalizing it throughout the whole country. Thankfully, chattel slavery was vanquished in the Civil War, but today we find ourselves awakening again to the reality of our country being “southernized” to the detriment of the American ideals of freedom and equality.

“We shall lie down pleasantly dreaming that the people of Missouri are on the verge of making their State free; and we shall awake to the reality, instead, that the Supreme Court has made Illinois a slave State.”



New York Daily Tribune discussion on Lincoln's *House Divided* speech. Credit: RareNewspapers.com

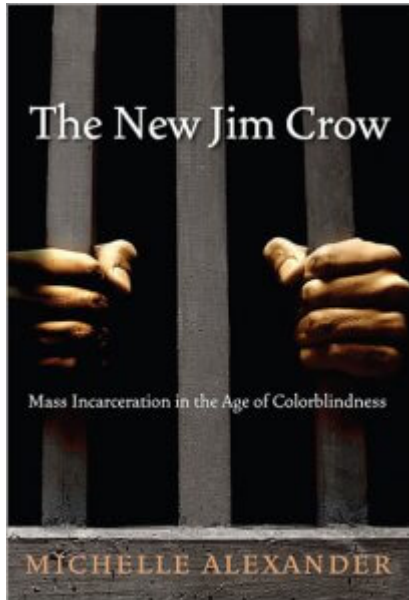
Abraham Lincoln thundered this warning to Illinois Republicans gathered in Springfield in 1858, articulating northerners' fears that their future, indeed their very understanding of the meaning of America as a land of expanding opportunity and equality, was under attack from the South's slave “dynasty” and its allies throughout the country. I've been thinking a lot about that line lately, and not just because I recently assigned what's known as Lincoln's “House Divided” speech to my first-year history seminar. The reason this passage jumped

from the page this semester is because it rhymes with our current political moment. Lincoln's nightmare did not come to pass, of course, because he, the northern people, and southern slaves united to fight and win the Civil War that saved the Union and — by executing emancipation — made that Union "forever worthy of the saving," as Lincoln put it. But while chattel slavery was vanquished on the battlefield 150 years ago, today we find ourselves awakening again to the reality of our country being "southernized" to the detriment of the American ideals of freedom and equality.

Let me point to three examples.

First, there's the rise of Walmart. The behemoth from Bentonville is now a global phenomenon, but it initially rose to dominance in the post-World War II years in the remote Ozark region of Arkansas, where founder Sam Walton took advantage of rural unemployment to construct a corporate culture wedded to both technological innovation in the movement of goods and patriarchal tradition in the management of labor. The result was a highly profitable company committed to rewarding consumers by squeezing every last dollar from the supply chain along with every last dime from employees' wages. An apparent bundle of contradictions, Walmart grew into an increasingly global operation while successfully promoting itself as the friendly neighborhood store. Along the way, its leaders exploited the legacy of white southern resistance to federal power by brazenly breaking labor laws to resist unionization and skirt worker protections on overtime, minimum wage, and unemployment insurance.

When Walmart began its move to the urban North in the 1990s, exporting its model of wringing low prices from low wages, it directly challenged the more labor-friendly, higher-wage communities forged in the crucible of New Deal-Great Society liberalism. As Nelson Lichtenstein wryly notes in his excellent history of the company, "It was as if Lee's army was once again moving across the Potomac and into Yankee territory." Twenty years on, Walmart's corporate culture is now the new normal, and not only for retailers. Celebrants and critics of the so-called gig economy point to companies like Uber and Lyft as exemplars of a new employment regime offloading much of the costs of labor onto workers, but these app-based upstarts simply build upon Walmart's innovations that have made working for others less secure, less stable, and less remunerative in the twenty-first century.



Michelle Alexander's, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness*

If Walmart's penetration of the North represents the southernization of our business culture, then mass incarceration of black and brown men signals the same in our criminal justice system, what legal scholar and activist Michelle Alexander has termed "[the New Jim Crow](#)." To be sure, mass incarceration is a national phenomenon, but its logic derives from enduring ideologies of racial hierarchy rooted in southern slavery and segregation that have long associated blackness with crime, disorder, and threats to white safety.

The criminalization of persons of color was a primary weapon in the decades-long political project waged by the Republican Party to shatter the New Deal coalition along racial lines, from Nixon's "law and order" campaign beginning in the late 1960s to Reagan's "war on drugs" in the 1980s. Jumping partisan lines to inform Clinton's politics of "personal responsibility" in the 1990s, it is now firmly implanted as our nation's crime policy, where practices like stop-and-frisk, racial profiling, mandatory sentencing, and three-strikes laws have long enjoyed consistent public support, especially amongst whites. When political analysts refer to the GOP's successful "southern strategy," they mean the mass conversion of southern whites from Democrats to Republicans since the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, but the term points to something bolder and broader: the remaking of national politics along southern lines, where racial identity to a large extent governs party affiliation and voting. The Republican sweep in the 2016 election is but the latest manifestation of the southernization of American political life.

Accompanying the southern takeovers of our business culture and criminal justice system is a similar transformation in labor law, and the sudden expansion of right-to-work states in the industrial heartland bears this out. Despite the highfalutin rhetoric, a right-to-work law doesn't grant anyone the right to get or hold onto a job. Instead, it forbids an employer and union from bargaining a contract requiring that all workers contribute to the contract's enforcement, even though under American law a labor agreement must cover all workers (union members or not) and the union must represent and protect all workers (again, union members or not). In short, right-to-work laws aim to prevent union stability and security by denying them a steady resource stream via obligatory worker contributions.

Setting aside legitimate questions about individual freedom, worker voice, and industrial democracy raised by labor laws, it's important to note that the strange career of right to work originated in the post-World War II moment, when white southern elites feared that a suddenly powerful labor movement reshaping politics in Detroit, Chicago, and communities across the urban North and the Pacific coast might soon challenge the South's political economy of low wages, racial segregation, and worker disfranchisement. In 1947, their Democratic representatives in Congress (in an era of regional mass black disfranchisement) collaborated with northern Republicans (also alarmed at the rise of unions) to produce the Taft-Hartley Act, which allowed individual states to pass right-to-work laws. The result was the creation of two labor relations regimes within one country. In the northeast, midwest, and west coast, there emerged a "fair share" economy committed to improving workers' lives via both the integration of unionism (by allowing — but not mandating, mind you — collective bargaining agreements where all workers would contribute to their enforcement) and the enactment of moderately redistributive welfare policies that raised the "social wage" for all (from funding public schools and parks to managing unemployment and antipoverty programs to passing fair employment practice statutes). Meanwhile, southern states embraced a right-to-work regime to keep unions out, keep labor costs low, and keep at bay any interracial alliance of workers, while continuing to minimize government expenditures conducive to the common good.

After several decades of this sectional split, the right-to-work movement has suddenly pivoted north and gone national. Since 2012, six midwestern states — Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri — have all passed right-to-work laws, meaning there are now more right-to-work states (28) than fair share ones (22, plus the District of Columbia). Meanwhile, Republicans in Congress have just introduced a national right-to-work law, one with a greater chance of passage than anytime before, in part because of President Trump's open support. "I love the right to work," then candidate Trump said in February 2016. "It is better for the people. You are not paying the big fees to

the unions.” Even if a national right-to-work bill fails to pass (Senate Democrats can be expected to filibuster), the US Supreme Court, soon to possess a conservative majority once Trump’s nominee Neil Gorsuch wins confirmation, might take matters into its own hands and rule that fair-share labor agreements are unconstitutional. If that happens, the once-southern right-to-work regime will then rule nationwide, and the US Supreme Court will repeat the role it played in nationalizing southern customs in the 1857 Dred Scott decision, which ruled unconstitutional any federal attempt to prohibit slavery anywhere.

I realize I’m not the first to remark upon the southernization of our national life, and I also realize that the retail revolution, mass incarceration, and union busting have been decades in the making. But the same was also true of slavery’s expansion in the years before the Civil War. For northerners like Lincoln, though, events of the 1850s like the Dred Scott decision came as rude shocks revealing that white southerners and their northern allies were prepared to sunder the nation and all its values in order to sanctify and spread slavery, in effect making the peculiar institution no longer peculiar. Perhaps our generation’s wake-up call will be the 2016 presidential election, which shattered any illusions of a country-wide consensus on equality for all Americans regardless of race, religion, national origin, or gender.

I honestly don’t aim to demonize southerners, flatter northerners, or encourage sectional thinking. I recognize that our country’s enduring confrontation with the problems of racism, poverty, and exclusion are national in scope, and they demand national solutions. But in order to restore the core American dream of liberty and justice for all, we first need to wake up to the national nightmare that we’ve increasingly been embracing or drifting toward with the adoption of peculiar southern practices and customs originally designed to resist workers’ rights and shore up white supremacy. In the tradition of American reformers stretching from Abraham Lincoln to Senator Elizabeth Warren today, I persist in the stubborn faith that rational thinking and historical awareness will help to get us there. [As Lincoln put it in that same 1858 speech](#), “If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it.” In an era of alternative facts and fake news, I hope that still holds true.

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