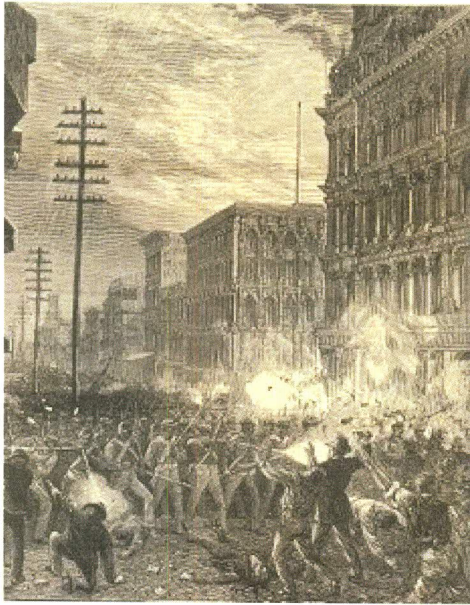


A Moment of Insight or Confusion?

by Kevin Levin on February 9, 2009 · [25 comments](#)

in [Southern History](#), [Teaching](#)



I've always struggled to understand what I've assumed to be a radical transformation that took place within the Republican Party between Reconstruction and the Gilded Age. As the story goes various pressures within the Republican Party caused them to abandon their Reconstruction agenda along with black civil rights, which allowed white "Redeemers" to reestablish white supremacy. The emphasis on *abandonment* implies fundamental change with a moral twist; it doesn't help that much of what I know about the Gilded Age and industrial revolution comes from the textbooks that I use in my AP classes. Most textbooks divide chapters between Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, which works to reinforce a sharp distinction between the Republican Party of Reconstruction and beyond.

I had one of those rare insights last week when it finally dawned on me that it is my preoccupation and interest in race and emancipation that has clouded my ability to more fully understand the history of the Republican Party beginning in 1855 and through the rest of the nineteenth century. We tend to forget that the Republican Party was organized primarily around an economic agenda following the demise of the Whig Party and in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The Party initially took shape around the Great Lakes, which pushed hard for internal improvements and a federal government that would

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