
BELIEFS OF THEIR FATHERS: VIOLENCE, RELIGION, AND THE BLACK PATCH WAR, 1904-1914

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I am a Southern by birth and by choice. The few years of my life spent outside Dixie made me feel a strong kinship to the protagonist in Robert Heinlein's science fiction classic, *A Stranger in a Strange Land*. I have the traditional rural Southerner's attachment to the land of his birth. Thus, a few years ago, it was logical for me to choose as a dissertation topic a subject that would allow me to explore a segment of the history of my native region: the Black Patch War which raged in the tobacco belt of northern middle Tennessee and western Kentucky from 1904 until 1914. Since I was reared in the area and am descended from several generations of tobacco farmers, I was, in a sense, writing about my own people. The work on the project revealed the links between the religion of the people of the area and their willingness to use lawlessness to redress their perceived economic grievances. This paper will describe the relationship between inhabitants of the region during the Black Patch War, their religious beliefs, and their propensity toward violence. There will also be some observations about the cultural persistence of some of these attitudes in the area in our own time. Two approaches will be used to present this information. The first approach will be that of an academically trained historian objectively examining the data, while the second point of view will be the subjective impressions of a person writing about his own people, society, and culture. Although scholars must always strive to be objective, it is also true that one must remember that all information reaches the receiver after being filtered through the sender. The first step in becoming objective is to understand that we are all, to some degree, subjective when we approach our material and recognize the need to compensate for that subjectivity.

The Black Patch region of Kentucky and Tennessee which took its name from the dark, heavy-leafed, fire-cured tobacco grown in the area, contained the proper human and physical characteristics to make it one of the major growing regions in the United States by 1900. At the same time the staple became the dominant source of income in the area, James B. Duke and his American Tobacco Company pioneered the industrialization and monopolization of the tobacco industry. This concentration contributed to lower profits for the growers of the weed in the region. Although several factors contributed to declining prices for the staple during this era, growers tended to place most of the blame on "The Trust," as they called Duke's monopoly. On September 24, 1904, in reaction to the tobacco prices, growers of the staple in the Black Patch formed the Dark Tobacco District Planters' Protective Association of Kentucky and Tennessee. The principal goal of the Association was to raise tobacco prices by the cooperative marketing of the staple. When the Association encountered difficulties in forcing prices upward between 1905 and 1907, some of its more radical members formed a second organization, the night riders, dedicated to the use of violence to gain higher prices. Over the next few years the night riders would use intimidation, threats, terrorism, and sometimes murder to force farmers into the Association and to coerce tobacco buyers to purchase only from the cooperative. Members of the silent brigade, as the night riders were often called, destroyed tobacco plant beds and crops in the field, physically assaulted recalcitrant growers and buyers, burned tobacco barns and Trust tobacco warehouses, and even raided Black Patch towns noted for being hostile to the Association. These lawless acts, collectively known as the Black Patch War, constituted one of the most serious

domestic threats to civil government in American history.

The copious primary and secondary material concerning the Black Patch War demonstrated to me that both participants and contemporaries used religion to explain or justify night rider activities. At the same time it slowly began to dawn on me that there were many similarities between the Black Patch of the night riders of my own time and place. In striving to understand this apparent contradiction between religion and violence, I realized that I needed to begin with the fact that these people were Southerners.

As Southerners, a propensity toward violence and a belief that in certain situations violence was a natural and useful tool were parts of the heritage and the legacy of the people of the Black Patch. C. Vann Woodward wrote that the South "seems to have been one of the most violent communities of comparable size in all Christendom." ¹ Historians and social scientists have long sought to understand the origins and endurance of Southern violence. Ethnicity, climate, the frontier heritage, culture, a militant spirit, religion, the presence of the Negro, a code of honor, a sense of persecution and grievance, and numerous other explanations have been offered. ² In Woodward's often quoted observation, there were really two points being made. The second and unstated point was that the South is Christian. The perceptive Southern sociologist John Shelton Reed observed that Southerners are both the most violent and the most religious group in the United States. ³ Although at first glance Reed's statement appears to hold an inherent contradiction, actually, there is none. The South is the most violent, in part, because it is the most religious.

In the section, religion and culture were mutually interdependent. Each, in turn, profoundly influenced and was influenced by the other. It is difficult to describe one without an understanding of its relationship to the other. Several aspects of Southern religion helped nurture rather than retard the use of force in Southern culture. Of these aspects, a tendency to view God in terms of the Old Testament, a vertical rather than a horizontal nature, a pessimistic view of the nature of man, and a willingness to sanction violence in certain instances are the most important.

To the Southern, God was Jehovah of the Old Testament. A jealous revengeful deity with a taste for blood, He kept His hand ever present in man's life, demanded complete obedience, and exacted swift and terrible retribution on those who transgressed His will. This view of God stood in sharp contrast to the New Testament image of God as a forgiving Father who taught men to be meek, to turn the other cheek, to cast not the first stone. The Golden Rule of the New Testament was for mortals to be good to one another, but the thrust of the Old Testament was man's relationship to God -- put no God before thy God. It was the logical next step for Southerners to reason that if God punishes those who transgress His will, are they not free to punish their transgressors as long as they maintain allegiance to God? The incisive student of the Southern mind, Wilbur J. Cash, described the relationship between the Southerner and his religion as follows:

What our Southerner required . . . was a faith as simple and emotional as himself. A faith to draw men together in hordes, to terrify them with Apocalyptic rhetoric, to cast them into the pit, rescue them and at least bring them shouting into the fold of Grace. A faith not of liturgy and prayer book, but of primitive frenzy and the blood sacrifice. . . . The God demanded was an anthropomorphic God -- the Jehovah of the Old Testament. ⁴

I understand this conception of God very well. It was the God of my family. I grew up in the Baptist church singing martial hymns such as "Onward Christian Soldiers, Marching As to War" and fearing more than loving God. When my grandfather, who usually carried a gun with him wherever he went, heard that I was going to

Nashville to attend graduate school, he offered me a handgun to carry with me. Along with the gun came the admonishment that if I was going to live among those scalawags, heathens, and poltroons in Sin City (Nashville), I would need something to put the fear of the Old Testament God into anyone who crossed me. Jehovah was my grandfather's God.

Partially because of this concept of God, Southern religion developed a vertical rather than a horizontal orientation. That is, Southern churches were much more concerned with man's relationship with God than with man's relationship with man. Protestant and evangelic by nature, the major goal of the churches was to save souls -- to help get others right with God -- rather than to alleviate social ills or influence man's treatment of others. Stressing each person's individual relationship with God, the Southern churches served neither as an agent of social and economic justice nor as a barrier to personal violence. As one historian of Southern violence wrote, "For plain folk, . . . there was no inconsistency in being religious and using one's fists." ⁵ The Great Revival of the early 1800s had a profound effect upon religion in the South as a whole and the Black Patch in specific. This religious movement originated and reached its greatest intensity in the dark tobacco region of Tennessee and Kentucky. The revival helped set patterns in Southern religion that are still prevalent today. The revivalists stressed two points: the innate sinfulness of man which could only be changed by the blood of Christ and the fearful retribution God would visit on those who would not repent and be saved. The Reverend Samuel McGready preached in Logan County, Kentucky, and other areas of the Black Patch during the revival. In a typical sermon he described to his listeners the fate of a sinful man:

He died accursed of God when his soul was separated from his body and the black flaming vultures of hell began to circle him on every side. . . . When the fiends of hell dragged him into the eternal gulf, he reared and screamed and yelled like a devil. . . . Now through the blazing flames of hell he sees that heaven he has lost. . . . In those pure regions he sees his father and mother, his sisters and brothers . . . but he is lost and damned forever. ⁶

Not only did the Great Revival reinforce the belief in a violent God, but also it helped develop a pessimistic Southern world view -- a belief that man is so sinful that sometimes violence is the only thing he understands. Dickson Bruce, a student of Southern culture, wrote of antebellum Southerners that their understanding of human nature convinced them that violence was a necessary and unavoidable part of human relations. ⁷

Not only did Southern churches fail in some cases to deter violence, but in selected instances they actually sanctioned it. Many Southerners used physical punishment to keep their children on the straight and narrow path. I can testify from personal experience that the biblical injunction not "to spare the rod and spoil the child" was held in high regard in the rural South as late as the 1950s. On the Southern frontier many preachers found themselves in agreement with Methodist minister Peter Cartwright's contention that sometimes before man can spread God's word he must use his fists to get the attention and respect of his congregation. ⁸ Cartwright spent much of his early career preaching at various Black Patch churches. Lest we assume that preacher violence was solely a product of frontier conditions, consider the following story. In 1884 in Todd County, in the Kentucky Black Patch, a preacher knocked down a parishioner who had struck him. The *Elkton Register* probably reflected local sentiment when it editorialized that "there is an unwritten law that must be obeyed as well as the law that is written and it keeps many a rascal in his proper place." ⁹ Many Southern churches supported and defended even broader elements of violence in Southern society, culture, and history. The Revolution, slavery, and the Civil War are examples. After the Civil War, Southern churchmen played a major role in the development of the cult of the lost cause -- a cause they claimed was "baptized in blood and had God on its side." ¹⁰

In my study of the Black Patch War, I examined several instances when religion and religious beliefs exacerbated rather than quelled the disturbances. Within the South, certain areas have been so exceptionally lawless that they possessed a culture of violence. In such an area, also called a violence-prone region, can be defined in Richard M. Brown's terms as "smaller than a state but larger than a county . . . a geographical entity with a unique history of turmoil and with an impact far beyond its own boundaries." ¹¹ The Black Patch was such an entity. Repeatedly the inhabitants of the region showed their willingness to take the law into their own hands when they felt themselves or their way of life to be threatened. Indian warfare, duelling, several regulator movements, guerrilla warfare during the Civil War and readjustment, and lynching were the major chapters in the Black Patch's history of violence before the onset of the tobacco war.

At the beginning of the 1900s, a culture of violence existed in the Black Patch. Robert Penn Warren, who was born in Guthrie, Todd County, at the turn of the century, said of the area of his birth: "There was a world of violence that I grew up on. You accepted violence as a component of life. . . . You heard about violence and you saw terrible fights. . . . There was some threat of being trapped into this whether you wanted to be or not." ¹²

Often the religious structure of the region, which was overwhelmingly evangelic Protestant, supported and nurtured the violence. This does not mean that on the denominational or local levels churches officially supported the night riders or that some church leaders and publications did not speak out against the lawlessness. Some churches, especially those in the large towns of the region, did oppose the silent brigade. In addition, the Methodists and Cumberland Presbyterians editorialized against the violence in the state publications. Even so, many Christians in the Black Patch during the early years of the war believed the night riders were fighting God's fight.

H. L. Beach, a correspondent sent to the region by the *Saturday Evening Post* to report on the tobacco war, noticed how easily a link between religion and violence could be forged. He described a Methodist church in one of the Tennessee counties where members loyal to the Association refused to allow a church leader to pray at public meetings. The fellow member had refused to pledge his crop to the Association. Implicit was the hint of retribution. ¹³ Students of the Black Patch War recounted similar links. One such scholar, Harry Harrison Kroll, described a group of night riders that operated in the Nabb schoolhouse district of Caldwell County, Kentucky, as "Nabb neighborhood Baptists and pillars of society" and a second gang that operated out of Robertson County, Tennessee, as a "roster of Baptists and Methodists and perhaps a few members of the Church of Christ." ¹⁴ James O. Nall, who conducted one of the earliest studies of the Black Patch War, described Dr. David Amoss, the head of the night rider organization, as a faithful member of the Christian Church at Wallonia, Caldwell County. Amoss frequently filled the pulpit in the absence of the pastor, conducted the weekly prayer meetings, officiated at funerals, and attended to other church affairs. ¹⁵ When Kroll questioned Caldwell County residents who remembered Dr. Amoss, many described him as "a Christian gentleman." ¹⁶

Leaders of the Association and the night riders recognized the power of religion in the area and attempted to capitalize on it. Local Association meetings often re held in rural churches and district chairmen would usually open meetings with prayers and close them with benedictions. If a farmer refused to pool his crops, the chairman, remembering techniques employed in the camp meetings and tent revivals, might get the doubter on his knees and pray to God to show him the light, the night riders initiated new members with a blood oath sworn on the Holy Bible. ¹⁷ When Charles Fort, one of the leaders of the Association, was asked about the night riders, he was apt to joke that "The Lord sent down those fellows to . . . make the principles of the Association more closely adhered to by all." ¹⁸ Night riders were often referred to as "Charlie Fort's angels." Fort's joke is better understood if we remember that many of the people of the Black Patch were Old Testament Christians. One observer of the region

described the theology of the region to Kroll as "the straight hellfire and brimstone brand." ¹⁹ Robert Penn Warren, whose first novel was a fictionalized account of the tobacco war, captured the essence of this Old Testament theology in the personality of one of his characters, Professor Ball. The Professor, who was the head of the night riders in Warren's book, began a raid with the following prayer, "Lead us, O Lord, and smite those who would rise against our face." Ball repeatedly turned to "the blood-letting texts of the Old Testament for his talks and prayers." ²⁰

As Old Testament Christians, it was easy for inhabitants of the Black Patch to see life as a fight between good and evil and to view their actions in relationship with the Bible. Suzanne Hall, who conducted a study of the region, concluded that many of the area's residents perceived life as an ongoing battle between God and Lucifer with the human soul as the trophy. ²¹ Not surprisingly then, many farmers saw their fight with the tobacco monopoly in similar terms. Kroll deduced that to many growers a person was either " . . . a child of God or an imp of Satan [and that] to save your immortal soul you had to place your tobacco in the pool." ²² To Professor Ball the night riders and the Trust were distinguished by "the difference between justice and injustice, darkness and the holy light." ²³ Since many of the farmers in the region believed they were engaged in a holy crusade, they believed that God was on their side. Many Association growers claimed to see the hand of God at work in the numerous tobacco plant bed scrapings and saltings that occurred in the Spring of 1905. ²⁴ The Clarksville *Leaf-Chronicle* and other newspapers in the Patch repeatedly reminded farmers of the righteousness in their cause. The *Leaf-Chronicle* called Felix Ewing, the most prominent Association leader, the Moses of the Black Patch, while referring to the Trust as "His Satanic Majesty." The local journal declared that the Association's organizers were preaching the "Tobacco Gospel of Purity." ²⁵ The newspaper reflected the feelings of many rural folk when it asked, "Can anyone of sound mind doubt that the hand of the Lord is in the movement, guiding his people in the way to overthrow an oppressive trust, that his favored people of a restored Israel may once more make the wilderness blossom as a rose?" ²⁶ Given these beliefs, it is not surprising that when the growers turned to violence they found justification in their understanding of the Old Testament. In a moment of introspection Professor Ball mused, "Yessir, I'm a man of peace. But it's surprising to a man what he'll find in himself sometime . . . now what's the right thing one time, that thing the next time is wrong. It's in the Bible that way." ²⁷

As a Southerner, having grown up with such justifications, I understand them. My Uncle Buck, who was dying of cancer, announced to me that he would be dead in a few days, but asked me not to grieve since he had been saved and was going to live with Jesus in a world far better than this one. Next Buck proceeded to tell me a story about how my great-grandfather, whose name was Tee, had killed a man who was about to cut Tee's brother's throat. After an interval of silence, Buck took my hand and said, "Son, you know Tee had to kill him, remember the Old Testament says we are our brother's keeper."

Finally, as Old Testament Christians, many farmers could justify their lawless actions by appealing to "higher law." The *Leaf-Chronicle* summed up this position when it editorialized: "No man has a moral right to go counter to everything that contributed to the welfare of the community, although he may not violate the statutes, there is a higher law by which the public may compel him to do good." ²⁸ The people of the Black Patch viewed God in terms of the Old Testament, saw life as a fight between good and evil, believed God to be on their side in the conflict with the "Trust," and justified their actions through the concept of "higher law." By doing so, they identified themselves with other Southerners. These traits contributed to the tobacco farmers' world view and helped them define their responses to that world.

Thus, the stage was set for violence in the first decade of the twentieth century when the tobacco farmers felt threatened by drastically low tobacco prices, believed they would receive little, if any, help from the government,

and saw in the tobacco companies and independent growers enemies upon whom they could focus. When the growers of the Black Patch turned to violence to help ease their economic plight, they were following long-established cultural, societal, and religious patterns -- patterns that would have been readily recognized and understood by their fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers.

Many of these beliefs exist today, if in a diminished capacity. That point came home to me a couple of years ago when an acquaintance of mine who had moved to Tennessee from Michigan asked me to explain the lyrics to Charlie Daniels's song, "A Simple Man." One of the verses declares:

If I had my way with people selling dope I'd take
a big tall tree and a short piece of rope
And I'd hang them up high
And let them swing 'till the sun goes down
You know what's wrong with the world today
People done gone and put their Bibles away
They're living by the law of the jungle
Not the law of the land
The Good Book says it is, so I know it's the truth
An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth ²⁹

The man said that he despaired of ever understanding Southerners and their legendary reputation for both violence and religiosity. Thus began an enjoyable evening of conversation as we discussed the differences between the North and the South and I attempted to explain the convolutions of the Southern mind to a foreigner. For you see, I could understand Charlie Daniels's song. After all, the night riders and I share a common heritage.

NOTES

1. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913*, 2nd ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1971), 159.
2. H. C. Brearley, "The Pattern of Violence," in *Culture in the South*, ed. W. T. Couch (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1934), 678-92; Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1979); Wilbur J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941); J. Winston Coleman, Jr., "The Code Duello in Antebellum Kentucky," in *A Kentucky Sampler: Essays from the Filson Club History Quarterly, 1926-1976*, ed. Lowell Harrison and Nelson L. Dawson (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1977), 54-62; John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South, 1800-1860* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1956); Raymond D. Gastil, "Homicide and a Regional Culture of Violence," *American Sociological Review* 36 (1971): 421-27; Sheldon Hackney, "Southern Violence," in *A History of Violence in America: A Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence*, ed. Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr (New York: New York Times, 1969), 505-27; Robert M. Ireland, "Homicide in Nineteenth Century Kentucky," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 81 (1983): 134-53; John Shelton Reed, *The Enduring South: Subcultural Persistence in Mass Society* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath, 1972); Frank Vandiver, "The Southerner as Extremist," in *The Idea of the South*, ed. Frank Vandiver (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1964), 43-56; Woodward, *Origins of the South*; and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford UP, 1982).
3. Reed, *The Enduring South*.

4. Cash 67-8.
5. Bruce 112.
6. Catherine C. Cleveland, *The Great Revival in the West, 1797-1805* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1916), 45-47.
7. Bruce 17-18.
8. Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956), 95-6; Bruce 160-1, 177.
9. Elkton, KY *Register*, as reported in the *Louisville Commercial* 18 May 1884, quoted in Ireland 150.
10. Charles R. Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1980), 3-17.
11. Richard M. Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1975), viii.
12. Quoted in John Shelton Reed, *One South: An Ethnic Approach to Regional Culture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1982), 145. See also Daniel J. Singal, *The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1982), 346.
13. H. L. Beach, "The Great Tobacco War," *Saturday Evening Post* 3 August 1907: 3.
14. Harry Harrison Kroll, *Riders in the Night* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1965), 247, 272.
15. James O. Nall, *The Tobacco Night Riders of Kentucky and Tennessee, 1905-1909* (Louisville: The Standard P, 1939), 59.
16. Kroll 54.
17. Kroll 52, 77.
18. Clarksville, TN *Leaf-Chronicle* 18 February 1908: 1.
19. Kroll 43.
20. Robert Penn Warren, *The Night Rider* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1939), 255.
21. Suzanne M. Hall, "Breaking Trust: The Black Patch Culture of Kentucky and Tennessee, 1900-1940" (Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1989), 150.

22. Kroll 61.

23. Warren 210.

24. *Leaf-Chronicle* 5 May 1905: 1.

25. *Leaf-Chronicle* 12 January 1905: 1; 13 January 1905:1; 2 February 1905: 1, 4 February 1905: 1, 9 March 1905:4.

26. *Leaf-Chronicle* 6 April 1905:1.

27. Warren 116-17.

28. *Leaf Chronicle* 9 March 1905: 1.

29. Charlie Daniels, et. al., "Simple Man" (Nashville: Cabin Fever Music/ Miss Hazel Music [BMI], 1989).

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