

ONE

RIDE TO THE RESCUE

D. W. GRIFFITH'S *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* (1915)

As we came to the end of both a century and a millennium a few years ago, professional experts and amateur buffs alike compiled lists of the most influential figures in various fields. The name of David Wark Griffith appeared at or near the top of every list of filmmakers. As such, Griffith was one of the great artists of the twentieth century. In the entire history of civilization, there have been few radical innovations in the way that songs and stories can be transmitted. The development of written language was one of them. This made it possible to preserve literature that had previously existed only in the memory of a few designated bards, who could forget part of the text or change it at will. (A friend of mine who teaches classics at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee believes that the great intellectual achievements of the ancient Greeks resulted from their possessing an alphabet complex enough to render human experience but simple enough to be mastered by people of ordinary intelligence.)¹ The next great leap forward came when Gutenberg invented movable type in the fifteenth century. This gave rise to the mass production of literature, thus taking it out of the court and salon and making it accessible to a general audience. Then, in the late nineteenth century, Thomas Edison developed a technology for telling stories with moving pictures. All that was needed was an artist capable of developing the creative possibilities of this new medium.

When Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* premiered at the Liberty Theater in New York on March 3, 1915, it was the first important feature film ever produced. And, at 202 minutes, it is still one of the longest. In addition to being the first director to tell a complex and coherent story on film, Griffith also developed such cinematic techniques as the close-up, the long shot, the flashback, and the fade-out. (His predecessors had done little more than train a camera on what were essentially static theatrical productions.) In the more than nine decades since its first release, this movie has come to be regarded as the most influential film of all time. Over the past quarter century, however, public screenings of Griffith's masterpiece have become exceedingly rare. In an age when soft-core pornography is readily available on cable television, *The Birth of a Nation* has been effectively banned because of its inflammatory presentation of race relations.

David Wark Griffith was born on January 22, 1875, to a rural Kentucky family still suffering economically from the ravages of the War Between the States. His ancestors had come to America from Wales before the Revolutionary War and had settled in Virginia. (His great-grandfather had fought the British in 1776.) Young David's father, Jacob Griffith, had briefly studied medicine before going off to fight in the Mexican War under General Zachary Taylor. In 1850, he escorted a wagon train from Missouri to California during the final days of the Gold Rush. He later returned to Kentucky, where he owned a small farm and served for a term in the Kentucky legislature. When the War Between the States broke out, Jake Griffith enlisted in the Confederate Army and served as a colonel under Stonewall Jackson. Young David's earliest memories were of his father's stories of wartime adventure. The elder Griffith's Southern loyalties and his flair for the theatrical left an indelible impression on his son. Because of the primitive treatment he received for his war wounds, "Thunder Jake" Griffith died in 1882, when his son was only seven.

Although he dreamed of becoming a playwright and made a precarious living as a traveling actor, D. W. Griffith was not destined for a conventional theatrical or literary career. Ever since he had seen a magic lantern show as a schoolboy in Kentucky, Griffith had been fascinated with the artistic possibilities of moving pictures. In 1908, he began a five-year directorial apprenticeship with the Biograph Company. Dur-

ing that period, he developed the techniques that would mark his later career and influence the style of other great directors, including the revolutionary Russian filmmaker Sergey Eisenstein. If Griffith's work at Biograph could be said to have any social vision, it was decidedly progressive. He championed the rights of American Indians against white oppression in *The Redman's View* (1909) and *Ramona* (1910). In *A Corner in Wheat* (1909), he attacked wealth and power as forthrightly as any contemporaneous muckraker. He exposed the horrors of urban poverty in *What Shall We Do with Our Old?* (1910) and *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912) and even presented the Ku Klux Klan in an unfavorable light in *The Rose of Kentucky* (1911)! After starting his own independent company in 1913, Griffith continued to produce films with righteous liberal sentiments. There can be little question that he considered *The Birth of a Nation* to be in this tradition. Griffith believed that he was making a strong statement against the brutality of war as his father had experienced it, while championing the underdog South against Northern oppression.²

The image of the South in American culture during the second half of the nineteenth century was largely shaped by the seemingly ubiquitous theatrical versions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Because of the role of Stowe's novel in bringing about the War Between the States, we sometimes overlook the fact that the various plays based on that novel reached an even larger audience for nearly four decades after the war was over. Although the plantation novels of Thomas Nelson Page and the Uncle Remus stories of Joel Chandler Harris presented a more positive view of the antebellum South, no form of popular entertainment had been able to counter the effect of the Uncle Tom plays. Then, one night around the turn of the century, a minister and temperance lecturer from North Carolina attended one of these infamous productions. Angered by what he considered an injustice to the South, it was all that Thomas Dixon Jr. could do to keep from leaping to his feet and denouncing the drama. When the performance was over, he rose with tears in his eyes—vowing not to rest until he had told the true story of the South. In a five-year period, he produced a trilogy of novels—*The Leopard's Spots* (1902), *The Clansman* (1905), and *The Traitor* (1907)—which sold millions of copies and provided the first effective challenge to the powerful myth embodied in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Unlike more genteel apologists for the Confederate South, Dixon seemed intent on beating Mrs. Stowe at her own game. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the most powerful argument against slavery is not that it violates individual human rights but that it threatens middle-class family values and the sanctity of the home. The ultimate embodiment of that threat was the nightmare image of interracial rape.³ Well before Mrs. Stowe put pen to paper, abolitionist propaganda had painted lurid pictures of Southern slave owners violating their female chattel and then selling the mulatto babies away from their grieving mothers. If the indigent Southerners in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* rarely go that far, Stowe's most loathsome slave owner, the Vermont-born Simon Legree, is the very incarnation of sadism and lust. By equating slavery with miscegenetic rape, Harriet Beecher Stowe appealed to the most visceral fears of her readers.

The success of this appeal required a kind of imaginative empathy on the part of Stowe's readers, almost all of whom were free white people, whose condition was far removed from that of the victimized slave women. To assure the effectiveness of her propaganda, Stowe enters the novel in certain key scenes and directly asks the reader to imagine herself subjected to such inhumane treatment. (It was just such an act of empathy that prompted the writing of the novel in the first place; when one of Stowe's own sons died of a childhood illness, she felt an immediate kinship with slave women separated from their offspring.) Dixon does not resort to such narrative hectoring because the distance between his characters and his readers is considerably narrower. Like Stowe—and unlike so many male novelists, who celebrate the flight from home and domestic entanglements—Dixon believed in the sanctity of the family. Also, like Stowe, he saw interracial rape as the ultimate threat to the stability of home life. The crucial difference is that his victims were white Southerners suffering from the ravages of Reconstruction, while his villains were freed blacks intent on ravishing the sisters, wives, and daughters of their former masters. If appeals to reason had failed to make the case for the South, perhaps evoking people's most troubled dreams would do the trick.

Because social, racial, and gender equality are unchallenged ideals in our own age, it is often difficult to appreciate the governing assumptions of an earlier time. Throughout most of recorded history, men of

the highest social class have considered women of a lower order to be fair game. It was only with the rise of the middle class that women began demanding marriage as payment for their sexual favors. Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), often cited as the first novel in English, tells the tale of a servant girl who finally extorts a proposal of marriage from the predatory young squire who has been pursuing her for several hundred pages. (The subtitle, *Virtue Rewarded*, tells us all we need to know about the game that Pamela is playing.) But when the threat of forcible seduction comes from a social inferior, what is at stake is not just a single woman's chastity but the order of society itself.

Born in Shelby, North Carolina, in 1864, Thomas Dixon graduated at age nineteen from Wake Forest College with a master of arts and the highest honors ever awarded by that institution, after which he did a year of graduate work at Johns Hopkins—where he formed a lifelong friendship with his classmate Woodrow Wilson. Prior to embarking on his career as a novelist, Dixon was a lawyer, an actor, and a popular lecturer against strong drink and other vices. Although he was an ordained Baptist minister, he left that church to form his own interdenominational congregation in New York City. Like the early D. W. Griffith, Dixon was on the liberal side of most political and economic issues. In fact, as late as 1896, he had publicly thanked God “that there is not to-day the clang of a single slave's chain on this continent,” because “democracy is the destiny of the race, because all men are bound together in the bonds of fraternal equality with one common love.” Dixon seems to have changed his views on race not because of any lingering prejudices from his Southern upbringing but as a reaction to American foreign policy. Our imperialist war against Spain resulted in American control of several Pacific and Caribbean populations. Believing that these dark-skinned peoples had proved incapable of self-government, Dixon concluded that all non-Aryans shared a genetic tendency toward barbarism. Although such views have been discredited in our own age, they were held by many reputable anthropologists in Dixon's own time.⁴

The Clansman is the story of two families—the Camerons of South Carolina and the Stonemans of Pennsylvania.⁵ Although Ben Cameron and

Phil Stoneman fought on opposite sides in the War Between the States, they are willing to forget regional differences in a spirit of healing under the benevolent leadership of Abraham Lincoln, who is considered by North and South alike to be the “Great Heart.” Unfortunately, Lincoln is assassinated, and radical forces within his own party (led by Phil’s father Austin Stoneman) are intent on bringing the conquered South under the heel of black despotism. As the story opens, Stoneman’s saintly daughter Elsie is playing the banjo for wounded soldiers from both sides in a makeshift hospital set up in the U.S. Patent Office. Ben Cameron, who is recovering from war wounds and facing trumped-up charges for guerilla activity, immediately falls in love with the Northern girl. With Elsie’s help, Ben’s mother secures a presidential pardon for her son and escapes with him to South Carolina before Lincoln’s murder incites a reign of recrimination in the nation’s capital. Except for a dramatic account of the impeachment and trial of Andrew Johnson, the rest of the action takes place in the Piedmont region of South Carolina.

In the public realm, we see radical white Reconstructionists using the newly freed black slaves to terrorize their former masters. At a personal level, romantic passion is bringing the Cameron and Stoneman children closer together. Not only is Ben Cameron smitten with Elsie Stoneman, but Elsie’s brother Phil has also fallen in love with Ben’s sister Margaret. In the meantime, Austin Stoneman (who has moved to the warmer climate of South Carolina for his health) is growing increasingly fond of individual Southerners, even as he doggedly pursues his vengeful political agenda.

In what Dixon implies is the inevitable consequence of emancipation, Ben Cameron’s former sweetheart, Marion Lenoir, is raped by a bestial former slave named Gus. (Having been irreparably polluted, both Marion and her mother throw themselves off a nearby cliff.) At this point, the Invisible Empire of the Ku Klux Klan materializes to avenge the violated damsel. Shortly thereafter, several thousand federal troops are summoned to quell the insurrection threatened by this show of vigilante justice. In the incendiary atmosphere, Phil Stoneman kills a black who has behaved in an uppity manner toward Margaret Cameron. Once again, Margaret’s hard-luck brother Ben is suspected of a crime he has not committed and sentenced to death. After Phil replaces

his look-alike friend in the death cell, the Klan rides to the rescue. Phil is saved, Old Austin Stoneman is chastened, and the Klan wins the victory over federal intervention that had previously eluded the more conventional forces of the Confederacy.

With its combination of sex, violence, and unabashed sentimentality, *The Clansman* was an even bigger success than its immediate predecessor, *The Leopard's Spots*. (Richard Schickel tells us that when Dixon submitted the manuscript of that earlier novel to his old friend Walter Hines Page, the redoubtable New South liberal stayed up all night reading it. Setting forth in search of breakfast the next morning and continuing to read while he walked, Page was promptly struck by a streetcar, with the blood from his cuts staining Dixon's text.) But no mere novel or pair of novels, no matter how popular, could undo the damage that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had wrought, both in print and on stage, for over half a century. Fired by both ambition and greed, Dixon combined the most sensational elements of both his anti-Uncle Tom books in a play he also called *The Clansman*, which began touring the nation in 1905.

Dixon's play, like the novels on which it was based, was panned by professional critics and public moralists, even as ordinary people fought for seats in crowded theaters while police stood ready with fire hoses to drive back those still trying to get in. Although one of the main actors had great difficulty learning his lines and the horses bearing the Klansmen always seemed on the verge of leaping over the footlights into the audience, the opening night and subsequent performances came off without mishap. When Dixon first heard the applause for his play, he thought, "What a tame thing [is] a book compared to this! There I saw, felt, heard, and touched the hands of my readers and their united heart beat lifted me to the heights." He believed that, even if his novel eventually sold five million copies, a successful play could reach ten million with an emotional power ten times as great as cold type. In the first week alone, the play recouped all its production cost and earned a profit of fifty thousand dollars. After touring the South and Midwest for four months, *The Clansman* opened in New York on January 8, 1906.⁶

Although the New York critics and ideologues were even more antagonistic toward Dixon's play than their counterparts in the provinces had been, the theater continued to be packed night after night. This re-

mained true when the show went on the road in other Northern cities. No doubt, the popularity of *The Clansman* was due in part to the spectacle of the production. Seeing white-robed Klansmen riding across the stage was even more thrilling than watching a runaway slave be pursued by bloodhounds in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But the racial politics of the play must also have been congenial to Yankee audiences. Anti-black sentiment was particularly strong among recent immigrants, who competed with African Americans for low-paying jobs. (At the Atlanta Exposition of 1900, Booker T. Washington had taken an anti-immigrant stance on the grounds that blacks had been in this country first and had proved themselves to be reliable workers.) If Northern playgoers were not exactly forgetting *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, racial solidarity was beginning to trump sectional animosity.

Just as Dixon had become frustrated with the limitations of print when he transferred his story to the stage, he eventually came to realize that stage drama itself was a dying genre. His new dream was to produce a version of his story in the emerging medium of motion pictures. In 1911, he tried unsuccessfully to form his own company for that purpose. After two years of having the door slammed in his face by established producers, Dixon approached the small-time entrepreneur Harry E. Aitken in 1913. Aitken had just hired D. W. Griffith away from Biograph, and the two were looking for a more ambitious project than the one-reel films Griffith had been used to turning out. Because of his own Southern background, Griffith felt an immediate affinity with Dixon's story. Moreover, as a director he was impressed with the visual possibilities for the film. He recalls that, when he first looked into *The Clansman*, he "skipped quickly through the book until I got to the part about the Klansmen, who, according to no less than Woodrow Wilson, ran to the rescue of the downtrodden South after the Civil War. I could see these Klansmen in a movie with their robes flying." What he envisioned was a ride to the rescue that would outdo anything previously attempted on stage or screen. "Instead of saving one poor Little Nell of the Plains," he said, "this ride would be to save a nation."⁷

Although Griffith's version of *The Clansman* was more faithful to Dixon's novel than many movies are to their sources, he made several crucial changes that rendered the narrative more effective.⁸ He starts

the film well before Reconstruction with a scene of a Puritan clergyman praying over a slave market. (The subtitle reads: "The bringing of the African to America sows the first seeds of disunion.") The very next scene is of a nineteenth-century abolitionist meeting. The same Puritan types who had blessed the original slave trade are now agitating for an end to the peculiar institution. Through this visual juxtaposition, Griffith exploits the stereotype of Puritans as cold-blooded hypocrites. Shortly thereafter, we see the two Stoneman boys visiting their boarding school chums the Camerons in South Carolina. (Griffith has supplied Phil Stoneman with a younger brother, while giving Ben two younger brothers and an additional sister.) In contrast to Puritan New England, life in the South is filled with grace, laughter, and a sense of joy large enough to include both races—the black slaves sing and dance during their two-hour lunch break. That such a life depends on social and racial hierarchy is emphasized visually by another pair of consecutive scenes. As a wagon full of jovial disorderly blacks passes in the street, a couple of "pickaninnies" fall out and are retrieved with a playful pat on the rear. Immediately thereafter, a carriage of well-dressed aristocratic whites passes in the opposite direction.

Because Griffith begins prior to the war, he is able to broaden his epic by showing us scenes of battle. The scope and realism of these scenes was unprecedented in the American cinema. Also, because World War I had already begun in Europe, Griffith's condemnation of armed conflict was particularly timely. He quickly kills off the two younger brothers he has provided for Ben Cameron and shows the gallant Ben succoring a fallen foe. (This scene is described in a conversation after the fact in the novel.) Only then do we see the angelic Elsie Stoneman ministering to Ben and the other wounded soldiers in the patent office.

With a kind of dramatic economy, Griffith has the black predator Gus pursue the additional younger sister he has given Ben, thus dispensing altogether with the character of Marion Lenoir. Rather than depicting an actual rape—which occurs off the page in Dixon's novel, anyway—he has the little sister leap off the cliff in order to avoid what would otherwise be a fate worse than death. Also, in the film the Klan rescues Elsie Stoneman rather than her brother Phil. Her calamity is the prospect of a forced marriage with the mulatto lieutenant governor

of South Carolina, Silas Lynch. In the end, however, the happy outcome is the same as in the novel—the Klan is triumphant, the blacks suppressed, and the Reconstructionists on the run. After the film's first showing, in a private screening at Clune's Auditorium in Los Angeles in February 1915, Thomas Dixon was so moved by the spectacle that he told Griffith that *The Clansman* was "too tame a title for so powerful a story." Instead, it must be called *The Birth of a Nation*.

If Thomas Dixon Jr. had hoped that his novel and play would replace *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the American consciousness, he was to be sadly disappointed. Nearly every American has at least heard of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and tens of millions of people who have never read the novel or seen an Uncle Tom play can identify characters and scenes from Stowe's story. After their obligatory fifteen minutes of fame, Dixon and *The Clansman* were soon forgotten. (Dixon's work is included in no anthology of American or Southern literature, and most of the standard reference books in the field fail even to mention his name.) Nevertheless, Dixon's vision continues to live in the first great film of the American cinema.⁹

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For many years, *The Birth of a Nation* was the most widely distributed and highest-grossing movie ever. Even if those distinctions have now been eclipsed by more recent films (particularly *Gone With the Wind*, which it influenced), Griffith's masterpiece has enjoyed remarkable longevity. Despite persistent efforts at suppression by political foes from the Communist Party to the NAACP, *The Birth of a Nation* continued for decades to be shown in revival houses specializing in classic films. Unfortunately, this practice came to a virtual end in 1980, when a lily-white group of Berkeley radicals stormed a San Francisco theater showing the movie. After they vandalized the building, destroyed projection equipment, and burned the print of the film, most other theaters owners became too scared to show the movie. But no amount of intimidation or censorship can completely banish myths and dreams. If Griffith's consummate artistry is responsible for the technical excellence of *The Birth of a Nation*, the much-maligned hack writer Thomas Dixon gave him two of the film's most memorable and disturbing im-

ages—the black rapist attacking his white victim, and the Klan riding to the rescue. It is perhaps for this reason, Leslie Fiedler argues, that Griffith “for all his talent never again was able to project archetypes that have refused to fade from the mind of the world.”¹⁰

These two images, much more than the Jim Crow stereotypes shown earlier in the film, are really what the fuss is all about. What are we to make of these images? How should we as enlightened twenty-first-century Americans respond to the controversy they have spawned? In considering the specter of interracial rape, we should probably acknowledge the fact that it was the abolitionists—particularly Harriet Beecher Stowe—who introduced this image into the debate over race relations. What is perhaps more telling, however, is not the convoluted genealogy of this image but the way in which it has been used in the nine decades since the filming of *The Birth of a Nation*. If Uncle Tom is the prototypical “Good Nigger,” then Gus is the equally prototypical bad one. In our own day and age, the worst thing you can possibly call a black male is an “Uncle Tom.” The Gus prototype, however, has fared much better.

The protagonist of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), the first great American novel by a black writer, achieves a sense of manhood and spiritual fulfillment when he convinces himself that he has raped and murdered a white girl—although he, like Gus in the movie, is technically innocent of both crimes. When the white Southern liberal William Styron wrote a historical novel about Nat Turner in 1967, he had the leader of this famous slave rebellion murder a white girl for whom he had secretly lusted. In *Soul on Ice* (1968), the black radical Eldridge Cleaver speaks of rape as a revolutionary act. He would begin by practicing on black women in his own neighborhood and then move to the white side of town when he got good enough at his craft. If miscegenetic rape has become an image of black power in the minds of some who are sympathetic to the cause of civil rights and black aspirations, it seems a bit disingenuous to blame Thomas Dixon and D. W. Griffith for being the first artists to plant this image in the American imagination.

The glorification of the Klan, however, is far more troubling than worrying about predators in the woodpile. Wright, Styron, and Cleaver notwithstanding, most decent people disapprove of sexual assault. But they would also add that such matters are properly handled by the po-

lice and the courts. The Klan, especially as we know it today, is more a terrorist organization than a fraternity of white knights. (It is true that reputable historians such as Woodrow Wilson once saw the original Klan as a necessary response to radical Reconstruction. Griffith's film is filled with quotes from Tom Dixon's old classmate, who was president in 1915. After a screening of *The Birth of a Nation* in the White House, Wilson said: "It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true.")

But an even more basic point needs to be made. When people are in distress, the last thing they are likely to do is demand a background check of those willing to help them. In countless B Westerns, seemingly acceptable to those who decry *The Birth of a Nation*, the cavalry rides to the rescue of helpless whites under siege by dark-skinned Native Americans. In the Tarzan movies, the potential victims are invariably white and the attackers black savages. (Even if the savior does swing from a vine, he is still a British lord.) Finally, in Hitler's favorite movie, *King Kong* (1933), the entire technology of civilized mankind is directed against the African beast who is climbing the Empire State Building with blonde Fay Wray in hand. Back when ethnic profiling was still allowed, the orders were to shoot Kong on sight.

When white leftists, such as the ones who vandalized the revival house in Berkeley, seek to suppress *The Birth of a Nation*, I am reminded of the scene in *Hamlet* in which the prince says, "Methinks the lady doth protest too much." In an essay on Dixon and Griffith, Leslie Fiedler writes: "I myself once saw . . . the members of a left-wing cin  club in Athens, believers all in the equality of the races and the unmitigated evil of the Klan, rise to their feet at ten o'clock in the morning (the year was 1960, two wars and innumerable revolutions after the making of the film) to scream with bloodlust and approval equal to that of the racist first-nighters of 1915 as white womanhood was once more delivered from the threat of black rape."¹¹

The scenario that Dixon and Griffith depicted so memorably seems to have been *discovered* rather than *created* by them. Consider, for example, a poem called "The Pipes of Lucknow: An Incident of the Sepoy Mutiny," written in 1858. The scene is India, where a group of Scottish women and children are besieged by an uprising of fearsome brown-skinned natives. Early in the poem, the dire scene is set:

Day by day the Indian Tiger
Louder yelled, and nearer crept;
Round and round the jungle serpent
Near and nearer circles swept.
“Pray for rescue wives and mothers—
Pray to-day!” the soldier said;
“To-morrow, death’s between us
And the wrong and shame we dread.”

At the moment when danger is greatest and all hope seems lost, one of the women hears a familiar sound in the distance. A silence falls on the group as the sound grows progressively louder.

Oh, they listened dumb and breathless,
And they caught the sound at last;
Faint and far beyond the Goomtee
Rose and fell the piper’s blast!
Then a burst of wild thanksgiving
Mingled woman’s voice and man’s;
“God be praised!—the march of Havelock!
The piping of the clans!”

Louder, nearer, fierce as vengeance,
Sharp and shrill as swords at strife,
Came the wild MacGregor’s clan-call,
Stinging all the air to life.
But when the far-off dust-cloud
To plaided legions grew,
Full tenderly and blithesomely
The pipes of rescue blew!

Round the silver domes of Lucknow,
Moslem mosque and Pagan shrine,
Breathed the air to Britons dearest,
The air of Auld Lang Syne.
O’er the cruel roll of war-drums
Rose that sweet and homelike strain;
And the tartan clove the turban,
As the Goomtee cleaves the plain . . .¹²

This poem was not written by a Southern defender of slavery or even by a Northern copperhead. It couldn't have been written by Rudyard Kipling, who wasn't born until 1865. The author of "The Pipes of Lucknow" was none other than the righteous Quaker abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier.

Even if *The Birth of a Nation* is a powerful work of art capable of exposing liberal hypocrisy, its depiction of the South, and hence of America, is incomplete. For that reason, it finally falls short of the total social vision that we demand of the greatest art. Ironically, the fact that Dixon and Griffith were both racists results in their undercutting the more principled rationale for secession. *The Birth of a Nation* is an accurate title for a film that so insistently depicts the reconciliation of North and South. In terms of the fictional story line, that reconciliation is symbolized by the double wedding that joins the Stoneman and Cameron families at the end of the movie. (Austin Stoneman, who is loosely based on the radical Reconstructionist Thaddeus Stevens, apparently realizes the error of his ways when his mulatto protégé seeks to marry Stoneman's own daughter.) Should we miss the larger historical point he is making, Griffith ends his film with Daniel Webster's statement, "Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable." This is not just a plea for national healing but an implicit admission that the South had been wrong to secede from the inseparable union, which is now being reconstituted on the principle of *white supremacy*.

In order to maintain a unionist perspective and still denounce the horrors of Reconstruction, it is necessary for Dixon and Griffith to buy into the Great Heart fraud. If only the saintly and compassionate Lincoln had not been murdered, Reconstruction would have been a joy rather than an agony. No literary or historical gushmeister from Walt Whitman to James Agee has given us a more saccharine view of Lincoln than the one we get in *The Birth of a Nation*. When the news of the assassination reaches Piedmont, South Carolina, old Colonel Cameron laments: "Our best friend is gone. What will become of us now?" Before the war, the same Colonel Cameron had read a newspaper headline saying: "If the North Carries the Election, the South Will Secede." This is of course historical nonsense. It was the election of *Lincoln* that prompted secession. Had the Northerner Stephen A. Douglas won the election, the South would have stayed in the union. But Griffith would

rather rewrite history than suggest that there was anything more than a temporary disagreement separating Lincoln from the South. It is deplorable that Dixon and Griffith would rather celebrate the lynching of African Americans than denounce the documented excesses of the Great Emancipator.¹³

Finally, another aspect of the question of race cannot be ignored. Even if *The Birth of a Nation* tells a hard and bitter truth, it is finally only a partial truth. In places, Griffith gives us what he no doubt considered to be a positive view of African Americans. The house servants of the Cameron family (who seem not to have heard about the Emancipation Proclamation) remain loyal and submissive. When the little sister plummets to her death, we see a shot of the servants' quarters and the subtitle "None grieved more than these." But no positive portrayal of a black character attains the mythic resonance we find in the image of Gus. Not only is there no counterpart to Uncle Tom in *The Birth of a Nation*, neither is there an equivalent to William Faulkner's Dilsey or Margaret Mitchell's Mammy. The absence of such characters is far more troubling than the presence of Gus.

Despite these limitations, the power of *The Birth of a Nation* has never been more evident than it is today. In recent years, we have been repeatedly told that America is a different country since the events of September 11, 2001. That particular day of infamy reminded us of our individual and collective vulnerability. It also taught us that tolerance and goodwill do not constitute an effective defense against real enemies. Tribal loyalty inevitably seems less of a vice when the tribe is under attack. These are views that D. W. Griffith instinctively affirmed nearly a century ago. For that reason, his great film continues to strike a responsive chord in us—whether we like it or not.