

[Dickson on Blair, 'The Record of Murders and Outrages: Racial Violence and the Fight over Truth at the Dawn of Reconstruction \(Civil War America\)'](#)

Review published on Wednesday, December 28, 2022

William Alan Blair. *The Record of Murders and Outrages: Racial Violence and the Fight over Truth at the Dawn of Reconstruction (Civil War America)*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021. 184 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), [ISBN 978-1-4696-6344-9](#); \$19.95 (paper), [ISBN 978-1-4696-6345-6](#).



Reviewed by Keith D. Dickson (National Defense University) **Published on** H-War (December, 2022)
Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Printable Version: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=57231>

Murders and Outrages initially offers a rumination on the role of information and its power to shape policy. A particular type of information, especially the belief in its veracity, was decisive in bringing about Congressional Reconstruction: military occupation, martial law, disfranchisement, and a social and political transformation imposed by military force. The epilogue, however, reveals Blair's intent to use this book as part of a larger effort to contribute to "a full reckoning" toward "reconciling wrongs in the past" and accounting for the dead by "recovering personal stories" (p. 138).

Intending "to overcome the past repression of these people's memory" (p. 138), he turns to the records of the Freedman's Bureau regarding 3,981 incident reports, concerning 5,000 to 6,000 individuals and categorized as "murders and outrages," that were compiled by bureau officers from 1866 to 1868.. He sees this document as "the proof of what really happened" (p. 5) in the South and intends to use it in order to correct the historical record that has rejected or ignored the "lawlessness as part of this history" (p. 5). This source is intended to explain all the postwar complexities of a region, once an independent nation, now in total defeat, without law or government, and subject to profound social upheaval. In doing so, he endorses the Radical agenda for compiling and using this information as a means to build a case for overturning Presidential Reconstruction. Because they did not accept the self-evident truth of this source, any contrary opinions that reports of violence in the South were "exaggerated for partisan reasons" (p. 128) are discounted.

The book's subtitle uses the term "racial violence," but Blair also uses the term "racial terrorism" at least five times and "political terrorism" another five times. The events recorded by the bureau agents are described repeatedly as "atrocities" another four times. Contemporary scholarship in its postmodern guise requires no attempts at definitions or analysis; words themselves convey whatever meaning the reader assigns to them, so they are useful in underpinning meaning and intent. As a result, there is no explanation for what constitutes an atrocity or what the difference between political and racial terrorism is, or for that matter, what terrorism is.

Blair takes another opportunity for the reader to fill in meaning and content by referring to "a

nascent insurgency against the upheaval in power in the post-emancipation South" (p. 47). Blair uses "insurgency" improperly, citing as evidence a 2009 US government source and two other sources, one from 1896 and one from 1900, neither of which has anything to do with insurgency. Without understanding the origins of unconventional warfare, he seems surprised that Southerners would organize a violent resistance movement.

Blair presents his evidence from the Freedman's Bureau in a table (p. 38). Only eight original Confederate states are included, along with Washington, DC (why is unclear). As to the categories of murder and outrages: outrages include physical assault (about 60 percent of the total outrages, described as "physical contact that harmed an individual" (p. 37)), verbal assault (representing 5 percent of all outrages reported), and sexual assault (a total of 37). Blair notes that in Kentucky and Tennessee, more whites were killed than African Americans (p. 85). The overall numbers are rather modest, even if extrapolated by a score or more. The number of murder arrests in New York City roughly parallels the number of murders reported in several Southern states over the same period. Blair recounts two incidents where a woman was killed because she spurned a man's sexual advances (p. 46); another deals with a white man trying to take possession of the child he fathered with a former slave (p. 45). A Black man kills a white man in self-defense and fears for his life (pp. 29-30). A white man, in an altercation, slashes a freedwoman with a knife (pp. 50-51). Blair elevates these incidents as direct challenges to the power and authority of the United States: "a slap in the face for African Americans and white Republicans for the sheer hubris conveyed" (p. 51).

Blair concludes that the Freedman's Bureau report "provided the hard evidence of the need for martial law" (p. 65). Blair echoes Thaddeus Stevens almost word for word: "Nothing but military power could protect the safety, security, or peace of loyal men and women" (p. 57). Blair is uncritical of violating a sworn oath for political purposes, when army officers ignored orders from the commander-in-chief and instead followed directions from Congress. Blair finds that "the power of the bayonet," as he puts it, was both "necessary and welcome" to implement Congressional Reconstruction, implying that the ends justify the means.

Keith D. Dickson is Professor Emeritus, National Defense University. He is the author of No Surrender: Asymmetric Warfare in the Reconstruction South, 1868-1877 (Praeger, 2017).

Citation: Keith D. Dickson. Review of Blair, William Alan, *The Record of Murders and Outrages: Racial Violence and the Fight over Truth at the Dawn of Reconstruction (Civil War America)*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2022. **URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57231>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).