

THE BIRTH OF A NATION: THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL MOTION PICTURE IN AMERICAN HISTORY

BY MICHAEL COLLINS PIPER

Although he probably didn't realize it, when Hollywood's D. W. Griffith produced *The Birth of a Nation* in 1914, he was establishing himself as a maverick pioneer in the world of historical revisionism. Griffith's monumental screen epic of federal tyranny and instigated mobocracy continues as a timeless lesson. It is, therefore, virulently suppressed by those who fear its message.

Since their advent, motion pictures have played an important part in shaping American life. They have both mirrored public opinion and molded it. They have shed new light on old problems, and stimulated discussion of public issues that had yet to be recognized. They have affected political action, and they have, in some cases, become political issues in themselves. Motion pictures are a force to be reckoned with in studying the history of the 20th century. Their power and influence has remained consistent since the earliest days of the film industry and will continue to be so.

A prime example of the phenomenon of a motion picture having such an impact on American life is David Wark Griffith's 1914 silent film epic, *The Birth of a Nation*. This amazing motion pic-

ture left its mark not only upon the then-young film industry, but upon American life as a whole.

The role of Griffith's film in shaping American life cannot easily be dismissed. The debate over race relations, censorship and civil liberties that came in the wake of this film played an important role in modern American history.

The Birth of a Nation was a faithful film adaptation of *The Clansman*, Reverend Thomas W. Dixon's potboiler of sex, sin, and racial conflict of the

Reconstruction Era in the South. Remembered today by reviewers as a work of "racism", *The Clansman* aimed to enlighten White Americans regarding the consequences of Reconstruction. A success when translated to the stage, Dixon's novel seemed—in Griffith's eyes—perfect for film.¹

Griffith, the Virginia son of a Confederate veteran, was open to the basic message of the work, and had no hesitation in bringing it to the screen.² Pitching himself heart and soul into this unique



The Birth of a Nation's battle scenes were filmed in the then-thinly populated San Fernando Valley, where the famous Forest Lawn Cemetery is now located. With only 300 extras, Griffith used smoke, horses and clever deployments to give the impression of thousands in battle. The thrilling "to the rescue" ride of the knight-like Klansmen was filmed on a dirt road that ran from Los Angeles into Orange County near Whittier.

project, Griffith created the longest American film yet produced (current running time 3:10). It was a motion picture that one film historian, Lewis Jacobs, suggested "foreshadowed the best that was to come in cinema technique, earned for the screen its right to the status of an art, and demonstrated with finality that the movie was one of the most potent social agencies in America."³

Although its modern-day critics (approaching it from socio-political perspectives) are loath to admit it, the film—as a work of cinematic art—was unequalled in motion picture history. The systematic use of closeups, wide-angle shots, effective panning (i.e. scanning a scene), intercutting sequences and the use of screen-synchronized orchestra music, all reached a high point with the advent of *The Birth of a Nation*. Combining experimental film techniques with those of his own creation, Griffith introduced dimensions to the then-fledgling cinema art.⁴

According to William K. Everson, a historian of the silent film, *The Birth of a Nation* did what no other film had done: "establish movies as an international art and an international industry almost overnight, and influenced the manner of narrative story-telling in American films for at least the next six years."⁵ Were it but for these qualities alone, *The Birth of a Nation* would have made societal history.

There was another interesting historical twist in relation to the film: because it was such a panoramic epic, theater owners hiked up admission prices. The movie was meant for those who could understand the story line, as articulated in the English language subtitles. It was a film for white Americans about their own history and their own culture, clearly presented in a dramatic manner that could be understood and appreciated.⁶

Even President Woodrow Wilson, today remembered as an obsessed internationalist and liberal reformer, endorsed the film and screened it at the White House.⁷ In spite of his professorial and Anglophile drappings, Wilson had not forsaken the hard-won Shenendoah creed of liberty and individualism of his forebears. Of *Birth* he stated: "It is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."

Aside from its major contributions to cinematic artistry, the release of the movie and its stunning success had a significant impact on the development of the motion picture industry from an economic standpoint. According to a Griffith



Intentional or not, actor Joseph Henabery's makeup made him look as much like a 19th century pawn shop operator as it did the Abraham Lincoln he portrayed. Standing is actor Ralph Lewis (note clubbed foot) who played "the Honorable Austin Stoneman, Leader of the House." Stoneman was clearly modeled after the monstrous real life lawmaker, Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania. He told emancipated blacks that he would "crush the white South under the beel of the black South."

biographer, Martin Williams:

"No one had known people could be so moved by a motion picture. Critics appeared to praise the film where there had been no critics before. It made a fortune. It brought new prestige and popularity to the movies, changed their whole method of presentation. Huge new movie theaters and chains of theaters were built, and huge production companies were formed, on the basis of its success."⁸ *then the jews took over!*

Let us now examine the film itself and the content which created so much con-

troversy—controversy that continues to this day when repertory cinemas dare public storm and media criticism by screening this motion picture classic.

Essentially, Griffith perceived his project to be a work of historical "revisionism"—although he could hardly have employed that term a decade before the concept of revisionism was recognized within historical circles. Griffith said that his film would tell the truth about the Civil War. "The history books," he said, "did not."⁹ Whatever the case, *The Birth of a Nation* left a tremendous impact

across the land. It tells the story of two families—one Northern and one Southern—and how their lives were affected by the War Between the States and the years of Reconstruction.

The Stoneman family is headed by Austin Stoneman, a Pennsylvania Congressman and avid abolitionist who, predictably, became a radical Reconstructionist in the period that followed Lee's surrender at Appomattox. Stoneman is portrayed as a scheming power broker whose desires for Negro equality are purely political in nature. In the movie's latter stages one of his black proteges—a mulatto politician named Silas Lynch—tells Stoneman that he intends to take a white woman for his wife. Stoneman smiles broadly and gives Lynch a congratulatory pat on the back. When Lynch adds that the white girl is Stoneham's daughter Elsie (who in fact loathes Lynch and all he stands for), Stoneham erupts in anger and collapses into a chair.

The situation is not unlike a contemporary scene in which one prominent local liberal tells another that the city plans to open a combined methadone clinic and homeless shelter. The second liberal thinks the plan is a splendid one, much needed. But when the first liberal tells the second liberal that the building to be acquired is in the second liberal's neighborhood, the second liberal pulls every pressure sting at his disposal to stop it.

The club-footed Stoneman is modeled after the real-life Thaddeus Stevens, an abolition zealot with the crazed eyes of a John Brown. Stoneman is also shown, however, to be having an affair with his mulatto housekeeper—a matter described in the film as a "weakness that is to blight a nation."¹⁰

The Cameron family of South Carolina is the southern counterpart of the Stoneman family. The Cameron and Stoneman boys are portrayed as boarding school friends. This results in a romance between Ben Cameron and Elsie Stoneman (played by Lillian Gish). These ties underline a key thrust of the film—that regional differences should be of no concern to white Americans when their racial integrity is at stake.

The coming of war is graphically depicted, and the ravages of the war on the lives and the property of the Camerons and their southern neighbors is strongly emphasized. The rise of the carpetbaggers, the scalawags and the free blacks becomes a focal point of the second half of the film. A number of blacks

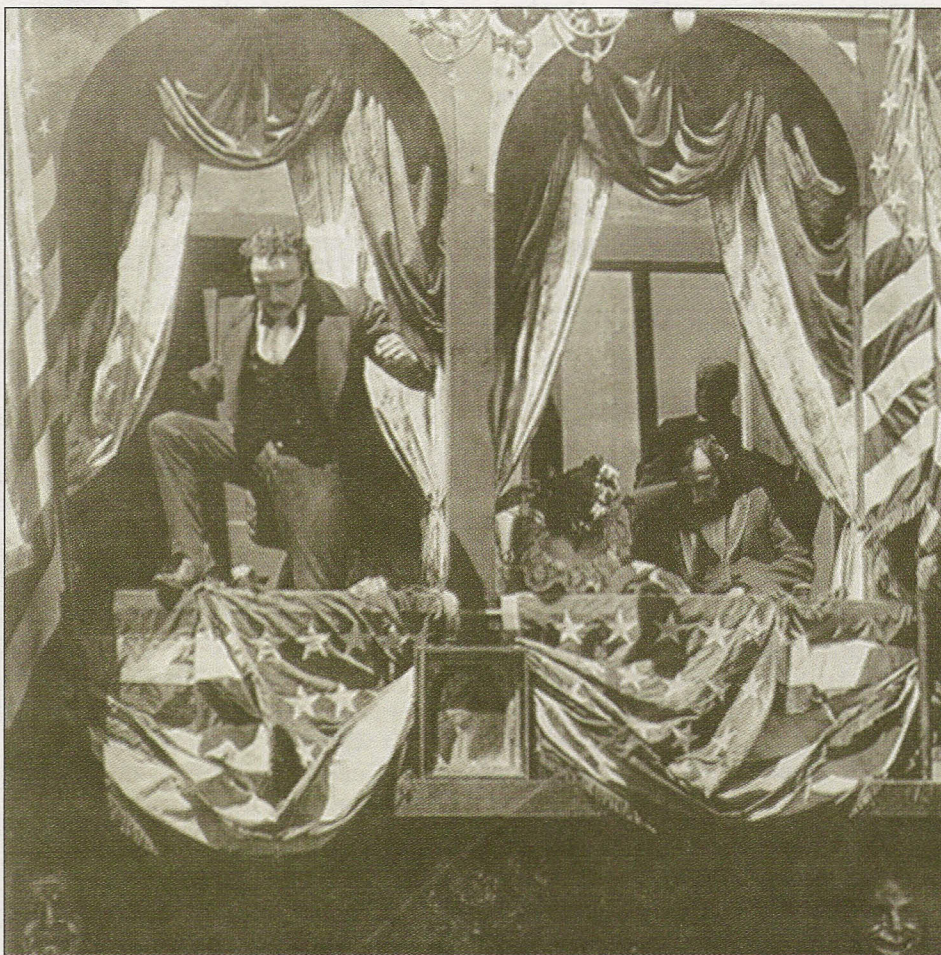
are shown as both loyal and disgusted by the criminal antics of their fellows. With historic accuracy, these were depicted as lecherous, ignorant bounders who, now "free", abandon any acquired sense of common courtesy and respect for persons and property. White women are prey to jungle-reverting blacks, and federally dictated state legislatures filled with black "lawmakers" are presented as veritable circuses. The threat posed by miscegenation is a major focus. One Negro newspaper of the day lambasted *The Birth of a Nation* by commenting: "No more vicious and harmful bit of propaganda has ever been put on the screen."¹¹

The film concludes with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and trumpets the rescue of the white South from the federally instigated black menace. During the siege of

whites in a cabin by armed black civilians and black federal infantry, the caption still reads: "The former enemies of North and South are united again in common defense of their Aryan birthright."¹²

There were also a number of other aspects of the film—aside from the racial perspective presented—that are worth noting:

- The futility of fratricidal war. Griffith's graphic presentation of the agony of war and its results was an important contribution to films. Few can doubt that its 1915 release hardened the resolve of many Americans against our involvement in Europe's "Great War." According to Martin Williams, "Griffith is one of the few filmmakers who have been able to make war seem exactly what it is—at once huge, heroic, pathetic, wasteful, harrowing, cruel, degrading, and horrifying."



Griffith's assistants during the filming included future outstanding directors Raoul Walsh, Erich von Stroheim and Donald Crisp (the latter two also outstanding silent and sound character actors). John Ford worked as an extra, and was knocked unconscious by a tree branch during the Klan ride. Ford's more talented brother, Francis, made the original Alamo movie, but "the drink" reduced Francis to small parts in John Ford and John Wayne movies; the latter man treating him with warmth and respect. In Birth, Walsh also assumed the role of John Wilkes Booth. Here, Walsh jumps to the stage of a partial Ford's Theater set open to the sky.

ing. Griffith's battle scenes have been imitated in films ever since, but they have probably never been equalled in their complexity."¹³

- American family values. The complex family and inter-family relationships that are so intricately explored in *The Birth of a Nation* marked an industry pioneering effort to present the glories and the tragedies of family life. The tragedy which looms over the two families might well present not only those suffering from the War Between the States and Reconstruction, as film historian Daniel Leab has suggested, but all Americans who might ask, as did the Cameron family in a time of turmoil, "What is to happen to us now?"¹⁴

- Political cynicism. *The Birth of a Nation* set a tone for many future movies that have addressed corruption and cynicism in American politics. Abraham Lincoln is portrayed as a dupe of evil Reconstructionists. Austin Stoneman is shown as a hypocrite, a bogus liberal egalitarian and a power-hungry demagogue. *The Birth of a Nation* brought to the screen an expression of sturdy perceptions, held by many Americans over the generations, regarding particular elected leaders.

It is impossible herein to discuss the entire film and the twists and turns of its memorable plot. However, the volcanic political reaction to *The Birth of a Nation*, within the liberal and black communities, continues to erupt to this day. When it was released, there was a nationwide campaign to prevent the distribution and showing of Griffith's monumental effort.

Film historian William Everson contends that the controversy was "often artificially created and sustained."¹⁵ Everson has criticized the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, saying that its protests—then and later—were often based on hearsay and that, more often than not, the protestors had never even seen the film.¹⁶

In any case, the publicity arising from conflict over the film stirred intense public discussion of racial attitudes in general. Many critics charged that the film stirred racial hatred. Historian George Tindall contends that the movie itself played an important role in the revival of the Ku Klux Klan during the years that followed.¹⁷

That was undoubtedly true, although at the time of the Klan's second great cantation following World War I the

states of the North, as well as those of the Old Confederacy, the border states and Washington, D.C., were overwhelmingly segregated. Washington newspaper ads for houses and apartments specified race right through the Eisenhower administration of the 1950s. There was little concern in the South regarding a "Negro problem." When the Klan was resuscitated, ultimate justice (and occasionally outrageous injustice) was often dispensed by way of rope and tree. Lynching was not a matter of federal concern or, more often than not, of concern to local authorities.

Almost certainly the new and largely venal recruitment effect stirred by *The Birth of a Nation* was most stimulated by Griffith's climactic rallying of the Klan, its proud charge of knights to the rescue and in pursuit of evil (while movie palace orchestras accompanied it with Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyrie*. And (again, one must envision a full pit orchestra accompanying the screen action), the rousing *Dixie*, played as the Klansmen, after a heavy skirmish, rout the black federal infantry. The effect of these scenes constitute one of the screen's greatest (although unintended) recruiting stimulants.

During Reconstruction, the original Klan under Nathan Bedford Forrest was more than a reaction against a transient but very real tyranny. It was a civilization-saving necessity.

Ironically, however, the black response to *The Birth of a Nation* also played a major role in organizing the black community. The mobilization against the film was a national crusade. Blacks had long been organized in local groups, but the mobilization against the film connected them into a nationwide network of organizations and individuals with a common goal.¹⁸ In effect, *The Birth of a Nation* was a factor in preparing the groundwork for what would evolve into the post-World War II "civil rights" movement.

Blacks also had another unusual indi-



Henry Walthall as Ben Cameron, "the Little Colonel", and the girl who would share his love, Lillian Gish as Elsie Stoneman. When the bard drinking Walthall died in 1936, Griffith said that he never thought of remaking *Birth* with sound, as he did not believe Walthall's performance could be approached by another actor. Following the epic's release, Griffith was stunned by the negative reactions. He had felt that most people of both races realized that southern blacks had been grievously misled by outside agitators.

rect benefit from the film. Black film casts and companies were formed in an attempt to produce black cinematic response to *The Birth of a Nation*.¹⁹

In fact, according to film historian Thomas Cripps, the overall response among blacks to *The Birth of a Nation* was "the dawn of a new day"²⁰ for black Americans, insofar as their involvement in American cultural and political life was concerned.

And while blacks were focusing on their own civil rights, D. W. Griffith and his allies were charging that efforts by blacks and their allies to censor him were a direct violation of the First Amendment. This paradox is of special interest, for it reflects a long and basic conflict in

Even then!
Jews

ugh...

American history: the right to freedom of expression and the question of what does or does not travel beyond bad taste to the realm of outright obscenity, in the consensus view of those who embrace accepted standards of Western Christian civilization.

In Boston, the main 19th century well-spring of obsessive and often unbalanced abolitionism, the effort to prevent showing *The Birth of a Nation* forced the state legislature to pass a bill which would have the authority to ban the film. In the end, however, the city board voted to allow it to be shown.

However, the black response to *The Birth of a Nation*—in another way—actually had the impact of backfiring. In response to the censorship efforts, Hollywood film-makers, for some time afterward, studiously avoided using blacks as characters in films, fearing repetition of the charges of "negativism" and "racism" that were levelled against Griffith. These efforts blocked the recognition of black talent in future motion pictures for many years to come.²¹

The Birth of a Nation remains significant in many ways. As a work of art, the film is recognized as a landmark in American (and world) cinematic history. It brought new direction to film and helped make the motion picture a powerful force in American social, political and economic life. *The Birth of a Nation* might well be called the mirror of a nation.

In her photo filled remembrance of the careers of the Gish sisters, *Dorothy and Lillian Gish*, Lillian stated that *The Birth of a Nation* cost \$61,000 to film; a remarkably low figure even in 1914-1915. Miss Gish wrote: "It took nine weeks to complete. Each scene was photographed only once as there was not enough money for two takes. The only exception was Mae Marsh's death scene (jumping from a cliff while fleeing a former slave) because she had forgotten to wear the Confederate flag tied around her waist. . . . Even the leading actors played other parts, some wearing burnt cork since there were no black actors (although there were some black extras) in Hollywood then. Much of the time we had no money to pay the company as the extras had to be paid daily."

Today and for many years, only licensed (and very highly paid) explosives and pyrotechnic experts can work on the "big bang" scenes so common in "comic book" and other contemporary movies, shot at a cost of many millions of

dollars. For Griffith's battle scenes, he had a former heavyweight and Jim Jeffries sparring partner toss high smoke-low charge grenades among the extras in blue and gray. At one point a grenade went off in this fellow's hand. But he was so enthusiastic about a project that had taken hold of all involved, that Griffith had to force him to stop and receive first aid.

But the biggest explosion was yet to come. When the movie premiered in 1915 a handful of talented and dedicated people, working on a shoestring budget, would shake a nation.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

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FOOTNOTES

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16. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

17. Leab, pp. 38-39.

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19. Leab, pp. 60-70

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21. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

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