**The Birth of a Nation and the Birth of Cancel Culture**

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There are three broad methods that people employ to get others to comply with their desires: power, purchase, and persuasion.[[1]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_edn1)

By “power” I mean the use of force, the threat of force, or theft. Power is employed not just by people, but by all animals. By “purchase” I mean the trading of valued goods for other valued goods. As Adam Smith sagely observed — in an observation well-supported by recent field biology — purchase is limited to humans. By “persuasion” I mean convincing others to do or believe something. This, again, is a method unique to human beings.

We can define “rhetoric” neutrally as speech[[2]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_edn2) aimed at persuasion. Rhetoric differs from (for instance) didactic speech, which is speech aimed at educating people, or performative speech (such as a comedy act), which is speech aimed at entertaining people. Rhetoric includes two main varieties, marketing (rhetoric aimed at persuading people to buy products), and propaganda (rhetoric aimed at persuading people to support a cause, ideology, or public figure).

Often, if a group puts out propaganda, individuals or groups who oppose it will reply with their own propaganda. So we have the notion of a “propaganda war.” In a literal war, two sides engage in an intense armed struggle continuously over an extended period of time. In a propaganda war, two sides engage in an intense rhetorical struggle continuously over an extended period of time. So in World War II, the major combatants continuously produced propaganda aimed at promoting their ideologies, historical narratives, and actions.

Just as in a military war, where there are both offensive and defensive campaigns, so in a propaganda war there are both offensive and defensive campaigns. Offensive — better called positive — propaganda is rhetoric aimed at getting people to feel sympathetic to one’s side — its ideology, goals, and actions. Defensive — better called negative — propaganda is rhetoric aimed at getting people to oppose the other side. This includes what I term “contrary propaganda,” which is rhetoric intended to arouse a general antipathy toward one’s opponents. It also includes what I term “counter-propaganda,” which is intended to refute specific narratives pushed by the other side.

As in a military war any manner of weapons may be used, so in a propaganda war any manner of media may be used.

Let’s consider an example of a propaganda and counter-propaganda, as presented in a recent documentary, *Birth of a Movement: The Battle against America’s first Blockbuster, ‘The Birth of a* Nation.’**[[3](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_edn3)**[**]**](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX#_edn3)(This film is based on the eponymous book by journalist Dick Lehr.[[4]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_edn4)) The movie tells the story of one remarkable man’s attempt to counter the propaganda contained in what is considered to be the first major film in American history, *The Birth of a Nation*.**[[5]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_edn5)** It remains one of the most unusual and controversial American films, at once a major commercial success, an artistic milestone, and a powerfully effective piece of dreadful propaganda. It put forward a deeply racist message — one that had major political effects.

*The Birth of a Nation* was initially called *The Clansman*, and was based on the 1905 novel and play of the same name, written by Thomas Dixon, Jr. It was directed by D.W. Griffith, produced by Griffith and Harry Aitken. The screenplay was written by D.W. Griffith and Frank Woods. The film runs three hours, with an intermission in the middle. It was the first “blockbuster” film, achieving great success. Griffith spared no expense producing it, and films and film historians point to it as the film that first used or at least popularized many cinematic devices. It was the first to take 12 reels, and the longest made to that point. It used what at the time were novel techniques, such as fadeouts, masses of extras, elaborate staged scenes, and closeups. It was the first movie with an intermission and a fully orchestrated music score. Besides being a popular hit, *Birth of a Nation*had the further distinction of being the first American film to be shown in the White House — where it was viewed by President Woodrow Wilson, 38 Senators, 50 Congressmen, and all the Supreme Court Justices.

But *Birth of a Nation* was deeply controversial from the start. The film propagated what is often called “the Lost Cause” narrative, or what I term the Southern Historical Narrative (SHN). According to the SHN, the South was brutalized during the Civil War, and was subjected to a humiliating occupation (the Reconstruction Era), in which former slaves lorded it over the vanquished whites. A brief précis of the film will show how craftily it advanced the SHN.

*The Birth of a Nation* has two parts. The first covers the period of Civil War to the assassination of Lincoln; the second the period of Reconstruction. The film focuses on two families, one Northern and one Southern. The story is told through their interactions.

In the first part we meet the families. The Northern family consists of the abolitionist Congressman Austin Stoneman and his children, his daughter Elsie and his two sons — Phil, the oldest, and Tod, the youngest. Austin Stoneman is clearly patterned after the powerful Congressman Thaddeus Stevens. The Southern family consists of Dr. Cameron, his wife, and five children — two daughters (Margaret, the older, and Flora) and three sons (Ben, Wade, and Duke).

The story begins with the Stoneman boys visiting the Cameron estate in the township of Piedmont, South Carolina. We see the young men (accompanied by the Cameron girls) touring the estate’s cotton fields, and watch the slaves singing and dancing happily during their “two hour dinner break.” By contrast, we see a scene in which a leader of the US Senate, Charles Sumner, humiliates one of Stoneman’s black servants, who we are led to believe is Stoneman’s mistress. The message is a key element of the SHN: Southerners treated blacks better than the Northerners did, because while the Southern blacks were predominantly slaves, the slave had a valued place in the Southern household.

Inevitably the older Stoneman boy, Phil, falls in love with Margaret Cameron. And one of the Cameron boys, Ben, is enchanted by a picture of Elise Stoneman. (Ben is apparently patterned on Thomas Dixon’s uncle Leroy McAfee, a South Carolinian who served with distinction in the Confederate Army, rising to the rank of Colonel, and later became a high-ranking member of the Ku Klux Klan.)

As the Civil War gets under way, both sets of sons join their respective regime’s armies. Two of the Cameron boys and the younger Stoneman boy die in battle. While Ben Cameron distinguishes himself at the Siege of Petersburg, he is wounded, captured, and moved to a Union military hospital in Washington D.C. During this time, the Cameron estate is attacked by a black militia, but Confederate soldiers rout them and save the Cameron women from being ravaged by the black soldiers.

At the hospital, where she is a nurse, Ben finally gets to meet Elsie, the woman he has idolized. He is sentenced to be hanged, but she arranges for his mother to meet President Lincoln to plead her son’s case. Lincoln pardons Ben, showing that he intends to be merciful to the defeated Confederacy.

Stoneman opposes Lincoln’s forgiving policies, telling Lincoln that “their [the Confederacy’s] leaders must be hanged and their states treated as conquered provinces.” Lincoln replies, “I shall deal with them as if they had never been away.”

The assassination ends the benign postwar reconciliation. When Stoneman is told of the assassination, he gets a stern look on his face. His servant-mistress tells him, “You are now the greatest power in the land,” as she meaningfully holds his arm. When Dr. Cameron reads of Lincoln’s death, he sadly notes that “our best friend is gone. Now what is to become of us?” Stoneman and his Radical Republicans choose to impose punitive and antagonistic measures on the defeated South. This sets up the half of the film, the one about the era of Reconstruction.

After the intermission, an intertitle quotes from then-President Wilson’s book, *The History of the American People*, putting the blame for what was to follow on Northern “carpetbaggers” and the Radical Reconstructionists in Congress. Another intertitle quotes Wilson as saying, “The policy of the Congressional leaders wrought . . . a veritable overthrow of civilization in the South . . . in their determination to ‘put the white South under the heel of the black South.’” A third intertitle continues the Wilson quotation: “The white men were roused by a mere instinct of self-preservation . . . until at last there had sprung into existence a great Ku Klux Klan, a veritable empire of the South, to protect the Southern country.”

The film then shows “the uncrowned King,” Stoneman, at the Capitol — clearly now the center of power — surrounded by toadies. He sends his “protégé” Silas Lynch down to South Carolina to oversee the imposition of reconstruction. Lynch — apparently patterned after two black politicians[[6]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_edn6) — is evil to his core. He goes to Piedmont, South Carolina, and starts to stir up discontent among the blacks. He induces them to quit working, and the Freedman’s Bureau keeps giving them food. Lynch encounters Ben in the street, and tells him that it “belongs as much to us” as it does to him.

Advised by his physician to move to a milder climate, and wanting to see his policies carried out first hand, Stoneman himself moves to Piedmont as well. His remaining son Phil and daughter Elsie go with him. They visit the Camerons’ house. Elsie is warmly greeted by Ben and his younger sister. We watch as Ben and Elsie fall deeply in love, and we see Margaret battle her nascent love for Phil in the face of her bitter memory of her dead brother.

Lynch is elected as Lieutenant Governor in a rigged election, with blacks stuffing ballot boxes and barring whites from voting. As blacks achieve power, we hear Ben relate a series of outrages, including black troops killing an elderly white man. We then cut to a session of the state legislature. The film shows newly elected blacks in deeply racist caricature: drinking, eating fried chicken, and so forth. As whites look on from the gallery, the black-controlled legislature passes a bill legalizing marriage between blacks and whites. As the blacks celebrate, an intertitle informs us, “Later, the grim reaping begins.” We see a “renegade” black, Gus, look on lasciviously as Elsie and Flora hug and talk affectionately.

Ben is now in despair at the “ruin of his people.” He sees some white children cover themselves with a sheet and pretend to be ghosts to scare some black children. Inspired, he creates the Ku Klux Klan, which the film calls “the organization that saved the South from the anarchy of black rule.” The film claims that over 400,000 Klan costumes were “made by the women of the South, and not one trust [was] betrayed.” Flora makes one for Ben.

Robed Klansmen “score first blood” against Lynch’s forces, but Lynch and some black soldiers kill several of the Klansmen. This leads Elsie — who is loyal to her father — to break up with Ben. Later, we see Flora innocently walking into the woodlands to get water, and Gus — now a freedman and an Army captain — tailing her. He catches up with her and says that he wants to marry her. She runs away in fear, Ben runs after her, Gus traps her on a cliff, and she warns him not to come closer or she will jump. Undeterred, he tries to get her, and she — obviously afraid of “racial defilement” — leaps to her death. She dies in Ben’s arms, and he carries her body home. A friend of Ben’s chases Gus, who shoots down the unarmed white man. Gus is captured and put on trial by the Klan. They (not surprisingly) find him guilty, lynch him, and dump his body at Sylas Lynch’s house.

Lynch responds by ordering the black militia into the streets to suppress the Klan. Cut to the Klansmen’s gathering, while Lynch sends out black spies to find anyone with a Klan costume, the possession of which has been made a capital offense. Lynch is told of a Klan costume in the Cameron house. Old Dr. Cameron is arrested, abused by the black troops, and paraded in chains before the black townspeople. Margaret runs to the Stoneman house, and Phil (along with the Camerons’ black servants) helps rescue Dr. Cameron. Margaret, Phil, and the Doctor, and the servants take him away. As they flee, their wagon gives out, and they are hidden by two former Union soldiers. An intertitle notes that “the former enemies of North and South are united again in common defense of their Aryan birthright.”

Stoneman leaves town to distance himself from Lynch’s abusive rule. Elsie goes to visit Lynch to plead for Dr. Cameron to be pardoned, only to discover that she is the target of Lynch’s lust, when he tries to make her marry him. After she faints at the prospect, Stoneman shows up. When Lynch tells him that he plans to marry a white woman, he initially approves, but the hypocrite turns angry when he learns that it’s Elsie whom Lynch desires. Elsie breaks a window and cries out for help; Klan sympathizers hear her and reach Ben, who is coming with the Klan to free the town, and tell him all about it. Ben leads the Klan to liberate Elsie and capture Lynch. The Klansmen celebrate, but when Ben learns that Lynch’s militia has surrounded the cabin where Cameron and his family are hiding, Ben leads the Klan to liberate them too, just in the nick of time.

On the next day, which, as it happens, is election day, black voters are intimidated into not voting by the presence of mounted and armed Klansmen. The conclusion of the film shows the double wedding of Phil and Margaret, Ben and Elsie. The final scene shows an image of a warrior figure intimidating the people, followed by an image of Jesus Christ benignly shining above them, with an intertitle, “Dare we dream of a golden day when the bestial War shall rule no more. But instead — the gentle Prince in the Hall of Brotherly Love in the City of Peace.”

What a story.

In pushing the Southern Historical Narrative, *Birth of a Nation* employed some very powerful anti-black propaganda. The film was popular both North and South. One suspects that the “Great Migration” of blacks from the South to the North may have played a role in the susceptibility of white Northerners to racial propaganda. The migration started in the 1890s and grew in intensity soon after 1910, increasing competition for Northern industrial jobs. The film’s graphically racist portrayal of blacks as ignorant, stupid, lazy, corrupt, and sexually predatory toward white women pandered to the worst racist stereotypes endemic in American society.

In its characterization of the first KKK — which lasted from 1865 to 1871 — as a heroic self-defense force helping whites regain political power and stop the threat to “racial purity,” *Birth of a Nation* was effective in inciting the rise of a second KKK, which started precisely in 1915, though whether the film was directly responsible for the Klan redivivus is a matter of dispute. What is indisputable is that the newly reborn KKK used *Birth of a Nation* as a recruiting and fundraising tool, with members of the KKK showing up and parading in towns where it was being shown, and showing the film at many of their rallies.[[7]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_edn7)

The second KKK lasted from 1915 until it faded away at the outset of WWII. At its peak in the early- to mid-1920s it had a membership in the millions. [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ku_Klux_Klan) puts the figure at 4–5 million men, that is, roughly 15% of the American white male population. It was for a period of time a very powerful political force.

But *Birth of a Nation* had an unintended political effect: it served to galvanize black resistance to the movie and the KKK specifically, and to the widespread discrimination against blacks generally. This took two forms: the strengthening of existing black civil rights organizations — especially the NAACP, founded in 1909, only six years before *Birth of a Nation* was released — and the emergence of successful black filmmakers eager to address racial injustice. It is the first form of this counterreaction that the documentary under review takes up: the emergence of a civil rights leader, William Monroe Trotter.[[8]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_edn8)

Let’s turn to the documentary.

*Birth of a Movement* opens by showing us Los Angeles in 1915, when *Birth of a Nation* is first being exhibited. As we watch scenes of the film, historian Vincent Brown points out that film is especially culturally important to Americans — we learn much of our history from film. *The Birth of a Nation* tells a narrative of America being born “out of white supremacy.” Journalist William Cobb notes that the film is historically inaccurate, propagandistic — “the most pure, honest distillation of white racial thought at the time.”

With that introduction, we cut to Dick Lehr, professor of journalism at Boston University. Lehr talks about getting interested in the fight over *Birth of a Nation* in Boston, a fight led by a radical civil rights activist, William Monroe Trotter. The documentary recounts Trotter’s efforts to fight the film. Historian Dolata Cathcart observes that Boston was historically a place where blacks struggled openly for their civil rights — likely because many of the Bostonian African Americans were skilled workers, businesspeople, and professionals.

Both of William Trotter’s parents were born of slave mothers and white slave masters. Trotter’s father James was born in 1842, moved as a child to Ohio with his mother, and at the age of 21 enlisted in an all-black unit of the Union Army and was sent to Boston for training. During the war, he distinguished himself on the battlefield and became an officer. Afterward, he settled in Boston, growing wealthy in the real estate business. He also wrote a book on music in black culture.

James’ son, William Monroe, born in 1872, was thus raised in a successful black family with an accomplished father proud of his heritage. William grew up in an all-white neighborhood, excelled at an all-white school. He was class president and valedictorian. He attended Harvard, where he met the black intellectual W.E.B. DuBois. They were outstanding students of like minds; they even fell for the same girl, Deenie (Geraldine) Pindell. (Trotter won her hand.) He graduated summa cum laude from Harvard in four years and was the first black Phi Beta Kappa scholar.

The documentary then reviews the background of D.W. Griffith. Griffith was born and raised in Kentucky. His father (like Trotter’s) fought in the Civil War, but on the side of the Confederacy. Film studies scholar Ira Gallen is interviewed, and we learn that Griffith had grown up poor, on a hardscrabble Kentucky farm. He was born a decade after the war ended; his only contact with the war was listening to his father trading war stories with other Confederate veterans. Gallen notes that Griffith only knew of the Klan and plantation life from folklore. His father died when D.W. was young, and at age 14 Griffith left home to find work as an actor, winding up in the nascent film industry.

We return to the Trotter bio. In 1895, Trotter and his wife moved into a predominantly white neighborhood in Boston, expecting to live a comfortable life. But events changed his plans. In this year, the main leader of the civil rights movement, Frederick Douglass, passed away, leaving Booker T. Washington as the main voice of the movement. The next year, the Supreme Court (in *Plessy*v.*Ferguson*) legalized government-based segregation. Washington argued in response that blacks should accept segregation, put aside the desire for political power, and focus on economic improvement and entrepreneurship — in short, on economic power. But as segregation took hold, Trotter assumed the role of spokesman for a more activist black movement — one that rejected Washington’s stand on segregation. In 1901, he founded a newspaper — *The Guardian* — aimed at pushing this new agenda.

Trotter’s growing antagonism toward Booker T. Washington was — as historian Henry Louis Gates notes in the film — in great part a struggle of competing ideologies and visions of the future, but it was also a struggle between Washington, Du Bois, and Trotter over who would be the main leader of the civil rights movement.

A pivotal moment came in 1903, when Washington came to Boston to deliver a speech. Trotter prepared a list of challenging and embarrassing questions, and started shouting them at Washington in person. A riot ensued, and Trotter wound up being sentenced to 30 days in jail. In this same year, Du Bois published a book laying out his own critique of Washington, *The Souls of Black Folk.* In 1905, Trotter, Du Bois, and 27 other Black intellectuals met in Niagara Falls to form a new, activist approach to the struggle. Trotter and Du Bois agreed on goals but not on tactics. Trotter favored a much more confrontational approach.

We then move to 1908. In New York City, Griffith is working at the early film studio Biograph. Griffith rapidly emerges as a major innovator in film, telling detailed stories in works such as *A Corner on Wheat* (1909), *Unseen Enemy*(1911), and *Musketeers of Pig Alley*(1912). In these films, Griffith introduces or systematically exploits many new cinematic techniques. He introduces the first “full length” or “feature” film, with lots of extras, and lots of action — his *Judith of Bethulia*(1913). He discovers many of the early stars, such as Lillian Gish and Mae Marsh. He aims at making cinema a major artform, and he does precisely that. In 1910, Griffith shoots the first film made in Hollywood, the short *In Old California.* After making *Judith of Bethulia*, Griffith leaves Biograph for the Mutual Film Corporation in Los Angeles, taking his troupe of actors with him.

Returning to the Trotter bio, we learn that in 1912, his newspaper backed presidential candidate Woodrow Wilson, who won a plurality of votes in a three-man race. Wilson, a Southerner, had promised to see that African Americans received fair and equal treatment. But he soon reneged on that promise, appointing five Southerners to his cabinet and instituting segregation of workers in federal agencies — something that had never been done before. Trotter was outraged. In 1913 he (along with journalist and civil rights activist Ida B. Wells) met with Wilson, bringing with him a chart showing all of the federal agencies that Wilson had segregated. Trotter went away from the meeting thinking that Wilson would reverse the process of segregation.

But Wilson extended rather than ended it. In 1914, he met with Wilson again and in frank and forceful terms urged that segregation stop. The result (as Gates indicates) was that Wilson told him to get lost.

The documentary now returns to Griffith. In August 1914, he was doing very well, and was looking for a new and greater project. He knew of Dixon’s book *The Clansman*, which had been a huge bestseller and had been turned into a play — one that repeatedly led to race riots when it was staged. Griffith started production of a film based on the book, with the early title of the same name. Lillian Gish would play Elsie.

The film was completed in early 1915 and debuted in Los Angeles in February with a 120-piece Philharmonic orchestra playing the score. The film opened with the intertitle “The bringing of the African to America planted the first seed of disunion,” which (as historian Brown notes) perversely makes blacks, rather than the institution of slavery, the cause of the Civil War. This is “blame the victim” on steroids. That *Birth of a Nation* appeared in the 50th anniversary of the end of the Civil War was darkly ironic.

The film was a big hit, but as the documentary shows, black leaders were outraged. Trotter, Washington, and Du Bois immediately united in opposition to the film.

In response, Griffith travelled to Washington to generate support for and protection of the showing of the (now renamed) *Birth of a Nation.*Griffith and Dixon arranged to have the film shown at the White House — which Dixon was able to do, since he and Wilson had been friends since they were undergrads at Johns Hopkins. Indeed, Dixon had worked as part of an influential group to help elect Wilson. The documentary notes that the film cleverly used quotations from Wilson’s own history of the US in many intertitles: Griffith, Dixon, and Wilson were all “children of the Reconstruction.” And Wilson enjoyed the film.

With this official stamp of approval, Griffith screened his movie at the Liberty Theater in New York in March 1915. The NAACP (founded only six years earlier) tried to get it banned, but failed. It was seen by thousands. The theater that first screened it advertised that no blacks would be admitted. The theater wanted to avoid any fights that could escalate to riots, which could then be used as an excuse to ban the film. *Birth of a Nation* became the biggest box office hit of the silent era, despite the NAACP’s efforts to block it.

The film then moved to Boston. Trotter, hitherto considered too radical by many in the civil rights movement, was now considered the best hope to thwart its release. He used the power of his paper to fight the film, which he rightly said “heaps ignominy upon the Negro race.” Griffith and his backers knew there was a well-organized civil rights movement in Boston that would seek to ban the film, but figured that if they could get it shown there, it could be shown anywhere else in the country.

The campaign by the NAACP, Trotter, and others to ban — not merely condemn, protest, or boycott, but to ban completely — the distribution of *Birth of a Nation* was the birth of cancel culture.

In Boston, the authority to approve the film rested in the hands of the mayor, James Curley. He was the most powerful mayor in Boston’s history. The documentary fails to note that he served four terms as mayor, one term as governor, and two terms as a congressman. He was deeply populist, widely supported by the Irish working class in part because of his free-spending approach to government, even though he was deeply corrupt.[[9]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_edn9) He controlled Boston’s political scene from 1914 to 1950.

Trotter had a few years earlier opposed the showing of Dixon’s play *The Clansman*, and succeeded in getting it banned. So he had every expectation of getting the Curley administration to ban the movie as well. As Lehr notes, Trotter — himself the publisher of a newspaper — was not indifferent to the right of free speech, but felt that the film was so deeply offensive that it shouldn’t be allowed. Griffith and Trotter met in a hearing presided over by Curley. Trotter argued to Curley — whose candidacy Trotter and his paper had supported in his first run for mayor — that he should ban the film, and threatened to organize black voters against Curley if he didn’t.

But Griffith had the backing of the White House. During the hearing, Curley asked Griffith if he would remove one especially controversial scene, the “Gus chase scene.” Griffith agreed, and that was enough to get Curley to allow the film to be shown. (Griffith didn’t fully alter that part of the film, but merely tinkered with it.)

Besides his desire to see his masterwork screened, and sell tickets doing so, Griffith had two other reasons for wanting it screened in Boston. First, he was convinced that it was historically accurate. That is, he believed his own propaganda. Second, he believed — rightly, in my view — that suppressing or banning the film violated his right to free speech and artistic expression. He even wrote a booklet during this period, *The Rise and Fall of Free Speech in America*, arguing forcefully that cinema should be covered by the First Amendment.[[10]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_edn10)

After Curley decided to let the film be screened, Trotter organized direct protests. As he put it, “The policy of compromise has failed. The policy of agitation and resistance deserves a try.” He and his followers showed up at the theater where *Birth of a Nation* was being screened, and demanded to be sold a ticket. He was assaulted and then arrested by the police, who had heard that there would be a demonstration. But some of Trotter’s supporters got in and disrupted the showing by hissing, booing, and throwing eggs at the screen. Under Trotter’s guidance, cancel culture turned militant.

Trotter then organized 3,000 black protestors to march on the statehouse. As Lehr notes, this was a 1960s scale protest — in 1915! It was reported in papers all over the country. Trotter was able to convince the Massachusetts Governor David Walsh to take authority for banning the film out of the hands of the mayor and vest it in a three-person committee, headed by the mayor. Trotter organized mass demonstrations for three weeks, while the committee considered the issue. But in the end, Curley curtly announced that the film would *not* be banned. In the end, Griffith won.

Gates comments that Trotter showed how people can be organized to protest *en masse.*But the protests only seemed to fan the flames of public interest in the film. Lehr comments that Trotter’s worst fears came true: when the film was shown in Atlanta in December 1915, it inspired William Simmons (according to his own words) to reconstitute the Klan. It rose much bigger than it was before. The documentary adds that because *Birth of a Nation* was such a huge financial success, it made the use of racist tropes a kind of precedent in Hollywood. Such tropes appeared in subsequent films, such as *Gone with the Wind*(1939) — an even larger blockbuster.

The documentary hits on an important point: while Trotter and the NAACP protested the film, they did not produce films that pushed a counter-narrative. This was left for black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux to do, with films such as *Within Our Gates*(1920), where Micheaux shows an innocent black family being lynched, and their daughter being sexually assaulted by a white man. As the documentary observes, the NAACP continued to use the film as a symbol to organize protests and try to get laws enacted banning racist films. Ironically, Trotter disliked the NAACP, because it had some white officers; he thought that any black civil rights organization should be run by blacks alone. He hated segregation, but apparently favored it in civil rights organizations.

In November of 1915, with *Birth of a Nation* riding high, Booker T. Washington died. The leadership of the civil rights movement passed to Du Bois and the NAACP, as opposed to Trotter. Why? Gates suggests that Trotter was “edgy.”

The documentary ends with Trotter’s own sad end. His wife died in 1918 from the Spanish flu, at the age of 46. She had been crucial in keeping the paper going and supporting Trotter’s career. He died at age 62 from a fall from his roof. Du Bois wrote a glowing obituary of his friend and competitor.

So what shall we say of *Birth of a Movement*? It is generally well done, but I would suggest that there are problems.

First, there is a significant historical point that is not even mentioned. In 1913, the state of Ohio passed a law setting up a board of censors to vet films for undesirable content. It called for the imprisonment for anyone screening a film that had not been approved by the board. Mutual Film Corporation sued the state of Ohio for infringement of its right to free speech, but the US Supreme Court ruled 9–0 (in *Mutual Film Corporation*v.*Industrial Commission of Ohio,*1915) that film production was a form of business, not art, so it was *not* protected by the First Amendment. Thus, during this period, there was nothing to stop government at any level (local, state or federal) from demanding the modification or even the total banning of any film it deemed unacceptable. The ruling held sway over the film industry until it was overturned in 1952, when the Supreme Court (in *Joseph Burstyn, Inc.*v.*Wilson*) ruled that film was indeed an artform and thus was perforce protected by the first amendment.

Second, another major historical point is surprisingly unmentioned: both Wilson and Curley were powerful figures in the Democratic Party. It is highly likely that Wilson’s approval of *Birth of a Nation* inclined Curley not to ban it. More broadly, the embarrassing fact for progressive Democrats is that there was then (and is to this day) a great deal of antipathy towards blacks among the white working class. The white (predominantly Irish) working class in Boston was Curley’s real source of support, Trotter and his pretensions notwithstanding.

But then, this documentary was produced by PBS, a very progressive-liberal medium. After all, PBS is a federally owned and funded medium, set up in 1967 by Democratic President Lyndon Johnson when the Democrats controlled Congress.

Third, the nature of Trotter’s personality is not clearly addressed. We can infer from his time a Harvard that he was very competitive, and perhaps arrogant. His resentment of the NAACP for allowing whites on its board seems to indicate a (perhaps understandable) antipathy toward them. Could it be that this is one reason, though perhaps not the most important, why he got nowhere in his meetings with Wilson and Curley, both of whom he and his paper had earlier supported?

Fourth, at least some of the speakers in the documentary apparently believe that Trotter was right in thinking that *Birth of a Nation* needed to be banned, not just protested against. One of them says explicitly that the film threatened blacks’ right to life, with the implication that this trumped the right to free expression. And Lehr says that the film caused the rise of the new KKK, so (again by implication) Trotter was justified in trying to ban it.

This leads to a fifth point, again about an argument undeveloped by the documentary: Trotter’s attempt to ban *Birth of a Nation* was morally questionable, but it was tactically questionable as well. It allowed Griffith to present himself as a victim of — intolerance! He wrote his booklet in defense of free speech, arguing that film is a form of instruction especially suited for the working man who can’t afford to go to college — a dig at people like Trotter and Du Bois. And the very next year, he released *Intolerance*, in which he explored man’s injustice to his fellow man in four interwoven stories: the fall of Babylon; Jesus’ crucifixion; the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre of the Protestants; and a contemporary story of a wrongfully convicted man. While *Intolerance*was lavishly produced and technically brilliant, it was a commercial failure and proved financially ruinous to Griffith — but here Trotter’s protests were in no way responsible. If Griffith was defeated, he defeated himself.

In short, for showing the power of organized mass protest in a democracy, Trotter deserves credit. But for trying to suppress other people’s voices — no matter how offensive and despicable they might be — he deserves nothing but blame.

To be fair, not all the scholars involved in the documentary agree that Trotter’s focus on banning the movie was a legitimate approach. Gates says that of course film is an artform, protected by the First Amendment. Director Spike Lee recounts that when he was in film school, he resented the fact that the film was presented as a triumph of art without any “context” (presumably, a discussion of its racist, propagandistic elements). But he makes it clear that he has no problem with its being shown.

Sixth, the documentary presents a questionable assumption about *Birth of a Nation*’s influence, the idea that it showed that racial tropes in film are highly profitable, and thus led the way for the success of *Gone with the Wind.*and other pictures. To begin with, I strongly disagree with this claim. What made *Birth of a Nation* a huge hit was not that it was racist in its message, but that it was profoundly game-changing in its production. The quality of the filming, the score, the storytelling, the actors, and so on made it a captivating film, not its clearly racist content. It’s for that very reason that the racist content was dangerous. This is a classic case of Goebbels’ dictum that the most effective propaganda films are ones that are great entertainment.

Moreover, the notion that studios were attracted to *Gone with the Wind*because of its racist content is deeply dubious. Yes, the novel’s author, Margaret Mitchell, was a Southerner who obviously believed in the Southern Historical Narrative, and her novel is set in Georgia during the Civil War and Reconstruction. In fact, as historian Tom Rice notes, “Mitchell’s novel largely endorsed the history of Reconstruction presented in *Birth* [*of a Nation*].” She wrote Dixon in 1936 that she was “practically raised” on his books and loved them.[[11]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_edn11) Her book, in addition to other racist elements (such as portraying slaves as content and docile), frankly sanctifies the KKK. She defended her portrayal by saying that what she wrote was “common knowledge to every Southerner.”

To start with, any Hollywood producer — especially one with the keen eyes of David O. Selznick — could see that a movie based on the book would be a certain moneymaker. When the novel was published in 1936 it was an immediate bestseller, it remained on the bestseller list through the next year, and it has sold well ever since.[[12]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_edn12) In 1937, it won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the National Book Award from the American Booksellers Association.

More importantly, as Rice notes, Selznick *stripped* the film of any mention of the KKK.[[13]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_edn13) After all, Selznick was Jewish, and the KKK hated Jews no less than it hated blacks. But Selznick was also a highly focused market-oriented producer, and clearly thought that portraying the KKK positively in the film would *diminish* the popularity of the movie, rather than enhance it. After all, at the time he was producing the flick, there were no less than three films in theaters around the nation that implicitly attacked the KKK.[[14]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_edn14) Simply put, after almost a quarter-century of witnessing the KKK’s hateful actions, a large part of the American public had nothing but contempt for the group.

Finally, stripping the pro-KKK narrative from the movie did not hurt it in the least in the public’s eyes. It was a spectacularly well produced film. It won ten Oscars, including Best Picture, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Director, Best Actress, and (ironically) Best Supporting Actress — Hattie McDaniel, the first black actor to win an Academy Award. In inflation-adjusted dollars, it remains the highest grossing film in history. Does it have racist elements remaining? Obviously it does, such as its portrayal of slaves as content and docile. But it was successful for its entertainment, as opposed to its implicit racism. Goebbels’ dictum again.

Despite these omissions, however, the documentary is a powerful reminder of how false and divisive propaganda can be, and how it can motivate people to oppose it.

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**NOTES**

[[1]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_ednref1) I explore these concepts at greater length in my recent books, *Cinematic Thoughts: Essays on Film and the Philosophy of Film* and *Purchase, Power and Persuasion: Essays on Political Philosophy,*both from Peter Lang Publishers, Bern, Switzerland, 2021.

[[2]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_ednref2) By “speech” here I mean not just natural language, but also the use of posters, pictures, music, and other symbolic messaging systems.

[[3]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_ednref3) *Birth of a Movement*, directed by Bestor Cran and Susan Greg; ITVS, Northern Light Production, String and Can See production companies, 60 minutes (2017). Available through PBS.

[[4]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_ednref4) *The Birth of a Nation: How a Legendary Film Maker and a Crusading Editor Reignited America’s Civil War*, by Dick Lehr (New York: Perseus Books, 2014).

[[5]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_ednref5) *The Birth of a Nation,*directed by D. W. Griffith; David W. Griffith Corp., 133 minutes (1915). For readers who have never seen the film, it is readily available on YouTube. Here is the link to the Kino Lorber restored version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ebtiJH3EOHo>.

[[6]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_ednref6) Richard Howell Gleaves and Alonso J. Ransier. Both men served as Lieutenant Governor of South Carolina during the Reconstruction Era (1865–1877).

[[7]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_ednref7) For a history of how the KKK used *Birth of a Nation* in particular and film in general to advance its agenda, see Tom Rice’s admirable book, *White Robes, Silvers Screens: Movies and the Making of the Ku Klux Klan*(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

[[8]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_ednref8) In a successor to this piece, I will review films countering *Birth of a Nation*.

[[9]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_ednref9) Curley was repeatedly indicted by federal authorities, was convicted in 1947 of mail fraud, and served five months in prison before being pardoned by President Truman.

[[10]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_ednref10) *The Rise and Fall of Free Speech in America,*David Wark Griffith (publisher unknown: 1916). The 60-page booklet is available for purchase through Amazon, and an audio version can be heard for free on [LibriVox](https://librivox.org/the-rise-and-fall-of-free-speech-in-america-by-dw-griffith/).

[[11]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_ednref11) Rice, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

[[12]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_ednref12) As [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gone_with_the_Wind_(novel)) notes, Harris polls conducted in 2008 and 2014 put the book second only to the Bible as the favorite book of American readers. More than 30 million copies have been sold. Its appeal seems universal: 25 editions of the book have been published in China, and a 2003 poll of UK readers put it as number 21 of their favorite books.

[[13]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_ednref13) Rice, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

[[14]](https://www.printfriendly.com/p/g/Yz5uzX" \l "_ednref14) *Fury*(1936), *Legion of Terror*(1936) and *Nation Aflame*(1937).

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