



The Birth of a Nation: How a Legendary Filmmaker and a Crusading Editor Reignited America's Civil War

Dick Lehr

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In a scene at the end of the Civil War, James Trotter, a sergeant in an all-black union regiment, marched into Charleston, South Carolina just as the Kentucky cavalry that included Colonel “Roaring Jake” Griffith fled for their lives. The two men were bit players in the vicious struggle for their country’s future. Fifty years later their sons, Monroe Trotter and D.W. Griffith engaged in a public confrontation that roiled the entire country, pitching black against white, Hollywood against Boston, free speech against censorship – and the focus of the attack was a film that depicted the events of the American Civil War: *The Birth of a Nation*.

The film – which included actors in black face, racist portraits of blacks and heroic portraits of the Ku Klux Klan, and the depiction of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln – was although a silent movie loudly controversial. It was seen eventually by 25 million Americans, and was the first feature film ever to be shown at the White House, for President Wilson. But it sparked riots and lengthy unrest in Boston and, to a lesser extent, in Philadelphia; Chicago, Pittsburgh, Kansas City and Denver, among other cities, banned the movie entirely.

The drama was over what America was in 1915, the year of the film’s release. Which of the nation’s cherished ideals – freedom of speech or civil rights for black Americans – would prevail? Through the story of two men, one a technically brilliant film maker, the other an activist journalist, America debated its identity in full public view, up and down the nation. *The Birth of A Nation* is a classic social history of a country in transition, and a richly characterful account of the principles set in opposition to each other.

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