After the Civil War, crowds of white men broke open jails, seized black prisoners, and hanged them in ways that closely resembled what Americans chose to call lynchings at the end of the nineteenth century. Brutal racial violence characterized the period from the 1860s through the 1890s. Yet contemporaries did not call these acts of violence “lynchings,” because white societal support for the killings was not yet solid or beyond dispute.2

In fact, while the underlying violence may not have changed all that much, post–Civil War “lynchings” did differ from those in the so-called lynching era. Historians call the period after the Civil War “Reconstruction,” a time when the national government tried to “reconstruct” race relations in the American South. The period at the end of the nineteenth century is often called the “Gilded Age.” Changes in language mark the difference between the Reconstruction era’s revolutionary violence and that found in the Gilded Age, when white conservatives held power more securely.

In a truly revolutionary environment, competitors for power make bids for popular support. With old power structures in disarray, the insurgents have a genuine opportunity to seize power. This happened in Reconstruction, when Republicans and Conservatives articulated, negotiated, and enforced competing claims for public support and popular sovereignty. Across the South, both Republicans and Conservatives presented themselves as the truly legitimate expression of popular will. They shared an ambition to represent the people, though they disagreed over what people they represented. The Republicans had fought the Civil War to make the United States function as a unified whole. According to the most determined Republicans, a
crime against a citizen’s civil rights in the most obscure Southern hamlet outraged the entire republic. Republicans defined community in new, more national, ways. Conservatives were more reluctant to surrender the old Anti-federalist understanding of America as a collection of mostly independent communities. They had an older conception of community, believing that violence condoned by the white people in an autonomous neighborhood, community, or state could be legitimate even when condemned by white “outsiders” from other states or black “outsiders” from within their own states.3

Since competitors for power try to fix labels on events, actions, and movements that paint themselves as legitimate and their enemies as less so, language becomes critically important in revolutionary situations. While modern historians have denounced Klansmen as terrorists and lynchers, the implications of the powerful language used to label the Klan have yet to be explored.4 Conservatives defended the perimeter around their constituents’ popular sovereignty by blasting their enemies in the newspapers and in political speeches as outsiders, “scalawags” and “carpetbaggers.” Their goal was to plant this language in ordinary conversation, in the public consciousness. How Klan violence should be described became a particularly hard-fought battle, one that in some ways continues even today. The words terror, lynching, and outrage have become important weapons in this subtle, even subconscious fight over appropriate language to describe the Klan. In Reconstruction, Republicans fought to persuade the public to conceptualize each Klan act as an outrage, repugnant to the entire public, an attack on the public good, defined nationally. If most Americans found such violence outrageous rather than legitimate, white conservatives had lost an important battle. Republicans battled conservatives for legitimacy in language.

Lynching implied a killing carried out by a coherent community, an expression of localized popular sovereignty of the sort Southern white conservatives advocated. Western lynching influenced their thinking. When Western writers talked of resorting to Judge Lynch, they meant a town meeting and communal trial followed by consensus and, often, an orderly execution. Lynchers were no mob, “but emphatically the people,” their defenders insisted.5 The Reconstruction Klan aspired to be seen as lynchers because they wanted to “emphatically [be] the people.” But they never achieved that status. The Klan’s failure to establish itself as a lynching organization does not mean that organization did not do exactly what later lynchers did, but it does call into question claims that white Southerners universally favored extralegal racial violence. In this environment, in some places, at some times, the insurgents did have a chance at success.