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CAPTAIN JASON W. JAMES, FRONTIER ANTI-DEMOCRAT

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JASON W. James—Confederate Cavalry Captain, Ku Klux leader, Texas Ranger, and Southwestern cattleman—was no systematic or original thinker; nor, obviously, had he time to be. Yet, for all his lack of intellectual discipline, James was a man of extraordinary perceptiveness. He was aware, perhaps more keenly than most of his equally unsophisticated contemporaries, of the changes taking place in American society during the last half of his life, and he spent much time pondering their meaning. In two small books of reminiscences, essays, and public speeches published at Roswell, New Mexico, toward the end of his long life, he recorded his opinions about a variety of current social and political phenomena.[1] However crude his writings may appear to be, they remain nonetheless of considerable interest to the historian of American ideas, the more so because as a Southwestern frontiersman, James represents a group of active men who rarely left written records revealing their social philosophy. Quite understandably, James enjoyed no direct contacts with the intellectuals of his day. His books may thus be read as the independent account of an essentially artless man's reaction to the rapid alterations that were occurring in American society during the half century that followed the Civil War. It is necessary to emphasize, however, that since no other

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1. Jason W. James, *Memorable Events in the Life of Captain Jason W. James* ([Roswell, N. Mex., 1911]); Jason W. James, *Memories and Viewpoints* (Roswell, N. Mex., 1928.

records of James's life are available, we cannot be certain that the distinctive pattern of thought and action that emerges from the memoirs was implicit in the events. What we can be sure of is that by the time James had reached old age, he assumed that the pattern had existed, and he arranged the record of his life to accord with it.

Jason James, writing and speaking in the first decades of the twentieth century, was no democrat. The experience of living on the Missouri, Texas, and New Mexico frontiers had not made of him an enthusiast for democratic political institutions. Thoroughly disenchanted with most of the easy cliches of liberal thought (if he ever heard them), James belongs to that company of Americans whose social and political views require them to bear the label "arch-conservative." And, after all, why should James have been other than pessimistic? There was little in his youth to connect him with the faith in romantic democracy and the genial assurance of progress that had appeared to be so characteristic of Americans in their early national period. Indeed, he was produced by a South whose best thinkers had rejected the tenets of Jeffersonian democracy, and he was schooled in the violence of civil war and reconstruction.[2]

From the end of his childhood until well after his thirtieth year, James was an almost constant participant in the titanic events of war and its aftermath. Born on a Missouri farm in 1843, he attended school fitfully until he was fifteen, when he quit for good. Then he hired out to a wagon train going west to supply Camp Floyd in the Salt Lake country. The next year he traveled with another train to Fort Bridger. In 1861, with the outbreak of war, he enlisted in the Missouri State Guard, and his boyhood was over.[3]

He served most of the war years with the Confederate Cavalry, first in Missouri, where his force was part of the time under the notorious W. C. Quantrill, and then in Arkansas and northern Louisiana. Much of the fighting he took part in was border action marked by the wholesale destruc-

2. Ralph Henry Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought; an Intellectual History since 1815* (New York, 1940), 12-25; Clement Eaton, *A History of the Old South* (New York, 1949), 389-390.

3. James, *Memorable Events*, 7-21.

tion of property and the spectacular violence peculiar to warfare that is essentially guerrilla in nature. Toward the end of the war, James was in Louisiana where the unit in which he was then captain fought small bands of Federal soldiers and groups of Negroes organized to protect those northerners who had taken over cotton plantations. When news reached the Louisiana sector that Generals Robert E. Lee and Joseph E. Johnston had surrendered, the local planters, as James remembered it, persuaded him to keep his command in order "to remain there and protect them." The Federal commander at Vicksburg soon authorized his status, and for the next few weeks, James later wrote, "I felt all right and safe with my command, and from then on was a dictator in several parishes." By the time of his parole in the summer of 1865, he had developed a youthful self-assurance that enabled him to look back on his war experiences with complete pride and toward the future with sanguine expectation: "I felt a foot higher," he remembered, "and of a great deal more importance in the world."[4]

But his confidence in his own ability was not immediately justified. Afraid to return to Missouri after the war because of his connection with W. C. Quantrill, he raised a few hundred dollars and went into the hardware business with his brother at Bastrop, Louisiana. The venture promptly failed. James might at that time have agreed with the modern historian who wrote that "Louisiana went through a terrific crucifixion" during Reconstruction,[5] for as James wrote many years later, everything in the state seemed wrong in 1866 and 1867. He thought that political conditions were deplorable, and he knew from costly experience that business was bad. The situation required analysis. No matter how James looked at the factors involved, he always arrived at the same explanation: Negroes, scalawags, and carpetbaggers were responsible for throwing the times out of joint. Negroes could vote, and many whites could not; Federal troops controlled the elections in each parish, and Negroes

4. *Ibid.*, 21-87. The quotations are on pp. 86-87.

5. E. Merton Coulter, *The South during Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (Baton Rouge, 1947), 352.

couldn't be convicted of crimes they were guilty of; carpetbaggers held the important state offices, and worst of all, they collected the taxes. "Business was almost at a standstill," James remembered, "confidence was destroyed and we realized that something must be done. We could not stand to be dominated by a lot of renegades and negroes." The solution, of course, was the organization of the Ku Klux Klan. " 'The best way to fight the devil,' " James philosophized, " 'is with fire.' "[6]

The Klan's outstanding extra-legal action against "the devil" in Louisiana, so far as James was concerned, took place in 1876. The local leaders had decided that the Democrats must win the fall election no matter what the cost: The goal was good; therefore, any action necessary to attain it was justified. The greatest obstacle to political victory appeared to be the Negro voters who remained loyal to the Radical element. They must in some way be made ineffective. For that purpose James organized his Bulldozers, six companies of about forty men each, who were to operate with the utmost secrecy. Members were ordered to attend Negro political meetings to listen to the proceedings. If they heard a speaker make "an assertion that was not true," they forced him to "correct it then and there . . . ."[7] From spending four years in the army, James had become accustomed to taking orders and to giving them. His authoritarian attitude now proved helpful in supervising the work of the Bulldozers. He personally took a group of his men at night to warn the leading Negroes in the region that they must either support the Democrats or "move out of the country." When a Republican sheriff became "disagreeable," one of James's delegations went to him "and told him that he had to resign." He was soon replaced by "a good man."[8]

Shortly before the crucial election, some of the Negroes in James's parish were summoned to a Republican meeting to be held at Monroe. James promptly called together a company of forty men and started after them. Before the chase was over, the Negroes had raised an ambush from which they

6. James, *Memorable Events*, 89-90.
7. *Ibid.*, 91-93.
8. *Ibid.*, 93-94.

opened fire on their pursuers. James's force charged, "killed several, wounded a few and made several prisoners . . . ," but most of the quarry escaped into a cane brake. Reinforcements for James soon arrived to the number of three hundred, including the sheriff and "many of the most conservative men." When some of the more cautious citizens took James aside to warn him not to allow his men to kill any of their captives, James responded that " 'it does not set very well with me to be ambushed by a lot of negroes and get no satisfaction for it.' " He had his captives thrown in jail, however, instead of killing them; and after they had supplied him with certain information that he wanted, he allowed them to be released.[9]

This was the most violent action James chose to record from his Reconstruction experience, but it was hardly the most clever. As election day approached, James and his friends began to fear that the voters in one of the wards in their parish would not vote "right." James engineered a special ruse to save the day. On the Saturday night before election, he broke into the registrar's office and stole all of the unused voter-registration blanks. These he filled out in imitation of the originals. He then dressed four of his men in the uniforms of the United States Army and sent them at night to visit the homes of Negro voters. Their job was to persuade the Negroes to exchange their genuine registration papers for the bogus ones. "The first night they got more than 300 genuine registration papers," reported James.[10]

With the election of 1876, Louisiana once more came into the political control of white Democrats. James, who had contributed his share to the victory, took no more part in politics. He now occupied himself in turn as a farmer, a partner in a firm supplying timber for railroad construction, the manager of the Roswell (New Mexico) Land and Water Company, and a Texas cattle rancher. None of these activities, however, allowed him to outgrow his martial past. Indeed, James never quite got over the Civil War; perhaps no one who lived through it did. His war experience was, after all, the great event of his life, and, like Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., his

9. *Ibid.*, 95-100.
10. *Ibid.*, 101-103.

heart was "touched with fire." But in James the fire remained chiefly as an old soldier's nostalgia for things military, a respect for force, and an almost childish desire to have society recognize in him the valiant officer, the martial authority. Violence, as C. Vann Woodward has pointed out, was "if anything more characteristic" of the South after 1876 than before.[11] Certainly throughout most of his own life, James retained a penchant for strong, vigorous, even violent, action. Although it was apparently poverty, not necessarily a love for action, that led him to join Company E of the Frontier Battalion of the Texas Rangers in 1884, his activities in that organization followed a pattern already familiar in his life: violence in the name of a worthy cause. One of his adventures in his capacity as Ranger required him to kill a man, and though he was at pains in his memoirs to indicate that he had killed in self-defense, one cannot, even as he reads both the description of the event and the disjoinder, quite blot out the picture of James the border terror burning the houses of Yankee sympathizers, of James the Klansman riding through the Louisiana countryside in pursuit of Negro voters.[12]

James's move to Roswell, New Mexico, in 1892, gave him a chance he had not often enjoyed since 1865 to indulge his military tastes. At Roswell lived Joseph C. Lea, Confederate Colonel and war-time associate of James. A man of considerable local reputation, Lea is credited with being largely responsible for the idea of establishing the New Mexico Military Institute at Roswell and was a member of its first board of regents.[13] James gloried in his association both with Lea and with the school. He now had a socially respectable opportunity to satisfy his propensity for military affairs. He took a personal interest in the corps of cadets and arranged to give them equipment for target practice at a time when such facilities were not otherwise regularly furnished.[14] In his honor

11. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge, 1951), 158.

12. James, *Memorable Events*, 45, 51, 107-110.

13. James R. Kelly, *A History of New Mexico Military Institute, 1891-1941* (Albuquerque, 1953), 20n., 9, 18.

14. James W. Willson to Jason W. James, Aug. 21, 1907, Superintendents' Letter Books, no. 15, Willson Hall, New Mexico Military Institute, Roswell; James, *Memories and Viewpoints*, 78-80.

the Institute's superintendent named the awards for excellence in marksmanship the "James Medals." James reciprocated by providing funds for the granting of the medals in perpetuity, and as an additional gesture, he presented his portrait to the school.[15]

James frequently used the occasion of the presentation of his medals to deliver an address to the assembled corps of cadets. Often these were developed around a military theme. In a speech delivered at the New Mexico Military Institute in the spring of 1909 on "The Need for Military Preparedness," he informed the cadets that while Americans had been busy developing the arts of peace, aggressive nations had produced "breech-loading artillery, rapid-fire guns, smokeless powder, battleships, submarines and hundreds of other death-dealing instruments . . . ."[16] It was perhaps natural that James, having recognized the existence of an armaments race, should adopt as his own some of the swaggering posture in international affairs assumed by the United States during the administration of Theodore Roosevelt. "The strong military governments," he once told the Institute cadets, "are today, and will remain, the rulers of the earth, besides [*sic*] whom the political governments are and will continue to be powerless to oppose, and they will be compelled to submit to all demands and exactions made on them."[17] Probably this was his explanation for the Southern defeat in 1865; certainly the moral he intended to teach the new generation was clear. The United States ought to become "military" and cease being primarily "political."

If James easily accepted the necessity for America's large role as a world power, he accepted as willingly the industrialization that had made such a role possible. Perhaps the most striking change in the United States during James's lifetime was the growth of the giant manufacturing industries that had come to dominate great sections of the country. Some of the leaders of the South, likewise smitten by business, proclaimed their region the "new South," and dreamed of the day the factory system would contend with their

15. James, *Memories and Viewpoints*, 81-82.
16. *Ibid.*, 164.
17. *Ibid.*, 182.

agrarian economy. James, an intensely practical man, an admirer of ingenuity, ambition, and initiative, welcomed these changes. At the same time a streak of conventional sentimentality impelled him to admit his regret for the passing of the old, simpler society.[18] It was, however, nostalgia for the yeoman farmer class that he felt. James was never a mourner for the Lost Cause; he did not weep for the antebellum South. At no time himself a member of the planting aristocracy, James shared only a part of its ideals. He could not, therefore, after the passing of years and upon mature reflection, regret that the Civil War had been fought. Disastrous though it had seemed at the time, the War had proved in the long run a blessing for the South, "a step," wrote James, and much of nineteenth-century thought echoes in the phrase, "in the march of progress."[19] True, the war had had certain unfortunate long-term results. The Negroes' morals had been worsened, they were less happy, they died sooner than in the beneficent days of slavery. (James could accept such an analysis as easily as any other Southerner.) And in the North the War had created a horde of pension seekers who were responsible for much of the corruption that had lately crept into the government. But when all of this had been admitted, one could still insist that it was for the best that the War had been fought and that the South had lost—and here James differed most sharply from the stereotyped Southerner, was most like the prophets of the "new South." The War, he thought, had freed the South from domination by the agrarian-aristocratic ideal. Its young men, finally emancipated from their bondage of indolence and ease, were now hastening to create a new South in the image of the conquering North. James approved of what he saw. He was, in short, thoroughly pleased with the material achievements of his day, and his pleasure was the greater because he believed that the historical events in which he himself had participated could be credited with their accomplishment.[20]

Such a thing as material progress does exist. James was as sure of it as were Americans generally. Certainly the evi-

18. *Ibid.*, 103-104.
19. James, *Memorable Events*, 142.
20. *Ibid.*, 139-143.

dence of its work was all about for everyone to see—in the reaper, the automobile, the irrigated farms surrounding Roswell. Yet James could not bring himself to agree that all was right with the world. After all, had "progress" made Americans "better citizens and better neighbors, happier and more contented" than they were in 1843, the year of his birth?[21] James decided that the answer was probably no. He remained unconvinced that "all of our fine schools with the moral teachings they are supposed to inculcate" had been able to make men "better and more honest than they were." The population of the country was simply lacking in the elements of morality. Witness, for example, the "pension grabs" of the 1880's and 1890's.[22]

A reservation as to the fundamental goodness of man lay at the root of James's pessimism. It did not leave him, and as he grew older, his doubt became conviction. This was not, however, a conventional Christian belief in original sin and imperfection; nor was it the result of any Melvillian obsession with doubt and insecurity. America and Americans, like the Romans of the Republic, had once been virtuous, James believed. The Founding Fathers had created a nearly perfect government, but that government had soon fallen into a decline. Worse and worse times had succeeded the days of its youth until now corruption was everywhere. "In 1913 hell broke loose," he declared.[23] By 1920 he had become convinced that the country had taken the road to national, perhaps racial, ruin.[24]

James's dark view was prompted by the political changes that had occurred during the administrations of Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson. Although James could enthusiastically approve the foreign policies of this period, he adjudged the constitutional achievements of the Progressive Era to be merely additional flagrant examples of the contemporary degradation. A prime purpose of state and national legislation during the two decades before the first World War had been to establish a greater degree of political democracy, apparently upon

21. *Ibid.*, 141.
22. *Ibid.*, 148-149.
23. James, *Memories and Viewpoints*, 92.
24. *Ibid.*, 94-95.

the premise that the ills and inadequacies of American democracy could be cured by administering larger doses of democracy. With such a point of view James was in total disagreement. He finally allowed himself to conclude that universal democracy itself was a mistake, its results all grievous.[25] This verdict, so extreme for an American of his day, although hardly unique, had been reached partly because of the racialism that James had espoused. The first decade of the twentieth century saw throughout the nation a vast increase in the popularity of such views. Those were the years that "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman was touring the Chautauqua circuit spreading his opinions of the Negro's inferiority. At the same time, Tom Watson was writing in *Watson's Jeffersonian Magazine* about the menace of the Negro. Charles Carroll's work, *"The Negro a Beast": or, "In the Image of God,"* was published in 1900. Thomas Dixon's anti-Negro novel, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan,* appeared in 1905, and Robert W. Shufeldt's *The Negro, a Menace to American Civilization* in 1907.[26] Obviously James did not arrive at his prejudices in isolation.

James, however, did not limit his attacks to the Negro. He was an enemy to all non-Nordics, whose biological inferiority he took for granted. Exactly where he acquired this idea cannot now be determined. It was, in any case, not an uncommon opinion among Americans at the turn of the century. His views of the superiority of the "Nordic race" constitute a generalized reflection of the works of J. A. Gobineau, H. S. Chamberlain, and Madison Grant, whose books were either published or re-issued shortly before James began expressing views similar to theirs.[27]

Scarcely a hint of these sentiments appears in James's *Memorable Events* published in 1911, but they provided him with a major theme for his *Memories and Viewpoints* written in the 1920's. By that time, James had been captivated by the view that the Anglo-Saxon or Nordic is a superior crea-

25. *Ibid.*, 95, 133-134.

26. Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 352.

27. For a discussion of racialism in the United States, see Harvey Wish, *Society and Thought in Modern America, a Social and Intellectual History of the American People from 1865* (New York, 1952), 423-425.

ture beside whom the Mediterranean races, to say nothing of the African and Oriental, are distinctly inferior. Such evils as existed in the United States of his day James believed might properly be charged to these races. Universal suffrage had been the device by which the lesser breeds had secured political control of the country. Progressive legislation had only allowed them to work greater damage. Their intent from the very first had been sinister. Representatives of the Mediterranean races had created the abolitionist agitation of the preceding century in order to "destroy the Nordic race" in a great civil war.[28] It was they who were responsible for disastrously altering the constitution in the first two decades of the twentieth century. They were always trouble makers, disturbers of the peace, if not downright depraved; and if their influence were not curbed, universal destruction was bound to follow. "Anglo-Saxon civilization will stand as long as the constitution of the United States stands," James warned. "When that constitution falls, Anglo-Saxon civilization will fall." "All *mongrel* races of people have had a short life," he added. "Will this government be an exception? I cannot think so."[29]

When Bastrop, Louisiana, had been in distress some fifty years earlier, James had known what to do. He had joined the Ku Klux Klan and resorted to the use of extra-legal methods in order to save society. Now when the United States and all the rest of Western civilization seemed to him to be in peril, James repeated the action. He became a member of the Pioneer Klan number 15 in Roswell and took a leading part in its work during the 1920's. The Klan in its modern, revived form, reported one Southerner in a spirit of unfairness, was " 'the fun-making social side of the Masons . . . .' "[30] However inaccurate and exaggerated such a generalization may be, James, at least, thought of the two organizations as partners, bulwarks against the onslaught of foreigners and Roman Catholics. He was a member of both societies in Roswell, and the speeches he delivered to them

28. James, *Memories and Viewpoints*, 146.
29. *Ibid.*, 92, 100.
30. Quoted by Raymond Brooks in El Paso *Times*, Sept. 28, 1954.

indicate that he thought of their purposes as practically identical.[31]

"The members of the orders of the Ku Klux Klan are the Nordics of America today," James declared. "They are the foundation upon which rests its civilization, and are responsible for the leading position we occupy in the world today."[32] The purpose of the new Klan, James told its members, "was to preserve and perpetuate the Nordic race, and the Protestant religion . . . ."[33] Aside from these grand goals, however, the Klan attempted to promote order and morality in the community. Roswell itself was probably little troubled by violence at the time. Although the local newspaper observed editorially in 1926 that "laws are broken wilfully and boldly every day," it reported in the next issue that the "people of Roswell [had been] extremely law-abiding . . . and serious crimes" were "very rare."[34] Nevertheless, there were other things not precisely of a criminal nature for James to worry about. He had developed an almost overpowering fear of the Papacy, and the Roman Catholic element in Roswell was undeniably large and influential. He was worried about radical political theories, and the rumor spread that a secret convention of the Socialist Party of New Mexico had met in Roswell.[35] He was interested in protecting the morals of Nordic youth, and moral conditions in Roswell were distressingly lax. In evidence everywhere, said James, were "lewd women, young libertiness [*sic*] with expensive cars, [and] the insidious bootlegger."[36]

James was equal to the great need. Although he did not this time organize a company to drive out the lewd women and the libertines (he was now past eighty years old), he did deliver little speeches at the meetings of both the Klan and the Masons warning the members of the danger the nation faced from the Pope through his agents, the Knights of Columbus, and from Negroes and non-Anglo-Saxons in general.

31. These speeches make up the last portion of *Memories and Viewpoints*.
32. James, *Memories and Viewpoints*, 145.
33. *Ibid.*, 148.
34. Roswell *Daily Record*, July 14, 15, 1926.
35. *Ibid.*, Sept. 31, 1926.
36. James, *Memories and Viewpoints*, 161.

He even hinted that the Klan might eventually resort to military action in order to save itself as the agent of civilization. "While we are a unit," he declared, "we can put a larger and better army in the field when necessary than General Pershing had in France."[37]

James's work for the new Klan may not have been spectacular, but his efforts were appreciated. To show him their respect for what he was now doing and for his services during the years of Reconstruction, the members of the Roswell Klan presented him with a gold "Hero Cross" bearing both the features of General Nathan Bedford Forrest, who had been the first Grand Wizard of the order, and a representation of "the beautiful fiery cross."[38]

James knew very well that his views on racialism and political democracy were not shared by all the people who listened to his speeches, particularly not by the Masons: ". . . it is perhaps too much for me to expect," he admitted, "that the younger generation of Masons will be able to see things as I see them. . . . Universal suffrage, with all that it implies, appeals to you men as a mark of progress; it does *not so appeal to me.*"[39] By the time James died on September 14, 1933, his Klan had been generally discredited, his opinions become a decidedly recessive strand in American thought. Economic dangers and an external menace to democracy led by the "Nordics" of Europe were attracting, or were about to attract, the attention of the country; and the United States had already launched on new national projects in the name of democracy. James's Cassandra-like books, therefore, had little to say to Americans after his death, nor are they likely to prove very appealing today. James remains of interest, however, not for what he did or for whom he may have influenced or even for the substance of his philosophy; but rather, he is of interest because he provides us with evidence of the reaction of one Southwestern frontiersman to the great events and the changing society of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

37. *Ibid.*, 154.
38. *Ibid.*, 156-157.
39. *Ibid.*, 133-134.