

1868: The Reconstruction Constitutional Convention

<p>Shot of Union troops in front of the State House.</p> <p>Shot of Isaac Murphy</p> <p>Shot of members of the 1866 Legislature</p> <p>Bingham painting of martial law</p> <p>Engraving of blacks voting</p> <p>Cut to House Chambers during the 1868 Constitutional Convention. The previous furnishings are gone, looted during the Civil War. In their place is a hodgepodge of period pieces. Most striking is the presence of several black delegates. There is a commotion and Chairman Bowen is pounding his gavel to restore order.</p> <p>Cypert begins his address in the manner of a practiced politician.</p> <p>Shots of the reaction of the other delegates, in particular Joseph Brooks and William Grey.</p>	<p>Narrator Voice Over: After the fall of Little Rock, Arkansas Unionists banded together to create a loyalist government in Union-occupied areas. They elected Isaac Murphy to a four-year term as governor in 1864. Murphy proved particularly lenient toward ex-Confederates following the war, granting many of them amnesty. So many had their rights restored that they gained control of the legislature in 1866. This occurred throughout the South as part of a national Democratic strategy to block ratification of the 14th Amendment, which among other things would have granted full citizenship to blacks. Congress responded by declaring martial law in the South, beginning the postwar period known as Reconstruction. Under Reconstruction blacks gained the right to vote in a special election to choose delegates to an 1868 convention to draft a new constitution.</p> <p>Bowen: Order! Order! Let the delegate from White County speak!...Continue Mr. Cypert.</p> <p>Cypert: Gentlemen, all I am proposing is that we re-adopt the 1864 Constitution of Isaac Murphy, a constitution which was approved by Abraham Lincoln. If you persist in the doctrine of Reconstruction, if you insist on suffrage for the Negro while disfranchising those who fought in the rebellion, you certainly sow the seeds of strife which will inevitably reverberate against the Negro.</p> <p>I assure you that I am a friend of the Negro. I have been an agent of the Freedmen's Bureau and have always been desirous of advancing the</p>
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There is faint applause and even more tumult as Cypert finishes.

Joseph Brooks rises.

Bowen acknowledges Brooks.

Brooks delivers his lines without undue drama and sits as he is concluding.

William Grey rises, but does not speak.

Bowen acknowledges Grey.

Grey is well dressed, but not expensively so. Bearded, with a slight afro, he speaks with the powerful, melodic voice of a black minister.

Back to Bowen

The drama of Grey's delivery slowly mounts. Occasionally the camera breaks away for reaction shots, but the focus is on Grey.

interests of this unfortunate race. I know the Negro in all his attributes and I appeal to the Negro delegates present here today: Do not be misled by false friends.

Brooks: Point of order, Mr. Chairman!

Bowen: The Chair recognizes Joseph Brooks.

Brooks: I wish to clarify a point of etiquette before we proceed. I wonder at the politeness of characterizing a fellow delegate solely on the basis of race. I would ask our delegates of color whether they object to being addressed as "Negroes."

Bowen: The Chair recognizes William Grey of Phillips County.

Grey: Mr. Chairman, I take no objection to the appellation "Negro." I am not ashamed of my race, allied as it is to those who built the great Pyramids of Egypt, where sleep the remains of those whose learning taught Solon and Lycurgus to frame the system of their laws, and to whom present ages are indebted for what hints we have of art and knowledge...

I would like, if I may, to respond to the previous speaker.

Bowen: You have the floor.

Grey: If I understood Mr. Cypert correctly, he says he is glad the rebellion was crushed. He is glad the Negro was freed, but while he would have the Negro protected by law in all their rights, he would never see them entrusted with the elective franchise and made the rulers of white men.

I am here as the representative of a portion of the citizens of Arkansas whose rights are not secured by the ordinance offered by the gentleman

Cheers and tumult from the other delegates punctuate the end of Grey's remarks.

from White County — men, sir, who have stood by the government and the old flag in times of trouble, when the republic trembled with thoughts of Civil War, from center to circumference, from base to cope....We are not here to ask charity at the hands of this honorable body, but to receive at the hands of the people of Arkansas in convention assembled, the apportionment of our rights, as assigned by the Reconstruction Acts of Congress.

I am here, sir, to see those rights of citizenship engrafted upon the organic law of the state....The gentleman from White County says the Negro cannot become a citizen....Sir, I claim that citizenship is ours, not only on constitutional grounds, according to the rulings of distinguished American jurists, but ours by right of purchase on the numerous battlefields of our country. It is ours, because from the Revolution down to and through the rebellion, we have stood unswervingly by our country and the flag. We fought for liberty. That liberty cannot be secured to us without the right of suffrage. The government owes the debt, acknowledges it, and apportions it out....We are here, sir, to receive the amount due us from the State of Arkansas.