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“ROOT, HOG, OR DIE”: A REPUBLICAN PROVERB

Abstract: The American proverb, “root hog or die,” though popular in the early nineteenth century, gained widespread use after President Lincoln used it at the Hampton Roads Conference. Newspapers across the country then published contradictory anecdotal accounts of how Lincoln had used the proverb, incensing the citizenry of both Northern and Southern states. The proverb then became a contentious political rallying cry used frequently in the racially charged rhetoric of the Reconstruction Era.

Keywords: American Proverbs, Abraham Lincoln, U.S. Civil War, Reconstruction Era, Political Rhetoric, Wellerisms, Folksong, Broadside, Minstrelsy

Though the *Dictionary of American Proverbs* lists *The Narrative of the Life of David Crockett* as the first recorded instance of the proverb “Root, hog, or die,” Crockett remarked that by 1834, the year his autobiography was published, this was already an “old saying” (Mieder et al. 1992, 500; Crockett 1834, 117). Until recently, the earliest discovered instance had come from Crockett’s (supposed) autobiography, first noted in the *Dictionary of American English* (Cragie and Hulbert 1938-44, 4:1971); the revised *OED*, however, presents a version from a Delaware periodical of 1828, in the form “Root, little hog, or die” (s.v. *root* verb.2). The first reference work to enter “root, hog, or die” was the third edition (called the fourth) of John Russell Bartlett’s *Dictionary of Americanisms*, 1877 (537), and versions appear in most proverb dictionaries that cover the time period for America (Stevenson 1948, 1147; Whiting 1952, 425; Taylor and Whiting 1958, 184 and 284; Brunvand 1961, 70; Whiting 1989, 310; Mieder et al. 1992, 303; Bryan and Mieder 2005, 389). Although not so commonly heard today, the proverb was very much alive in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It certainly seems apt that such an adage should arise in the United States, a country that claims to

value hard work, self-sufficiency, and (in 1834, anyway) puritanical austerity above all other things. In the two decades between 1850 and 1870, the proverb gained widespread use and became inextricably enmeshed in the racial and political tensions between the Northern and Southern states.

Regardless of when and where “Root, hog, or die” originated, by 1852 it was current enough to have been the basis for a welleristic jest in the form of minstrel show stump speech, a genre that mixed the high-flown language of political rhetoric with Southern black dialect to mock the (at the time) ludicrous notion that African-Americans could ever become politicians. This speech, attributed to the fictitious politician, “Dick Daily,” read, “Go it Porky---root, hog, or die. As Shakepeel said when Caesar stabbed him in the House ov Representatives” (“Dick Daily’s Stump Speech” 1852). Mieder and Kingsbury cite a slightly different version of this “speech” from the magazine *Yankee Notions* (1994, 62). I won’t attempt to explain *all* the humor at play here, but “Dick Daily” seems to be referring to the point in *Julius Caesar*, when, just after the conspirators have murdered the emperor, Casca urges Brutus to “Go to the pulpit” (3.1.84). So, even at this early date, “Root, hog, or die” had begun to take on some complex racial and political dynamics, not to mention the ironic foreshadowing of the assassination of the head of state who would later use the term and bring it to the forefront of the country’s dialogue on Reconstruction and reconciliation.

“Root, hog, or die” was also the title of a popular 19th century folksong, or rather, a refrain upon which were built a great number of folksongs and broadsides. Mieder cites one such ballad from 1856 that recounts the hardscrabble life of a bullwhacker:

I’m a lonely bull-whacker
 On the Red Cloud Line,
 I can lick any son-of-a-gun
 Can yoke an ox of mine.
 If I can catch him
 You bet I will or try,
 I’ll lick him with my ox-bow,
 Root, hog, or die.

Well, it’s out upon the road
 With a very heavy load,

With a very awkward team
And a very muddy road,
You may whip and holler,
If you cuss it's on the sly,
Then it's whack the cattle on, boys,
Root, hog, or die. [etc.]

(Mieder 1989, 202-203)

The listed author of this song, Richard J. McGowan, seems to have found “root, hog, or die” a highly productive refrain and composed at least four different versions during his lifetime, three of which he wrote specifically for performance in black-face minstrel shows, though all three of these are essentially variations on the following [Figure 1]:

The greatest old Nigger that ever I did see,
Looked like a sick monkey up a sour apple-tree.
It don't make a bit of difference to either you or I,
Big pig, little pig, root hog, or die.

CHORUS.

Chief cook and bottle washer, captain of the waiters,
Stand upon your head while you peel a bag of taters.
Jog along.

I come from old Virginy with a pocket-full of news,
I am worth four shillings, standing in my shoes,
Doesn't make a bit of difference to either you or I,
Little pig, big pig, root hog, or die.

Chief cook, &c.

The Broadway niggers look so mighty grand,
Shanghai coats and gloves upon the hand,
A big standing collar, standing away up to the sky,
Little pig, big pig, root hog, or die.

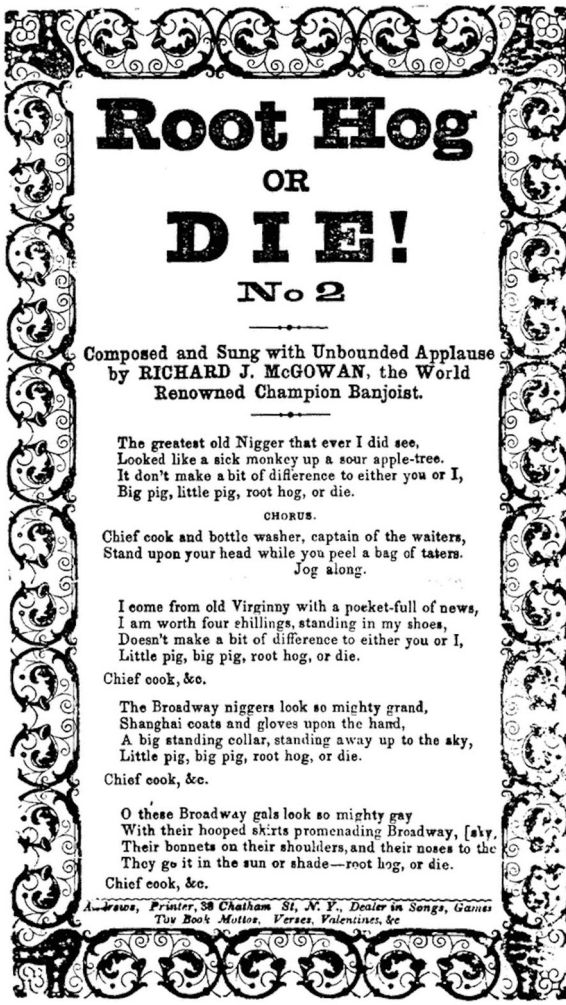
Chief cook, &c.

O these Broadway gals look so mighty gay
With their hooped skirts promenading Broadway,

Their bonnets on their shoulders, and their noses to the
 sky,
 They go it in the sun or shade--root hog, or die.
 (McGowan)

Soon enough, other New York printers took up this wildly popular piece “composed and sung with unbounded applause by Richard J. McGowan, the world renowned champion banjoist” rendered their own imitations of McGowan’s song for use in *Minstrelsy* (*ibid.*). Perhaps the most prolific of these printers was H. De Marsan of Chatham St. (also associated with Andrews of Chatham St.), whose wide array of minstrel song sheets offers an authentic “Ethiopian” minstrel experience. The illustrative woodblock border on De Marsan’s texts depicts an “Ethiopian” attired in a sort of renaissance costume, complete with jerkin and leggings, but rather than a lyre, he plays a banjo. Though the border—which also presents an image of drum-playing black women and cherubim—sports an almost art nouveau visual aesthetic, the lyrics are quite predictably racist, telling the story of a runaway slave going to New York “just to have a spree” (Root Hog or DIE! no. 3). [Figure 2] Over the next few years, De Marsan and other New York printers would manufacture quite a few more broadsides with this refrain, many of them concerned with events current and historical, such as the American Revolution, the Great Police Riot of 1857, John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, the rise of the “Plug Uglies” in Boston, and eventually the American Civil War.

De Marsan used the aforementioned woodblock to frame yet another broadside that employed the “root, hog, or die” refrain, one entitled “Jeff Davis and His Uncle,” a union fight-song that calls out by name Davis, of course, but also John Floyd, referring to the latter Union traitor as “head devil.” [Figure 3] Perhaps as a direct reply to De Marsan’s broadside, in 1861 T.W. Crowson of Galveston, Texas, penned a broadside entitled “Run, Yank, or Die.” [Figure 4] Crowson printed this early Confederate fight-song with a sketch of two roosters above the lyrics, one of them standing fully erect, marked “R.E. Lee,” and the other submissive, marked “Old Abe,” both with cartoon speech-bubbles issuing from their beaks with the words “As usual, Victorious,” and



Root Hog
OR
DIE!
No 2

Composed and Sung with Unbounded Applause
by RICHARD J. MCGOWAN, the World
Renowned Champion Banjoist.

The greatest old Nigger that ever I did see,
Looked like a sick monkey up a sour apple-tree.
It don't make a bit of difference to either you or I,
Big pig, little pig, root hog, or die.

CHORUS.

Chief cook and bottle washer, captain of the waiters,
Stand upon your head while you peel a bag of taters.
Jog along.

I come from old Virginy with a pocket-full of news,
I am worth four shillings, standing in my shoes,
Doesn't make a bit of difference to either you or I,
Little pig, big pig, root hog, or die.

Chief cook, &c.

The Broadway niggers look so mighty grand,
Shanghai coats and gloves upon the hand,
A big standing collar, standing away up to the sky,
Little pig, big pig, root hog, or die.

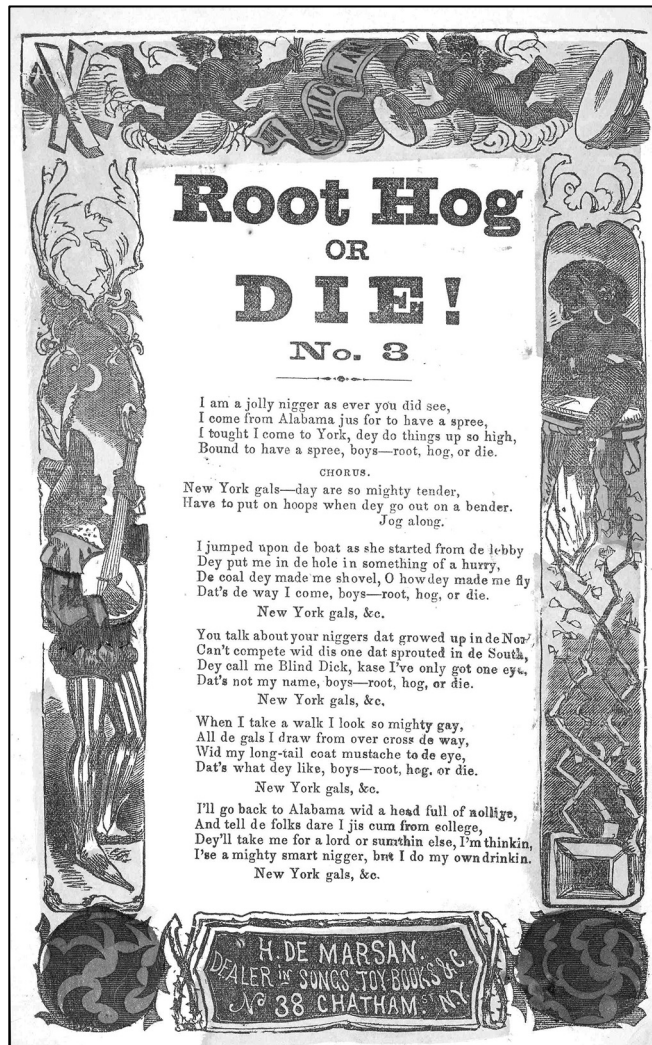
Chief cook, &c.

O these Broadway gals look so mighty gay
With their hooped skirts promenading Broadway, [sky,
Their bonnets on their shoulders, and their noses to the
They go it in the sun or shade—root hog, or die.

Chief cook, &c.

A. Traus, Printer, 38 Chatham St., N. Y., Dealer in Songs, Games,
Tux Boot Mottos, Valentines, &c.

Figure 1



Root Hog
OR
DIE!
No. 3

I am a jolly nigger as ever you did see,
I come from Alabama jus for to have a spree,
I tought I come to York, dey do things up so high,
Bound to have a spree, boys—root, hog, or die.

CHORUS.
New York gals—day are so mighty tender,
Have to put on hoops when dey go out on a bender.
Jog along.

I jumped upon de boat as she started from de lebbby
Dey put me in de hole in something of a hurry,
De coal dey made me shovel, O how dey made me fly
Dat's de way I come, boys—root, hog, or die.
New York gals, &c.

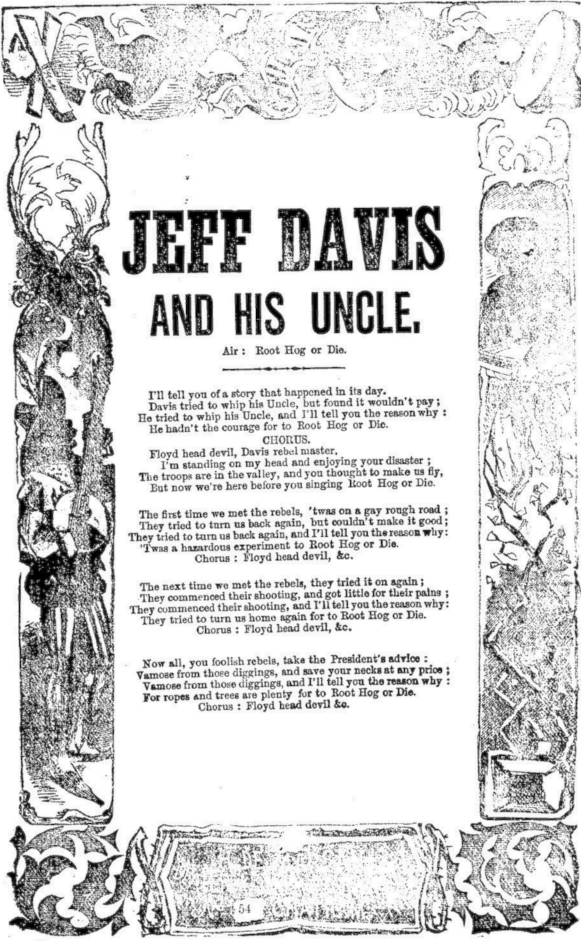
You talk about your niggers dat grewed up in de Nor?
Can't compete wid dis one dat sprouted in de South,
Dey call me Blind Dick, kase I've only got one eye,
Dat's not my name, boys—root, hog, or die.
New York gals, &c.

When I take a walk I look so mighty gay,
All de gals I draw from over cross de way,
Wid my long-tail coat mustache to de eye,
Dat's what dey like, boys—root, hog, or die.
New York gals, &c.

I'll go back to Alabama wid a head full of nollige,
And tell de folks dare I jis cum from college,
Dey'll take me for a lord or sumthin else, I'm thinkin,
I'ee a mighty smart nigger, but I do my own drinkin.
New York gals, &c.

H. DE MARSAN,
DEALER IN SONGS, TOY BOOKS, &c.
No. 38 CHATHAM, N.Y.

Figure 2



**JEFF DAVIS
AND HIS UNCLE.**

Air: Root Hog or Die.

I'll tell you of a story that happened in its day.
Davis tried to whip his Uncle, but found it wouldn't pay;
He tried to whip his Uncle, and I'll tell you the reason why;
He hadn't the courage for to Root Hog or Die.

CHORUS.
Floyd head devil, Davis rebel master,
I'm standing on my head and enjoying your disaster;
The troops are in the valley, and you thought to make us fly,
But now we're here before you singing Root Hog or Die.

The first time we met the rebels, 'twas on a gay rough road;
They tried to turn us back again, but couldn't make it good;
They tried to turn us back again, and I'll tell you the reason why:
'Twas a hazardous experiment to Root Hog or Die.
Chorus: Floyd head devil, &c.

The next time we met the rebels, they tried it on again;
They commenced their shooting, and got little for their pains;
They commenced their shooting, and I'll tell you the reason why:
They tried to turn us home again for to Root Hog or Die.
Chorus: Floyd head devil, &c.

Now all, you foolish rebels, take the President's advice:
Vamoose from those diggings, and save your necks at any price;
Vamoose from those diggings, and I'll tell you the reason why:
For ropes and trees are plenty fur to Root Hog or Die.
Chorus: Floyd head devil &c.

Figure 3

Allen's Lone Star Ballads--Galveston & Houston.

Confederate

Abolitionist

RUN, YANK, OR DIE!

Composed by T. W. CROWSON, of the Alabama Pickens.
A. G. "Lost, Hog, or Die!"

Now if you all will let me add a few bits
About the case of freedom you're here to exhibit,
Old Abe tried to enslave us, but soon it was too dry;
O, Liberty for Southern boys! run, Yank, or die!

Chorus--Hurrah for Slavery, for Southerners are the boys,
For singing and fighting, and stopping Yank's noise!

The young Old Federality is getting on quite spry,
He's a big Yank--hide Yank!--run, Yank, or die!

The finest looking mortal that ever I did see,
He had John Brown to a white oak tree,
To see him tie the rope, you ought to stand by,
I was done with Cheek and cotton--Run, Yank, or die!

Chorus--Hurrah for Slavery, &c.

There's old Andy Johnson, of Miss Tennessee,
He's come and paid the price to set the negro free,
But when he undertakes to, it's sure for to s'ch,
He'll look from the Southern boys--Run, Yank, or die!

Chorus--Hurrah for Slavery, &c.

The little Northern Yankees are getting very sick,
They don't like medicine because it is so thick,
And when they go to take it, its sure to hurt their eye,
They don't like the Southern pills--Run, Yank, or die!

Chorus--Hurrah for Slavery, &c.

We're going out to Richmond to get all the news,
We're coming back by Washington to get old Lincoln's shoes;
And as we walk the streets, the Yankees they will fly,
They'll hollow out it's Southern boys--Run, Yank, or die!

Chorus--Hurrah for Slavery, &c.

Old General Scott is a mighty great sinner,
He never comes to fight us but he is sure to bring his dinner;
When he saw the boys coming, it was time for to fly,
For Jeff was after him--Run, Yank, or die!

Chorus--Hurrah for Slavery, &c.

The little Northern Yankees are getting very grand,
They brought down their dinner and sat it on our land;
They had all kinds of spees mixed up in pie,
But the Southern boys eat it up--Run, Yank, or die!

Chorus--Hurrah for Slavery, &c.

There were the Northern ladies, no doubt they looked fine,
Standing round the table with demijohns of wine;
But when they saw us coming, they made their shoes dry,
Twas no place for women folks--Run, Yank, or die!

Chorus--Hurrah for Slavery, &c.

Old Abe's head is now a getting gray,
He asked General Davis for a ninety days' stay;
He had to have money, he wanted time to try,
But Jeff wouldn't grant it to him--Run, Yank, or die!

Chorus--Hurrah for Slavery, &c.

(Telegraph Print.)

Figure 4

“I’ll change my base and free the negroes,” respectively (Crowson). The ballad, with its chilling chorus of “Hurrah for slavery,” celebrates the hanging of John Brown, Northern soldiers’ dying of malaria, and the anticipated moment when the Confederate army would harry women out of the Northern cities.

On February 3, 1865, President Lincoln, along with Secretary of State Seward, met with vice-president of the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens, and Confederate senator Robert Hunter in an attempt to work out the terms of an armistice. By all accounts, this meeting, known as the Hampton Roads conference (even though it took place aboard the steamboat *River Queen*), was informal, cordial, even affable, and Lincoln informed the rebel peace commission that the U.S. Congress had adopted the Thirteenth Amendment; at this point, however, the several narratives diverge somewhat. The Confederate story insists that Hunter asked Lincoln “something about the inhumanity of leaving so many poor old negroes and young children destitute, by encouraging the able-bodied negroes to run away, and asked, what are they, the helpless, to do?” (Stephens 1865). F.B. Carpenter claimed that Stephens said (though Charles Coffin later attributed the same quote to Hunter), “slaves, always accustomed to an overseer, and to work under compulsion, suddenly freed [...] would precipitate not only themselves but the entire Southern society into irremediable ruin. No work would be done, nothing would be cultivated, and both blacks and whites would *starve*” (“Abraham Lincoln: Personal Impressions and Recollections” 1865). Carpenter further reports that Lincoln then gave over to his penchant for homilies and replied,

I can only say in reply to your statement of the case that it reminds me of a man out in Illinois by the name of Case, who undertook a few years ago to raise a very large herd of hogs. It was a great trouble in feeding them, and how to get around this was a puzzle to him. At length he hit on the plan of planting an immense field of potatoes, and, when they were sufficiently grown, he turned the whole herd into the field, and let them have full swing, thus saving not only the labor of feeding the hogs, but also that of digging the potatoes. Charmed with his sagacity, he stood one day leaning against the

fence counting his hogs, when a neighbor came along. 'Well, well,' said he, 'Mr. Case, this is all very fine. Your hogs are doing very well just now, but you know out here in Illinois the frost comes early, and the ground freezes for a foot deep. Then what are they going to do?' This was a view of the matter Mr. Case had not taken into account. Butchering time for hogs was away on in December or January? He scratched his head, and at length stammered, 'Well, it may come pretty hard on their snouts, but I don't see but that it will be 'root, hog, or die!' (*ibid.*)

On the other hand, Stephens maintained that Lincoln's punchline was simply "let 'em root." Owing to these discrepancies in the first-hand accounts, Don and Virginia Fehrenbacher determine that Carpenter's story constitutes "a quotation about whose authenticity there is more than average doubt" and conclude that Stephens' version of the event is "perhaps more reliable than this long-drawn narrative," which merely points up the dubious nature of both versions (1996, 89). Further compounding the murkiness of this tale, is the fact that "root, hog, or die" absolutely does not appear in Lincoln's own works (Mieder 2002).

In his thoughtful biography of Jefferson Davis, Robert Penn Warren writes, "it is truly a pity that we cannot know the expression on Lincoln's face and in his voice—cynical detachment or outraged sarcasm—when he uttered this all too astute prediction," but Lincoln's words were no less open to interpretation in 1865 than they are today (Warren 1980, 42). Perhaps what Lincoln *actually* said is irrelevant, because, over the next few months, dozens of newspapers on either side of the Mason-Dixon Line reprinted both versions of this little anecdote, and "root, hog, or die" became Reconstruction's chameleonic rallying cry, a proverb used by virtually anyone openly discussing the nation's uncertain future. Southerners, perhaps choosing to ignore the obvious disingenuousness of Hunter's professed concern for the plight of Freedmen, saw Lincoln's use of "root, hog, or die" as an emblem of the North's callousness toward Southerners of both races, while Northerners, conversely, took it to mean that "the southern people can go to work like honest people or starve" ("Stories of the Peace Conference" 1865).

The public discourse over the economic future of freed African-Americans and the creation of the Freedmen’s bureau quickly became nothing short of editorial volleys of “Root, hog, or die.” The *Star of the North*, a Democratic paper, printed a story concerning a group of Massachusetts officers who brought their servants, Freedmen, back from the war and then left them to shift for themselves, strangers in a strange land, as it were, but the story ended with the commentary: “In this treatment of their servants they exemplify the true Abolition spirit. They give them ‘freedom’ and then say to them ‘root hog, or die!’” (*Star of the North* 1865). Republicans soon proved that Hunter’s fears had been, if not sincere, at least warranted, when anti-philanthropic sentiment in the North began to manifest itself with a widely quoted column from the *New York Daily Tribune* stating, “You do not benefit any human being—whether black, white, or yellow—by contriving that he shall live idly on the products of others’ labor; on the contrary, you do him very great injury. ‘Root, hog, or die!’ that is nature’s mandate: whatever opposes it or seeks to evade it is atheism and must result in evil” (*Daily Ohio Statesman* 1865). Though this statement belies a somewhat selective reading of the New Testament, echoing the epistles of Saint Paul (*KJV Gal. 6:7*) rather than the Gospels (*John 4:38*), creative misreadings of the Old Testament soon lent the proverb some darkly racist undertones in bantering exchanges such as this:

A Foolish Question Wisely Answered

Shall the negro live by the sweat of the white man’s face? ---*Louisville Democrat*

No sir-ee, he is going to live upon corn-dodgers and ham; and as he won’t have any master to feed him whether he works or not, it will be “root, hog, or die” with him. We guess he’ll prefer the former. ---*Louisville Journal*

(“A Foolish Question Wisely Answered” 1865)

The *White Cloud Kansas Chief* reprinted the above article on July 27 of the same year, this time, however, slyly italicizing “ham,” hinting at the spurious biblical justification for slavery, that Africans were the “sons of Ham” and therefore destined to be the “servant of servants[...]unto his brethren” (*Genesis 9:25*).

Despite the fact that slavery had been legally abolished, this brief passage from Genesis (wherein Ham is cursed for having accidentally glimpsed his father Noah's naked body while the old man is drunk and unconscious after a bout of postdiluvian tippling) was still used by preachers of a certain ilk both as biblical evidence for racial superiority and to rationalize the continued mistreatment of Freedmen. In an extremely sardonic retort to this kind of wordplay, the *Ashtabula Weekly Telegraph* questioned racist theologians, "Does the great law of Ham form the original precedent for the custom of the whole hog or none, or develop in its operation the great principle of root, hog, or die? Does the great law of Ham include Bacon? [...] Was Ham bred under the great law, or only mustered?" ("Great Law of Ham" 1865). While this article seems at first humorous, it then continues the conceit, describing the disturbing admittance records to the Freedmen's hospital in Montgomery, Alabama: "Does the great law prescribe that Ham shall be cured after this fashion: Luther Jones—beard and chin cut off? Or that Ham shall be peppered in this manner: Washington Booth—shot in the back with a load of buckshot while returning peaceably from his work?" and so on.

During the Reconstruction years, the "Grand Old Party," scarcely a decade old, was still a bumptious young upstart. The Republicans had come to power on an anti-slavery, pro-Union platform and, having achieved those goals in a relatively short time, sought to maintain relevancy and power by advancing the economic ideals of classical liberalism. Though they ostensibly espoused free markets and deregulation, the economy in former Confederate states was regulated quite heavily, and economically crippling policies foisted upon the South during Reconstruction effectively placed its citizenry under colonial rule, an arrangement under which "taxation without representation" became the *de facto* mode of governance. The resentment engendered by such a system, wholly lacking in empathy, was expressed thus: "It is a bitter mockery to put a ring in the nose of a hog, or a grinding despotism over a section of our common country, and say to either, 'Root, hog, or die!'" ("Root, Hog, or Die!" 1868). Without a doubt, many Southerners, white and black alike, did actually starve during and after the Civil War, but the data are tenuous.

In the more than 150 years since the end of the Civil War, the Republican Party’s insistence on the justice of social Darwinism may not have waned much, but the currency of the proverb “Root, hog, or die” surely has. In a recent informal survey, not one person under the age of fifty claimed to recognize it. Rural flight and the factory farming system have distanced Americans from the origin of their food, creating the illusion that bacon comes from the grocer’s cooler. Sadly, this old American proverb has failed to root and met the consequences.

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