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Description

Historian Josh Brown analyzes a political cartoon from magazine "Harper's Weekly" that focuses on former Confederate President Jefferson Davis, and Hiram Revels, the first black senator in history.

Keywords

Harper's Weekly, Thomas Nast, Political Cartoon, President, Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, Othello, Hiram Revels, African Americans, Congress, Blacks, Politics, Reconstruction, South, Charles Sumner, Senate, Senator

Transcript

Time Works Wonders
Professor JOSH BROWN (American Social History Project, City University of New York): This is a
cartoon by Thomas Nast that was in Harper's Weekly. This is a terrific cartoon in many, many ways because it’s a snapshot of the political moment, of the significant political moment, that sort of captures the political struggle at play at this period of time.

What you're seeing here is Jefferson Davis in the foreground who is in the role of Iago, one of Shakespeare's most famous villains in Othello. And Iago is looking back at Hiram Revels, who was the first black senator, who replaced Jefferson Davis in as the senator for Mississippi. In this case, Hiram Revels is being referred to as Othello. But the, the role is being switched here, and the triumph is Othello's and not Iago's. The villain actually gets his, gets his doing.

This was a quite significant moment in American politics, one that has only been recaptured against in, you know, in the last 20 years as, as the very nature sort of the politics of Reconstruction have been reinterpreted.

There are a range of senators. Charles Sumner is in the foreground, who was the Massachusetts senator, was a radical Republican and a number of his colleagues. I think the emphasis here in particular is that is Revel's being greeted as an equal in, in the Senate. And, significantly and importantly, replacing Jefferson Davis, who, of course, was the president of the Confederacy.