

ISSUE 19

WAS RECONSTRUCTION A TOTAL FAILURE?

YES: J.G. Randall, from "Reconstruction Debacle," *The Civil War and Reconstruction** (D.C. Heath and Company, 1937)

NO: Eric Foner, "The New View of Reconstruction," *American Heritage*, October/November 1983

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Author Randall argues that reconstruction failed because carpetbaggers and their Negro allies misgoverned the South and looted its treasures.

NO: Professor Eric Foner believes that, although reconstruction was nonrevolutionary and conservative, it was a splendid failure because it offered blacks a temporary vision of a free society.

The Reconstruction Era (1865-1877) contains a mythological history which has been impossible for professional historians to dislodge. While the Civil War has been portrayed as an heroic era for both sides, reconstruction has been categorized as a tragedy for all Americans—northerners, southerners, whites, and blacks. According to the mythology a vengeful Congress, dominated by radical Republicans, imposed a military rule upon the southern states. Carpetbaggers from the North, along with traitorous white scalawags and their ignorant Negro accomplices, rewrote the state constitutions, disenfranchised former Confederate whites, controlled the legislature, passed laws which enabled them to raise taxes, looted the coffers of the government, and stole the possessions of the good white northerners. This farce came to an end in 1877 when a deal was made to allow Rutherford B. Hayes to assume the office of the Presidency. Hayes was given fifteen disputed electoral college votes (which enabled him to defeat his opponent Samuel J. Tilden by one vote). In return, the President agreed to end reconstruction by withdrawing federal troops from the southern states.

Between the years 1890 and 1930, this mythological portrait of reconstruction dominated the historical profession. The reasons for this are obvious: White southerners who wrote about this period made two basic assumptions: (1) that the South was capable of solving its own problems without federal government interference and (2) that blacks were intellectually inferior to whites and incapable of running a government (much less one in which whites would be their subordinates). Further-

more, the events of the times made this interpretation seem plausible. By the 1890s, most social scientists believed that the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) were biologically superior to Negroes, Orientals, Catholics, and Jewish immigrants. Segregation was legalized by statute in the southern states and the Supreme Court, and the rest of the nation wanted to heal the wounds of the Civil War and allowed the South to handle its own "problem." As a result of the Spanish American War in 1898, the United States acquired an empire in South America and the Pacific and forcibly ruled over non-white inhabitants.

Professional historians now reject this interpretation of the Reconstruction Era. The general public, however, still learns most of its history from fiction, movies, and the televised docudramas. Two of the greatest movies ever made dealt with the Civil War and the reconstruction period. In 1915 the silent film epic "The Birth of a Nation" mythologized the pre- and post-Civil War South and made heroes of the Ku Klux Klan. (It was, said President Woodrow Wilson, "cultural history written with lightning.") In 1939 another great epic movie "Gone With the Wind" romanticized the South for the current generation of Americans and is still shown to large television audiences.

The traditional interpretation of reconstruction has been under attack by historians for the past fifty years. Corruption, for example, existed in some reconstruction states but it also existed in northern states. (The Grant administration in Washington has been called the "era of good stealings.") Even after reconstruction ended, many other southern states became more corrupt than they had been during reconstruction.

Progressive historians printed a more positive picture of reconstruction. New state constitutions were written during this era that outlasted the politicians who wrote them; improvements were made in local administrations; the court systems were revised; and state-supported public schools were established for both whites and blacks.

Revisionist historians sharply attacked the notion that blacks had dominated the politics of the reconstruction South. They pointed out that there were no black governors, only two black senators, and fifteen black congressmen during this period. In no southern state did blacks control both houses of the legislature. Black politicians were usually better educated than their constituents and, contrary to legend, generally followed moderate policies favoring black equality; through the adoption of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments blacks were granted citizenship and adult males were given the right to vote.

In a selection that represents the traditional view of reconstruction, the Lincoln scholar, J.G. Randall, argues that reconstruction failed because the carpetbagger-Negro coalition of radical Republicans mismanaged the state governments and robbed its citizens. Searching for a new synthesis which moves beyond the negative post-revisionist studies, Professor Eric Foner concedes that reconstruction was not very radical, much less revolutionary. Nevertheless, it was a splendid failure because it offered blacks a vision of what a free society should look like.

RECONSTRUCTION DÉBÂCLE

I

For the seceded states the Grant period constituted the darkest days of "reconstruction." Coming south after the war to make money and seize political power, the Northern "carpetbagger" became the dominant figure in Southern politics for a decade. In collusion with the carpetbaggers were the "scalawags," native whites in the South who took advantage of the chance for aggrandizement which the postwar régime offered. Southern as they were, familiar with Negro characteristics and unembarrassed by the extravagance and gaucheerie of the carpetbaggers, they obtained control of numerous offices and became a power in local politics. Aided by a system which gave the vote to the Negro while it disfranchised the more substantial element among the whites, these political adventurers improved upon the system and added extra-legal touches of their own.

Elections in the South became a byword and a travesty. Ignorant blacks by the thousands cast ballots without knowing even the names of men for whom they were voting.¹ Southern communities in their political, social, and economic interests were subjected to the misguided action of these irresponsible creatures directed by white bosses. Election laws were deliberately framed to open the way for manipulation and fraud. Ballots were inspected before going into the box, and Negroes seeking to cast Democratic ballots were held up by objections and by an effort to change their votes.² Registration lists showed Negroes in proportion to population at a much higher ratio than the actual fact. Vote-buying became so common that Negroes came to expect it; much of the bacon and ham mentioned as "relief" was distributed with an eye to election-day results.³ To colored voters in Florida, acting under instructions from Radical leaders, the motto seemed to be "Vote early and often." Starting in early morning they moved along in groups, voting "at every precinct" on a long "line

of march," each time under assumed names.⁴ In advance of the voting hour ballots would be fraudulently deposited in the box. Party conventions were manipulated by Radical leaders, and nominations were forced by the bosses (sometimes military officers) in control. Reporting on the election of 1872 in Louisiana a committee of Congress stated that in their determination to have a legislature of their own party, the Republican returning board judged election returns, accepted false affidavits, and in some cases merely estimated "what the vote ought to have been." The whole proceeding was characterized as a "comedy of blunders and frauds."⁵

By 1867 the Union League had become strongly entrenched in the South; and it proved an effective instrument in the organization of the Radical Republican party among the blacks. It was stated in October, 1867, that the League had eighty-eight chapters in South Carolina, and that almost every Negro in the state was enrolled in the order.⁶ According to a statement of a Leaguer, every member was oath-bound to vote for those nominated by the order. The league, he said, existed "for no other purpose than to carry the elections. . . ."⁷ Ritual, ceremony, high-flown phrases about freedom and equal rights, sententious references to the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, accompanied by song, prayer, and oratory, had a compelling effect upon Negro emotions, while the black man's instinctive dependence upon whites made conquest easy, so that the sanctimonious League functioned with remarkable success in capturing and delivering the Negro vote. The Leagues "voted the Negroes like 'herds of senseless cattle'" is the statement of competent observers, borne out by numerous instances similar to that of a South Carolina black who explained his vote by saying that the League

was the "place where we learn the law." Another typical case was that of a Negro who was asked why he voted Republican and replied, "I can't read, and I can't write. . . . We go by instructions. We don't know nothing much."⁸

As the processes of carpetbag rule unfolded, honest men in the South felt increasing disgust. Conservative editors referred to the fancy state conventions as "black and tan" gatherings, "ing-streaked and speckled" conventions, or as assemblies of "baboons," "ragamuffins," or "jailbirds."⁹ "The maddest, most. . . infamous revolution in history," was the comment of the *Fairfield* (South Carolina) *Herald*.¹⁰ In the carpetbag constitutional convention of South Carolina (1868) 76 of the 124 delegates were colored, two-thirds of the Negroes being illiterates just emerging from slavery. These black members comported themselves in "bashful silence" while the whites attended to matters.¹¹ Of the whites one was put in jail for stealing his fellow members' belongings; others were accused of graver crimes, and in general it was remarked by the *New York Times* that hardly a white among the lot had a character that "would keep him out of the penitentiary."¹²

II

Supported by the Grant administration and fortified by military power, the Radical Republican state machines plunged the Southern commonwealths into an abyss of misgovernment. A congressional committee reported that one of the leading carpetbag governors made over \$100,000 during his first year though his salary was \$8000, while one of his appointees received fees exceeding \$60,000 a year.¹³ Another carpetbag governor was charged with stealing and selling the food of the freedmen's bureau intended for the relief of helpless

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and ragged ex-slaves. One of his associates was accused of falsely arresting Democratic members of the Florida state legislature in order to produce a carpetbag majority. F. J. Moses scalawag, stated that he received \$15,000 while governor of South Carolina for approving a large printing bill, \$25,000 when speaker, and various other sums.¹⁴

Southern legislatures were composed largely, sometimes predominantly, of Negroes. J. S. Pike, in a passage that has become classic, described the dense Negro crowd which, amid clamor and disorder, did the debating, squabbling, and lawmaking in South Carolina. Speaker, clerk, doorkeepers, pages, and chaplain were black. No one talked more than five minutes, said Pike, without interruption. Their "bel-lowsings and physical contortions" baffled description. It seemed to him barbarism overwhelming civilization with physical force, yet there was a curious earnestness about it all. In the confusion and uproar, with guffaws greeting the speaker as he rapped for order, the uncouth lawmakers were taking themselves seriously. "Seven years ago these men were raising corn and cotton under the whip of the overseer. Today they are raising points of order and questions of privilege. . . . It is easier and better paid. . . . It is their day of jubilee!"¹⁵

Some of the justices put into office by the Radicals could not write. According to a report of conditions in Mississippi, where the Ames Republicans¹⁶ controlled the Negro vote and used it "as a solid mass," the legislature contained Negroes who could neither read nor write, members of grand juries were "totally illiterate," and the Republicans nominated as mayor of Vicksburg a man who was under indictment for twenty-three offenses.¹⁷ Taking a leaf out of the carpetbaggers' book, Negro members of the Florida legislature were said to have formed a caucus with a

"smelling committee" to "ferret out all. . . money schemes." The arrangement broke down when it was found that the colored caucus chairman appropriated to himself the moneys intended to be distributed among members for the fixing of legislative votes.¹⁸ A Negro leader in South Carolina, admitting the receipt of \$5000 "in connection with" legislative matters, stated that he voted for the legislative measures because he thought they were right, and that by taking the money he was keeping it in the state! Refreshments supplied at public expense to South Carolina legislators included the finest wines, ales, whiskeys, and cigars; indeed the porter thought it impossible for men to drink so much whiskey and attend to any business.¹⁹ State house "supplies" paid for out of public funds included many varieties of liquors, costly table delicacies, luxurious furniture in lavish amounts, horses, and carriages. For the one item of printing in South Carolina the cost per month under Republican rule was more than a hundred times that of the subsequent Hampton administration. In fifteen months under the Republican administration \$835,000 was spent for printing as compared to \$609,000 for seventy-eight years under the old regime.²⁰ In the matter of "state aid" to railroad building in Alabama the notorious Stantons (John C. and Daniel N. of Boston) found their opportunity. Bringing no money into the state, they organized and promoted the Alabama and Chattanooga Railroad Company, obtained millions of state money from a bribed Radical legislature, built a hotel and opera house with some of the money, obtained fraudulent bond endorsements from the scalawag governor (William H. Smith), and left the state a wretched heritage of defaulted obligations.²¹

Huge debts were saddled upon the Southern states with the meagrest im-

provements to show for them. Millions in bonds in South Carolina were issued contrary to law, taxation being greatly increased, while the total assessed value of property in the state declined from \$489,000,000 in 1860 to \$90,000,000 in 1866.²² Delicate women were reported selling provisions needed for their hungry children, in order to pay taxes, while for failure to pay taxes Southern whites were losing lands which were brought up by Negroes or Northern speculators.²³ South Carolina newspapers were "full of reports of sheriff's sales," 74,000 acres being put under tax sales in a brief period in Darlington County, 86,000 acres in Williamsburg County, and more than two thousand pieces of real estate in Charleston.²⁴ Tax rates in Mississippi were fourteen times as great in 1874 as in 1869, the public debt being piled up annually at the rate of \$664,000.²⁵ Grants under the scalawag Holden regime to railroad companies in North Carolina exceeded \$27,000,000.²⁶

One of the flagrant evils of misgovernment was seen in the militia of carpetbag times. White desperadoes from Missouri, enlisted as Arkansas militiamen, tore up and down the state smashing property, destroying crops, and committing murder.²⁷ Groups of Negro militia in the same state became murderous mobs, with defiance born of the belief "that crimes committed. . . as a mob. . . [would] not subject them to. . . punishment."²⁸ A Negro militia detachment of more than a hundred men dashed into an Arkansas town and galloped about, cursing, threatening, raiding a grocery store, and breaking into the jail.²⁹ Because of the terrorism practiced by the militia in North Carolina, Governor Holden was impeached and removed from office.³⁰ In South Carolina militia troubles developed into a war of races as outraged whites organized to protect their property and

lives against armed Negro militiamen.³¹ In this commonwealth the militia was almost entirely colored, and it was reported that at least two-thirds of the militia expenditures were a "huge fraud," the amount being in reality used for "political services."³²

To use a modern phrase, government under Radical Republican rule in the South had become a kind of "racket." A parasitic organization had been grafted on to the government itself, so that the agencies of rule and authority were manipulated for private and partisan ends. Often in the reconstructed states government bore a bogus quality, that which called itself government was an artificial fabrication. Where the chance of plunder was so alluring it was no wonder that rival factions would clash for control of the spoils, nor that outraged citizens, seeking to recover the government for the people, should resort to irregular and abnormal methods. At times this clash of factions created the demoralizing spectacle of dual or rival governments. In Louisiana the Warrmoth-McEnery faction battled furiously with the Kellogg-Cassey faction.³³ In South Carolina "was seen the. . . spectacle of two speakers and two Houses conducting deliberations in the same hall. Motions. . . [etc.] were heard by the respective speakers, neither speaker, however, recognized members of the other House."³⁴ In Arkansas similar conditions produced the cheap melodrama of the "Brooks-Baxter war," with rival "armies" facing each other in support of their "governments," resulting in some actual bloodshed, various arrests for treason, sundry impeachments, not a little *opéra bouffe* comedy, and general confusion.³⁵

Such, in brief, was the nature of carpetbag rule in the South. The concept which the Radicals sought to disseminate was that the problems of restoration had all been neatly solved, the country saved, and

the South "reconstructed" by 1868. That dignified publication known as the *American Annual Cyclopedica* began its preface for the year 1868 with the following amazing statement: "This volume of the *Annual Cyclopedica*, for the year 1868, presents the complete restoration, as members of the Union, of all the Southern states except three [Virginia, Mississippi, Texas], and the final disappearance of all difficulties between the citizens of those States and the Federal Government." The fact of the matter was that this "complete restoration" was merely the beginning of the corrupt and abusive era of carpetbag rule by the forcible imposition of Radical governments upon an unwilling and protesting people. Before this imposition took place the Southern states already had satisfactory governments. It is a serious misconception to suppose that Johnson's efforts in the South had been altogether a "failure." On the contrary, in the years from 1865 to 1868, when Congress had not "reconstructed" a state except Tennessee, and when state governments in the South were imperatively needed for domestic purposes, such governments were set up by Johnson. It must not be forgotten that these were native white governments genuinely supported and put into power by the Southern people, and that they functioned in the preservation of order and internal government in those important years that intervened between the surrenders and the establishment of carpetbag misrule by Congress. If one would seek to measure the importance of this, let him contemplate what would have been the result if these commonwealths had made no such adjustment and had waited several years for Congress to supply the pattern for state governments. Instead of saying that reconstruction had been solved by Congress in 1868, the truer generalization would be

that the transition to normal polity in the South had been pretty well worked out by Johnson, that it was violently interrupted by the Radicals, and that only after the overthrow of the Radical regime (about 1877) did genuine political reconstruction get under way with any fair prospect for the future.

Another unfair conclusion is to attribute the excesses of the carpetbag period to the Negro. Though the Radicals used Negro voting and officeholding for their own ends, Republican governments in the South were not Negro governments. Even where Negroes served, the governments were under white control. It is the contention of Carter G. Woodson that "most of the local offices . . . were held by the white men, and [that] those Negroes who did attain some of the higher offices were . . . about as competent as the average whites thereto elected." He also argues that illiteracy among Negro officeholders has been exaggerated.³⁶ That the first phase of the Negro's experience of freedom after centuries of slavery should occur under the degrading conditions of these carpetbag years was not the fault of the Negro himself, but of the whites who exploited him. . . .

NOTES

1. W. L. Fleming, ed., *Documentary History of Reconstruction*, II, 44.
2. *Ibid.*, II, 81-82.
3. *Ibid.*, II, 83.
4. *Ibid.*, II, 85-86.
5. H. C. Wernoth, *War, Politics and Reconstruction: Stormy Days in Louisiana*, 225.
6. Simkins and Woody, *South Carolina during Reconstruction*, 75 n.
7. *Ibid.*, 79.
8. *Ibid.*, 80.
9. E. F. Oberholzer, *Hist. of the U. S. since the Civil War*, II, 45.
10. Quoted in Simkins and Woody, 110.
11. *Ibid.*, 91.
12. *Ibid.*, 92-93.
13. Fleming, *Doc Hist.*, II, 39.
14. *Ibid.*, II, 41.

15. J. S. Pike, *The Prostrate State*, 121f, quoted in Fleming, *Doc Hist.*, II, 51f.
16. So named after General Adbert Ames of Maine, who was provisional governor, United States senator, and then governor of Mississippi in the carpetbag period, and under whose Radical rule there was violent opposition among the whites, leading to terrorism over the state and a serious race riot at Vicksburg on December 7, 1874.
17. Fleming, *Doc Hist.*, II, 42-43.
18. *Ibid.*, II, 50-51.
19. *Ibid.*, II, 59.
20. *Ibid.*, II, 69.
21. A. B. Moore, "Railroad Building in Alabama During the Reconstruction Period," *Journal of Southern Hist.*, I, 421-441 (Nov., 1935), especially 427-430.
22. Simkins and Woody, 173.
23. *Ibid.*, 178-179.

24. *Ibid.*, 180-181.
25. Fleming, *Doc Hist.*, II, 71.
26. J. G. deR. Hamilton, *Reconstruction in North Carolina*, 448.
27. Fleming, *Doc Hist.*, II, 73 ff.
28. *Ibid.*, II, 77.
29. *Ibid.*, II, 76.
30. *Ibid.*, II, 78.
31. Simkins and Woody, 485.
32. Fleming, *Doc Hist.*, II, 79.
33. See below (sec. vi of the present chapter); see also H. C. Wernoth, *War, Politics and Reconstruction . . . in Louisiana*, 233, and *passim*.
34. Simkins and Woody, 524.
35. J. M. Harell, *The Brooks and Boxer War: A History of the Reconstruction Period in Arkansas*.
36. Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro in Our History*, 403 ff.

THE NEW VIEW OF RECONSTRUCTION

In the past twenty years, no period of American history has been the subject of a more thoroughgoing reevaluation than Reconstruction—the violent, dramatic, and still controversial era following the Civil War. Race relations, politics, social life, and economic change during Reconstruction have all been reinterpreted in the light of changed attitudes toward the place of blacks within American society. If historians have not yet forged a fully satisfying portrait of Reconstruction as a whole, the traditional interpretation that dominated historical writing for much of this century has irrevocably been laid to rest.

Anyone who attended high school before 1960 learned that Reconstruction was an era of unrelieved sordidness in American political and social life. The martyred Lincoln, according to this view, had planned a quick and painless readmission of the Southern states as equal members of the national family. President Andrew Johnson, his successor, attempted to carry out Lincoln's policies but was foiled by the Radical Republicans (also known as Vindictives or Jacobins). Motivated by an irrational hatred of Rebels or by ties with Northern capitalists out to plunder the South, the Radicals swept aside Johnson's lenient program and fastened black supremacy upon the defeated Confederacy. An orgy of corruption followed, presided over by unscrupulous carpetbaggers (Northerners who ventured south to reap the spoils of office), traitorous scoundrels (Southern whites who cooperated with the new governments for personal gain), and the ignorant and childlike freedmen, who were incapable of properly exercising the political power that had been thrust upon them. After much needless suffering, the white community of the South banded together to overthrow these "black" governments and restore home rule (their euphemism for white supremacy). All told, Reconstruction was just about the darkest page in the American saga.

Originating in Anti-Reconstruction propaganda of Southern Democrats during the 1870s, this traditional interpretation achieved scholarly legitimacy

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around the turn of the century through the work of William Dunning and his students at Columbia University. It reached the larger public through films like *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind* and that best-selling work of myth-making masquerading as history, *The Tragic Era* by Claude G. Bowers. In language as exaggerated as it was colorful, Bowers told how Andrew Johnson "fought the bravest battle for constitutional liberty and for the preservation of our institutions ever waged by an Executive" but was overwhelmed by the "poisonous propaganda" of the Radicals. Southern whites, as a result, "literally were put to the torture" by "emissaries of hate" who manipulated the "simple-minded" freedmen, "inflaming the negroes' egotism" and even inspiring "lustful assaults" by blacks upon white womanhood.

In a discipline that sometimes seems to pride itself on the rapid rise and fall of historical interpretations, this traditional portrait of Reconstruction enjoyed remarkable staying power. The long reign of the old interpretation is not difficult to explain. It presented a set of easily identifiable heroes and villains. It enjoyed the imprimatur of the nation's leading scholars. And it accorded with the political and social realities of the first half of this century. This image of Reconstruction helped freeze the mind of the white South in unalterable opposition to any movement for breaching the ascendancy of the Democratic party, eliminating segregation, or readmitting disfranchised blacks to the vote.

Nevertheless, the demise of the traditional interpretation was inevitable, for it ignored the testimony of the central participant in the drama of Reconstruction—the black freedman. Furthermore, it was grounded in the conviction that blacks were unfit to share in political power. As Dunning's Columbia colleague John W.

Burgess put it, "A black skin means membership in a race of men which has never of itself succeeded in subjecting passion to reason, has never, therefore, created any civilization of any kind." Once objective scholarship and modern experience rendered that assumption untenable, the entire edifice was bound to fall.

The work of "revising" the history of Reconstruction began with the writings of a handful of survivors of the era, such as John R. Lynch, who had served as a black congressman from Mississippi after the Civil War. In the 1930s white scholars like Francis Simluns and Robert Woody carried the task forward. Then, in 1935, the black historian and activist W.E.B. Du Bois produced *Black Reconstruction in America*, a monumental reevaluation that closed with an irrefutable indictment of a historical profession that had sacrificed scholarly objectivity on the altar of racial bias. "One fact and one alone," he wrote, "explains the attitude of most recent writers toward Reconstruction: they cannot conceive of Negroes as men." Du Bois's work, however, was ignored by most historians.

It was not until the 1960s that the full force of the revisionist wave broke over the field. Then, in rapid succession, virtually every assumption of the traditional viewpoint was systematically dismantled. A drastically different portrait emerged to take its place. President Lincoln did not have a coherent "plan" for Reconstruction, but at the time of his assassination he had been cautiously contemplating black suffrage. Andrew Johnson was a stubborn, racist politician who lacked the ability to compromise. By isolating himself from the broad currents of public opinion that had nourished Lincoln's career, Johnson created an impasse with Congress that Lincoln would certainly have avoided, thus throwing away his political power and destroying

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his own plans for reconstructing the South. The Radicals in Congress were acquitted of both vindictive motives and the charge of serving as the stalking-horses of Northern capitalism. They emerged instead as idealists in the best nineteenth-century reform tradition. Radical leaders like Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens had worked for the rights of blacks long before any conceivable political advantage flowed from such a commitment. Stevens refused to sign the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1838 because it disfranchised the state's black citizens. Sumner led a fight in the 1850s to integrate Boston's public schools. Their Reconstruction policies were based on principle, not petty political advantage, for the central issue dividing Johnson and these Radical Republicans was the civil rights of freedmen. Studies of congressional policy-making, such as Eric L. McKittrick's *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction*, also revealed that Reconstruction legislation, ranging from the Civil Rights Act of 1866 to the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, enjoyed broad support from moderate and conservative Republicans. It was not simply the work of a narrow radical faction.

Even more startling was the revised portrait of Reconstruction in the South itself. Imbued with the spirit of the civil rights movement and rejecting entirely the racial assumptions that had underpinned the traditional interpretation, these historians evaluated Reconstruction from the black point of view. Works like Joel Williamson's *After Slavery* portrayed the period as a time of extraordinary political, social, and economic progress for blacks. The establishment of public school systems, the granting of equal citizenship to blacks, the effort to restore the devastated Southern economy, the attempt to construct an interracial political democracy from the ashes of slavery, all these were commend-

able achievements, not the elements of Bowers's "tragic era."

Unlike earlier writers, the revisionists stressed the active role of the freedmen in shaping Reconstruction. Black initiative established as many schools as did Northern religious societies and the Freedmen's Bureau. The right to vote was not simply thrust upon them by meddling outsiders, since blacks began agitating for the suffrage as soon as they were freed. In 1865 black conventions throughout the South issued eloquent, though unheeded, appeals for equal civil and political rights.

With the advent of Radical Reconstruction in 1867, the freedmen did enjoy a real measure of political power. But black supremacy never existed. In most states blacks held only a small fraction of political offices, and even in South Carolina, where they compromised a majority of the state legislature's lower house, effective power remained in white hands. As for corruption, moral standards in both government and private enterprise were at low ebb throughout the nation in the postwar years—the era of Boss Tweed, the Credit Mobilier scandal, and the Whiskey Ring. Southern corruption could hardly be blamed on former slaves.

Other actors in the Reconstruction drama also came in for reevaluation. Most carpetbaggers were former Union soldiers seeking economic opportunity in the postwar South, not unscrupulous adventurers. Their motives, a typically American amalgam of humanitarianism and the pursuit of profit, were no more insidious than those of Western pioneers. Scalawags, previously seen as traitors to the white race, now emerged as "Old Line" Whig Unionists who had opposed secession in the first place or as poor whites who had long resented planters' domination of Southern life and who saw in Reconstruction a

chance to recast Southern society along more democratic lines. Strongholds of Southern white Republicanism like east Tennessee and western North Carolina had been the scene of resistance to Confederate rule throughout the Civil War; now, as one scalawag newspaper put it, the choice was "between salvation at the hand of the Negro or destruction at the hand of the rebels."

At the same time, the Ku Klux Klan and kindred groups, whose campaign of violence against black and white Republicans had been minimized or excused in older writings, were portrayed as they really were. Earlier scholars had conveyed the impression that the Klan intimidated blacks mainly by dressing as ghosts and playing on the freedmen's superstitions. In fact, black fears were all too real: the Klan was a terrorist organization that beat and killed its political opponents to deprive blacks of their newly won rights. The complicity of the Democratic party and the silence of prominent whites in the face of such outrages stood as an indictment of the moral code the South had inherited from the days of slavery.

By the end of the 1960s, then, the old interpretation had been completely revised. Southern freedmen were the heroes, the "Redeemers" who overthrew Reconstruction were the villains, and if the era was "tragic," it was because change did not go far enough. Reconstruction had been a time of real progress and its failure a lost opportunity for the South and the nation. But the legacy of Reconstruction—the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments—endured to inspire future efforts for civil rights. As Kenneth Stampp wrote in *The Era of Reconstruction*, a superb summary of revisionist findings published in 1965, "If it was worth four years of civil war to save the Union, it was worth a few

years of radical reconstruction to give the American Negro the ultimate promise of equal civil and political rights."

As Stampp's statement suggests, the reevaluation of the first Reconstruction was inspired in large measure by the impact of the second—the modern civil rights movement. And with the waning of that movement in recent years, writing on Reconstruction has undergone still another transformation. Instead of seeing the Civil War and its aftermath as a second American Revolution (as Charles Beard had), a regression into barbarism (as Bowers argued), or a golden opportunity squandered (as the revisionists saw it), recent writers argue that Radical Reconstruction was not really very radical. Since land was not distributed to the former slaves, they remained economically dependent upon their former owners. The planter class survived both the war and Reconstruction with its property (apart from slaves) and prestige more or less intact.

Not only changing times but also the changing concerns of historians have contributed to this latest reassessment of Reconstruction. The hallmark of the past decade's historical writing has been an emphasis upon "social history"—the evocation of the past lives of ordinary Americans—and the downplaying of strictly political events. When applied to Reconstruction, this concern with the "social" suggested that black suffrage and officeholding, once seen as the most radical departures of the Reconstruction era, were relatively insignificant.

Recent historians have focused their investigations not upon the politics of Reconstruction but upon the social and economic aspects of the transition from slavery to freedom. Herbert Gutman's influential study of the black family during and after slavery found little change in family

structure or relations between men and women resulting from emancipation. Under slavery most blacks had lived in nuclear family units, although they faced the constant threat of separation from loved ones by sale. Reconstruction provided the opportunity for blacks to solidify their pre-existing family ties. Conflicts over whether black women should work in the cotton fields (planters said yes, many black families said no) and over white attempts to "apprentice" black children revealed that the autonomy of family life was a major preoccupation of the freedmen. Indeed, whether manifested in their withdrawal from churches controlled by whites, in the blossoming of black fraternal, benevolent, and self-improvement organizations, or in the demise of the slave quarters and their replacement by small tenant farms occupied by individual families, the quest for independence from white authority and control over their own day-to-day lives shaped the black response to emancipation.

In the post-Civil War South the surest guarantee of economic autonomy, blacks believed, was land. To the freedmen the justice of a claim to land based on their years of unrequited labor appeared self-evident. As an Alabama black convention put it, "The property which they [the planters] hold was nearly all earned by the sweat of our brows." As Leon Litwack showed in *Been in the Storm So Long*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the black response to emancipation, many freedmen in 1865 and 1866 refused to sign labor contracts, expecting the federal government to give them land. In some localities, as one Alabama overseer reported, they "set up claims to the plantation and all on it."

In the end, of course, the vast majority of Southern blacks remained propertyless and poor. But exactly why the South, and

especially its black population, suffered from dire poverty and economic retardation in the decades following the Civil War is a matter of much dispute. In *One Kind of Freedom*, economists Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch indicted country merchants for monopolizing credit and charging usurious interest rates, forcing black tenants into debt and locking the South into a dependence on cotton production that impoverished the entire region. But Jonathan Wiener, in his study of postwar Alabama, argued that planters used their political power to compel blacks to remain on the plantations. Planters succeeded in stabilizing the plantation system, but only by blocking the growth of alternative enterprises, like factories, that might draw off black laborers, thus locking the region into a pattern of economic backwardness.

If the thrust of recent writing has emphasized the social and economic aspects of Reconstruction, politics has not been entirely neglected. But political studies have also reflected the postrevisionist mood summarized by C. Vann Woodward when he observed "how essentially nonrevolutionary and conservative Reconstruction really was." Recent writers, unlike their revisionist predecessors, have found little to praise in federal policy toward the emancipated blacks.

A new sensitivity to the strength of prejudice and *laissez-faire* ideas in the nineteenth-century North has led many historians to doubt whether the Republican party ever made a genuine commitment to racial justice in the South. The granting of black suffrage was an alternative to a long-term federal responsibility for protecting the rights of the former slaves. Once entrenched, blacks could be left to fend for themselves. With the exception of a few Radicals like Thaddeus Stevens, nearly all Northern policy-makers and educators are

criticized today for assuming that, so long as the unfettered operations of the marketplace afforded blacks the opportunity to advance through diligent labor, federal efforts to assist them in acquiring land were unnecessary.

Probably the most innovative recent writing on Reconstruction politics has centered on a broad reassessment of black Republicanism, largely undertaken by a new generation of black historians. Scholars like Thomas Holt and Nell Painter insist that Reconstruction was not simply a matter of black and white. Conflicts within the black community, no less than divisions among whites, shaped Reconstruction politics. Where revisionist scholars, both black and white, had celebrated the accomplishments of black political leaders, Holt, Painter, and others charge that they failed to address the economic plight of the black masses. Painter criticized "representative colored men," as national black leaders were called, for failing to provide ordinary freedmen with effective political leadership. Holt found that black office-holders in South Carolina mostly emerged from the old free mulatto class of Charleston, which shared many assumptions with prominent whites. "Basically bourgeois in their origins and orientation," he wrote, they "failed to act in the interest of black peasants."

In emphasizing the persistence from slavery of divisions between free blacks and slaves, these writers reflect the increasing concern with continuity and conservatism in Reconstruction. Their work reflects a startling extension of revisionist premises. If, as has been argued for the past twenty years, blacks were active agents rather than mere victims of manipulation, then they could not be absolved of blame for the ultimate failure of Reconstruction.

Despite the excellence of recent writing and the continual expansion of our knowl-

edge of the period, historians of Reconstruction today face a unique dilemma. An old interpretation has been overthrown, but a coherent new synthesis has yet to take its place. The revisionists of the 1960s effectively established a series of negative points: the Reconstruction governments were not as bad as had been portrayed, black supremacy was a myth, the Radicals were not cynical manipulators of the freedmen. Yet no convincing overall portrait of the quality of political and social life emerged from their writings. More recent historians have rightly pointed to elements of continuity that spanned the nineteenth-century Southern experience, especially the survival, in modified form, of the plantation system. Nevertheless, by denying the real changes that did occur, they have failed to provide a convincing portrait of an era characterized above all by drama, turmoil, and social change.

Building upon the findings of the past twenty years of scholarship, a new portrait of Reconstruction ought to begin by viewing it not as a specific time period, bounded by the years 1865 and 1877, but as an episode in a prolonged historical process—American society's adjustment to the consequences of the Civil War and emancipation. The Civil War, of course, raised the decisive questions of America's national existence: the relations between local and national authority, the definition of citizenship, the balance between force and consent in generating obedience to authority. The war and Reconstruction, as Allan Nevins observed over fifty years ago, marked the "emergence of modern America." This was the era of the completion of the national railroad network, the creation of the modern steel industry, the conquest of the West and final subduing of the Indians, and the expansion of the mining frontier. Lincoln's America—the world of the small farm and artisan

shop—gave way to a rapidly industrializing economy. The issues that galvanized postwar Northern politics—from the question of the greenback currency to the mode of paying holders of the national debt—arose from the economic changes unleashed by the Civil War.

Above all the war irrevocably abolished slavery. Since 1619, when "twenty negroes" disembarked from a Dutch ship in Virginia, racial injustice had haunted American life, mocking its professed ideals even as tobacco and cotton, the products of slave labor, helped finance the nation's economic development. Now the implications of the black presence could no longer be ignored. The Civil War resolved the problem of slavery but, as the Philadelphia diarist Sydney George Fisher observed in June 1865, it opened an even more intractable problem: "What shall we do with the Negro?" Indeed, he went on, this was a problem "incapable of any solution that will satisfy both North and South."

As Fisher realized, the focal point of Reconstruction was the social revolution known as emancipation. Plantation slavery was simultaneously a system of labor, a form of racial domination, and the foundation upon which arose a distinctive ruling class within the South. Its demise threw open the most fundamental questions of economy, society, and politics. A new system of labor, social, racial, and political relations had to be created to replace slavery.

The United States was not the only nation to experience emancipation in the nineteenth century. Neither plantation slavery nor abolition were unique to the United States. But Reconstruction was. In a comparative perspective Radical Reconstruction stands as a remarkable experiment, the only effort of a society experiencing abolition to bring the former slaves within the um-

brella of equal citizenship. Because the Radicals did not achieve everything they wanted, historians have lately tended to play down the stunning departure represented by black suffrage and officeholding. Former slaves, most fewer than two years removed from bondage, debated the fundamental questions of the polity: What is a republican form of government? Should the state provide equal education for all? How could political equality be reconciled with a society in which property was so unequally distributed? There was something inspiring in the way such men met the challenge of Reconstruction. "I knew nothing more than to obey my master," James K. Greene, an Alabama black politician later recalled. "But the tocsin of freedom sounded and knocked at the door and we walked out like free men and we met the exigencies as they grew up, and shouldered the responsibilities."

"You never saw a people more excited on the subject of politics than are the negroes of the south," one planter observed in 1867. And there were more than a few Southern whites as well who in these years shook off the prejudices of the past to embrace the vision of a new South dedicated to the principles of equal citizenship and social justice. One ordinary South Carolinian expressed the new sense of possibility in 1868 to the Republican governor of the state: "I am sorry that I cannot write an elegant stilted letter to your excellency. But I rejoice to think that God almighty has given to the poor of S. C. a Gov. to hear to feel to protect the humble poor without distinction to race or color. . . . I am a native borned S. C. a poor man never owned a Negro in my life nor my father before me. . . . Remember the true and loyal are the poor of the whites and blacks, outside of these you can find none loyal." Few modern scholars believe the Recor-

struction governments established in the South in 1867 and 1868 fulfilled the aspirations of their humble constituents. While their achievements in such realms as education, civil rights, and the economic rebuilding of the South are now widely appreciated, historians today believe they failed to affect either the economic plight of the emancipated slave or the ongoing transformation of independent white farmers into cotton tenants. Yet their opponents did perceive the Reconstruction governments in precisely this way—as representatives of a revolution that had put the bottom rail, both racial and economic, on top. This perception helps explain the ferocity of the attacks leveled against them and the pervasiveness of violence in the postemancipation South.

The spectacle of black men voting and holding office was anathema to large numbers of Southern whites. Even more disturbing, at least in the view of those who still controlled the plantation regions of the South, was the emergence of local officials, black and white, who sympathized with the plight of the black laborer. Alabama's vagrancy law was a "dead letter" in 1870, "because those who are charged with its enforcement are indebted to the vagrant vote for their offices and emoluments." Political debates over the level and incidence of taxation, the control of crops, and the resolution of contract disputes revealed that a primary issue of Reconstruction was the role of government in a plantation society. During presidential Reconstruction, and after "Redemption," with planters and their allies in control of politics, the law emerged as a means of stabilizing and promoting the plantation system. If Radical Reconstruction failed to redistribute the land of the South, the ouster of the planter class from control of politics at least ensured that the sanctions of the criminal law would

not be employed to discipline the black labor force.

An understanding of this fundamental conflict over the relation between government and society helps explain the pervasive complaints concerning corruption and "extravagance" during Radical Reconstruction. Corruption there was aplenty; tax rates did rise sharply. More significant than the rate of taxation, however, was the change in its incidence. For the first time, planters and white farmers had to pay a significant portion of their income to the government, while propertyless blacks often escaped scot-free. Several states moreover, enacted heavy taxes on uncultivated land to discourage land speculation and force land onto the market, benefiting, it was hoped, the freedmen.

As time passed, complaints about the "extravagance" and corruption of Southern governments found a sympathetic audience among influential Northerners. The Democratic charge that universal suffrage in the South was responsible for high taxes and governmental extravagance coincided with a rising conviction among the urban middle classes of the North that city government had to be taken out of the hands of the immigrant poor and returned to the "best men"—the educated, professional, financially independent citizens unable to exert much political influence at a time of mass parties and machine politics. Increasingly the "respectable" middle classes began to retreat from the very notion of universal suffrage. The poor were no longer perceived as honest producers, the backbone of the social order, now they became the "dangerous classes," the "mob." As the historian Francis Parkman put it, too much power rested with "masses of imported ignorance and hereditary ineptitude." To Parkman the Irish of the Northern cities and the blacks of the South were equally incapable

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of utilizing the ballot: "Witness the municipal corruptions of New York, and the mortostrosities of negro rule in South Carolina." Such attitudes helped to justify Northern inaction as, one by one, the Reconstruction regimes of the South were overthrown by political violence.

In the end, then, neither the abolition of slavery nor Reconstruction succeeded in resolving the debate over the meaning of freedom in American life. Twenty years before the American Civil War, writing about the prospect of abolition in France's colonies, Alexis de Tocqueville had written, "If the Negroes have the right to become free, the [planters] have the incontestable right not to be ruined by the Negroes' freedom." And in the United States, as in nearly every plantation society that experienced the end of slavery, a rigid social and political dichotomy between former master and former slave, an ideology of racism, and a dependent labor force with limited economic opportunities all survived abolition. Unless one means by freedom the simple fact of not being a slave, emancipation thrust blacks into a kind of no-man's land, a partial freedom that made a mockery of the American ideal of equal citizenship. Yet by the same token the ultimate outcome underscores the uniqueness of Reconstruction itself. Alone among the

societies that abolished slavery in the nineteenth century, the United States, for a moment, offered the freedmen a measure of political control over their own destinies. However brief its sway, Reconstruction allowed scope for a remarkable political and social mobilization of the black community. It opened doors of opportunity that could never be completely closed. Reconstruction transformed the lives of Southern blacks in ways unmeasurable by statistics and unreachable by law. It raised their expectations and aspirations, redefined their status in relation to the larger society, and allowed space for the creation of institutions that enabled them to survive the repression that followed. And it established constitutional principles of civil and political equality that, while flagrantly violated after Redemption, planted the seeds of future struggle.

Certainly, in terms of the sense of possibility with which it opened, Reconstruction failed. But as Du Bois observed, it was a "splendid failure." For its animating vision—a society in which social advancement would be open to all on the basis of individual merit, not inherited caste distinctions—is as old as America itself and remains relevant to a nation still grappling with the unresolved legacy of emancipation.

POSTSCRIPT

WAS RECONSTRUCTION A TOTAL FAILURE?

Both the traditional and revisionist writers of reconstruction history have treated blacks in a passive manner. Traditionalists like Randall, who assumed the intellectual inferiority of Negroes to whites, argued that black politicians were the junior partners of the white carpetbaggers and scalawags in looting the reconstruction governments. Revisionists like Kenneth Stampp, who believed in the biological equality of all human races, maintained that the black politicians did not constitute a majority in the reconstruction government, were not totally corrupt, and did not want to disenfranchise whites but only desired their political and social constitutional rights. Writing at the peak of the civil rights movement in 1965, it appears that Stampp was trying to assure his readers that blacks only wanted to become good Americans and obtain (in this second Reconstruction Era) what had been denied them a century ago.

Professor Foner's essay makes it clear that the Reconstruction Era is in search of a new synthesis. One area that deserves further investigation is the role of the era's ex-slaves. In recent years, slavery has been reinterpreted from the point of view of the slaves rather than the slave owners. Post-revisionist writers must look at the newly freed blacks as actively struggling to achieve their rights and to assume their new responsibilities in the post-Civil War society.

Recent writers of this period have taken two different approaches—local history and comparative history. Thomas Holt's *Black Over White* (Illinois, 1977) is a sophisticated study of Negro political leadership in South Carolina during reconstruction. Combining traditional sources like old letters, military service records, and newspapers with sophisticated quantitative analyses of voting records, Holt gives a complex picture of the reconstructed state with the largest number of "black peasants" (p. 3). Reconstruction failed in South Carolina, says Holt, not because of corruption but because Negro leaders failed to develop a clear and unifying ideology to challenge whites who wanted to restore white supremacy.

Clearly, Holt is arguing from a "pessimistic" viewpoint which believes that reconstruction accomplished very little because the federal government did not break up "the planter class" and give every former slave "fifty acres and a mule." More hopeful about the achievements of the Reconstruction Era is Professor Eric Foner. In a series of essays published in 1984 by the Louisiana State University Press, Foner's *Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy* compares American ex-slaves with those newly emancipated in Haiti and the British West Indies. Only in America were the freed men given voting and economic rights. Though these rights had been taken away from the majority of blacks by 1900 reconstruction had, nevertheless, created a legacy of freedom which inspired succeeding generations of blacks.