

The Legacy of Reconstruction

After the Civil War, America was faced with issues and challenges not anticipated or experienced previously by other leading nations around the world:

What were the roles to be performed by the different branches of the government in reconstructing and uniting the country?

What powers were extended or limited by the Constitution?

How to reform a Union shattered by 4 years of war?

How to assimilate millions of newly freed slaves, mostly in an economically shattered South.

How to determine the legal status of the freed slaves?

How to structure Reconstruction to insure that a future insurrection would not occur?

How to repair and rebuild a devastated Southern economy and culture.

The effects of the decisions made and the policies implemented impacted not just the South in the 10 years following the Civil War but have left a legacy still experienced today.

Lesson Format

In small groups you will research and explore the Legacy of Reconstruction by analyzing the Political, Economic and Social impacts on the United States for specific time periods:

Immediately after the Civil War 1865 to 1877

Southern control of Reconstruction 1877 to 1887

The Legacy of Reconstruction from 1887 to today

You are expected to source Primary and Secondary sources in your research as well as trends in historical perspectives.

Each group will then present their findings to their class.

Expectations

Each presentation will include a creative visual presentation to reinforce their topic>

PowerPoint presentations are not allowed with the exception of the group framing the Contextual elements of the Reconstruction Period.

Group Structures and Assignments

1. Provide factual overview of Reconstruction in the 1st 5 years after the Civil War.
PowerPoint or Prezi may be used for this assignment.
2. Sub-Groups of each period analyzing and evaluating the 3 themes of Historical Analysis.
 - a. Political
 - b. Economic
 - c. Social
3. Each subgroup will develop 2 discussion questions for their specific assignment. These ?'s will be reviewed and approved prior to the class presentation on Wednesday, 12/6 or Thursday 12/8.

Reconstruction Reconsidered: A Historiography of Reconstruction, From the Late Nineteenth Century to the 1960s.

Like the history of the Civil War and slavery itself, the history of Reconstruction (1865-1877), I am adopting here the periodization used by most of... that brief period when “the country experimented with genuine interracial democracy” (Foner *Forever Free* xx), proved a contested terrain from the first. The mainstream narrative which gradually emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries held that Reconstruction had been a time of chaos and corruption, when ignorant newly-freed men, supported by the bayonets of the federal government, had been allowed to rule over the South. Redemption restored society to its presumed natural order and put an end to the unholy alliance of freed slaves, adventurers from the North (“carpetbaggers”) and Southern white traitors (“scalawags”). The elaboration and continuation of the overarching narrative of Reconstruction served to justify, among a host of other acts, the removal of the recently-won rights of African Americans. This totalizing discourse—and the treatment of blacks in the South—did not go unchallenged. Dissenting voices remained largely unheard, however, before the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. This article aims to retrace and contextualize “The Dark and Bloody Ground of Reconstruction Historiography” (Weisberger) until the beginning of what C. Vann Woodward called the “Second Reconstruction” (Woodward 8).

The fight over the writing of Reconstruction arguably began during Reconstruction itself, and the contentious debates over the various laws and amendments which turned freedmen into full citizens and allowed them to play an active role in the political life of the South. Contemporary periodicals, which both echoed and tried to influence those debates, provide today’s reader with the seeds of two very different interpretations of the Reconstruction then underway. Thus *Harper’s Weekly* staunchly defended radical Reconstruction and the enfranchisement of freedmen as the only means to protect them from their former masters. The New York-based weekly provided its readers with positive pictures of African Americans taking on their new responsibilities as citizens, lawmakers and the like. It also exposed, in word and image, the violence of the Ku Klux Klan and other terrorist groups, in order to emphasize the continued need for

the federal government —and the Republican Party —to keep close watch on events in the South. On the other hand, Southern magazines such as *DeBow's Review* warned that the South was falling victim to “negro domination,” a contention supported by some accounts of conditions in the South by Northerners, perhaps most notably James S. Pike. Pike, a journalist, was dispatched to South Carolina by the *New York Tribune* in 1873 and charged with assessing the results of Reconstruction. The series of articles that he produced was published in book format the following year, and the title of the work, *The Prostrate State: South Carolina under Negro Government* (1874), left little doubt as to his interpretation of events. *The Prostrate State* posits blacks as an “inferior race” (69) and tells the tragic story of a Southern aristocracy ruined by war and trampled upon by its former servants. Pike denounced the “Africanization” of South Carolina (4), the “spectacle of a society suddenly turned bottom-side up,” (12) in which corruption ruled (the headings of at least 8 of the 34 chapters include the word “fraud”). In respect to the State government, he declared, “It is barbarism overwhelming civilization by physical force. It is the slave rioting in the halls of his master, and putting that master under his feet” (12).

Pike's reading of Reconstruction was far from unique. By the early 1870s, a certain lassitude on the part of Northerners could be detected in even the most vigorous proponents of radical Reconstruction, and *Harper's Weekly* provides a case in point. The famed political cartoonist Thomas Nast, who supported radical Reconstruction, produced as early as 1874 a critical portrait of Reconstruction governments: entitled “Colored Rule in a Reconstructed (?) State,” and printed on the front page, it depicted coarse, thick-lipped black legislators engaged in a boisterous quarrel, suggesting that at least some African Americans were unfit to occupy political positions (*Harper's Weekly*, March 14, 1874: 229). Even before the end of the 1860s, a few articles in the same weekly had voiced doubts respecting the ability of former slaves to take their fate into their own hands. Slavery, it was sometimes argued, left a permanent imprint on the former slave, in the form of laziness, improvidence, or a love of subordination. After the 1876 compromise and the end of Reconstruction, *Harper's*, which approved of the compromise, began expressing sympathy for the plight of Southerners under Reconstruction, described as an “apparent reversal of a rational order of society” (“A Southern Duty,” September 21, 1878: 747).

Post-Reconstruction Accounts

Not all contemporaries viewed Reconstruction in such unfavorable light, and this was especially true of those who had played a role in it. Thus in his three-volume *History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America* (1877), Vice President Henry Wilson singled out the abolition of slavery and the enfranchisement of freedmen as the most memorable achievements of Reconstruction. He was less sanguine over the current situation, however, contending that the defeated South still defended the “lost cause” and was determined to exclude freedmen from Southern governments, by violence and fraud if necessary (Wilson 736). Albion Tourgée, a “carpetbagger” who fought for the Union before settling in Greensboro, North Carolina, where he served as a state superior court judge, produced a sobering account of the end of Reconstruction in his 1879 *A Fool’s Errand*, a novel based on his personal experiences in North Carolina. Reconstruction, he argued, had failed because it had secured the rights of freedmen on paper only. African Americans were now reduced to unofficial serfdom (Tourgée 337-44).

Former slaves Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, two of the most famous anti-slavery speakers before the Civil War, sought both to vindicate the achievements of Reconstruction and denounce the violence exerted against the now unprotected freedmen. In the early 1880s, Douglass noted that the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments had represented considerable achievements, but that they had been made a “mockery” of inasmuch as the old master class triumphed while the economic exploitation of freedmen reduced them to a state hardly better than slavery (Douglass 511-13). In *My Southern Home* (1880), Brown called upon readers to marvel at millions of slaves who, “set at liberty in a single day... reconstructed the State Governments that their masters had destroyed; became Legislators, held State offices, and with all their blunders, surpassed the whites that had preceded them” (W. W. Brown 245). While Brown acknowledged that Reconstruction governments had been corrupt, he attributed that corruption to the freedmen’s want of education owing to slavery and to the “white adventurers” from the North (W. W. Brown 244).

African American amateur historian George Washington Williams took Brown’s mildly apologetic tone a step further in his monumental *History of the Negro Race in*

America, 1619-1880 (1883). For Williams, Reconstruction had failed (he singled out education as the exception to the rule), a failure largely due to the federal government having delivered power into hands too feeble to hold it: “The Government gave him [the freedman] the statute-book when he ought to have had the spelling-book; placed him in the Legislature when he ought to have been in the school-house” (Williams vol. 2 527). According to Williams, this made the removal of “Negro governments” inevitable. That Williams used the phrase “Negro governments” — whereas African Americans in fact controlled none of the Reconstruction governments amply demonstrates that he too subscribed to the hostile vision of Reconstruction that was beginning to gain ground in the nation as a whole. In addition, Williams seemed to give in to the pervasive racism of his time when he noted that “An ignorant majority without competent leaders, could not rule an intelligent Caucasian minority” (Franklin 1998, 112).

This was precisely the point that Southerners wanted to make. Two years after Williams’s book was issued, Henry Grady, editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* and a wholehearted proponent of the New South, published a lengthy essay entitled “In Plain Black and White” (*The Century Magazine*, April 1885), in which he described Reconstruction as chaos, and Redemption as “the reassertion of the moral power that overthrew the scandalous reconstruction governments, even though, to the shame of the republic be it said, they were supported by the bayonets of the General Government.” By opposition, Grady painted an ideal picture of the contemporaneous racial harmony in a segregated South, where each race knew its place and was satisfied with it, and he asserted the right of the South to “home rule” based on white supremacy. That the nation was gradually moving toward a Southern interpretation of the recent past is evidenced in widely circulated periodicals such as *Harper’s Weekly*. The magazine occasionally rued the sad plight of black Americans in the South, and underlined the latter’s anger and sense of injustice at economic exploitation and racial violence. See, for instance, the series of articles entitled... Yet, like Grady, the weekly’s commentators advised the government to let the South “work out her own salvation.” Rather than call upon federal action to eradicate the race problem —after all, it had already proved ineffective in this regard — the paper relied on the “healing influence of time” and advised African Americans to be patient (Parfait 2003).

Dissenting Voices

In the 1940s, historian E. Merton Coulter explained that the South “had lost on the fields of carnage, but she was determined to win in the Battle of the Records” (Coulter 181). Indeed, in the struggle over the history and memory of Reconstruction, the Dunning school emerged as the clear victor and its interpretation held sway for several decades, thus providing the justification for the continued second-class citizenship of African Americans. There were, however, dissenting voices. Most issued from trained historians, but with a few notable exceptions. One of these was John R. Lynch. Lynch had been born under slavery and held political office in Mississippi during Reconstruction before his election to the U.S. House of Representatives. In 1913, his *The Facts of Reconstruction* attempted to revise the mainstream history of the period, defend the enfranchisement of freedmen, and correct the perception of Reconstruction governments as ineffective and corrupt.

In the following decades, several African American scholars also set out to revise the accepted wisdom on Reconstruction. In *A Social History of the American Negro*, Benjamin Brawley rejected the commonly held idea that “the Negro was primarily to blame for the corruption of the day” (Brawley 271). Corruption, Brawley contended, had little or nothing to do with race or region; it was widespread in both North and South, as exemplified by the Tweed Ring and Crédit Mobilier scandals. In addition, Brawley defended the legacy of Reconstruction governments, and the many “excellent models” of constitutions framed by such governments (Brawley 271). Carter G. Woodson, who had founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915, dismissed the Dunning school interpretation as “biased and inadequate” in *The Negro in Our History* (Woodson 239, n. 1).

The voices of dissent were predominantly black but some white historians also produced more balanced views of Reconstruction, for instance Francis B. Simkins and Robert H. Woody, whose *South Carolina During Reconstruction* was issued in 1933. In a review for *The American Historical Review*, Howard K. Beale noted how, “with refreshing freedom from prejudice and special pleading, the authors picture honest,

historian, whose ideas of Reconstruction were largely derived from the Dunning school (Tyrrell 56), published *The Tragic Era: The Revolution after Lincoln*. This bestselling work was, according to John Hope Franklin, the most widely read book on Reconstruction for more than a generation (*Race and History* 22). *The Tragic Era* described the white Southerners' "dramatic struggle for the preservation of Southern civilization and the redemption of their people" (Bowers vi). According to Bowers, freedmen, children really, had fallen under the influence of demagogues —soldiers, Freedmen's Bureau agents, and carpetbaggers —, although "Left to themselves," Bowers contended, "the negroes would have turned for leadership to the native whites, who understood them best" (Bowers 198). Bower's narrative pits good and sensible men, like Andrew Johnson, against an array of vengeful and uncompromising villains, with Thaddeus Stevens at their head. Bowers' depiction of the black members of the South Carolina legislature could have been lifted straight from Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* Franklin considered the 1915 film the single greatest...: "... the members' feet upon their desks, their faces hidden behind their soles. Chuckles, guffaws, the noisy cracking of peanuts, and raucous voices disturb the parliamentary dignity of the scene" (Bowers 353). The "tragic era" ended on the 1876 election, which struck the hour of "the South's redemption from military despotism"

Early Twentieth Century: Popular and Scholarly Accounts of Reconstruction

The interpretation of Reconstruction as a tragic period for white Southerners received a wide audience thanks to the success of works such as *The Clansman* (1905), by Thomas Dixon Jr. The note “To the Reader” which opened the novel was an unabashed celebration of the Ku Klux Klan, an organization understood to have “saved” the South from the “the bold attempt of Thaddeus Stevens to Africanize ten great states of the American Union.” *The Clansman*, which was to serve as the basis for David W. Griffith’s enormously popular movie *Birth of a Nation* (1915), became a massive bestseller, while a very different novelistic depiction of Reconstruction by African American writer Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), hardly created a ripple on the American publishing scene.

Like Chesnutt, black scholar W. E. B. Du Bois offered his own interpretation of Reconstruction while also denouncing the plight of African Americans in the South. In the second essay of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), entitled “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” Du Bois argued that the granting of the franchise to the freedmen was indispensable to protect the freedmen themselves; necessary too in order to force the South to accept its defeat. At the same time, however, Du Bois somberly concluded that “Negro suffrage ended a civil war by beginning a race feud” (Du Bois 1903, 76). For Du Bois, Reconstruction represented a tragedy whose main protagonists were an embittered South and a bewildered freedman. It was doomed to fail — though there were successes, especially in education —, and that failure was evidenced by the situation of African Americans in the South at the turn of the century: “... despite compromise, war, and struggle, the Negro is not free” (Du Bois 1903, 77). The scholar/activist provided a short list of the problems that beset Southern African Americans: economic exploitation in the form of peonage, segregation, absence of political power, and racial violence (Du Bois 1903, 78). The number of lynchings had in fact peaked in the 1890s, a trend which the contemporary press ascribed to an increase in black criminality. Thus, depending on its author, the narrative of Reconstruction read as a tragedy for whites or for blacks. In 1907, Booker T. Washington noted that African Americans had

been “less the instigators than the victims of the mistakes of Reconstruction” (Washington 387). The Southern take on Reconstruction, however, unambiguously ascribed victimhood to Southern whites, and essentially blamed the federal government and carpetbaggers for what was seen as the tragedy of Reconstruction. Inasmuch as freedmen were considered totally ignorant, they were regarded as less culpable in the tragedy, serving merely as unwitting instruments of Northern whites. This version of history, already pervasive in the press and popular literature of the time, received scholarly legitimacy in a series of works published in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The Dunning School

Although history was becoming increasingly “professional” at the turn of the twentieth century, one of the most influential works on Reconstruction was drafted by an amateur historian, James Ford Rhodes, a businessman from Ohio who had retired at an early age to devote his time to the study of American history. The two volumes (6 and 7) of his *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850 to the McKinley-Bryan Campaign of 1896* which dealt with Reconstruction were issued in 1906. Rhodes firmly believed that blacks were inferior and that giving them the franchise had been a grievous mistake (Taylor 18-20).

A similar reading of Reconstruction was propounded by John W. Burgess and William A. Dunning, whose works were to exert a lasting influence on Reconstruction historiography, giving birth to the “Dunning school.” An anecdote related by Peter Novick reveals the ideological subtext of these writings of history. John W. Burgess, a Tennessean who taught political science at Columbia University, was approached by a publisher who thought the time had come for a complete reconciliation between the two sections opposed in the Civil War. Such a reconciliation could be achieved through a better understanding of the points of view of North and South on the war and its aftermath. Burgess undertook to write a history of the period, a task which he saw as a “sacred duty” to his country (Novick 74). In the preface to his 1902 *Reconstruction and the Constitution*, Burgess made clear that secession had been a mistake, but that it was time for the North finally to acknowledge that the means taken to achieve Reconstruction had been a failure as well. For Burgess, Reconstruction constituted a “blunder-crime against civilization” (Burgess 252), in which the federal government vastly exceeded its constitutional powers, and Congress placed freedmen — “ignorant barbarians” — in control of the South (Burgess 252). Burgess also argued that the experience of the recent Spanish-American War and of the “imperial enterprises” undertaken by the country under the leadership of the Republican party, had brought the North to a closer understanding of the Southern attitude toward African Americans: “... the North is learning every day by valuable experiences that there are vast differences in political capacity between the races, and that it is the white man’s mission, his duty and his right,

to hold the reins of political power in his own hands for the civilization of the world and the welfare of mankind ” (Burgess viii-ix).

In 1907, another Columbia University professor, historian William Archibald Dunning, a Northerner who had studied under Burgess, published *Reconstruction, Political and Economic*, which formed volume 22 of the series *The American Nation: A History*. In his introduction to the volume, Albert Bushnell Hart, Professor of history at Harvard University and editor of the series, summarized Dunning’s thesis: “The purpose of this volume is to show that Reconstruction, with all its hardships and inequities, was not deliberately planned as a punishment and humiliation for those formerly in rebellion, though the spirit of retribution had its part. It was an effort, clumsy and partisan, yet in the main honestly meant to make provision for the inevitable consequences of the Civil War; though it failed it left a state of things out of which has slowly grown the consciousness of a national harmony far stronger and more lasting than that before the war” (xiv). In his preface, Dunning explained that his account of the period focused on the nation at large, rather than merely “the struggle through which the southern whites, subjugated by adversaries of their own race, thwarted the scheme which threatened permanent subjection to another race” (xv). According to Dunning, radical Republicans deliberately misconstrued the black codes passed by Southern provisional governments in the winter of 1865-1866 as an attempt to re-establish slavery, whereas they in truth represented “in the main a conscientious and straightforward attempt to bring some sort of order out of the social and economic chaos which a full acceptance of the results of war and emancipation involved” (58). The black codes allowed the radicals to push for their plan for Reconstruction, leading to new Southern governments headed by freedmen, carpetbaggers and scalawags, governments stained by rampant corruption. Dunning emphasized the despair of white Southerners under these governments, while maintaining that propaganda in respect to alleged racial violence exerted by former rebels on blacks and on white Republicans ensured the North’s continued acquiescence to radical Reconstruction.

The Dunning school was all the more influential as its findings were based on meticulous and thorough research work, even if its interpretation was biased by racism (T. Brown 3-4). Furthermore, the audience of Dunning and his students was not confined to the small readership of scholarly monographs. In 1929, Claude Bowers, a journalist and amateur

Reconciliation

As Grady's 1885 essay makes clear, advancing a horrific picture of Reconstruction as a time of chaos and misrule enabled many white Southerners to claim that freedmen could not be entrusted with political responsibilities. Such a position was then used to justify the gradual disfranchisement of freedmen. The interpretation of the role of the federal government during Reconstruction as having constituted an abuse of power enforced by military rule, was supported by a series of Supreme Court decisions that removed federal control over the status of freedmen. The 1883 invalidation of the 1875 Civil Rights Act which prohibited racial discrimination in public places is just one of many such examples. Similar rulings by the High Court also paved the way for Jim Crow laws and systematic segregation in the wake of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896).⁷

The trend toward national reconciliation was one reason why the Southern interpretation of Reconstruction gained ground. As David Blight and others have demonstrated, the Gilded Age witnessed a wave of nostalgia for the Antebellum days. The feeling was partly due to the momentous changes the nation was undergoing, especially the fast pace of industrialization and urbanization, as well as the massive waves of immigrants that began to arrive in the last decades of the nineteenth century. This nostalgic trend could already be seen in the early 1870s in the nation's periodicals, highlighting the affection that linked slaves to their masters—in a reminder of old pro-slavery arguments—, thereby hinting that the system could not have been utterly bad. The trend accelerated as the war grew more remote, and found its ultimate expression in the works of Joel Chandler Harris and the plantation stories of Thomas Nelson Page. This “literature of reunion” which celebrated the old plantation South, had pride of place in the nation's magazines, many of them published in the North (Blight 216-17).

The Spanish-American War of 1898 found former Union and Confederate officers fighting side by side, helping to cement a reconciliation that was largely achieved at the expense of African Americans. The growing consensus was that slavery indeed had to disappear, but that the Civil War—with heroes on both sides—had not been about slavery itself, but rather the right to secede. Reconstruction had been a mistake. Reconciliation was a narrative more than a fact, and...

Early twentieth-century historians played a central role in the negotiation over a consensual “usable past” for the nation, a negotiation made possible by “the pervasive racism which —across regions, classes, and political persuasions —dominated the thought of the period” (Novick 74). Indeed, at a time when much if not most of the nation subscribed to social Darwinism and “scientific” racism, the degraded status of African Americans —both real and symbolic —was evidenced in the systematic use of stereotypes, textual and iconographic, in the nation’s periodicals, many of them published in the North. In this literature, blacks were consistently portrayed as buffoons who loved watermelon, and evinced a marked propensity for stealing chickens and fighting with razors, a people whose skewered grammar was but one sign of inferiority (Logan 242-75).