

LESSON 7 To What Extent Was Reconstruction a Tragic Era?

After the Civil War the country faced the challenge of bringing the 11 seceded states back into the Union. This period from 1865 to 1877 is called the Reconstruction era. During the first phase of Reconstruction, in 1865, Presidents Lincoln and Johnson allowed Southern whites to form governments on generous terms. In the second phase, the Radical Republicans in Congress took control of Reconstruction and imposed more restrictions on the Southern states. The issue of protecting the rights of freedmen, former slaves who had been freed by the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment, was a central dispute at this time.

The third phase of Reconstruction began gradually as the Southern whites regained control of their state governments in the 1870s.

In this lesson, three viewpoints deal primarily with the question of the rights of blacks and whether Reconstruction governments in the Southern states, controlled by the Republican party, were a good idea. The

viewpoints deal with the issue of whether Reconstruction should be called a tragic era, and if so, why. It will not deal with the constitutional question of which branch of government, Congress or the President, should have controlled Reconstruction, and it will not deal with the impeachment trial of Andrew Johnson.

The first viewpoint actually is derived from two historians who represent what has been called the “Dunning School” on Reconstruction. The second viewpoint represents the “revisionist school”—an effort to revise the original Dunning interpretation. The third viewpoint is a more modern interpretation which has no “school” label. In some of the earlier interpretations the word Negro is used for blacks—the word has been retained in these summaries of the viewpoints. So “Negro” and “black” are both used in the viewpoints.

Note the dates of each interpretation before you read it. The date may give you a clue to why Reconstruction was interpreted the way it was by each historian.

Historian A (1907, 1937)

(1) In the spring of 1865, the Southern armies surrendered bringing the Civil War to a close. To the people of the North, the Union had been preserved. To the people of the South, uncertainty and foreboding dominated. In some parts of the South the economy was almost at a standstill. Railways and bridges were destroyed, many farms lay idle, and worst of all, the system of labor was completely disorganized.

(2) Despite these drawbacks there was

an opportunity for prompt recovery if the whole population, black as well as white, could have resumed plantation production, especially of cotton, since the price was fabulously high. But before such economic results were to be attained, Northern politicians plunged the South into political crises which paralyzed the region.

(3) “With malice toward none; with charity toward all,” President Lincoln

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had said in March 1865. It was his policy toward the South. He realized the South had to be brought back into the Union without harsh restrictions. After Lincoln's assassination, President Johnson continued the policy of encouraging Southern states to form governments under the generous 10% Plan.¹

(4) Southerners were shocked and insulted by Negro troops in their midst, by being "jostled from the sidewalks by dusky guards" among whom, in some cases, they recognized their former servants.² There was no need for troops—the South had accepted defeat. Further, Southerners resented being commanded to ratify the 13th Amendment before they could reenter the Union. Despite these difficulties, the Southern states chose new governments and sent their representatives off to Washington. Their representatives were never allowed to sit in the government.

(5) Vindictive politicians, called Radical Republicans, prevented the southern Senators and Representatives from taking their seats. Led by the sarcastic and scornful Thaddeus Stevens, the Radical Republicans wanted confiscation of ex-Confederate property, Negro suffrage (right to vote), and punishment of rebels. Stevens openly explained his motive by saying his policies "would insure the ascendancy of the Union [Republican] party."³

(6) The Radical Republicans used as the excuse for their harsh actions the so-called "Black Codes" of the seceded states. The Radicals claimed these laws, passed in Southern states, were an attempt by the reorganized governments to drive blacks back into virtual slavery. Actually, the Black Codes gave specific rights to blacks and were a straightforward attempt to bring order out of the chaos brought about by the war and emancipation of

the slaves. The laws simply reflected the actual situation in the South. Freedmen were not, and could not be for generations, on the same social, moral, and intellectual plane with whites, so they were accorded a separate class by law. The restrictions in respect to bearing arms, testifying in court, and keeping labor contracts were justified by well-established traits and habits of Negroes.⁴

(7) The worst problem was caused by the vagrancy of the Negroes. As soon as they received freedom, many blacks irresponsibly wandered around and did not work. Many became vagabonds, wandering from camp to camp and becoming unmanageable. Even a sympathizer with blacks said they strayed from the plantations "just at the time when their labor was most needed to secure the crops of the season."⁵ Naturally, Southern states passed vagrancy laws as part of the Black Codes in order to stop this idleness and get the farms and plantations running again.

(8) But Northerners believed the Radical propaganda about Black Codes. The Radicals created the Freedmen's Bureau and passed a Civil Rights Law. The Freedmen's Bureau was a mixture of genuine service and shameful corruption. Its head, General O.O. Howard, was a man of the finest character, but many of its agents were unscrupulous and abused their powers. Southerners thoroughly disliked the agency.

(9) Like the Freedmen's Bureau, the Civil Rights Act was an unwarranted extension of central government power forced upon state governments. The Radicals argued that Negro rights were insecure unless protected by federal (national) law. They soon made the protection of Negro rights a part of the Constitution itself by passing the Fourteenth Amendment and getting it

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ratified.

(10) In 1867, the Radical program to control state governments in the South reached its peak when the Reconstruction Act was passed. This act divided 10 Southern states into 5 military districts and required general Negro enfranchisement (voting) and disfranchisement (denial of the right to vote) of many former rebels. The military commanders were to register the voters, assemble the conventions, and adopt new state constitutions—in short, start new state governments. The Southern states were now under the control of the Republican Party.

(11) For the Southern states this period of Republican control was the darkest time of Reconstruction. Northern “carpetbaggers” were now running the state governments. These dishonest politicians, so named because their few belongings could all fit into a small bag, came South to make money and gain political power. They allied themselves with Southern “scalawags,” white Southern natives who took advantage of the situation to make money and gain power. Aided by a system which gave the vote to the Negro while it disfranchised the wealthier, more intelligent whites, the carpetbaggers and scalawags brought new levels of corruption and fraud to state government.

(12) Elections in the South became a joke. Ignorant blacks voted by the thousands without knowing even the names of the men for whom they were voting.⁶ Vote-buying became so common that Negroes came to expect it; much of the bacon and ham mentioned as “relief” was given out with an eye to election-day results.⁷ Starting early in the morning, Negro voters in Florida moved along in groups, voting at every polling place, each time under an assumed (fake) name!⁸

(13) The corruption and fraud were believable. A congressional committee

reported that one of the leading carpetbag governors made over \$100,000 during his first year though his salary was \$8,000.⁹ Another carpetbag governor was charged with stealing and selling the food of the Freedmen’s Bureau intended for the relief of helpless and ragged ex-slaves. F.J. Moses, scalawag, stated that he received \$15,000 while governor of South Carolina for approving a large printing bill.¹⁰

(14) Radical Republican legislatures supported by the army, piled up expenses against their poor states to fantastic heights. Millions of dollars were lent to railroads, increasing state debts beyond all reason. In Florida, the cost of printing alone in 1869 was more than the entire cost of state government in 1860. Taxes, of course, rose dramatically. White women sold possessions and food needed for their hungry children in order to pay taxes. Many whites lost their land for failure to pay taxes, and the land was bought by Negroes and Northern carpetbaggers.¹¹

(15) Needless to say, decent white men in the South detested this misgovernment. The resentment led to tension between the races which soon became violent. The Union Leagues provided a secret organization, including secret rites and ceremonies, that Negroes joined to terrorize whites.¹² In reaction, extremist whites formed the Ku Klux Klan, organized to use violence to intimidate blacks.

(16) At election times, blacks were systematically terrorized to keep them away from the polls. As Northern troops were withdrawn from the South (the last troops were withdrawn in 1877) conservative whites regained control of their state government. Unfortunately, Radical rule in the South had embittered relations between blacks and whites for generations.

(17) Reconstruction was a tragic era

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in American history. In the name of protecting Negroes' rights, Radical Republicans imposed national control on the Southern states, completely ignoring the constitutional concept of federalism in which states should handle issues within their own boundaries. The fact that most

Northern states did not give blacks the right to vote shows that Radicals were not really interested in blacks' rights. Rather, they used the blacks to gain political power for the Republican Party. The whole era was marked by this hypocrisy which hurt both whites and blacks in the South.

Historian A Endnotes

- ¹ President Johnson spoke about harsh penalties on ex-Confederates but he nevertheless pardoned most of them and allowed new governments to be formed. The 10% Plan allowed the people of each state to organize a state government when 10% of the population took an oath to support the constitution of the United States in the future.
- ² Whitelaw Reid, *After the War: A Southern Tour*. (Cincinnati, 1866) (quoting a New Orleans editorial), p. 422.
- ³ *Congressional Globe*, 39 Congress, 2 session, 252 (January 3, 1867).
- ⁴ W.L. Fleming, *Documentary History of Reconstruction*. (Cleveland, OH, 1906-7), Vol. I, p. 247.
- ⁵ Carl Schurz, *Reminiscences of Carl Schurz*. (New York, 1907-8) Vol. III, p. 214.
- ⁶ Fleming, Vol. II, p. 44. Statement of Samuel Hale, a Unionist (a Southerner who supported the North during the Civil War), in 1867, to a Congressional committee: "I wish you could have seen the poor, ignorant blacks giving in their 'bits of paper,' as they called their printed ballots, when they knew no more of the names on them...than you did."
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 83. Deputy U.S. Marshall Perrin testified: "[A] report was circulated among the Negroes that in order to obtain bacon they would have to vote the straight Republican ticket."
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 85-86. Mr. Wallace, who was on the Republican side in the Florida election campaign described, stated in his book that blacks voted repeatedly.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 39. Report of Messrs. Speer and Archer of the Congressional Investigating Committee in 1872. House Report no. 92, 42 Congress, 2nd Session, p. 24.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 41. Statement by F.J. Moses in 1873, contained in *Report on Public Frauds in South Carolina*, p. 317.
- ¹¹ F.B. Simkins and R.H. Woody, *South Carolina during Reconstruction*. (Chapel Hill, 1932), pp. 178-79.
- ¹² Fleming, Vol. II, Chapter vii. *Extracts from the Ritual of the Union League of America* includes emblems such as altar, Bible, incense, sword, anvil and rites such as "Have I your solemn pledge to keep secret whatever may transpire in your presence?"

Historian B (1965)

(1) Reconstruction has been called a tragic era by traditional historians. According to this view, the Radical Republicans imposed control on the Southern states, setting up corrupt state governments under carpetbaggers, scalawags, and freedmen. Naturally, Southern whites resented this

control and fought back as soon as they could. Thus, racial tensions in the South were strained. The economy of the South was crippled and blacks did not get their rights.

(2) This traditional viewpoint greatly

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distorts what really happened during Reconstruction. The efforts of the Radical Republicans actually were idealistic and made Southern society more democratic in the long run. The short term problems were caused by Southern whites, not the Radicals. To be sure, there was some corruption in Reconstruction governments, and there were other problems. Nevertheless, the efforts of the Radicals helped blacks and show that the tragic era view is wrong.

(3) In 1865, President Lincoln wanted to bind the nation back together quickly by allowing Southerners to reorganize their state governments on generous terms in what became known as the 10% Plan. President Johnson continued Lincoln's policies and Southern states soon had their governments in place. Just as soon as those governments were in place they passed "Black Codes" under which blacks were not allowed to marry whites, serve on juries, or testify against whites. In South Carolina, Negroes could work only as agricultural labor except with a special license. Mississippi would not permit Negroes to buy or rent farmland. And in a number of Southern states, Negroes found without lawful employment were to be arrested as vagrants and auctioned off or hired to landowners who would pay their fines. In Louisiana, Negroes were not permitted to leave their place of employment without permission, and they could not refuse to work for their employers. Blacks were little better than slaves, since they could easily be tied to a plantation as cheap labor—they could not move around looking for other work for fear of being arrested under the vagrancy laws. Further, they could not vote or go to school.¹

(4) As might be expected, the Black Codes angered many Northerners. It was obvious to everyone that the futures envisioned for the Negro by Southern

whites was that of an illiterate, unskilled, propertyless, agricultural worker.² Those who cared about rights for blacks had no choice but to oppose the governments formed under the Johnson policies. Thus, when the Southern delegates showed up to sit in Congress, the Republicans refused to seat them. The truth is, and it is very important, that before the Radical Republican program began, the Johnson governments themselves had introduced the whole pattern of disfranchisement, discrimination, and segregation into the postwar South. These racist policies against Negroes weren't a response to Radical control—they happened first.

(5) The Radicals' motivation for fighting President Johnson over Reconstruction in the South has been a source of disagreement. Traditional historians see the Radicals as wanting revenge on Southerners and wanting to strengthen the Republican Party by getting the Negro vote. But the Radicals had been abolitionists before the Civil War, some for over 20 years. This shows their genuine concern for Negro rights. Why would they lose their idealism suddenly in 1865? The Radicals felt that the only way Negroes could learn to be free men was for them to start living as free men.

(6) Some Radicals wanted to give economic assistance to blacks in the form of land. Land ownership would give blacks the economic power to become independent of the plantation system. The land would be confiscated (taken from) the chief rebels (about 5% of Southern families) and divided among the freedmen each of whom would receive "40 acres and a hut." Even most Radicals believed so strongly in private property, however, that they could not support taking land away from any owner. As an alternative, economic assistance was given through the Freedmen's Bureau. This agency was

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well run, but made many enemies in the South. The bureau provided emergency relief, set up Negro schools, prevented landowners from taking advantage of Negroes, and protected Negroes' civil rights.

(7) The conflict heightened between Johnson and the Radicals until Congress passed the Reconstruction Act of 1867 over Johnson's veto. In it, the South was divided into 5 military districts. Troops would now be used to ensure that blacks would be able to vote and enjoy their other rights as citizens. Southern state governments were now controlled by three groups—carpetbaggers, scalawags, and freedmen. Some carpetbaggers, it is true, were disreputable characters, but most were sincerely interested in helping blacks. They were mostly teachers and clergy. Scalawags have likewise been stereotyped as traitors looking for political power. In reality, they were made up of four different groups with very different motives. Their common feature was that they felt the Republican party would promote their political and economic interests.

(8) The third group in the Reconstruction governments was the freedmen. Most were illiterate and many were easily intimidated. They wanted suffrage (the right to vote) and, although they consistently voted Republican, they had their own leadership and were not always tools of the Republicans. They were seldom vengeful toward Southern whites.

(9) The new Republican state governments wrote very good state constitutions which contained a number of important reforms, such as free public education. There was definitely some corruption in the Radical governments. There were fraudulent bond issues and graft in the sale of land. Governor Warmoth allegedly pocketed \$100,000 during his first year in office, though his

salary was \$8,000. Another governor was accused of stealing and selling the supplies of the Freedmen's Bureau. The credit of some Southern states was hurt by mounting debts.

(10) But the high taxes, mounting debts, and corruption of the Radical regimes must be put within the context of those times. The devastation of the Civil War required a great deal of spending to rebuild factories, bridges, and so forth no matter who was running the governments at the time. This was, moreover, a time of great corruption throughout the United States, as the incredible swindling by the Tweed Ring in New York City shows. Further, the reforms begun under the Radicals such as public education and relief for the destitute were costly, but were democratic and worthwhile.

(11) Most of the debt increases went for grants and loans to railroads, among whose owners were always some native white Democrats. And some Democrats always voted for railroad bond issues.³ Most of Alabama's Reconstruction debt—\$18,000,000 out of \$20,500,000—was for state bonds issued to help railroad construction. Thus, very little of the money gained by corruption ended up in Negro pockets.

(12) To further complicate matters, when white Democrats took over in the 1870s, the Southern states often found the new governments just as corrupt as before. The treasurer of one Democratic government embezzled \$316,000 which broke all previous records. Eight other state treasurers were found guilty of embezzlement, including one in Louisiana who stole over a million dollars. In Mississippi, a white delegate said that, "We have been stuffing ballot boxes, committing perjury, and here and there in the state carrying the elections by fraud and violence....No man can be in favor of

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perpetuating the election methods which have prevailed in Mississippi since 1875 who is not a moral idiot.”

(13) The real problem in Reconstruction governments was not corruption—corruption existed in Southern governments before and after Reconstruction. The real problem was the change in who paid taxes. Whites were now paying their fair share of higher taxes and they were paying them for services provided to blacks.

(14) Eventually, Southern whites used violence to prevent blacks from voting which undermined Republican strength. The violence was epitomized by the Ku

Klux Klan, but it continued as a basic part of Southern politics long after the Klan declined.⁴ The Republican party was divided and support for the rights of blacks dwindled in the 1870s. When the final troops were withdrawn in 1877, blacks were left to the mercy of whites. Southern society was rigidly segregated and blacks had few rights for more than 70 years. Nevertheless, Reconstruction had seen the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which became key elements in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s—the second Reconstruction.

Endnotes for Historian B

- ¹ Governor Humphreys of Mississippi affirmed in his inaugural address, “that ours is and it shall ever be, a government of white men.” Carl Schurz, an observer in the South, stated that “the popular prejudice is almost as bitterly set against the Negro’s having the advantage of education as it was when the Negro was a slave...Hundreds of times I heard the old assertion repeated that ‘learning will spoil the nigger for work,’ and ‘Negro education will be the ruin of the South.’”
- ² A delegate to the Texas Constitutional Convention said: “I concede them [blacks] nothing but the station of ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water.’”
- ³ Ella Lonn, (a historian), *Reconstruction in Louisiana after 1868*. (New York, 1918), pp. 36-37. “Such measures [railroad bond issues] were supported by members of both parties, often introduced by Democrats, in every case supported by a large majority of Democrats in both houses.”
- ⁴ In the Mississippi campaign of 1875 a local newspaper announced, “All other means having been exhausted to abate the horrible conditions of things, the thieves and robbers, and scoundrels, white and black, deserve death and ought to be killed....Carry the election peaceably if we can, forcibly if we must.”

Historian C (1988)

(1) The Civil War brought great changes to the United States. Blacks had fought valiantly on the Union side. “They say,” an Alabama planter reported in 1867, “the Yankees never could have whipped the South without the aid of the Negroes.” Military service along with emancipation brought new status for blacks and new claims to equal citizenship.¹ The meeting

of the national black convention at Syracuse in October 1864 criticized racial prejudice in the Northern states.

(2) The North prospered from the war. But the north was divided in many ways. Industrial businessmen were tied closely with the Republican party and a strong central government, including national

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paper currency and a national banking system. Skilled workers prospered from the war, but among the poorer classes there was great resentment as shown by the New York City draft riot of July 1863. It originated in resentment over the draft—the provision that men who paid \$300 didn't have to serve in the army was called "class legislation." But it also showed resentment toward wealthy industrial owners, abolitionists, and blacks. The Colored Orphan Asylum was burned to the ground and countless blacks were beaten or murdered.²

(3) The South was devastated by the war. Like the North, it too was divided. Large sections of the hill country of Southern states hated the wealthy plantation owners and their "slaveocracy." They resented taxes, which were very low for the large plantation owners of the lowlands while the up-country farmers paid high taxes. And, of course, they resented the plantation owners for leading their states into the disastrous Civil War. The up-country contained many Unionist (pro-north) regions, the extreme being the hill country of Virginia which formed the separate state of West Virginia. Naturally, these Unionist strongholds supported the Republicans against traditional southern leaders during Reconstruction.

(4) At the end of the war in the spring of 1865, many Southern whites assumed that blacks faced the end of slavery entirely unprepared for the responsibilities of freedom.³ Blacks, however, had very specific ideas about freedom. They immediately held mass meetings and religious services and acquired dogs, guns, and liquor, all of which had been barred under slavery. Among the most resented of the restrictions under slavery was the

rule that no black could travel without a pass. Now blacks moved in large numbers. Some moved to cities to get away from plantation labor. Many moved to be reunited with family members separated during slavery.⁴ Blacks also withdrew their women and children from field labor. In 1869, a Georgia newspaper reported, "The Freedmen have almost universally withdrawn their women and children from the fields, putting the first at housework and the latter at school." In addition, freedmen set up their own churches, schools, and benevolent societies (burial societies, debating clubs, fire companies, trade associations, and so forth).

(5) To blacks freedom meant freedom from working in gangs under the direction of an overseer, as they had under slavery. Further, as in other places where slavery was abolished, freedmen in the United States saw land ownership as the key to their economic independence.⁵ They couldn't afford to buy the land so they asked the government to distribute land to them. They wanted small farms where they would grow food crops for subsistence rather than the "slave crops"—cotton. "If ole massa want to grow cotton, let him plant it himself," declared a Georgia freedman. And blacks demanded the right to vote.⁵

(6) Southern whites reacted sharply to blacks defining their freedom in so many ways. They often responded with violence when blacks did not treat them as superiors, or when there were labor disputes, such as attempting to leave plantations, arguing over labor contracts, or resisting whippings.⁷ Plantation owners, meanwhile, realized they needed black labor to continue their plantations.

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Emancipation in the West Indies taught the plantation owners an important lesson: freedmen must be barred from access to land. Only on smaller islands, like Barbados, where whites owned all the land, “and the Negro is unable to get possession of a foot of it,” had plantation agriculture continued to prosper. Plantation owners turned to written contracts with freedmen to reestablish their authority over every aspect of their laborers’ lives.

(7) The disputes between white owners and black workers were intensified by nature. Poor weather in 1866 caused poor crop at the same time that the price of cotton plummeted.⁸

(8) Into this crucial situation stepped Andrew Johnson. When O.O. Howard, the head of the Freedmen’s Bureau, issued an order to set aside forty-acre tracts of land for freedmen (the Bureau controlled over 850,000 acres of abandoned lands), the President made him issue a new order restoring almost all of the land to its former white owners. Thousands of freedmen were evicted (thrown out) from the land they had “owned.” Johnson further recognized the new Southern state governments, though none of them gave the vote to blacks, and he pardoned almost all ex-Confederates and restored their land to them. Johnson’s pro-white policies encouraged white Southerners to resist civil rights, especially the vote, for blacks.

(9) The “slaveocracy” was back in power in the South. Property taxes were kept low while freedmen and poor whites paid a much higher portion of their income in taxes. Though both blacks and whites paid taxes, services (such as poor-relief and education) were provided for whites which were not provided for blacks.⁹

Plantation owners used state governments to enforce labor discipline. State and local governments passed laws limiting black freedom of movement, punishing them for vagrancy (a vagrant is someone who isn’t working when he should be) and restricting blacks’ right to rent or buy land. The Black Codes forced blacks to sign labor contracts and punished those who did not stick to them. Mississippi required all blacks to have, each January, written evidence of employment for the coming year. Laborers leaving their jobs before the contract expired would forfeit wages already earned and could be arrested.

(10) Quite naturally, Republicans rejected Johnson’s policies in the South, including the Black Codes. Radical Republicans, such as Thaddeus Stevens, had fought for decades to free the slaves. Now he and many moderate Republicans were asking if the slaves had been freed only to have no rights. In the Congressional Joint Committee on Reconstruction, speaker after speaker criticized Johnson’s lenient policies toward Confederates for encouraging whites to resist granting blacks’ rights. They told of injustices against blacks, loyal whites, and Northerners. One black stated, “If [Southern] representatives were received in Congress, the condition of the freedmen would be very little better than that of the slaves.”¹⁰ The Southern representatives chosen under Johnson’s policies were not allowed in Congress.

(11) Congress then passed the Freedmen’s Bureau Bill and the Civil Rights Bill, both of which Johnson vetoed. Congress overrode his vetoes and then passed the Fourteenth Amendment. The United States alone among the nations

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that abolished slavery in the nineteenth century clothed its former slaves with citizenship rights equal to those of whites. After the 1866 Election, Congress passed the reconstruction Act which divided the South into 5 military districts and required suffrage for blacks and ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment. New governments under republican control were soon established in the Southern states.

(12) The new Reconstruction governments consisted of a few Northerners (a small minority since Northerners were less than 2 percent of the Southern population); Southern whites, the largest group, which controlled the party in the South; and the freedmen. The Northerners, called carpetbaggers by Southerners, were mostly veterans of the Civil War, teachers, Freedmen's Bureau agents, and investors in cotton plantations. Most of these Northerners probably combined the desire for personal gain with a commitment to remake Southern society based on freedom.¹¹

(13) Southern whites who supported the Republican party, called scalawags by conservative whites, were made up of many different groups. But most of them were from up-country areas which were Unionist during the Civil War. These white Republicans disagreed on many issues, but they agreed in trying to take power away from the slaveocracy, as we have seen. They wanted low taxes and a public school system. They were committed to blacks' civil rights but the commitment was shaky. Blacks were concentrated in the lowland plantation areas. If plantation owners could control the black vote, the lowlands would be stronger and the up-country would be weaker. Besides, racism

was a central part of their upbringing.

(14) Blacks comprised the third group of Republicans. They joined the Union Leagues hoping for land, and almost all of them voted.¹² They had a junior role in the Republican Party however, which they came to resent and against which they spoke out.

(15) The new Republican governments in the South wrote modern liberal constitutions, including state-funded systems of free public education; guaranteed civil and political rights for blacks; and abolition of such things as property qualifications for holding office, imprisonment for debt, and whipping as a punishment for crime.¹³ But the new governments faced a crisis of legitimacy. Ordinarily, political parties take for granted the authority of the government and the legitimacy of the other parties. Reconstruction opponents however, viewed the new governments as foreign—forced on them from outside. They felt blacks were not entitled to a permanent role in politics. Thus, Republican governments depended upon winning over white voters for their very existence. Compromises made by white Republicans at the expense of blacks were made from the start.

(16) The Reconstruction governments had major expenses to pay for rebuilding the South from the devastation of the war. Republicans as well as Democrats believed that railroads generated prosperity.¹⁴ In the first years of Republican rule, every Southern state gave lavish aid to railroad companies. Soon the extensive borrowing caused the credit of the state governments to collapse. Widespread corruption further drained the state treasuries and undermined

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the legitimacy of the Republicans. The corruption was not unique to these governments however, and Democrats, especially railroad owners, shared in the spoils. In fact, although blacks were involved in the corruption, they received very little from it.¹⁵ Political involvement often made their lives much worse.

(17) Blacks never did get the land they hoped for, though large tracts of land were confiscated for nonpayment of taxes. Further, the Democrats used the race issue to divide the Republicans. At every opportunity Democrats forced white Republicans to take a position on racial questions such as interracial marriage and separate schools for blacks and whites. If the Republicans sided with blacks they would lose white votes. Southerners also resorted to violence to intimidate and disfranchise (prevent from voting) blacks. As we have seen, violence was common throughout Reconstruction. After the start of Republican governments, however, it was increased dramatically by such organizations as the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan aimed to destroy the Republican party in the South, reestablish control of the black labor force, and restore the racial subordination of blacks in every aspect of Southern life.¹⁶

(18) The Republican party in the North was weakened by political struggles over economic and political issues, such as corruption in the Grant Administration. Support in the North for blacks' rights had always been limited anyway, as shown by the defeat of black suffrage in all the Northern states outside New England except for Iowa and Minnesota.¹⁷ Racism was a part of Northern society, as was shown in the New York City draft riot. Northern investors wanted Southern

plantations to produce cash crops, especially cotton, which would promote economic growth. Thus, they too were concerned that freedmen be disciplined workers on productive plantations. They gave little support to black ownership of small farms, and as capitalists they vehemently opposed confiscating land from ex-Confederates to divide it among freedmen.¹⁸ The Republican party became increasingly allied to these capitalists through the 1860s and 1870s.

(19) The depression of 1873 weakened the Republican party in the North. The working class became critical of railroad owners and other capitalists. Reconstruction governments in the South were crippled as up-country farmers as well as planters were squeezed by falling cotton prices. Prejudice and violence against blacks intensified once again.¹⁹ By 1877 all the Southern states were "redeemed" from Republican control. Conservative white Democrats were again running Southern governments while most blacks no longer voted or participated in politics. The great experiment in Reconstruction was over.

(20) In terms of its goal of securing blacks' rights as citizens and free laborers, Reconstruction can only be judged a failure. A number of reasons for this outcome seem especially significant. The weather and the depression of 1873 severely limited the chances for basic economic changes. Political conflicts in the North and a variety of competing interests in the South divided the Republican Party. Corruption further undermined the legitimacy of the Reconstruction governments. The decision by almost all groups to reject giving land to the freedmen kept the land, and hence a great

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deal of economic power, in the hands of the plantation owners. Racism in both the North and South severely limited white commitments to blacks' rights. Another key to the failure was the campaign of violence that returned the South to the hands of the Democrats.

(21) Blacks and Radical Republicans had envisioned an expanded role for the national government in protecting the fundamental rights of American citizens. Most whites would not agree with such an

interventionist government. Nevertheless, most did not oppose the use of the army to pursue the Nez Perce Indians to enforce a federal order, or the use of the army to protect private property against striking workers in the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. The inconsistencies of Americans' beliefs, and the conflicting interests between various groups, went a long way toward explaining the failures of Reconstruction.

Endnotes for Historian C

- ¹ Former slave William Murphey at the Arkansas constitutional convention of 1868 asked: "Has not the man who conquers upon the field of battle, gained any rights? Have we gained none by the sacrifice of our brethren?"
- ² Mattie Griffeth to Mary Estlin, (letter) July 27, 1863, Estlin Papers, Dr. William's Library, London: "A child of 3 years of age was thrown from a 4th story window and instantly killed. A woman one hour after confinement was set upon and beaten with her tender babe in arms.... Children were torn from their mother's embrace and their brains blown out in the very face of the afflicted mother. Men were burnt by slow fires."
- ³ South Carolinian White Julius Fleming wrote, "The Negroes are to be pitied.... They do not understand the liberty which has been conferred upon them."
- ⁴ John W. De Forest, *A Union Officer in the Reconstruction*, edited by James Croushere and David Potter. (New Haven, 1948), pp. 36-37. De Forest, who was a Freedmen's Bureau agent wrote: "In their eyes the work of emancipation was incomplete until the families which had been dispersed by slavery were reunited."
- ⁵ Edward Magdol, *A Right to the Land: Essays on the Freedmen's Community*. (Westport, CT, 1977), pp. 140-41. Magdol says that freedmen in Haiti, the British and Spanish Caribbean, and Brazil all wanted land ownership.
- ⁶ At the statewide conventions in the South in 1865 speaker after speaker from the black delegation called for universal manhood suffrage (every male being able to vote regardless of race or property holdings).
- ⁷ 39th Congress, 1st Session, House Report 30, pt. 2:178
A Freedmen's Bureau agent stated that, "Southern whites are quite indignant if they are not treated with the same deference that they were accustomed to" under slavery.
Barry A. Crouch, "A Spirit of Lawlessness: White Violence, Texas Blacks, 1865-1868," *Journal of Social History*, 18 (Winter 1984), pp. 218-20. This article details violence over labor disputes.
- ⁸ George Benham, *A Year of Wreck*. (New York, 1980), pp. 402-3.
Benham, a Northern planter, stated, "If Providence had smiled on this region in 1866, by giving it a reasonable crop,...injustice to the Negro and the newcomer, bitterness of heart and hatred of the government would all have disappeared. In the absence of a good crop...all these were intensified."
- ⁹ Howard Rabinowitz, "From Exclusion to Segregation: Southern Race Relations, 1865-1890," *Journal of American History*, 63 (September 1976), pp. 326-27.

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Endnotes for Historian C

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“Southern states and cities barred blacks from poor relief, orphanages, parks, and schools among others.”

¹⁰ 39th Congress, 1st Session, House Report 30, pt. 2: pp. 30-31,55-56.

¹¹ William C. Harris, “The Creed of the Carpetbaggers: The Case of Mississippi,” *Journal of Southern History* 40 (May 1974), pp. 199-224.

¹² *Cincinnati Commercial in American Freedman*, February 1868, p. 373.

¹³ Jean-Charles Houzeau, *My Passage at the New Orleans “Tribune”*: A Memoir of the Civil War, edited by David C. Rankin, translated by Gerard F. Debault. (Baton Rouge, 1984), p. 143.

Tribune editor Houzeau said that most of the conventions produced modern, democratic constitutions, “magnificent for their liberal principles.”

The texts of the Reconstruction constitutions are in Francis N. Thorpe, ed., *The Federal and State Constitutions*, 7 vols (Washington, D.C., 1909).

¹⁴ Mark W. Summers, *Railroads, Reconstruction, and the Gospel of Prosperity: Aid Under the Radical Republicans*, 1865-1877. (Princeton, 1984), pp. 68-84.

¹⁵ Edmund Drago, *Black Politicians and Reconstruction in Georgia*. (Baton Rouge, 1982), p. 67.

¹⁶ Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction*. (New York, 1971), p. xlvi.

¹⁷ William Gillette, *The Right to Vote*. (Baltimore, 1969 ed.), pp. 25-28.

¹⁸ *New York Times*, February 19, March 10, April 10, June 27, 1867.

When Thaddeus Stevens submitted a bill giving 40 acres to freedmen from confiscated land, conservative Republicans denounced Stevens for adding to “the distrust which already deters capitalists” from investing in the South. *The New York Times* said that capitalists would not invest for fear of confiscation.

¹⁹ 44th Congress, 2nd Session, Senate Miscellaneous Document 48, 1:34-39, 3:473-76; Daniel Henderson, *The White Man’s Revolution in South Carolina*. (North Augusta, S.C., 1916), p. 1.

An example of white violence occurred in the town of Hamburg, South Carolina, in 1874. A dispute developed between black militia and armed whites. Outgunned, the black militia tried to flee. Twenty-five were captured by whites, of which five were murdered in cold blood. After the killings, a white mob ransacked the homes and the shops of the town’s blacks.



Historian A

1. What is the main point of Historian A’s view?

2. How does Historian A view each of the following? (Hint: watch for adjectives)
 - a. Radical Republicans

 - b. Former Confederates and plantation owners

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