

Civil War and Reconstruction, 1861-1877

by Eric Foner



"The Battle of Mill Spring, Ky., January 19th, 1862," by Currier and Ives, New York. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

In 1877, soon after retiring as president of the United States, Ulysses S. Grant, embarked with his wife on a two-year tour of the world. At almost every location, he was greeted as a hero. In England, the son of the Duke of Wellington, whose father had vanquished Napoleon, greeted Grant as a military genius, the primary architect of Union victory in the American Civil War. Parading English workers hailed him as the man whose military prowess had saved the world's leading experiment in democratic government and as a Hero of Freedom who had helped secure the emancipation of America's four million slaves. Otto von Bismarck, the Chancellor of Germany, welcomed Grant as a nation builder, who had accomplished on the battlefield something—national unity—that Bismarck was attempting to create for his own people.

As the reaction to Grant's tour demonstrates, contemporaries recognized the Civil War as an event of international significance. The various meanings imparted to it offer a useful way of outlining why the Civil War was so pivotal in our own history. The war changed the nature of warfare, gave rise to today's American nation-state, and destroyed a slave society unprecedented in the modern world. In its aftermath, during the era of Reconstruction, Americans struggled to come to terms with these dramatic changes and, temporarily, established biracial democratic government on the ashes of slavery.

In the physical destruction it brought to the South, the economic changes it produced throughout the nation, and the new ideas it spawned, the Civil War altered the lives of several generations of Americans. The war produced a loss of life unprecedented in the American experience. The 620,000 combatants who perished nearly outnumber those who died in all other American wars combined. For those who lived through it, the Civil War would always remain the defining experience of their lives.

The Civil War is sometimes called the first modern war, although what constitutes "modernity" in warfare is a matter of debate. It was the first war to bring the full impact of the industrial revolution to bear on the battlefield. Railroads transported troops and supplies, and railroad junctions such as Chattanooga, Atlanta, and Petersburg became major military objectives. The telegraph made possible

instantaneous communication between generals and between the battlefield and home front. The war took place soon after a revolution in arms manufacture had replaced the traditional musket, accurate at only a short range, with the more modern, and deadly, rifle and bullet. This development changed the nature of combat, emphasizing the importance of heavy fortifications and elaborate trenches and giving those on the defensive—usually Southern armies—an immense advantage over attacking forces. The rifle produced the appalling casualty statistics of Civil War battles. At Gettysburg, there were nearly fifty thousand dead, wounded, and missing. Total wartime casualties numbered well over one million, in an American population of around thirty-two million.

The Civil War began as a conventional contest of army versus army but by the end had become a war of society against society, with slavery, the foundation of the southern social order, becoming a target. In such a contest, civilian morale proved as crucial to sustaining and winning the war as events on the battlefield, and the population's will to fight became as much a military consideration as armies in the field. Historians have long debated whether the Union's victory was inevitable. Certainly, the Union overshadowed the Confederacy in manpower and economic resources. But the Union also had a far greater task. It had to conquer an area as large as western Europe, while the Confederacy, like the American patriots during the War of Independence, could lose battle after battle and still win the war, if their opponents tired of the conflict. Thus, political leadership was crucial to victory, and Lincoln proved far more successful than his Confederate counterpart, Jefferson Davis, in mobilizing public sentiment. One historian has suggested that if the North and South had exchanged presidents, the South would have won the war.[1]

Northern victory consolidated the American Union. In this sense, the Civil War forms part of the nineteenth-century process of nation-building. But Lincoln's Union was rather different from the nations being constructed in Europe. It was conceived as neither the reclamation of ancestral lands nor the institutional embodiment of a common ancestry, language, or culture. Rather, as Lincoln himself insisted, the nation was the incarnation of a universal set of ideas, centered on political democracy and human liberty. These principles, of course, had been enunciated by the Founding Fathers, but only with the destruction of slavery could the United States seriously claim to represent to the world the idea of human liberty.

It is easy to forget how decentralized the United States was in 1861, and how limited were the powers of the federal government. There was no national banking system, no national railroad gauge, no national tax system, not even reliable maps of the areas where the war would take place. The army in 1861 numbered 14,000 men, the federal budget was minuscule, and nearly all functions of government were handled at the state and local level. The Civil War created the modern national state in America. It also profoundly altered the federal government's relationship to the American economy. To mobilize the North's economic resources, the Lincoln administration instituted the first national banking system and national currency, the first national taxes on income, and the first highly protective tariffs, and laid the foundation for the first transcontinental railroad. Whether the war retarded or encouraged economic growth in the short run remains a point of debate among historians. But the economic policies of the Union forged a long-lasting alliance between the Republican Party, the national state, and the emerging class of industrial capitalists. The transfer of political power in Washington from southern planters to allies of northern industrialists and merchants created the political conditions under which the United States emerged by century's end as the greatest economic power on earth.

Central to the war's meaning was the abolition of slavery. Slavery lay at the root of the political crisis that produced the Civil War, and the war became, although it did not begin as, a struggle for emancipation. Union victory eradicated slavery from American life. Yet the war left it to future generations to confront the numerous legacies of slavery and to embark on the unfinished quest for racial justice.

The destruction of slavery—by presidential proclamation, legislation, and constitutional amendment—was a key act in the nation-building process. A war begun to preserve the old Union without threatening slavery produced one of the greatest social revolutions of the nineteenth century. The old image of Lincoln single-handedly abolishing slavery with the stroke of his pen has long been abandoned, for too many other Americans—politicians, reformers, soldiers, and slaves themselves—contributed to the coming of emancipation. In 1862, with military success elusive, Radical Republicans in Congress and abolitionists clamoring for action against slavery, and slaves by the thousands fleeing the plantations wherever the Union Army appeared, Lincoln concluded that his initial policy of fighting a war solely to preserve the Union had to change. The Emancipation Proclamation, issued on January 1, 1863, profoundly altered the nature of the war and the future course of American history. It was the Proclamation, moreover, more than any other single wartime event, that transformed a war of armies into a conflict of societies. Although it freed few slaves on the day it was issued, as it applied almost exclusively to areas under Confederate control, the Emancipation Proclamation ensured that Union victory would produce a social revolution within the South and a redefinition of the place of blacks in American life. There could now be no going back to the prewar Union. A new system of labor, politics, and race relations would have to replace the shattered institution of slavery.

Before the Civil War, the definition of those entitled to enjoy the “blessings of liberty” protected by the Constitution was increasingly defined by race. In the *Dred Scott* decision of 1857, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney declared that no black person could be a citizen of the United States. The enlistment of 200,000 black men in the Union armed forces during the second half of the war placed black citizenship on the postwar agenda. From the war emerged the principle of a national citizenship whose members enjoyed the equal protection of the laws. That principle, which we know today as “civil rights,” originated in the Civil War and the turbulent era of Reconstruction that followed.

With Union victory, the status of the former slaves in the reunited nation became the focal point of the politics of postwar Reconstruction. In a society that had made political participation a core element of freedom, the right to vote inevitably became central to the former slaves’ desire for empowerment and autonomy. As soon as the Civil War ended, and in some parts of the South even earlier, blacks who had been free before the war came together with emancipated slaves in conventions, parades, and petition drives to demand suffrage and, on occasion, to organize their own “freedom ballots.” Radical Republicans in the North supported black male suffrage both as an act of justice and as the only way to prevent former Confederates from dominating southern political life.

However, Andrew Johnson, who succeeded the martyred Lincoln as president in April 1865, inaugurated a program of Reconstruction that placed full power in the hands of white southerners. The new governments established during the summer and fall of 1865 enacted laws—the notorious Black Codes—that severely limited the rights of former slaves in an effort to force them to return to work as dependent plantation laborers. In response, the Republican majority in Congress in 1866 enacted its own plan of Reconstruction. In the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, they permanently altered the federal system and the nature of American citizenship.

For the first time, the national government assumed basic responsibility for defining and protecting Americans’ civil rights. The Fourteenth Amendment enshrined in the Constitution the ideas of birthright citizenship and equal rights for all Americans. The Amendment prohibited states from abridging the “privileges and immunities of citizens” or denying them the “equal protection of the law.” This broad language opened the door for future Congresses and the federal courts to breathe meaning into the guarantee of legal equality, a process that occupied the courts for much of the twentieth century. Later, the Fifteenth Amendment barred the states from making race a qualification for voting. Strictly speaking, suffrage remained a privilege rather than a right, subject to numerous regulations by the states. But by the time Reconstruction legislation had run its course, the federal government had taken upon itself the responsibility for ensuring that states respected the equal civil and political rights of all

American citizens. Reconstruction radicalism, however, had its limits. The right to vote, expanded to eliminate the barrier of race, was still restricted to men, despite the demands of the era's woman suffrage movement. And no steps were taken to provide an economic underpinning for African Americans' new freedom—the "forty acres and a mule" former slaves insisted would guarantee them economic independence from their former owners.

Nonetheless, Reconstruction witnessed a remarkable political revolution in the South. In 1867, African American men in the defeated Confederacy were given the right to vote and hold office—a radical departure from pre-Civil War days, when blacks could vote only in a handful of northern states. A politically mobilized black community joined with white allies to bring the Republican Party to power throughout the South, and with it a redefinition of the purposes and responsibilities of government. The region's first public school systems were established, and efforts were made to rebuild and diversify the shattered economy. For the first time in American history, black men held positions of political power, ranging from the US Congress to state legislatures, and local sheriffs, school board officials, and justices of the peace. The Reconstruction ideal of interracial democracy and color-blind citizenship eventually succumbed to a counterattack from violent organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and the progressive abandonment of the principle of equality in the North and the idea of federal intervention to protect the rights of the newly freed slaves. Not until the "Second Reconstruction"—the civil rights revolution of the 1960s—would the United States once again seek to come to terms with the political and social consequences of the destruction of slavery.

With the overthrow of biracial state governments in the South and the withdrawal of the last federal troops from the region by President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1877, the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction came to an end. But conflict continued in the arena of historical interpretation and public memory. In the North, the Grand Army of the Republic, the organization of war veterans, became a fixture of Republican politics and a presence in every northern community. Even as the Republican Party abandoned its earlier idealism, the loyalties created by the war helped it retain national dominance well into the twentieth century. In the South, the Confederate experience came to be remembered as the Lost Cause, a noble struggle for local rights and individual liberty (with the defense of slavery conveniently forgotten).

By the turn of the century, as soldiers from North and South fought side by side in the Spanish-American War, it seemed that the nation had put the bitterness of the 1860s behind it. But the road to reunion was paved with black Americans' shattered dreams. With northern acquiescence, the Solid South, now uniformly Democratic, effectively nullified the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and imposed a new racial order based on disenfranchisement, segregation, and economic inequality.

Historical accounts of Reconstruction played an important part in this retreat from the ideal of equality. For much of the twentieth century, both scholarly and popular writing presented Reconstruction as the lowest point in the saga of American history. Supposedly, Radical Republicans in Congress vindictively fastened black supremacy upon the defeated Confederacy and an orgy of corruption and misgovernment followed, presided over by unscrupulous "carpetbaggers" (northerners who ventured south to reap the spoils of office), "scalawags" (white southerners who cooperated with the Republican Party for personal gain), and ignorant and childlike freed people. After much needless suffering, the South's white community banded together to restore "home rule" (a euphemism for white supremacy). Originating in the political propaganda of Reconstruction's opponents, this interpretation rested on the assumption that African Americans were by nature incapable of participating in democratic government and that black suffrage was the gravest error of the Civil War period. This quite inaccurate "memory" of Reconstruction was invoked for decades as a potent defense of the South's racial status quo in the era of segregation and disenfranchisement. More recently, in the wake of the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, scholars have taken a far more sympathetic approach to Reconstruction, viewing it as an effort,

noble if flawed, to create interracial democracy in the South. The tragedy was not that it was attempted, but that it failed.

Overall, the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction raised questions that remain central to our understanding of ourselves as a nation. What should be the balance of power between local authority and the national government; who is entitled to American citizenship; what are the meanings of freedom and equality in the United States? These questions remain subjects of controversy today. In that sense, the Civil War is not yet over.

[1] David Potter, “Jefferson Davis and the Political Factors in Confederate Defeat,” in *Why the North Won the Civil War*, ed. David H. Donald (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 93–114.

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