Reconstruction

by Edward L. Ayers

Five generations of an African American family in South Carolina, ca. 1862. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

In the twelve years after the Civil War—the era of Reconstruction—there were massive changes in American culture, economy, and politics. These were the years of the "Old West," of cowboys, Indians, and buffalo hunts, of cattle drives, railroads, and ranches. It was also the beginning of the "Gilded Age" in the North, the age of big fortunes, enormous businesses, struggle over labor unions, and the burgeoning of cities filled with immigrants, all of it given an air of desperation by the largest economic depression in United States history beginning in 1873. The events in the West and the North interwove with those in the South, where the central struggles of Reconstruction unfolded.

The political Reconstruction of the South progressed in two distinct eras. The first was Presidential Reconstruction, from 1865 through early spring 1867, when Andrew Johnson shaped the pace and depth of the reintegration of the South into the United States following the Confederacy's surrender. The United States government, including President Lincoln, had defined no explicit and coherent plan for the postwar South and Lincoln's assassination and Johnson's rise to the presidency threw things into even greater uncertainty. Johnson, who had defended the Union as a United States senator and wartime governor of Tennessee and who was elected vice president under Lincoln in 1864, proved surprisingly lenient with white Southerners and unsympathetic to the people who had been held in slavery. Johnson hoped to create a national party devoted to the Union and sought the support of the former leaders of the South. He sacrificed black Southerners' interests in the process.

Under Johnson, white Southerners held on to all they could of the old order. They passed "Black Codes" that narrowly defined the possibilities of life for freedpeople, preventing them from renting land or owning firearms and placing their children in coercive "apprenticeships" to their former owners. Former Confederates violently attacked black people in New Orleans, in Memphis, and in the countryside across the region. The Ku Klux Klan terrorized those who challenged white supremacy in any way. White Southerners resisted the Freedmen's Bureau, which aided impoverished whites and blacks with surplus United States Army material, used special courts to adjudicate conflicts between freedpeople and their former masters, and tried to prevent violence against African Americans.

In this period of tumult immediately after the war, former slaves and former slaveholders had to define new ways of living. White landowners wanted black workers to labor in gangs under close supervision; African Americans wanted to work on their own. Within a few years, a system evolved in which landowners and landless workers shared some of the profits from the crops they produced. This bargain, born of necessity, became a system known as sharecropping and would dominate the Southern economy for generations to come.

Sharecropping often led the families doing the work in the fields deeper into debt over the course of the year, for they had no cash until the crop came in. Without collateral, sharecroppers had to pay whatever interest the landowner or the storeowner (often the same person) charged. When the crop—almost always cotton—was harvested and they received their share, the laboring families often owed more than they had earned for all their work. This system induced both landowners and sharecroppers to grow more and more cotton, driving down the price as a result and locking the South in a desperate cycle.

Relations between black women and black men changed with emancipation as well. Enslaved people had sustained families despite the lack of legal recognition of marriage and despite the reality that children could be sold off at a slaveholder's whim. Relationships in slavery did not foster the kind of relationships held up as the ideal among white Americans, with an independent man as the breadwinner and a wife working in the home. Enslaved women were often on their own, raising children without a husband or father present. People who loved one another were often separated against their will, with little hope of reunion; others found themselves forced to live with or have children with partners not of their choosing.

When slavery ended, African American women joined men, with varying degrees of eagerness, in separate households. The Freedmen's Bureau and churches encouraged marriage, but relationships between formerly enslaved people were not always easily resolved. Couples that had been formed by necessity or force broke or drifted apart. Both men and women were happy for women to devote less time to the white men's fields and to be less subject to sexual assault and coercion, but many black women were not eager to submit themselves to the will of husbands either. The individual household as well as the regional economy, in other words, had to be reconstructed. The reconstitution of African American families and communities proved a major accomplishment of succeeding generations.

Even as long-term changes in labor and in family life evolved in the South after the Civil War, political conflict and change roiled the nation. A second era of Reconstruction began in March 1867, when a new Republican majority in Congress pressed for a much more aggressive recasting of the South than Johnson had overseen. The blatant and violent resistance of white Southerners to even the mild reforms of Presidential Reconstruction had persuaded the Northern electorate that deeper reforms were required before the Southern states could rejoin the Union. A wing of the Republican Party, called "Radicals" by their critics, instituted a sweeping set of changes in the South.

The Reconstruction Acts of 1867 divided the South into five military districts under national control. The Acts required that each state write a new constitution giving voting rights to all men, regardless of race or prior enslaved status, and ratify the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which declared that all people other than American Indians born in the United States were citizens, with rights to due process of law. African American men mobilized to vote and elected many of their number to the constitutional conventions and political positions across the South.

The Republican conventions and legislatures formed in Reconstruction sought to use the power of the state to help public education, to spread tax responsibility, to stop public whipping, and to foster economic development. White Southerners ridiculed, derided, and undermined every action of those bodies. Although most Republican officeholders, especially at the higher levels, were white men,

every instance of failure was held up as an example of the unfitness of African Americans to hold positions of public trust.

Any white man who joined with black voters and allies in the Republican Party was castigated as a traitor to his race, as either a “scalawag” (a native white Southern Republican) or a “carpetbagger” (a white Northern Republican). The scalawags were portrayed by the Democrats as shameless men of poor character, willing to sell their heritage as white men for a chance at a political office. The carpetbaggers, who received positions as governors, congressmen, or senators from their Republican allies, were portrayed as rootless adventurers so shiftless they could carry all they owned in a cheap bag made of carpet, exploiting the ignorance of black voters for their own greed. In reality, these Northern-born white Republicans tended to be well-educated men of property, often US veterans, who had come to the South months or years before any prospect of office holding appeared.

Reconstruction in the South in the years after 1867 proved to be a kaleidoscope of conflicting motivations, coalitions, and expectations. Some former abolitionists, white and black, came to the South to help complete the work of emancipation; other newcomers sought mainly personal economic advantage. Some white Southern Republicans worked in good faith alongside black allies while others spoke of their supposed comrades with open distaste. Some Southern Republicans advocated laws that aided business while others sought to protect the landless. Whatever their goals or backgrounds, Republicans found themselves under relentless attack from white Democrats, who sought to remove their opponents from power quickly and permanently. The Democrats favored as little government as possible, especially when it was under the control of a biracial coalition.

Republican power lasted varying amounts of time in different Southern states. The course of Reconstruction in each state depended on how quickly new constitutions were written and approved, on how much black men and their white Republican allies could remain mobilized in the face of white violence and blacklisting, and how effective Republican political leaders were in holding on to power. In some Southern states Reconstruction ended quietly, in backroom deals among conservative men eager to bring the conflict to a close. Elsewhere Reconstruction ended in open warfare, as armed white men terrorized black and white Republicans in their homes, at work and at church, and at the polls. In Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina, Reconstruction came to an end only after contested election returns in the presidential race of 1876 led to a compromise that gave the electoral votes to the Republican candidate, Rutherford B. Hayes, who, in return, removed the troops from those last states.

Such a complex and charged history has been open to widely differing interpretations, at the time and ever since. The nation’s first generation of professional scholars told their readers early in the twentieth century that black people simply were not prepared for freedom much less citizenship, that the leaders of Reconstruction in the South were rootless, incompetent, and morally bankrupt Yankees who came to the South only to pillage it. After World War II, with the occupations of Japan and Germany fresh in Americans’ minds, and with the civil rights struggle emerging, historians argued that Reconstruction had failed because it had not gone nearly far enough in removing former Confederates from power or in providing the freed people the land and justice they deserved. Such a view became dominant in the 1960s and has remained central to historians’ understanding.

The magisterial 1988 history by Eric Foner, *Reconstruction*, sympathetic to African Americans, their accomplishments, and their allies, deemed Reconstruction “America’s unfinished revolution.” Historians today generally accept that verdict, seeing the era of Reconstruction as a period of remarkable effort defeated by white Southerners and undermined by a faltering white Northern electorate. The goals of legal and political equity would be delayed for another century.

From the largest perspective, the challenges of Reconstruction are all too clear. The effort to recast the postwar South was up against long odds from the outset. Reconstruction sought to complete one of the great revolutions of modern history and to do so without the benefit of overwhelming military force, modern tools of surveillance, or a contrite opponent. Slavery in the United States had been strong and growing stronger when it suddenly ended in a vast war waged over much of the continent. Southern slave-holders had held the largest slave population in the hemisphere, in an empire that had grown in population through a massive domestic slave trade and in territory through a war with Mexico that determined the future of much of North America. Southerners had dominated the presidency and the Supreme Court throughout the first three generations of United States history and had not hesitated to use that power to suppress abolition, to force northern complicity in returning fugitive slaves, and to lay legal claim to at least half of the nation's territory. Changing all those power relations at one time was a massive undertaking.

Moreover, the three major groups in Reconstruction were divided internally. The white North wanted irreconcilable goals: vengeance and reconciliation, transformation and stability, justice and the status quo. In the white South, many called for peace and acceptance of the new order while others demanded relentless resistance to alien invaders. The black South saw conflicts between former slaves and former free blacks, between people from town and people from the country, between women and men, between secular leaders and religious leaders. Reconstruction was shaped by struggles within as well as among those groups.

Black Southerners, despite their divisions, showed a remarkable eagerness to practice democratic politics to advance their own ends. They mobilized quickly and effectively, posing a powerful threat in numbers and leadership. "This is a democracy—a government of the people," argued a convention of African Americans in Nashville in January 1865, as they petitioned white Unionists for a voice in the future that stretched before them. "It should aim to make every man, without regard to the color of his skin, the amount of his wealth, or the character of his religious faith, feel personally interested in its welfare. Every man who lives under the Government should feel that it is his property, his treasure, the bulwark and defense of himself and his family, his pearl of great price, which he must preserve, protect, and defend faithfully at all times, on all occasions, in every possible manner."

These ideals and these aspirations refused to fade over the next century. Black Southerners sustained their political power wherever they could, joining with white allies when practical over the twenty years following the end of Reconstruction, even electing African American congressmen into the early twentieth century. Faced with this determined quest for democratic representation, white Southerners revised the state constitutions of the Reconstruction era around the turn of the century, negating the power of the Fifteenth Amendment and stripping African American men of the vote through poll taxes and other supposedly race-blind provisions. Despite these obstacles, over the first half of the twentieth century black Southern men and women asserted their humanity and their rights in businesses, churches, and schools. In the Civil Rights struggles of the post–World War II era, they turned to the hard-won gains of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments as the leverage they needed to secure their full rights as Americans. Only then would the possibilities of Reconstruction begin to be realized.

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