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# Assessing Reconstruction: Did the South Undergo Revolutionary Change?

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# Assessing Reconstruction: Did the South Undergo Revolutionary Change?

## **Abstract**

With the end of the Civil War, came a number of unanswered questions Reconstruction would attempt to answer for the South. While the South underwent economic, political and social changes for a short period, old traditions continued to persist resulting in racist sentiment.

## **Keywords**

Civil War, Reconstruction, Southern History, Old South, Emancipation, Freedman's Bureau, Fourteenth Amendment, Fifteenth Amendment, Slavery, African American, Slave Owners, Master-Slave, Ku Klux Klan, Jim Crow, Racism

## **Disciplines**

African American Studies | Cultural History | History | Military History | Political History | Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Social History | United States History

## **Comments**

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HIST 339: Old South to New South

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### Assessing Reconstruction: Did the South Undergo Revolutionary Change?

In order to evaluate whether Reconstruction brought revolutionary change to the South, one must analyze the significant differences of political, economic and social life. In terms of reuniting the Union, emancipating African Americans and establishing a cohesive relationship between the North and South, Reconstruction provided revolutionary change. However, despite legislative measures such as the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, white Southerners exerted their dominance through acts of violence and black codes. Issues of labor continued to persist after the war, as former slaveholders found themselves at odds with a newly freed class of workers that resulted in a development of gang labor and sharecropping. While African Americans under these labor guidelines were technically free, such measures held underlying tones of the former master-slave relationship. Likewise, Reconstruction granted African Americans the opportunity to become involved in politics, yet southern states found loopholes in such legislation and eventually barred many blacks from holding positions of power. On a social level, racism persisted leading to acts of violence by the Ku Klux Klan, despite attempts to alleviate such by the Freedmen's Bureau, northern Republicans and the federal government. One important element of a delay to full Reconstruction was the powerful discourse employed by white Southerners, casting African Americans as indolent workers and unfit patriarchs. While Reconstruction succeeded in reuniting the North and South, fierce debate over the newly ratified

amendments, federal intervention in Southern states and the persistence of violence proves the revolution of Reconstruction did not emerge until decades later.

Although the Emancipation Proclamation signed in 1863 freed slaves in the rebellious confederate states, the issue of slavery at the national level was not addressed until the culmination of the war. The question of the abolition of slavery was in dire need of resolution and in 1865, Senators Lyman Trumbull, Charles Sumner and John Henderson sponsored resolutions for a constitutional amendment.<sup>i</sup> On December 6, 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified and used as conditionality for readmission for Confederate states. While slavery was henceforth abolished, the issues of African American citizenship and suffrage were not addressed until 1868 and 1870, respectively. On July 9, 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment was written into the Constitution granting African Americans citizenship, due process and equal protection under the law.<sup>ii</sup> This amendment also addressed concerns over punishment of Ex-Confederate States and generals. At the commencement of this amendment, the South was divided into 5 military districts under careful watch by the federal government. Additionally, Southern congressional representation was reduced and ex-Confederate soldiers were banned from holding any civil, military or elected office without majority approval from Congress.<sup>iii</sup> The last of the Reconstruction Amendments was ratified on February 3, 1870. The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution prohibited states from disenfranchising voters on account of race or previous condition of servitude.<sup>iv</sup> This seemingly revolutionary amendment unfortunately left open the possibility of states instituting voter qualifications. Although members of all races were technically supposed to meet such qualifications, Confederate states took advantage of this loop hole to punish African American voters. Through poll taxes and literacy tests, many African Americans were abridged of this constitutional right.

While Radical, or Congressional, Reconstruction lasted nearly a decade, the impact of this time period was profound on the future of Southern society.<sup>v</sup> The classification of this period as “radical” is important in understanding the scope of such changes in the South. The Reconstruction Act of 1867 enabled African Americans to participate in politics, and thus gain a powerful voice in society, a concept previously foreign to them. When analyzing the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, it is evident the crucial part of this document was the Equal Protection Clause, a section dedicated to ensuring the rights of African Americans be readily maintained by the federal government. Likewise, the division of military districts further enabled African Americans to become involved in politics and exert their civil rights. The political mobilization of African Americans was perhaps one of the most paramount gains during this period of radical Reconstruction. Out of this ability to run for office, came real black political power, which further empowered the newly freed population. At the onset of the Reconstruction period, many outspoken African Americans encouraged the black race to quickly become autonomous and self-sufficient. Major Martin R. Delany, a representative of the Freedmen’s Bureau, wrote in 1865, “People say that you are too lazy to work, that you have not the intelligence to get on for yourselves. I tell you slavery is over, and shall never return again.”<sup>vi</sup>

Through his discussion of post-war Southern society, Peter Kolchin notes that the end of the war left African American slaves freed, but their ensuing status otherwise undetermined.<sup>vii</sup> For African Americans, Reconstruction left them somewhere in between slave and freed men. In political terms, African Americans did achieve the kind of freedom they had longed for on paper. With the passage of the Reconstruction Amendments, slavery was henceforth abolished and African Americans were granted equal protection under the law, due process and suffrage, for black men only. Slaves sensed their impending liberty as the war waged on and for hundreds of

thousands of slaves, slavery ended before the war had even ended.<sup>viii</sup> African Americans did not wait for handouts after emancipation, and instead, sought to establish complete autonomy as soon as possible. This determination to be autonomous united the freed people and those with the most freedom were those who owned land. While initially the result of emancipation and Reconstruction proved to be a bit of a stalemate, there were substantial victories for African Americans. However, with these victories came numerous road blocks put forth by ex-Confederates in the South through legal measures. This included “black codes,” which restricted African Americans from holding specific occupations, owning property or having access to the judicial system.<sup>ix</sup> While African Americans were granted the right to vote and protection under the law, Southerners did everything in their power to ensure this did not happen. One important point Kolchin makes was the sense of disillusionment after the war and how although this manifested in the entire nation, it was most apparent to blacks.<sup>x</sup> African Americans believed they would get more than what was given to them after the war ended, and thus, one could argue they did not receive the kind of freedom for which they had longed. While the number of agricultural black families increased by the latter half of the century, many African Americans still found themselves in similar roles to that of a slave through a continuous cycle of hierarchical relationships. On paper, the Emancipation Proclamation and Reconstruction Amendments sought to help African Americans achieve freedom following the war. However, this disillusionment manifested into many African Americans through a false sense of freedom. In a testimonial excerpt from Senate Report 693, Henry Adams reiterated this idea by stating, “I told him (my former master and current boss) I thought that every man, when he was free, could have his rights and protect themselves. He said, “The colored people could never protect themselves

among the white people.”<sup>xii</sup> This is a powerful statement because it reaffirms the persistent belief among whites that African Americans were inferior, despite gaining federal legal status.

Despite Reconstruction, the U.S. military found itself at odds with ex-Confederates, or Southern Democrats years after the conclusion of the war. The military, working with the federal government, helped restore the Union through the creation of five military districts. While this policing of southern towns help repress some violence, even military leaders were hesitant to intervene too much. These reservations stemmed from such a setup contrary to democratic principles outlined in the Constitution. After the districts were dispersed, it became apparent that not much had changed. While the South attempted to adhere to Northern demands to regain prosperity, the tensions between both regions continue to manifest. In a journal entry from Kate Stone, the daughter of a large plantation owner in Louisiana, this notion was further echoed. Stone wrote, “The Northern papers do make us so mad! Even Little Sister, the child of the house, gets angry. Why will they tell such horrible stories about us?”<sup>xiii</sup> Such a statement is significant because it alludes to the fact that Stone is either unaware of the violent acts committed in the South, or believes such acts are not wrong. Furthermore, many Southerners held views similar to Stone’s, believing they were being cast as the villains.

Likewise, Redeemers, or ex-Confederates who regained power in the 1870s, attempted to restore white supremacy and a slave society.<sup>xiv</sup> These Southern Democrats retook control of local and state governments, and while on the surface they discredited violence against blacks, they turned their head the other way when such violence occurred. Redeemers defined themselves by what they were not, showing no interest in biracial coalitions, attention to black needs or desire to use government as an agent of change.<sup>xv</sup> Redeemers continuously said blacks could exercise their right to vote, but this right did not permit them to run for office. Consequently, many

former slaveholders regained political control similar to that before the war. One by one, conservative democrats redeemed each southern state until the Republicans were almost completely driven out of power. It is important to bear in mind the difference in Reconstruction in the U.S. as opposed to other parts of the world, in the context of shaping new legislation. While Southern Democrats ultimately regained political control, they had absolutely no say in shaping Reconstruction legislation. However, Redeemers played a crucial role in the discourse that amounted as radical Reconstruction came to a close. These men linked the use of violence with redemption and linked their actions to a sacred crusade intended to restore the “right” order.

Regardless of the power exerted by the Redeemers, control over the black political voice fractured white Southerners within the Democratic Party. On the surface, Redeemers stood for white supremacy and unity among whites of all classes. Because many southern whites wanted to move past old customs, tensions arose between poor whites and elites. Both poor blacks and whites felt exploited by the Democratic Party, signaling an end towards any kind of universal white unity.<sup>xv</sup> Many of these individuals unsatisfied with the Redeemers were farmers who felt the centralization of power in merchants at the general store hurt their business. Furthermore, railroads monopolized the South by setting uncompetitive rates and minimizing profits for farmers. Another point of controversy was the issue of money and whether the country should maintain a gold or silver standard. Farmers wanted silver because of its cheaper value and easiness to obtain. The significance of this disagreement over monetary policy was that it was a cry for cheaper credit against upper class, ruling elites.<sup>xvi</sup>

While other parts of the world experienced widespread plantation labor, Southern plantation labor was more widely dispersed, mainly operating out of the plantation belt. This region contained the most fertile land culminating into the production of a staple crop for the



world market. Southern prosperity coupled with the production of staple crops required a dependent labor force, in the eyes of plantation owners. This notion was echoed in a Georgia newspaper that stated the survival of southern prosperity depended upon, “one single condition: the ability of the planter to command labor.”<sup>xvii</sup> Following the war, planters attempted to recreate this form of dependent labor, but newly freed African Americans continued to exert their rights. The end of the war left Southern planters in a state of shock, with many reeling from debt and loss of a labor force. One ex-Confederate’s situation, General Tench Tilghman, was described as follows: “This family, one of our oldest and most respectable, once very wealthy, are now reduced to that state which is even worse in my estimation than actual poverty, large debts, large pride, large wants: small income, and small helpfulness. They are now without servants...the young ladies on Wednesday and Thursday *milked* the cows, while their father the General held the umbrella over them to keep off the rain...the general has to harness his own carriage horses and probably black his own boots.”<sup>xviii</sup> This description of a former slaveholding family’s plight following the war is clearly intended to invoke sympathy. However, this is a perfect example of how powerful white discourse was during the time of Reconstruction. Although working on one’s own plantation is written to appear as an outlandish concept, the inclusion of the women of the household helping is further drives home the significance of this manipulative language. Providing for women was a central part of the notion of southern honor and this vision of women being forced to work on their own plantation symbolizes a sense of dishonor and need for reversion.

The question of labor persisted throughout the South following emancipation. Radical changes implemented during Reconstruction took a back seat to the hot topic of labor amongst white Southerners at the onset of Reconstruction. In the eyes of whites, the newly freedmen were

naturally indolent and unlikely to work unless under compulsion. White planters developed a nostalgia for days when their power lay within the lash and such a notion was echoed by a Louisiana planter: “I have come to the conclusion that the great secret of our success was the great motive power contained in that little instrument.”<sup>xxix</sup> The issue of labor in the New South stemmed arose from conflicting authorities, rather than merely the question of wages and hours. A clash between races emerged from white planters’ determination to reestablish old forms of domination and concurrent attempts by freedmen to assert their independence.<sup>xx</sup> Sharecropping emerged as a popular form of labor, in which white land owners assumed a similar role to that of a master. Moreover, individual families signed contracts with a landowner promising to maintain a specific plot of land. In general, sharecroppers retained one third of the annual crop production in exchange for seed, fertilizers and work animals from the landowner. African Americans embraced this form of labor because it provided them an escape from gang labor and continued white supervision.<sup>xxi</sup> However, this practice did not become as widespread as intended due to the persistent view among whites that African Americans would not work without compulsion.

Race in the antebellum South was anchored in the notion of exclusivity that was further perpetuated by slavery, thus casting African Americans in an unfavorable light for being a darker race. After emancipation, the nation moved towards a radical shift by granting citizenship and suffrage to African American males. However, Hana Rosen notes that such contests involving race also overlapped with gender issues.<sup>xxii</sup> Conservative discourse at this time portrayed African American women as promiscuous, and thus raping a black woman could not be proved. Despite offering testimonial evidence to such horrific events, not a single white man was arrested for rape at this time. Rosen also focuses on how white Southerners of all classes united together to continue to promote inequality for African Americans.<sup>xxiii</sup> While the hierarchical structure of

society was still an underlying factor, it is important to bear in mind the deeper sense of unity between planters and poor whites than prior to the war. African Americans threatened the livelihood of many yeomen farmers, or poor whites, which amounted to growing hostilities between these men. Moreover, the notion of discourse is central to the overarching theme of Rosen's work. In this regard, discourse is a seemingly natural message stemming from the ruling class. Casting African American men as unfit patriarchs and black women as sexually promiscuous are examples of the powerful discourse enacted by white Southerners. Out of this view of African American men as lazy and not contributing to society came the notion that black men could not be the head of the household. Patriarchy was a pivotal part of Southern society and with this came the honor accompanied with the desire to protect women. Through rapes and home invasions, white Southerners asserted their dominance not only to the African American race, but more importantly to these black men they saw unfit to command a household.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Many historians, including Mark Summers, note that Reconstruction should have been complete by 1870.<sup>xxv</sup> With the passage of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment and the readmission of all states except one, many Americans were under the impression the country was finally ready to embark upon a new era of freedom. At this time, northern opinion towards the process began to shift, which in essence effected the leadership decisions by President Grant.<sup>xxvi</sup> Most Northerners were against furthering federal action in Southern states and grew increasingly tired of alleviating the various problems continuing to arise in these regions. As a result, Grant continued to pull troops out of the South, despite the perpetuation of violence and threat of southern Democrat reemergence. By refocusing attention on other legislation, such as the transcontinental railroad, tariff revisions and tax or revenue cuts, the Democrats began to regain some of their lost control in the government. As evidenced in Georgia, Democrats were successful in expelling blacks

from government office. This expulsion prompted a clash between Georgia Democrats and Governor Rufus Bullock, prompting the federal government to once again take action to ease the violence. During this time, Bullock wrote, “I was earnestly urged to do, to pander to their prejudices, by betraying the principles of the Republican Party and shutting my eyes to a palpable violation of the laws and the wrong and injustice done by their expulsion of the colored members of the legislature.”<sup>xxvii</sup> This statement was in response to the ensuing insurrection in Georgia between Klan members and the abolitionist governor. Moreover, in 1867, 24 African American citizens of Calhoun, Georgia wrote a pleading letter to the General of the Third Military District requesting federal troops.<sup>xxviii</sup> The letter referenced the fear residing in most African Americans in this town, stating, “We would open a school here, but are almost afraid to do so, not knowing that we have any protection for life or limb.”<sup>xxix</sup> Furthermore, these men recounted the violence and inequality white Southerners continued to exert against them by writing, “Their first act was to deprive us the privilege to worship any longer in Church. Since we have procured one of our own, they threaten us if we hold meetings in it.”<sup>xxx</sup> For Grant, the case of Georgia served as another stumbling block to a steady Reconstruction. Aware of northern retreat from a drawn out Reconstruction, Grant did not want too much federal intervention, but knew something had to be done to curb the violence. The problem in Georgia is yet another example of continued backlash to moving forward with Reconstruction and black equality.

The emergence of the New South was a manifestation of southern society before the war accompanied with the stark changes after emancipation. As previously mentioned, feelings of exploitation by Southern Democrats unified poor blacks and whites. Out of this, local organizations with a vision for cooperative associations originated. These associations pooled resources together in order to ensure the best prices from the railroads and markets. Moreover,

the biracial makeup of these movements is symbolic of shifting attitudes toward the African American race by whites. Likewise, these associations show that not all whites were united in an effort towards disfranchisement and segregation.

Powerful white elites in the South continued to maintain power over the discourse available to the public. These Southerners invented a crisis, titling it the “Negro Problem.”<sup>xxxix</sup> To justify the violent acts to African Americans, white supremacists told the nation an embellished tale. In *Stories of the South*, K. Stephen Prince writes, “They insisted that the South was under siege. Three decades after emancipation, they said, African Americans had proven themselves incapable of advancement, unworthy of the ballot, and indifferent to laws, thrift, and education. They had become a danger to the well-being, even the continued survival, of southern whites.”<sup>xxxix</sup> By attempting to paint the problem as a threat to the future of the South, white supremacists intended to revert back to norms of the Old South. This type of rhetoric was employed to further justify the violent acts completed by the KKK and explain the need for Jim Crow laws. In response to such violence, many African Americans testified, but little was done to rid the South of these vigilante groups. While the Klan targeted all members of the black community, it is likely they paid special attention to African Americans in position of power. Likewise, the testimony of Abram Colby, a former slave and member of the Georgia legislature, describes an assault, which left him permanently injured and nearly killed. In response to a question regarding the makeup of the assailants, Colby stated, “Some are first-class men in our town. One is a lawyer, one a doctor, and some are farmers.”<sup>xxxix</sup> The Klan was not a homogenous group when it came to occupation or class standing. Rather, as Colby stated, the Klan was comprised of powerful elites and farmers, which shows the depth of white hostility towards the black community.

Similarly, white Southerners intended to take the vote away from African Americans through disfranchisement. In this regard, African Americans who attempted to voice their political rights were subject to tremendous violence. Such calculated violence ultimately demoralized many blacks from exercising their right to suffrage. However, even with redemption and attempts at disfranchisement, African Americans were still voting in significant numbers. By the 1880s, 8 out of 10 white and black men voted.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Patronage emerged from the disunity in the political process in the South. Because white Southerners needed the votes of African Americans and poor whites, they seemingly paid them off to guarantee their position in government.

The degree to which disfranchisement played a role in society was a fundamental part in shaping the New South. On a national scale, progressive disfranchisement emerged in an attempt to “clean up democracy.”<sup>xxxv</sup> This group of progressives, mostly middle class southerners, sought to establish a better form of democracy through the exclusion of blacks. Such a view correlates back to the importance of discourse referring to African Americans as lazy, vagrants. Many whites at this time felt blacks were corrupt and therefore should not hold a respectable position, like government office. On the other hand, whites exerted the honor and respect worthy of maintaining such positions. These ideas formulated into a growing belief that removing blacks from the political process would simultaneously clean up democracy. Literacy tests, poll taxes and the grandfather clause were measures employed by these progressives to exclude blacks from the political process.

As the South became a production of a new era, many ex-Confederates attempted to construct a favorable history of the Old South. These advocates for the white South established a “Lost Cause” mythology and memory of the Civil War and southern culture.<sup>xxxvi</sup> This view

sought to reestablish the traditionalist white society exemplified in antebellum Southern society. Moreover, Confederates were portrayed as chivalrous, noble fighters who were simply overwhelmed by a more resourceful and industrious North. This Lost Cause mentality came together with the vision of the New South and attempts to renounce the work of Northern Republicans during Reconstruction.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Southerners believed Reconstruction had been a deliberate attempt by northerners to destroy the traditional Old South. For Southerners who were willing to work together with their northern counterparts, they were not the bad guys for simply wanting to exclude blacks from politics. These perverse views translated into longstanding beliefs that white southerners would once again reclaim the South. Thomas Dixon Jr. echoed this notion, in a letter from Virginia in 1904. Dixon, describing the Klan, wrote, “In the darkest hour of the life of the South, when her wounded people lay helpless amid rags and ashes under the beak and talon of the Vulture, suddenly from the mists of the mountains appeared a white cloud the size of a man’s hand.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> Despite the horrific violent acts committed by Klansmen, many white southerners held similar views as Dixon. For these individuals, groups like the KKK were seen as noble heroes, attempting to rid their land of a threatening race.

Looking back on Reconstruction, it is not quite evident a New South emerged following the war. Some degree of a New South emerged, anchored in the allusion of the Lost Cause and racial exclusivity. While ex-Confederate soldiers and generals were barred from participating in politics, they eventually regained control of their state legislatures, expelling African Americans who had shortly maintained power. The Reconstruction Amendments, coupled with the work of the Freedmen’s Bureau and federal government, attempted to promote equality of races and diminish notions of disfranchisement and Klan violence. Although African Americans gain autonomy, many found themselves holding similar labor positions in sharecropping or tenant

farming, as prior to the war. In some ways, Reconstruction brought about revolutionary change to the South. While African Americans were continuously targeted, they still maintained their civil rights and freedom, unlike before the war. However, Reconstruction perhaps did not play out in the way many northerners, and Grant, envisioned. One could argue it took another century for Reconstruction to fully run its course. Regardless, Reconstruction paved the way for a New South, where African Americans ultimately had the ability to work on their own terms, run for political office and control their families.



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