

## The Failure of Reconstruction

To some the Era of Reconstruction, at least, in the area of race relation was a revolutionary period. America had, it has been argued, a golden opportunity to settle the racial conflict and create an equalitarian society. But the revolution was aborted and the promise of equality went unfulfilled. Why did that happened?

Following the Civil War the legacy of slavery loomed over the American society. The nation was concerned about the devastation of the South and the economic, political and social problems caused by the war but both the North and the South seemed to be preoccupied with one question—what would be the future of Black people in the United States? Would they be full fledged citizens? This question lingered in the minds of many because, slavery as an institution was never totally integrated into the American society. However, the psychological consequences, that I resulted from the existence of that institution, became a part of American thought and behavior and thus, contributed to the failure of Reconstruction.

At the end of the Civil war the South faced enormous problems, most

which of stemmed directly from the psychological consequences resulting from the institution of slavery, the war, and the emancipation of its slave. The South was devastated by the war which had been fought almost entirely on Southern soil. Over 250 million southerners had died and other seriously wounded. The countryside lay in ruins, with farms and plantations wrecked, crops destroyed. Cities such as Richmond and Atlanta were ravaged by fire and the region's transportation system was in total disrepair while the labor system completely had been disrupted by the freeing of 4 million slaves.

In late 1863, believing that Southern Reconstruction was a matter to be handled by the President, Lincoln issued a proclamation of amnesty and reconstruction. Accord to Lincoln's plan, ten percent of the number of southern voters who participated in the election of 1860 were required to take an oath of allegiance after they would allowed to reorganize their state government. A number of Confederate military official were denied the right to vote and run for office. Property rights were to be restored, expect for the right to own slaves. Blacks were denied the right to vote.

Lincoln's Plan met opposition in Congress, who responded with a plan of its own. This was due in part to the fact that members of Congress

were skeptical of southern intentions. Consequently, the Wade-Davis bill contained severe restrictions regarding the rights of ex-rebels to vote and hold office. The bill also contained provisions for the occupation of federal appointments in the rebellious territories, the abolition of slavery, and demands that the southern states pay the war debt. The bill made no provisions to extend voting rights to black people. Lincoln vetoed the bill which initiated a congressional and presidential conflict over control of Reconstruction.

Lincoln moved with caution as he approached the question of reconciliation between the North and the South. It was not his intent to reconstruct the South but he develop a program of restoration. As he did so, he avoided the "Negro Question." His approach was essentially conservative. His attitude reflected that of his contemporaries who believed that the races were not equally endowed and that blacks and whites could not live peacefully sharing equal rights in the same society. Lincoln's goal, to be achieved through his plan, was to bring the nation together as quickly as possible and to settle the dispute between the north and the south as peacefully as possible.

Some Southern whites dreamed of reestablishing slavery and others

hoped to receive compensation for the freeing of their slaves, most recognized the legal abolition of slavery. There was little agreement, however, concerning the precise position of the freedmen in the new South or how Southern society could and should be reconstituted on the basis of free labor.

Many Southerners doubted the feasibility of free blacks altogether, whereas others expected that the freedmen would continue working for their former owners, legally free but virtually as slaves. Most Northerners felt that the Southern blacks needed some kind of protection to prevent the virtual re-enslavement, but their proposals varied widely from providing a few basic civil rights to instituting sweeping reform—including suffrage and land redistribution—in order to guarantee to Southern blacks basic equal opportunity. The freedmen, too, seemed less sure about what freedom would mean and they were determined that it should be as far removed as possible from the slavery they had known. In short, the situation in the South was extremely uncertain--- much depended upon the actions and reactions of Southern whites and the federal government and the freedmen themselves.

The behavior of most Southern whites was not likely to reassure

either freedmen or Northerners that the South would indeed accept the results of the war. Bitter at their defeat, convinced that they knew and understood their blacks labor, they attempted to restore as much as possible the society they had known. They were encouraged by President Andrew Johnson, himself from Tennessee, a former slave holder, the Governor of and a supporter of the Union. When Johnson became President it was hoped that he would carry out the “radical” republican concept of reconstruction. To the contrary, Johnson had his own agenda for Reconstruction.

Johnson like Lincoln developed a program of restoration. His vision of Reconstruction was closer to that of Lincoln ‘s in that he believed that the matter of Reconstruction was an executive not a legislative matter. Believing that the South had never left the Union, he was conciliatory not coercive. Johnson pardoned many Confederate leaders, ordered the eviction of black families from the land that had been confiscated, during the war, by the United States Army and returned those properties to the original owners. He recognized the Southern electorates based on anti-bellum qualifications to chose the delegates to repudiate secession, to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment, repudiated the Confederate debt and

pledged loyalty to the Union with the promise that those states would be readmitted to the Union. He was not prepared to deal with the "Negro Question," and supported restrictive "black codes" which reduced African Americans to second class citizenship without voting rights. (However, the "black codes" had limited effect because Blacks fell under protection of the Freedmen's Bureau. Created by Congress as a branch of the War Department in 1865, the Freedmen's Bureau provided the poor, whites and freed slaves with emergency food and housing. It also found work for thousands of blacks and settled thousands of others on land that had been confiscated or abandoned during the Civil War. The Bureau also built thousands of schools. More than forty hospitals were constructed to provide much-needed medical care. It also attempted to protect the civil right of African Americans).

In the fall of 1865, Congress, particularly the "radical" faction of the Republican party, condemned Johnson's policies and blocked the readmission of ex-rebel states to the Congress. Congress also renewed the Freedmen's Bureau. Johnson vetoed the Republican supported Freedmen's Bureau and the first Civil Rights bill designed to protect rights of all people in America at the time. Penned by the moderate

## Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois the bill stipulates:

That all persons born in the United States and not subject to any foreign power, excluding Indians not taxed, are hereby declared to be citizens of the United States; and such citizens, of every race and color, without regard to any previous condition of slavery or involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall have the same right, in every State and Territory in the United States, to make and enforce contracts, to sue, be parties, and give evidence, to inherit, purchase, lease, sell, hold, and convey real and personal property, and to full and equal benefit of all laws and proceedings for the security of person and property, as is enjoyed by white citizens, and shall be subject to like punishment, pains, and penalties, and to none other, any law, statute, ordinance, regulation, or custom, to the contrary notwithstanding.

The Civil Rights Act- April 9, 1866

An Act to protect all Persons in the United States in their Civil Rights, and furnish the Means of their Vindication.

Johnson objected to the bill because he saw the bill as an infringement on states' rights. To Johnson it was a effort to centralize and concentrate all legislative power in the hands of the national government. However congress did over ride the veto and the bill became law.

To ease increasingly hostile political tensions, Senator Trumbull and other moderates made a last ditch effort to council Johnson to support for the proposed Fourteenth Amendment.\* John refused and seeing the amendment as punitive proceeded to urge Southern states not to ratify it.

In the election of 1866, the Radicals won an overwhelming majority in Congress and Congressional Reconstruction was on. Radicals no longer had to fear Johnson's veto power—they could easily override it.

In March of 1867, with Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner at the helm, Congress enacted the Military Reconstruction Act. Under this act the South was divided into five military districts. District commanders were required to enroll qualified voters—including Blacks. Those who participated in the officialdom of the Confederacy were barred from the political process. The qualified voters chose delegates to the states conventions to revise the states' constitutions. Accordingly, each state constitution was to include universal manhood suffrage. After the constitution were revised, regular elections were to take place and at the first meeting of the state legislatures the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment had to be ratified. (A condition for re-admission to the Union) After federal approval of the new state constitution and the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment became part of the United States Constitution the state was admitted to the Union.

One of the first accomplished objective of Military Reconstruction was the creation of a new electorate. Although there is some question about the legitimacy of the voter rolls, for the first time in Southern

history—more than 703,000 Blacks and some 627,000 whites were qualified to vote in the reconstructed states. (And for all intents and purposes the process of disenfranchisement and enfranchisement was taking place at the same time.) While two Southern states had a majority Black population, five states had a black majority registered to vote. For example the state black population in Louisiana was 92, 502, while 84,436 black people were registered to vote. The white population in Louisiana was 94,711 and 45,218 whites were registered to vote. In Alabama, the black population was 92,404 and the black voting population 104,518 while the white population 113,871 with a white voting population of 61,295.

Black participated in all phases of political life during Reconstruction. They were modest in there demands, un-aggressive in their conduct and deferential in their attitudes. In no state did they hold place and power in anything approaching their actual numbers and voting strength. They never really took advantage of their numbers to take control of local government. On the national level, the same holds true, only 3 blacks were elected to the 41<sup>st</sup> Congress. Out of more than 100 seats, no more than 8 blacks served in Congress at one time. Given this fact, there is no validity to the old idea that Blacks ruled the South in the Reconstruction years.

And yet in varying numbers and in different states Blacks did hold offices that ranged from justices of the peace to lieutenant governors. To the surprise of many the enfranchisement of the ex-slave and the eagerness and skill which the freedmen took to politics expelled the notion of their alleged docility and incompetence. Most blacks politicians were honest, sober and capable leaders in spite of their limited resources and experiences.

Almost unanimously supporting the Republican party—the freedmen participated in conventions of 1867-1868. They helped to elect governments that launched statewide education systems, encouraged railroads, civil rights laws, protected the rights of laborers, established orphanages and other public institutions and mandated universal manhood suffrage. African American sat in all southern legislature and filled high state posts in Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina. Several, mostly from South Carolina, were elected to the House of Representatives and two, Hiram Revel from South Carolina and Blanche K. Bruce, from Mississippi, were elected to the United States Senate. Most black males continued to vote in the South until around 1900 when suffrage restrictions were adopted by Southern legislature and constitutional conventions

disfranchised the vast majority of African Americans and poor white males.

From the beginning of Reconstruction conservatives attempted to convince former slaves that they were their best friends and that poor whites were their enemies and that the carpetbaggers were intruder (from the North) who only wanted to exploit them. Blacks were not persuaded and gave their support to the Republican party—a support that lasted until 1932.

When oral persuasion did not work, the conservatives resorted to violence. Their intent was to keep blacks from exercising their civil and political rights and to keep them in their place. Terrorist groups were organized such as the Ku Klux Klan, Pale Faces, and the Red Jacks.

In an attempt to protect the rights of Blacks and to insure Republican control of the South, the radical wing of the Republican Party pressed the passage of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment (1869); the Enforcement Act (1870) and a law giving the President power to use direct force against counter-revolutionaries. For the most part the laws were ineffective and did not receive much support from the Grant White House.

The situation in the South became intense as riots occurred protesting military occupation and the change in the status of former

slaves. Mississippi came close to a civil war. The Democrats seized the opportunity to regain power. Taking advantage of the split within the Republican party and the uneasy climate of the South, the Democrats won overwhelming political victories in the name of white supremacy. The South had been redeemed. Home Rule returned in 1877, when Rutherford B. Hayes became President of the States and promptly withdrew military troops from the South.

The South promptly took steps to press blacks into second class citizenship by adopting Jim Crow Laws that received sanction by the United States Supreme Court in the Plessey v. Ferguson decision in 1896 and remained enforce until 1964. This decision supported the separate but equal doctrine” (“separate” facilities for blacks and whites were constitutional as long as they were “equal.” The “separate but equal” doctrine was quickly extended to cover many areas of public life, such as restaurants, theaters, restrooms, and public schools” and in effect artificially removed African Americans from the social, political, and economic mainstream of American life.

Unfortunately, Reconstruction intensified hostile relations between the North and the South. It also intensified racial hatred. Military

occupation of the South represented defeat and the abolishment of self-determination and tradition. Blacks became identified with Northern Republican and hence the object of retaliation. To most Southerners, blacks had to be subordinated in the Southern white society. Most whites viewed Blacks as a threat to the norms of white society and they saw themselves being niggerized. That is to say, that they saw themselves in the position previously held by blacks, for, as they saw it, Blacks had gained rights they had enjoyed prior to the war and now did not have. This feeling that pervaded the South did contribute to the failure of Reconstruction and help to abort a revolutionary opportunity. And yet, there were other significant reasons why Reconstruction failed.

The attitudes of the North with regards to Blacks in many respects did not differ from those of the South. Northern whites, were only superficially committed to the equalitarian purposes of Reconstruction. From 1865 to 1869, Northern public supported the passage of Reconstruction measures enfranchising the freedmen, but this was the result more of war-born anti-southern sentiment than of genuine pro black feeling. In 1867, when the Reconstruction Acts instituted Black suffrage in the South, black men could vote in only seven of the twenty Northern states and in none of the four

border states. Northern voters rejected, several times, black suffrage amendments to their own state constitutions. It was not until the ratification of the Fifteenth amendment, in 1869-70, three years after the Southern freedmen had been enfranchised, that blacks were able to exercise the franchise in the North. This hostility or indifference to equal rights, was a sign that success for an equalitarian Reconstruction policy required a strong national commitment if it was to succeed.

The second reason for the failure of Reconstruction was the bitter, often violent and always well organized opposition of most Southern whites. Confederate veterans, accustomed to the use of violence to achieve their political ends, formed such militia organizations as the Ku Klux Klan, the White League, the Red Shirts and a variety of rifle clubs to terrorize Republicans, especially black Republicans, in an effort to break down and destroy the South. Between 1870 and 1874, the federal government made serious efforts to protect equal rights of blacks against the counterrevolution. The Ku Klux Klan act of 1871 gave President Grant sweeping powers to use the armed forces and the courts to suppress white terrorist activity. And for a time these tools were effective. However, a combination of factors--- the economic depression of 1873 diverted

national attention from Reconstruction to economic issues, the Democratic victory in the congressional election of 1874; adverse Supreme Court decisions that gutted enforcement legislation of much of its power, and growing Northern disillusionment with the whole Reconstruction experiment, contributed to the decline of government enforcement of equality.

Perhaps one of the most critical reasons why Reconstruction failed, had to do with black people themselves. The four million freedmen were for the most part illiterate, penniless, and totally without political experience. The institution of slavery had crippled the self-reliance, initiative, pride, and manhood of many blacks. Black people emerging from slavery did not have the social, economic, and educational resources to make themselves instant equals to their former masters.

Another major reason for the failure of Reconstruction was the instability of the Republican Party coalition in the south. This coalition was made up of a small number of Northern whites (carpetbaggers), Southern whites (scalawags) and the freedmen. Although many of the carpetbaggers and scalawags were scoundrels, most were honest and wanted to make interracial democracy work. Inevitably there was friction

among the components of the Republican coalition. Native Southern Republican shared the Southern dislike for “outsiders and there was a power struggle within the party that pitted the carpetbaggers against the scalawags. Blacks who provided most of the Republican votes, held no official posts in the party, began to demand that their voices be heard. Some of the carpetbaggers had difficulty overcoming their own racial prejudices. The Southern Democrats, increasing united and strong under the banner of home rule and white supremacy, took advantage of racial and other tensions in the party, ultimately bended to inducements and threats, moved to the “white mans party.” In the 1870s, the unstable Republican coalition broke into squabbling factions in several Southern states, making it easier for the Democrats, aided by the terrorizing of black voters, to gain control of one state after another. Thus the promise of Reconstruction goes unfulfilled.

