Reconstruction, the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, was one of the most revolutionary episodes in American history. The war had opened the door to far-reaching changes in American society. In the twelve years that followed the Confederate surrender at Appomattox, the United States pursued some of its noblest values and committed some of its darkest betrayals. By the end of Reconstruction, the federal government and its citizenry, in both the North and the South, would be forever transformed. The legacy of Reconstruction would be debated for over a century, until the Civil Rights Movement set out to finish what Reconstruction had begun.

Why Should I Care?

If you care about the Civil Rights Movement, you should care about Reconstruction. If you are concerned with racial equality in America, you need to study Reconstruction. If you have ever been curious about the history behind the current debate over the role of the federal government in people's lives, then this is the chapter of history for you.

Reconstruction was a truly revolutionary time. It was the sort of experiment in expanded federal authority and intervention that could only have come after a cataclysmic war; at least, that was true in the nineteenth century. Just imagine it: four million people, suddenly freed from the chains of bondage, walking around amidst the ruins of the South and still interacting with the people who used to own them, who used to whip them or sell their relatives down the river if they chose. Under slavery, racial boundaries had been clearly established. Now the question on everyone's mind was: "How free is free?" That turned out to be an extremely difficult and complex question. One historian—Leon F. Litwack—won a Pulitzer Prize for the 600 pages he took to try and explain it, and even then he said his answer only beganto suggest the challenges inherent in the idea. We will give that question and a few others our very best shot here—in considerably fewer than 600 pages. What happened when freedom suddenly came to four million people, and what did that mean?

This is a story about federal, state, and local governments; about presidents and sheriffs; about northerners and southerners, terrorists and liberated slaves, and blacks and whites and mulattoes. This is a story about the everyday people on the ground whose names are mostly lost to history, and about the prominent legislators and journalists who were and are more well-known. It encompasses politics, society, gender, economics, and constitutional law. It involves the confrontation between black hopes and white values that structured the Reconstruction period. It details the process by which this country sought to put itself back together again. It is not simple, but the most important stories seldom are. What they are, is worth reading.

Reconstruction was America's first experiment in interracial democracy for men. It tested the central philosophies and traditions of America's society and institutions. The Civil War entailed a dramatic expansion of the roles and responsibilities of the central government that resulted in the ratification of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution. These amendments made involuntary servitude a federal crime, created a new federal dimension of citizenship for all Americans, and sought to guarantee universal male suffrage. Once they were
ratified, Congress was constitutionally empowered and obligated to protect and enforce them, sustaining the broad new powers and active role of the national government.

The postwar period began with a series of fairly lenient Reconstruction plans put forth by presidents Lincoln and Johnson, who were both eager to see the former Confederacy returned to the Union with as much speed and as little vindictiveness as possible. As the ineffectiveness of Presidential Reconstruction became apparent in the face of blatant violations of the freed peoples' constitutional rights and liberties, northern voters elected Republicans to Congress by a landslide, thereby providing a mandate for the Republicans to take over the job of putting the Union back together again. They were deemed "radical" by subsequent historians because they insisted that blacks be protected in their newfound rights.

When white southern intransigence followed the nation's first Civil Rights Act, Congress passed the Ku Klux Klan Act, which gave federal authorities jurisdiction over both states and individuals who tried to deprive freedmen and women of their newfound rights. Never before had the federal government intervened so forcefully and directly on behalf of its citizens, let alone its most castigated and impoverished minority.

Yet even that unprecedented level of involvement proved insufficient to protect African-Americans or bring about a fundamental change in racial attitudes. Not since the Haitian Revolution had a recently enslaved population risen up amidst cataclysmic social change to claim their own rights and freedoms, to exercise power at every level of government in a society that had been—and, to a great extent, remained—predicated upon the concept of white supremacy. Central to the struggle of the emancipated men and women was the question, "How free is free?" Was freedom simply the absence of bondage, or the right to obtain an education, to receive healthcare, to negotiate for wages, to vote, and to tend one's own plot of land?

Black scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, who was born in 1868—the year that the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified—famously termed the Reconstruction period a "splendid failure," for it did not fail for the reasons that whites thought or expected that it would. Rather than revealing any innate inferiority or incompetence, some 2,000 black Americans governed reasonably well in nearly every level of government, from the Senate to the local sheriff and tax collector. They learned the uses of political power and served with great courage amidst a hostile environment of embittered and war-scared southern whites, many of whom targeted black representatives with violent attacks.

During Reconstruction, African-Americans formed their own fraternal organizations and worshipped in their own churches, and they embraced the notion of an activist government that promoted and safeguarded the welfare of its citizens. Rather than becoming the illiterate, ignorant dupes of demagogues and northern white Republicans, as so many whites suspected or believed, black men and women eagerly obtained the education that had been denied them by law under slavery. The Reconstruction governments were hardly perfect, but blacks proved themselves neither superior nor inferior to their white counterparts. This in itself was a revolutionary concept, in a society where white supremacy remained the central tenet of life, North and South, and where white ministers preached from the pulpit on Sundays that blacks had descended from Ham, and were therefore an inferior race, separated from the superior Anglo Saxon (even though the Curse of Ham passage in the Book of Genesis makes no mention of skin color or race).
Corruption and bribery did take place in government during Reconstruction, as they had prior to the Civil War and as they still do today. Railroad promoters, business speculators and their retainers, land contractors, and stock market investors all sought to purchase their share of influence with elected leaders. As one black representative and former slave commented, "I've been sold eleven times in my life; this is the first time I ever got the money." Yet despite these moral frailties, all of the southern governments combined did not steal as much from the public treasury as William "Boss" Tweed's Ring in New York City, a Democratic Party machine that lined its pockets with over $75 million, or the Republican "Gas Ring" in Philadelphia, which did the same thing. Though such comparisons do not excuse the failings that Reconstruction governments did exhibit, the fact remains that such governments did establish some of the first public and social services in the South outside of North Carolina; they collected taxes to fund public schools, expand hospitals, and build asylums, among other programs.

Nonetheless, as whites regained power over the South by 1877 and throughout the century that followed, whites from both North and South pilloried the Reconstruction period as a disaster because blacks were in charge, and were—by their interpretation—racially unfit to rule and unprepared for the rights, responsibilities, and freedoms granted to them in postwar America. Reconstruction-era instances of corruption or bribery were vastly exaggerated; the nation's foremost scholars, especially historians, wrote seething histories of the period that decried the supposedly deplorable treatment of white southerners and spun overtly racist tales concerning the ignorance and savage lust of black officeholders. The two sides of the Civil War reunited during the late nineteenth century by casting the fate of the black population aside and basing innumerable aspects of their reunited culture, education, and society on the concept of white supremacy. In fact, whites during Reconstruction had responded the same way to all Reconstruction governments, whether corrupt or not. The white South turned to force to end the country's first experiment in integrated government; not because of black failure, but because of black success. Evidence of black ambition, confidence, and aptitude threatened the power structure, institutions, labor system, and society of the former Confederacy more than black corruption or ignorance ever could. But by discrediting the era in which blacks were most active politically, historians, filmmakers, politicians, and writers from across the country effectively acquitted the white South of disfranchising blacks under the Redemption and Jim Crow periods; they permitted racial segregation and discrimination, and even sanctioned it, for over a century.
Where Historians Disagree - Reconstruction

Debate over the nature of Reconstruction—not only among historians, but among the public at large—has created so much controversy over the decades that one scholar, writing in 1959, described the issue as a “dark and bloody ground.” Among historians, the passions of the debate have to some extent subsided since then; but in the popular mind, Reconstruction continues to raise “dark and bloody” images.

For many years, a relatively uniform and highly critical view of Reconstruction prevailed among historians, a reflection of broad currents in popular thought. By the late nineteenth century, most white Americans in both the North and the South had come to believe that few real differences any longer divided the sections, that the nation should strive for a genuine reconciliation.

And most white Americans believed as well in the superiority of their race, in the inherent unfitness of African Americans for political or social equality. Out of this mentality was born the first major historical interpretation of Reconstruction, through the work of William A. Dunning. In Reconstruction, Political and Economic (1907), Dunning portrayed Reconstruction as a corrupt outrage perpetrated on the prostrate South by a vicious and vindictive cabal of Northern Republican Radicals. Reconstruction governments were based on “bayonet rule.” Unscrupulous and self-aggrandizing carpetbaggers flooded the South to profit from the misery of the defeated region. Ignorant, illiterate blacks were thrust into positions of power for which they were entirely unfit. The Reconstruction experiment, a moral abomination from its first moments, survived only because of the determination of the Republican Party to keep itself in power. (Some later writers, notably Howard K. Beale, added an economic motive—to protect Northern business interests.) Dunning and his many students (who together formed what became known as the “Dunning school”) compiled state-by-state evidence to show that the legacy of Reconstruction was corruption, ruinous taxation, and astronomical increases in the public debt.

The Dunning school not only shaped the views of several generations of historians. It also reflected and helped to shape the views of much of the public. Popular depictions of Reconstruction for years to come (as first the 1915 film The Birth of a Nation and then the 1936 book and 1939 movie Gone with the Wind illustrated) portrayed the era as one of tragic exploitation of the South by the North. Even today, many white southerners and others continue to accept the basic premises of the Dunning interpretation. Among historians, however, the old view of Reconstruction has gradually lost credibility.

The great African-American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois was among the first to challenge the Dunning view in a 1910 article and, later, in a 1935 book, Black Reconstruction. To him, Reconstruction politics in the Southern states had been an effort on the part of the masses, black and white, to create a more democratic society. The misdeeds of the Reconstruction governments, he claimed, had been greatly exaggerated, and their achievements overlooked. The governments had been expensive, he insisted, because they had tried to provide public education and other public services on a scale never before attempted in the South. But Du Bois’ use of Marxist theory in his work caused many historians to dismiss his argument; and it remained for a group of less radical, white historians to shatter the Dunning image of Reconstruction.

In the 1940s, historians such as C. Vann Woodward, David Herbert Donald, Thomas B. Alexander, and others began to reexamine the Reconstruction governments in the South and to suggest that their records were not nearly as bad as most historians had previously assumed. They also looked at the Radical Republicans in Congress and suggested that they had not been motivated by vindictiveness and partisanship alone.

By the early 1960s, a new view of Reconstruction was emerging from these efforts, a view whose appeal to historians grew stronger with the emergence of the “Second Reconstruction,” the civil rights movement. The revisionist approach was summarized by John Hope Franklin in Reconstruction After the Civil War (1961) and Kenneth Stampp in The Era of Reconstruction (1965), who claimed that the postwar Republicans had been engaged in a genuine, if flawed, effort to solve the problem of race in the South by providing much-needed protection to the freedmen. The Reconstruction governments, for all their faults, had been bold experiments in interracial politics.

The congressional Radicals were not saints, but they had displayed a genuine concern for the rights of slaves. Andrew Johnson was not a martyr defender of the Constitution, but an inept, racist politician who resisted reasonable compromise and brought the government to a crisis. There had been no such thing as “bayonet rule” or “Negro rule” in the South. African Americans had played only a small part in Reconstruction governments and had generally acquiesced themselves well. The Reconstruction regimes had, in fact, brought important progress to the South, establishing the region’s first public school system and other important social changes. Corruption in the South had been no worse than corruption in the North at that time. What was tragic about Reconstruction, the revisionist view claimed, was not what it did to Southern whites but what it did not do for Southern blacks. By stopping short of the reforms necessary to ensure blacks genuine equality, Reconstruction had consigned them to more than a century of injustice and discrimination.

In later years, scholars began to question the revisionist view—not in an effort to revive the old Dunning interpretation but, rather, in an attempt to draw attention to those things Reconstruction in fact achieved. Eric Foner, in Nothing but Freedom (1983) and Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution (1988), concluded that what is striking about the American experience in this period is not how little was accomplished, but how far the former slaves moved toward freedom and independence in a short time, and how large a role African Americans themselves played in shaping Reconstruction. During Reconstruction, blacks won a certain amount of legal and political power in the South; and even though they held that power only temporarily, they used it for a time to strengthen their economic and social positions and to win a position of limited but genuine independence. Through
Reconstruction they won, if not equality, a measure of individual and community autonomy, building blocks of the freedom that emancipation alone had not guaranteed.

Historians writing from the perspective of African-American and women's history have made related arguments. Leon Litwack's *Been in the Storm So Long* (1979) maintained that former slaves used the relative latitude they enjoyed under Reconstruction to build a certain independence for themselves within Southern society. They strengthened their churches; they reunited their families; they refused to work in the "gang-labor" system of the plantations and forced the creation of a new labor system in which they had more control over their own lives. Amy Dru Stanley and Jacqueline Jones have both argued that the freed slaves displayed considerable independence in constructing their households on their own terms and asserting their control over family life, reproduction, and work. Women in particular sought the opportunity, according to Jacqueline Jones in *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (1985), "to labor on behalf of their own families and kin within the protected spheres of household and community."

But Reconstruction, some historians have begun to argue, was not restricted to the South alone. Heather Richardson, in *West from Appomattox* (2007) and *The Death of Reconstruction* (2001), shows how the entire nation changed during and as a result of the Civil War and Reconstruction—with the South, perhaps, changing least of all. The age of Reconstruction was also the age of western expansion and industrialization.

**Changing Interpretations of Reconstruction**

1907 William Dunning

Reconstruction was an outrage perpetrated on the prostrate South by a group of vindictive Northern Radical Republicans. It was a period of great corruption during which unprincipled and self-serving carpetbaggers flooded the South so they could profit from the misery of the defeated region. At the same time, ignorant and illiterate blacks obtained positions of power for which they were entirely unfit. The Reconstruction experiment survived only because of the Republican party's determination to keep itself in power.

-From *Reconstruction, Political and Economic*

1935 W. E. B. DuBois

Southerners, both black and white, used Reconstruction to create a truly democratic society. The misdeeds of the Reconstruction governments are greatly exaggerated and their achievements almost entirely overlooked. The money expended by the Southern governments did not go to the politicians. Rather, it went areas such as education and other public services that had never been funded on such a large scale.

-From *Black Reconstruction*

1960s

Post–war Republicans engaged in a genuine, if flawed, effort to solve the problem of race in the South by providing much-needed protection to the freedmen. The Reconstruction governments, for all their faults, had been bold experiments in interracial politics. The congressional Radicals were not saints, but they had displayed a genuine concern for the rights of slaves. Andrew Johnson was not a martyred defender of the Constitution, but an inept, racist politician who resisted reasonable compromise and brought the governments to a crisis. There had been no such thing as “bayonet rule” or “negro rule” in the South. Blacks had played only a small part in Reconstruction government and had generally acquitted themselves well. The Reconstruction regimes had, in fact, brought important progress to the South, established the region’s first public school system and other important social changes. Corruption in the South was not worse that corruption in the North at that time. What was tragic about Reconstruction, the revisionist view claimed, was not what it did to Southern whites but what it did not do for Southern blacks. By stopping short of the reforms necessary to ensure blacks genuine equality, Reconstruction had consigned them to more than a century of injustice and discrimination.
1979 Leon Litwack

During Reconstruction, former slaves used their new found freedom to develop a certain independence for themselves within the Southern society. They built up their churches, reunited their families, and refused to work within the "gang labor" system that replaced slavery. Instead, they created a new labor system in which they had more control over their lives. Reconstruction gave blacks a certain amount of legal and political power in the South. -From Been in the Storm So Long

1980s Eric Foner

The striking aspect of Reconstruction is not how little was accomplished, but how far the former slaves moved toward freedom and independence in a short time, and how large a role African Americans played in shaping Reconstruction. During Reconstruction, blacks won a certain amount of legal and political power in the South, and even thought they held that power only temporarily, they used it for a time to strengthen their economic and social positions and to win a position of limited but genuine independence. Through Reconstruction they won, if not equality, a measure of individual and community autonomy, building blocks of the freedom that emancipation alone had not guaranteed.


**Essential Question**: Why might historians have arrived at different interpretations about Reconstruction?

* * * * * * * * * * * * *

Questions Raised by Historians:

* Were the revisionists correct in suggesting that the major issue during Reconstruction was economic?
* Were the neo-revisionists justified in insisting that the major issue during Reconstruction was moral in nature?
* Did the particular structural form of state and national politics preclude effective governmental action in dealing with the problems growing out of emancipation?
* What should have been the proper policy for both the federal and state governments to follow with regard to black Americans?
* How were the voices of blacks to be heard during policy formation and implementation?
* Was the American experience dissimilar or similar to that of other nations that also experienced the transition from a slave to a free society?
* Was Reconstruction a meaningless experiment after which the Southern elite resumed business as usual complete with white supremacy?
* Was Reconstruction a “splendid failure?”
* Was Reconstruction a brave but shortlived attempt to fashion real democracy in the South – one that would lay the groundwork for the civil rights movement one hundred years later?
* How did the juggernaut of postwar capitalism affect the terrain on which Reconstruction was being attempted?

**Essential Question**: How might a historian’s choice of questions impact his or her conclusions?
“Reconstruction was a failure.”
Federal and state governments failed to secure the rights guaranteed to former slaves by constitutional amendments.

- State Republican parties could not preserve black-white voter coalitions that would have enabled them to stay in power and continue political reform.
- Radical Republican governments were unable or unwilling to enact land reform or to provide former slaves with the economic resources needed to break the cycle of poverty.
- Racial bias was a national, not a regional, problem. After the Panic of 1873, Northerners were more concerned with economic problems than with the problems of former slaves.
- The Supreme Court undermined the power of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

At the end of Reconstruction, former slaves found themselves once again in a subordinate position in society. The historian Eric Foner concludes, “Whether measured by the dreams inspired by emancipation or the more limited goals of securing blacks’ rights as citizens... Reconstruction can only be judged a failure.”

“Reconstruction was a success.”
Reconstruction was an attempt to create a social and political revolution despite economic collapse and the opposition of much of the white South. Under these conditions its accomplishments were extraordinary.

- African Americans only a few years removed from slavery participated at all levels of government.
- State governments had some success in solving social problems; for example, they funded public school systems open to all citizens.
- African Americans established institutions that had been denied them during slavery: schools, churches, and families.
- The breakup of the plantation system led to some redistribution of land.
- Congress passed the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which helped African Americans to attain full civil rights in the 20th century.

W. E. B. Du Bois summarized the achievements of the period this way: “[I]t was Negro loyalty and the Negro vote alone that restored the South to the Union; established the new democracy, both for white and black.”

Despite the loss of ground that followed Reconstruction, African Americans succeeded in carving out a measure of independence within Southern society.

THINKING CRITICALLY

1. CONNECT TO HISTORY  Evaluating What are the two major arguments each side makes as to whether Reconstruction was a success or failure? Which perspective do you agree with, and why?
   SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R16.

2. CONNECT TO TODAY  Analyzing Issues One historian has referred to Reconstruction as “America’s Unfinished Revolution.” Is the U.S. still dealing with issues left over from that period? Research Reconstruction’s legacy using newspapers, magazines, or other sources. Make a short persuasive presentation in class.
Report Cards on Reconstruction

Directions: For each Reconstruction issue, read President Johnson's plan and the Radical Republicans' plan. Discuss with your group members the strengths and weaknesses of each plan. Keep in mind that the goal of Reconstruction was to reunite the country in a stable and fair way. Then, give each plan a letter grade, and explain your reason for assigning that grade. Group members do not have to agree on the same grade.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grading Scale</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A = Excellent plan, no weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B = Good plan, has only minor weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C = Some good parts and some weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D = Only limited strengths and major weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F = Plan is doomed for failure</td>
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Reconstruction Issue 1: What Should be done to Southerners who rebelled?

Radical Republicans' Plan
- Southerners should be punished so they would not rebel again. One idea was to confiscate (take away) all the plantations and divide up the land among the freedmen.
- Leaders of the South should lose their governmental positions. A new set of leaders should be brought in to reconstruct the South. Any person who held a leadership position before the war could not hold public office until he was pardoned (forgiven) by Congress.

I would give this plan a grade of _____ because . . .

President Johnson's Plan
- Southerners had to take an oath (verbal pledge) to support, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. The oath also included a promise to obey all laws passed during the war, especially regarding the emancipation (freeing) of the slaves.
- Confederate officers, large landholders, and any other leaders of the pre-war South had to seek a special pardon (forgiveness) if they wanted to regain their rights as citizens.
- Lincoln's idea of "malice (hatred) toward none" was a good one. Being lenient towards Southerners would heal the wounds of the nation more effectively and quickly.

I would give this plan a grade of _____ because . . .
Reconstruction Issue 2: What should Southern states be required to do to be re-admitted into the Union?
Radical Republicans' Plan
- Southern states had given up secession by complying with the terms outlined above. They
  needed to be punished for their actions.
- In order to come back into the union as a state, a southern state would have to meet these
  conditions:
  - Call a constitutional convention to write a new constitution (set of laws).
  - Guarantee African Americans' right to vote. At the time, both states, former Confederate
    states, and state officials could not vote on these issues.
  - The states would be ruled by the military until all new laws were enforced.
  I would give this plan a grade of ___ because ___.

President Johnson's Plan
- Individual leaders of the Southern states—most notably the states on the North—had made the
  decisions to secede. Therefore, states should not be punished harshly or be forced to
  rejoin the union in a timely manner.
- In order to come back into the union, Southern states would have to meet these conditions:
  - Call a constitutional convention to write a new constitution (set of laws).
  - Repeal all Confederate debts. (This was approved of the 13th Amendment, which abolished
    slavery.)
  - Once the above conditions were met, Southerners were allowed to run their own
    states, hold elections, and send representatives to Congress.
  I would give this plan a grade of ___ because ___.

Reconstruction Issue 3: What should be done for the freedmen?
Radical Republicans' Plan
- African Americans should be guaranteed equal rights and be assisted in establishing new
  lives as free people. Congress would pass laws giving some land to the freedmen and build
  schools for them. In fact, it was Congress's duty to help our African Americans until they
  could provide for themselves.
  - Freedmen will only receive justice and security if they are considered full citizens—just like
    whites—under the law. Many felt right to vote was also key.
  - The military should have control over enforcing all laws helping the freedmen.
  I would give this plan a grade of ___ because ___.

President Johnson's Plan
- African Americans should not be guaranteed the right to vote. Only certain African
  Americans should be given the vote, like those who could read or write.
  - African Americans should not be guaranteed the right to vote. I would give this plan a grade of
    ___ because ___.
DEBATE ISSUE: Was Reconstruction a "Splendid Failure"?

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Eric Foner asserts that although Reconstruction did not achieve radical goals, it was a "splendid failure" because it offered African Americans in the South a temporary vision of a free society. YES: Eric Foner, from "The New View of Reconstruction," American Heritage (October/November 1983)

NO: LaWanda Cox explores the hypothetical question of whether Reconstruction would have succeeded had Lincoln lived and concludes that, despite his many talents, not even Lincoln could have guaranteed the success of the full range of reform, for African Americans. NO: LaWanda Cox, from Lincoln and Black Freedom: A Study in Presidential Leadership (University of South Carolina Press, 1981)

Given the complex issues of the post-Civil War years, it is not surprising that the era of Reconstruction (1865-1877) is shrouded in controversy. For the better part of a century following the war, historians typically characterized Reconstruction as a total failure that had proved detrimental to all Americans—northerners and southerners, whites and blacks. According to this traditional interpretation, a vengeful Congress, dominated by radical Republicans, imposed military rule upon the southern states. Carpetbaggers from the North, along with traitorous white scalawags and their black accomplices in the South, established coalition governments that rewrote state constitutions, raised taxes, looted state treasuries, and disenfranchised former Confederates while extending the ballot to the freedmen. This era finally ended in 1877 when courageous southern white Democrats successfully "redeemed" their region from "Negro rule" by toppling the Republican state governments.

This portrait of Reconstruction dominated the historical profession until the 1960s. One reason for this is that white historians (both northerners and southerners) who wrote about this period operated from two basic assumptions: (1) The South was capable of solving its own problems without federal government interference, and (2) the former slaves were intellectually inferior to whites and incapable of running a government (much less one in which some whites would be their subordinates). African American historians, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, wrote several essays and books that challenged this negative portrayal of Reconstruction, but their works seldom were taken seriously in the academic world and rarely were read by the general public. Still, these black historians foreshadowed the acceptance of revisionist interpretations of Reconstruction, which coincided with the successes of the civil rights movement (or "Second Reconstruction") in the 1960s.

Without ignoring obvious problems and limitations connected with this period, revisionist historians identified a number of accomplishments of the Republican state governments in the South and their supporters in Washington, D.C. For example, revisionists argued that the state constitutions that were written during Reconstruction were the most democratic documents that the South had seen up to that time. Also, while taxes increased in the southern states, the revenues generated by these levies financed the rebuilding and expansion of the South's railroad network, the creation of a number of social service institutions, and the establishment of a public school system that benefited African Americans as well as whites. At the federal level, Reconstruction achieved the ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which extended significant privileges of citizenship (including the right to vote) to African Americans, both North and South. Revisionists also placed the charges of corruption leveled by traditionalists against the Republican regimes in the South in a more appropriate context by insisting that political corruption was a national malady. Although the leaders of the Republican state governments in the South engaged in a number of corrupt activities, they were no more guilty than several federal officeholders in the Grant administration, or the members of New York City's notorious Tweed Ring (a Democratic urban political machine), or even the southern white Democrats (the Redeemers) who replaced the radical Republicans in positions of power in the
former Confederate states. Finally, revisionist historians sharply attacked the notion that African Americans dominated the reconstructed governments of the South. They pointed out that there were no black governors, only two black senators, and fifteen black congressmen during this period.

In the essays that follow, Eric Foner and LaWanda Cox present thoughtprovoking analyses of the Reconstruction period. In the first selection, Foner concedes that Reconstruction was not very radical, much less revolutionary. Nevertheless, he argues, it was a "splendid failure" (a phrase coined by Du Bois) because it offered African Americans a vision of how a free society could look.

LaWanda Cox approaches this question from the counterfactual premise that Abraham Lincoln lived to oversee the political, economic, and social experiment that was Reconstruction. If anyone could have met the challenges of the post-Civil War era, she states, it was Lincoln. On the other hand, however, even had Lincoln gained broad consent from the white South during his second presidential term, Republican lawmakers' commitment to state responsibility for the rights of citizens, coupled with deeply entrenched racism in the South, would have derailed the more progressive aspects of Reconstruction legislation.

YES:  Eric Foner

The New View of Reconstruction
In the past twenty years, no period of American history has been the subject of a more thoroughgoing reevaluation than Reconstruction—the violent, dramatic, and still controversial era following the Civil War. Race relations, politics, social life, and economic change during Reconstruction have all been reinterpreted in the light of changed attitudes toward the place of blacks within American society. If historians have not yet forged a fully satisfying portrait of Reconstruction as a whole, the traditional interpretation that dominated historical writing for much of this century has irrevocably been laid to rest.

Anyone who attended high school before 1960 learned that Reconstruction was an era of unrelieved sordidness in American political and social life. The martyred Lincoln, according to this view, had planned a quick and painless readmission of the Southern states as equal members of the national family. President Andrew Johnson, his successor, attempted to carry out Lincoln's policies but was foiled by the Radical Republicans (also known as Vindictives or Jacobins). Motivated by an irrational hatred of Rebels or by ties with Northern capitalists out to plunder the South, the Radicals swept aside Johnson's lenient program and fastened black supremacy upon the defeated Confederacy. An orgy of corruption followed, presided over by unscrupulous carpet-baggers (Northerners who ventured south to reap the spoils of office), traitorous scalawags (Southern whites who cooperated with the new governments for personal gain), and the ignorant and childlike freedmen, who were incapable of properly exercising the political power that had been thrust upon them. After much needless suffering, the white community of the South banded together to overthrow these "black" governments and restore home rule (their euphemism for white supremacy). All told, Reconstruction was just about the darkest page in the American saga.

Originating in anti-Reconstruction propaganda of Southern Democrats during the 1870s, this traditional interpretation achieved scholarly legitimacy around the turn of the century through the work of William Dunning and his students at Columbia University. It reached the larger public through films like Birth of a Nation and Gone With the Wind and that best-selling work of myth-making masquerading as history, The Tragic Era by Claude G. Bowers. In language as exaggerated as it was colorful, Bowers told how Andrew Johnson "fought the bravest battle for constitutional liberty and for the preservation of our institutions ever waged by an Executive" but was overwhelmed by the "poisonous propaganda" of the Radicals. Southern whites, as a result,
"literally were put to the torture" by "emissaries of hate" who manipulated the "simpleminded" freedmen, "inflaming the negroes' egotism" and even inspiring "lustful assaults" by blacks upon white womanhood.

In a discipline that sometimes seems to pride itself on the rapid rise and fall of historical interpretations, this traditional portrait of Reconstruction enjoyed remarkable staying power. The long reign of the old interpretation is not difficult to explain. It presented a set of easily identifiable heroes and villains. It enjoyed the imprimatur of the nation's leading scholars. And it accorded with the political and social realities of the first half of this century. This image of Reconstruction helped freeze the mind of the white South in unalterable opposition to any movement for breaching the ascendancy of the Democratic party, eliminating segregation, or readmitting disfranchised blacks to the vote. Nevertheless, the demise of the traditional interpretation was inevitable, for it ignored the testimony of the central participant in the drama of Reconstruction—the black freedman. Furthermore, it was grounded in the conviction that blacks were unfit to share in political power. As Dunning's Columbia colleague John W Burgess put it, "A black skin means membership in a race of men which has never of itself succeeded in subjecting passion to reason, has never, therefore, created any civilization of any kind." Once objective scholarship and modern experience rendered that assumption untenable, the entire edifice was bound to fall.

The work of "revising" the history of Reconstruction began with the writings of a handful of survivors of the era, such as John R. Lynch, who had served as a black congressman from Mississippi after the Civil War. In the 1930s white scholars like Francis Simkins and Robert Woody carried the task forward. Then, in 1935, the black historian and activist W. E. B. Du Bois produced Black Reconstruction in America, a monumental reevaluation that closed with an irrefutable indictment of a historical profession that had sacrificed scholarly objectivity on the altar of racial bias. "One fact and one alone," he wrote, "explains the attitude of most recent writers toward Reconstruction; they cannot conceive of Negroes as men." Du Bois's work, however, was ignored by most historians.

It was not until the 1960s that the full force of the revisionist wave broke over the field. Then, in rapid succession, virtually every assumption of the traditional viewpoint was systematically dismantled. A drastically different portrait emerged to take its place. President Lincoln did not have a coherent "plan" for Reconstruction, but at the time of his assassination he had been cautiously contemplating black suffrage. Andrew Johnson was a stubborn, racist politician who lacked the ability to compromise. By isolating himself from the broad currents of public opinion that had nourished Lincoln's career, Johnson created an impasse with Congress that Lincoln would certainly have avoided, thus throwing away his political power and destroying his own plans for reconstructing the South.

The Radicals in Congress were acquitted of both vindictive motives and the charge of serving as the stalking-horses of Northern capitalism. They emerged instead as idealists in the best nineteenth-century reform tradition.

Radical leaders like Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens had worked for the rights of blacks long before any conceivable political advantage flowed from such a commitment. Stevens refused to sign the Pennsylvania Constitution 1838 because it disfranchised the state's black citizens; Sumner led a fight in the 1850s to integrate Boston's public schools. Their Reconstruction policies were based on principle, not petty political advantage, for the central issue divide Johnson and these Radical Republicans was the civil rights of freedmen. Studies of congressional policy-making such as Eric L. McKitrick's Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction, also revealed that Reconstruction legislation, ranging from the Civil Rights Act of 1866 to the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, enjoy broad support from moderate and conservative Republicans. It was not simp the work of a narrow radical faction.
Even more startling was the revised portrait of Reconstruction in the South itself. Imbued with the spirit of the civil rights movement and rejecting entirely the racial assumptions that had underpinned the traditional interpretation, these historians evaluated Reconstruction from the black point of view. Works like Joel Williamson’s *After Slavery* portrayed the period as a time of extraordinary political, social, and economic progress for blacks. The establishment of public school systems, the granting of equal citizenship to blacks, the effort to restore the devastated Southern economy, the attempt to construct an intentional political democracy from the ashes of slavery, all these were commendable achievements, not the elements of Bowers’s “tragic era.”

Unlike earlier writers, the revisionists stressed the active role of the free men in shaping Reconstruction. Black initiative established as many schools did Northern religious societies and the Freedmen’s Bureau. The right to vote was not simply thrust upon them by meddling outsiders, since blacks began agitating for the suffrage as soon as they were freed. In 1865 black conventions throughout the South issued eloquent, though unheeded, appeals for equal civil and political rights.

With the advent of Radical Reconstruction in 1867, the freedmen did enjoy a real measure of political power. But black supremacy never existed. Most states placed blacks held only a small fraction of political offices, and even in South Carolina, where they comprised a majority of the state legislature’s lower house, effective power remained in white hands. As for corruption, moral standards in both government and private enterprise were at low ebb throughout the nation in the postwar years—the era of Boss Tweed, the Credit Mobilier scandal, and the Whiskey Ring. Southern corruption could hardly be blamed on former slaves.

Other actors in the Reconstruction drama also came in for reevaluation. Most carpetbaggers were former Union soldiers seeking economic opportunites in the postwar South, not unscrupulous adventurers. Their motives, a typical American amalgam of humanitarianism and the pursuit of profit, were no more insidious than those of Western pioneers. Scalawags, previously seen traitors to the white race, now emerged as “Old Line” Whig Unionists who had opposed secession in the first place or as poor whites who had long resented planters’ domination of Southern life and who saw in Reconstruction a chance to recast Southern society along more democratic lines. Strongholds of Southern white Republicanism like east Tennessee and western North Carolina had been the scene of resistance to Confederate rule throughout the Civil War; now, as one scalawag newspaper put it, the choice was “between salvation at the hand of the Negro or destruction at the hand of the rebels.”

At the same time, the Ku Klux Klan and kindred groups, whose campaign of violence against black and white Republicans had been minimized or excused in older writings, were portrayed as they really were. Earlier scholars had conveyed the impression that the Klan intimidated blacks mainly by dressing as ghosts and playing on the freedmen’s superstitions. In fact, black fears were all too real; the Klan was a terrorist organization that beat and killed its political opponents to deprive blacks of their newly won rights. The complicity of the Democratic party and the silence of prominent whites in the face of such outrages stood as an indictment of the moral code the South had inherited from the days of slavery.

By the end of the 1960s, then, the old interpretation had been completely reversed. Southern freedmen were the heroes, the “Redeemers” who overthrew Reconstruction were the villains, and if the era was “tragic,” it was because change did not go far enough. Reconstruction had been a time of real progress and its failure a lost opportunity for the South and the nation. But the legacy of Reconstruction—the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments—endured to inspire future efforts for civil rights. As Kenneth Stampp wrote in *The Era of Reconstruction*, a superb summary of revisionist findings published in 1965, “If it was worth four years of civil war to save the Union, it was worth a few years of radical reconstruction to give the American Negro the ultimate promise of equal civil and political rights.”
As Stampp's statement suggests, the reevaluation of the first Reconstruction was inspired in large measure by the impact of the second—the modern civil rights movement. And with the waning of that movement in recent years, writing on Reconstruction has undergone still another transformation. Instead of seeing the Civil War and its aftermath as a second American Revolution (as Charles Beard had), a regression into barbarism (as Bowers argued), or a golden opportunity squandered (as the revisionists saw it), recent writers argue that Radical Reconstruction was not really very radical. Since land was not distributed to the former slaves, they remained economically dependent upon their former owners. The planter class survived both the war and Reconstruction with its property (apart from slaves) and prestige more or less intact.

Not only changing times but also the changing concerns of historians have contributed to this latest reassessment of Reconstruction. The hallmark of the past decade's historical writing has been an emphasis upon "social history"—the evocation of the past lives of ordinary Americans—and the downplaying of strictly political events. When applied to Reconstruction, this concern with the "social" suggested that black suffrage and officeholding, once seen as the most radical departures of the Reconstruction era, were relatively insignificant.

Recent historians have focused their investigations not upon the politics of Reconstruction but upon the social and economic aspects of the transition from slavery to freedom. Herbert Gutman's influential study of the black family during and after slavery found little change in family structure or relations between men and women resulting from emancipation. Under slavery most blacks had lived in nuclear family units, although they faced the constant threat of separation from loved ones by sale. Reconstruction provided the opportunity for blacks to solidify their preexisting family ties. Conflicts over whether black women should work in the cotton fields (planters said yes, many black families said no) and over white attempts to "apprentice" black children revealed that the autonomy of family life was a major preoccupation of the freedmen. Indeed, whether manifested in their withdrawal from churches controlled by whites, in the blossoming of black fraternal, benevolent, and self-improvement organizations, or in the demise of the slave quarters and their replacement by small tenant farms occupied by individual families, the quest for independence from white authority and control over their own day-to-day lives shaped the black response to emancipation.

In the post-Civil War South the surest guarantee of economic autonomy, blacks believed, was land. To the freedmen the justice of a claim to land based on their years of unrequited labor appeared self-evident. As an Alabama black convention put it, "The property which they [the planters] hold was nearly all earned by the sweat of our brows." As Leon Litwack showed in Been in the Storm So Long, a Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the black response to emancipation, many freedmen in 1865 and 1866 refused to sign labor contracts, expecting the federal government to give them land. In some localities, as one Alabama overseer reported, they "set up claims to the plantation and all on it."

In the end, of course, the vast majority of Southern blacks remained propertyless and poor. But exactly why the South, and especially its black population, suffered from dire poverty and economic retardation in the decades following the Civil War is a matter of much dispute. In One Kind of Freedom, economists Roger Ransom and Richard Stitch indicted country merchants for monopolizing credit and charging usurious interest rates, forcing black tenants into debt and locking the South into a dependence on cotton production that impoverished the entire region. But Jonathan Wiener, in his study of postwar Alabama, argued that planters used their political power to compel blacks to remain on the plantations. Planters succeeded in stabilizing the plantation system, but only by blocking the growth of alternative enterprises, like factories, that might draw off black laborers, thus locking the region into a pattern of economic backwardness.

If the thrust of recent writing has emphasized the social and economic aspects of Reconstruction, politics has not been entirely neglected. But political studies have also reflected the postrevisionist mood summarized by C. Vann Woodward when he observed "how essentially nonrevolutionary and conservative Reconstruction really was." Recent writers, unlike their
revisionist predecessors, have found little to praise in federal policy toward the emancipated blacks.

A new sensitivity to the strength of prejudice and laissez-faire ideas in the nineteenth-century North has led many historians to doubt whether the Republican party ever made a genuine commitment to racial justice in the South. The granting of black suffrage was an alternative to a long-term federal responsibility for protecting the rights of the former slaves. Once enfranchised, blacks could be left to fend for themselves. With the exception of a few Radicals like Thaddeus Stevens, nearly all Northern policy-makers and educators are criticized today for assuming that, so long as the unfettered operations of the marketplace afforded blacks the opportunity to advance through diligent labor, federal efforts to assist them in acquiring land were unnecessary.

Probably the most innovative recent writing on Reconstruction politics has centered on a broad reassessment of black Republicanism, largely undertaken by a new generation of black historians. Scholars like Thomas Holt and Nell Painter insist that Reconstruction was not simply a matter of black and white. Conflicts within the black community, no less than divisions among whites, shaped Reconstruction politics. Where revisionist scholars, both black and white, had celebrated the accomplishments of black political leaders, Holt, Painter, and others charge that they failed to address the economic plight of the black masses. Painter criticized "representative colored men," as national black leaders were called, for failing to provide ordinary freedmen with effective political leadership. Holt found that black officeholders in South Carolina mostly emerged from the old free mulatto class of Charleston, which shared many assumptions with prominent whites. "Basically bourgeois in their origins and orientation," he wrote, they "failed to act in the interest of black peasants."

In emphasizing the persistence from slavery of divisions between free blacks and slaves, these writers reflect the increasing concern with continuity and conservatism in Reconstruction. Their work reflects a startling extension of revisionist premises. If, as has been argued for the past twenty years, blacks were active agents rather than mere victims of manipulation, then they could not be absolved of blame for the ultimate failure of Reconstruction.

Despite the excellence of recent writing and the continual expansion of our knowledge of the period, historians of Reconstruction today face a unique dilemma. An old interpretation has been overthrown, but a coherent new synthesis has yet to take its place. The revisionists of the 1960s effectively established a series of negative points: the Reconstruction governments were not as bad as had been portrayed, black supremacy was a myth, the Radicals were not cynical manipulators of the freedmen. Yet no convincing overall portrait of the quality of political and social life emerged from their writings. More recent historians have rightly pointed to elements of continuity that spanned the nineteenth-century Southern experience, especially the survival, in modified form, of the plantation system. Nevertheless, by denying the real changes that did occur, they have failed to provide a convincing portrait of an era characterized above all by drama, turmoil, and social change.

Building upon the findings of the past twenty years of scholarship, a new portrait of Reconstruction ought to begin by viewing it not as a specific time period, bounded by the years 1865 and 1877, but as an episode in a prolonged historical process-American society's adjustment to the consequences of the Civil War and emancipation. The Civil War, of course, raised the decisive questions of America's national existence: the relations between local and national authority, the definition of citizenship, the balance between force and consent in generating obedience to authority. The war and Reconstruction, as Allan Nevins observed over fifty years ago, marked the "emergence of modern America." This was the era of the completion of the national railroad network, the creation of the modern steel industry, the conquest of the West and final subduing of the Indians, and the expansion of the mining frontier. Lincoln's America-the world of the small farm and artisan shop-gave way to a rapidly industrializing economy. The issues that galvanized postwar Northern politics from the question of the greenback
currency to the mode of paying holders of the national debt—arose from the economic changes unleashed by the Civil War.

Above all, the war irrevocably abolished slavery. Since 1619, when "twenty negars" disembarked from a Dutch ship in Virginia, racial injustice had haunted American life, mocking its professed ideals even as tobacco and cotton, the products of slave labor, helped finance the nation's economic development. Now the implications of the black presence could no longer be ignored. The Civil War resolved the problem of slavery but, as the Philadelphia diarist Sydney George Fisher observed in June 1865, it opened an even more intractable problem: "What shall we do with the Negro?" Indeed, he went on, this was a problem "incapable of any solution that will satisfy both North and South."

As Fisher realized, the focal point of Reconstruction was the social revolution known as emancipation. Plantation slavery was simultaneously a system of labor, a form of racial domination, and the foundation upon which arose a distinctive ruling class within the South. Its demise threw open the most fundamental questions of economy, society, and politics. A new system of labor, social, racial, and political relations had to be created to replace slavery.

The United States was not the only nation to experience emancipation in the nineteenth century. Neither plantation slavery nor abolition were unique to the United States. But Reconstruction was. In a comparative perspective Radical Reconstruction stands as a remarkable experiment, the only effort of a society experiencing abolition to bring the former slaves within the umbrella of equal citizenship. Because the Radicals did not achieve everything they wanted, historians have lately tended to play down the stunning departure represented by black suffrage and officeholding. Former slaves, most fewer than two years removed from bondage, debated the fundamental questions of the polity: What is a republican form of government? Should the state provide equal education for all? How could political equality be reconciled with a society in which property was so unequally distributed? There was something inspiring in the way such men met the challenge of Reconstruction. "I knew nothing more than to obey my master," James K. Greene, an Alabama black politician later recalled. "But the tocsin of freedom sounded and knocked at the door and we walked out like free men and we met the exigencies as they grew up, and shouldered the responsibilities."

You never saw a people more excited on the subject of politics than are the negroes of the south," one planter observed in 1867. And there were more than a few Southern whites as well who in these years shook off the prejudices of the past to embrace the vision of a new South dedicated to the principles of equal citizenship and social justice. One ordinary South Carolinian expressed the new sense of possibility in 1868 to the Republican governor of the state: "I am sorry that I cannot write an elegant stiled letter to your excellency. But I rejoice to think that God almighty has given to the poor of S. C. a Gov. to hear to feel to protect the humble poor without distinction to race or color.... I am a native bomed S. C. a poor man never owned a Negro in my life nor my father before me.... Remember the true and loyal are the poor of the whites and blacks, outside of these you can find none loyal."

Few modern scholars believe the Reconstruction governments established in the South in 1867 and 1868 fulfilled the aspirations of their humble constituents. While their achievements in such realms as education, civil rights, and the economic rebuilding of the South are now widely appreciated, historians today believe they failed to affect either the economic plight of the emancipated slave or the ongoing transformation of independent white farmers into cotton tenants. Yet their opponents did perceive the Reconstruction governments in precisely this way—as representatives of a revolution that had put the bottom rail, both racial and economic, on top. This perception helps explain the ferocity of the attacks leveled against them and the pervasiveness of violence in the postmancipation South.
The spectacle of black men voting and holding office was anathema to large numbers of Southern whites. Even more disturbing, at least in the view of those who still controlled the plantation regions of the South, was the emergence of local officials, black and white, who sympathized with the plight of the black laborer. Alabama's vagrancy law was a "dead letter" in 1870, "because those who are charged with its enforcement are indebted to the vagrant vote for their offices and emoluments." Political debates over the level and incidence of taxation, the control of crops, and the resolution of contract disputes revealed that a primary issue of Reconstruction was the role of government in a plantation society. During presidential Reconstruction, and after "Redemption," with planters and their allies in control of politics, the law emerged as a means of stabilizing and promoting the plantation system. If Radical Reconstruction failed to redistribute the land of the South, the ouster of the planter class from control of politics at least ensured that the sanctions of the criminal law would not be employed to discipline the black labor force.

An understanding of this fundamental conflict over the relation between government and society helps explain the pervasive complaints concerning corruption and "extravagance" during Radical Reconstruction. Corruption there was aplenty; tax rates did rise sharply. More significant than the rate of taxation, however, was the change in its incidence. For the first time, planters and white farmers had to pay a significant portion of their income to the government, while propertyless blacks often escaped scot-free. Several states, moreover, enacted heavy taxes on uncultivated land to discourage land speculation and force land onto the market, benefiting, it was hoped, the freedmen.

As time passed, complaints about the "extravagance" and corruption of Southern governments found a sympathetic audience among influential Northerners. The Democratic charge that universal suffrage in the South was responsible for high taxes and governmental extravagance coincided with a rising conviction among the urban middle classes of the North that city government had to be taken out of the hands of the immigrant poor and returned to the "best men"-the educated, professional, financially independent citizens unable to exert much political influence at a time of mass parties and machine politics. Increasingly the "respectable" middle classes began to retreat from the very notion of universal suffrage. The poor were no longer perceived as honest producers, the backbone of the social order; now they became the "dangerous classes," the "mob." As the historian Francis Parkman put it, too much power rested with "masses of imported ignorance and hereditary ineptitude." To Parkman the Irish of the Northern cities and the blacks of the South were equally incapable of utilizing the ballot: "Witness the municipal corruptions of New York, and the monstrosities of negro rule in South Carolina." Such attitudes helped to justify Northern inaction as, one by one, the Reconstruction regimes of the South were overthrown by political violence.

In the end, then, neither the abolition of slavery nor Reconstruction succeeded in resolving the debate over the meaning of freedom in American life. Twenty years before the American Civil War, writing about the prospect of abolition in France's colonies, Alexis de Tocqueville had written, "If the Negroes have the right to become free, the [planters] have the incontestable right not to be ruined by the Negroes' freedom." And in the United States, as in nearly every plantation society that experienced the end of slavery, a rigid social and political dichotomy between former master and former slave, an ideology of racism, and a dependent labor force with limited economic opportunities all survived abolition. Unless one means by freedom the simple fact of not being a slave, emancipation thrust blacks into a kind of no-man's land, a partial freedom that made a mockery of the American ideal of equal citizenship.

Yet by the same token the ultimate outcome underscores the uniqueness of Reconstruction itself. Alone among the societies that abolished slavery in the nineteenth century, the United States, for a moment, offered the freedmen a measure of political control over their own destinies. However brief its sway, Reconstruction allowed scope for a remarkable political and social mobilization of the black community. It opened doors of opportunity that could never be completely closed.
Reconstruction transformed the lives of Southern blacks in ways unmeasurable by statistics and unreachable by law. It raised their expectations and aspirations, redefined their status in relation to the larger society, and allowed space for the creation of institutions that enabled them to survive the repression that followed. And it established constitutional principles of civil and political equality that, while flagrantly violated after Reconstruction, planted the seeds of future struggle.

Certainly, in terms of the sense of possibility with which it opened, Reconstruction failed. But as Du Bois observed, it was a "splendid failure." For its animating vision—a society in which social advancement would be open to all on the basis of individual merit, not inherited caste distinctions—is as old as America itself and remains relevant to a nation still grappling with the unresolved legacy of emancipation.

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Reflections on the Limits of the Possible

... Lincoln's presidential style, at odds with that forthrightness which stands high in twentieth-century criteria for presidential leadership, was not inappropriate to the situation he faced. The manner in which he unveiled the crucial, controversial element of his Reconstruction policy—some measure of suffrage for blacks—was designed to crystallise support and minimize opposition. At the time only the most minimal suffrage proposal could command an intraparty consensus; this was all that he asked, actually less than his supporters had sought in Louisiana. Yet he managed to open the door to future enfranchisement for more blacks than the relatively few, Union soldiers and the "very intelligent," whose qualifications he commended. In phrasing that avoided a definite formulation of either means or goal he suggested the desirability of a fuller franchise, one that would meet what "the colored man" "desires." In the same address he stated that "the sole object of the government" was to get the secession states back into "their proper practical relation with the Union" and asked that "all join in doing the acts necessary" to restore them. He refrained from defining the "acts necessary." To counter criticism that he had set up the reconstructed state government, Lincoln minimized his role in Louisiana, but he did not disavow his authority as commander in chief to shape the Reconstruction process. By virtue of that power he had just sent General Banks back to New Orleans with military authority to perform an essentially civil mission—to promote the kind of Unionist government and racial policy the administration desired.

Although his statements could be otherwise interpreted, Lincoln's purpose, like that of his party, went beyond the readmission of the secession states. In early 1865 he was in an excellent position to implement a larger purpose by combining a minimum of direct force with a maximum use of other means of asserting the power and influence of the presidency. Lincoln's election victory the previous November had greatly strengthened his hand with Congress and with the northern public. Final military victory could only have increased the public esteem and congressional respect he had won. In the summer and fall that followed, Lincoln would have found additional support in a mounting sense of indignation in the North as reports from the South confirmed warnings that the freedom of blacks would be in peril if left in the hands of southern whites. A widespread perception of injustice can be a powerful political force, as indeed it became in 1866.

It would have been uncharacteristic of Lincoln not to have recognized the opportunity. In his pragmatic fashion, advancing step by step as events permitted, with caution but when necessary
with great boldness, it is just possible that Lincoln might have succeeded in making a policy of basic citizenship rights for blacks "acceptable to those who must support it, tolerable to those who must put up with it." The challenge to presidential leadership was formidable. If any man could have met the challenge, that man was Lincoln.

Had Lincoln in the course of a second term succeeded in obtaining a far broader consent from the white South to terms that would satisfy northern Republican opinion than did Congress in 1867-1869, ultimate victory in the battle over the ex-slave's status as free man would not necessarily have followed. There would still have been the need to build institutions that could safeguard and expand what had been won—laws that the courts would uphold, an economy offering escape from poverty and dependency, a Union-Republican party in the South recognized by its opponents as a legitimate contestant for political power. The opportunities open to Lincoln for institutionalizing gains made toward equal citizenship irrespective of color were limited.

A fatal weakness of Reconstruction, constitutional historians have argued, arose from the constitutional conservativism of Republican lawmakers, particularly their deference to the traditional federal structure embodied in the Constitution. This led them to preserve the primacy of state responsibility for the rights of citizens, thereby denying to the national government effective power to protect the rights of blacks. It has been contended that Reconstruction required "a major constitutional upheaval," that it "could have been effected only by a revolutionary destruction of the states and the substitution of a unitary constitutional system." Part of the argument is unassailable. The new scholarship has demolished the old stereotype of Republican leaders as constitutional revolutionaries. They had, indeed, been waging a war for constitution as well as for nation with every intent of maintaining both. And the concern of Republicans for state and local government was no superficial adulation of the constitution; it was deeply rooted in their commitment to self-government. Yet unlike Democrats who denounced as unconstitutional any amendment to the constitution that enlarged federal authority at the expense of the states, Republicans did not uphold state rights federalism without qualification. They believed that they had found a way to protect freedmen in their new citizenship status by modifying, rather than destroying, the traditional federal structure.

What is questionable in the case against "respect for federalism" as fatally compromising Reconstruction is the assumption that the state rights federalist approach to the problem made a solution impossible. Not all scholars would agree. Some believe that the Reconstruction amendments needed only to have, been more carefully framed. Others hold that as written they were adequate to the task. The Supreme Court, of course, seemed to disagree, overturning much of the legislation Congress passed under the amendments. Beginning with the Slaughterhouse decision of 1873, which did not directly affect blacks but carried ominous implications for them, a Republican Court handed down a series of constrictive decisions described in retrospect as "vacuous" and as "a major triumph for the South." Concern to preserve the functions of the states strongly influenced those decisions. Some authorities hold that without destroying federalism the Court could have devised a workable new division of authority between state and nation which would have enabled the latter to protect the rights of blacks against violation by either states or individuals. The Court did not foreclose all avenues of congressional action to protect black rights. However, by 1875 when it rendered the first adverse decision directly relating to the national enforcement effort, further legislation to meet the Court's criteria of adequacy was politically impossible because of the strength in Congress of the Democratic political opposition.

The Supreme Court seemed to have denied to congressional Reconstruction much needed legitimacy and legal sanctions. Without them, it is questionable that the Reconstruction effort could have been successfully defended during the postemancipation decades. The Court's narrow interpretation of which civil rights pertained to national as distinct from state citizenship added to the difficulties the Court had raised for the exercise of power to protect rights recognized as subject to the nation's authority. The decisions presented monumental obstacles to the enforcement of black rights. Better drafted amendments, laws, and indictments, more resourceful
judicial reasoning, or less concern in the early decisions for technicalities might have avoided or remedied them. Lincoln’s presence was unlikely to have increased those possibilities directly. Yet had he been president in the immediate post-Appomattox period he might have succeeded in dissipating southern resistance, in unifying Republicans on the preconditions for restoration, and in inducing reconstructed state governments to accept those conditions—a tall order. The resulting climate of opinion could have led the Court to play a positive role in the nineteenth-century Reconstruction effort. A possibility, but a very tenuous possibility.

Similarly circumscribed was any potential role for Lincoln in helping shape economic developments to assure freedmen an escape from poverty and dependence. No explanation for the tragic outcome of the postwar decades for black America has been more generally accepted in modern scholarship than that Reconstruction failed because the national government did not provide land for the freedman. The thesis has been sharply challenged, and the challenge has not been met. The work of historians and economists in exploring afresh the roots of poverty, particularly of black poverty, in the postbellum South afford some relevant perspectives. Between 1974 and 1979 six booklength studies appeared with significant bearing on the problem of black poverty, and others were in progress; conference papers and published articles also reflected the vigor of scholarly interest in the question.

No consensus has developed either as explanation for the continuing dependence and poverty of southern blacks or as an analysis of the potential economic effect of land distribution. However, four of five econometricians who addressed the latter question concluded that grants of land, while desirable and beneficial, would not have solved the predicament of the freedmen and their children. Robert Higgs has written that “historians have no doubt exaggerated the economic impact of such a grant.” Gavin Wright holds that “the tenancy systems of the South cannot be assigned primary blame for Southern poverty,” that a more equitable distribution of land “would not have produced dramatic improvements in living standards” or “generated sustained progress.” In their book, One Kind of Freedom, Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch appear to accept what Heman Belz has characterized as the “new orthodoxy” of the historians, but they dramatically qualified that position in a subsequent paper. They argued that confiscation and redistribution would have resulted in little improvement in the postbellum situation, which they characterize as one of economic stagnation and exploitation, unless accompanied by federally funded compensation for landowners thereby providing liquid capital for rein vigorating agriculture and possibly developing manufactures. This retrospective prescription is restrained as compared to the requirements outlined by twentieth-century experts who seek land distribution as an avenue out of rural poverty. They see successful land reform as requiring supplementary government programs providing credit, seed and fertilizer distribution, marketing facilities, rural and feeder transportation, pricing mechanisms affecting both what the farmer buys and what he sells, technical research, and agricultural education.

More than a land program was needed to insure the freedman's economic future. Although areas of land with high fertility prospered, it seems doubtful that income from cotton between the close of the war and the turn of the century, even if equitably distributed, could have sustained much beyond a marginal level of existence for those who worked the cotton fields whether as wage earner, cropper, tenant, or small owner. And the lower South because of its soils and climate, as Julius Rubin has convincingly shown, had no viable alternative to cotton as a commercial crop until the scientific and technological advances of the twentieth century. Nor could nonmarket subsistence farming offer much by way of material reward. The "more" that was needed can be envisaged in retrospect, and was glimpsed by contemporaries, but it is not clear how it could have been achieved. Gavin Wright has concluded that the postbellum South "required either a massive migration away from the region or a massive Southern industrial revolution." Both in the North and the South there was enthusiasm for promoting southern industry, but only the future could reveal how elusive would be that "New South" of ever-renewed expectations.
Despite scholarship, new and old, there is no certain explanation of why the South failed to catch up with the North. If historians and economists should agree upon a diagnosis, it is unlikely that they will uncover a remedy that could have been recognized and implemented a century ago. The heritage of slavery most certainly will be part of the diagnosis. It left behind an underdeveloped, overwhelmingly rural economy tied to the world market and bereft of adequate foundations for rapid economic growth. Recovery and growth had to be attempted in a period of initial crop disasters, of disadvantage for primary products in terms of world trade, and by the mid-1870s of prolonged and recurrent economic crises. There were high hopes for southern industrialization in the 1880s, but the effort substantially failed. With opportunity drastically limited in the South and industry expanding in the North, there was yet no great outmigration of blacks until the twentieth century. The reasons for this also are not altogether clear. Neither the restraints placed on southern agricultural labor by law and custom nor the discrimination blacks faced in the North is sufficient explanation. The ways in which European immigrants blocked black advance deserve further study, as does the attitude of blacks themselves both toward leaving the South and toward the unskilled, menial labor which alone might have afforded them large-scale entry into the northern labor market.

Lincoln was a man of his age. The concepts and perceptions then dominant, although not unreasonable on the basis of past experience, were inadequate to meet the challenge of transforming the South. Postwar expectations were buoyant. King Cotton was expected to regain his throne with beneficent results for all. Freed from the incubus of slavery, the South would be reshaped after the image of the bustling North, with large landholdings disintegrated by natural forces, village and school house replacing plantation quarters, internal improvements and local industry transforming the economy. The former slave would share the bright future through diligence and thrift, and the forces of the marketplace. There were, of course, dissenters, both radicals like George W. Julian and Thaddeus Stevens who would confiscate the great estates and conservatives such as those cotton manufacturers, by no means all, who would perpetuate the plantation in some form. Neither had sufficient influence at war's end to shape national policy. Republican leaders who did make postwar policy would have reached beyond prevailing concepts of self-help, the law of supply and demand, and the danger of "class legislation" to enact a modest land program had not President Johnson vetoed it with an appeal to all the economic verities of the day.

In the interest of the emancipated, Lincoln could have been expected to approve and encourage such deviations from the doctrinaire. And it would have been completely out of character for Lincoln to have exercised his power of pardon, as did President Johnson, with ruthless disregard for the former slave's interest and justifiable expectations. Indeed, there are intimations that Lincoln considered using that power to obtain from former masters grants of land for former slaves. Whatever support the national government might have given to the freedman's quest for land would have been a psychological boon, more symbol than substance of equal citizenship and independence, but not without some economic advantage. A land program more effective than the southern homestead act was a real possibility, lost due to President Johnson's opposition. With Lincoln, a Whiggish heritage, as well as humanity and a sense of responsibility for the emancipated, reinforced a pragmatic approach to the relationship between government and the future of the freedmen. Nor was he inhibited by the anxiety felt by many, including Thaddeus Stevens, over the unprecedented debt incurred in fighting the war. In early 1865 he calmly contemplated adding to the war's cost by indemnifying southerners for property seized and not restored. Whatever sums Congress might have appropriated to finance land purchase for freedmen could only have helped alleviate the South's postwar paucity of capital and credit. Its economic recovery would also have benefited from the lesser turbulence of the immediate postwar years had there been no war between president and Congress. Limited gains would have been possible and probable, but there existed neither the power nor the perception necessary to forestall the poverty that engulfed so many southerners, black and white, during the last decades of the nineteenth century.
There were limits to the possible. Yet the dismal outcome for southern blacks as the nation entered the twentieth century need not have been as unrelieved as it was in fact. More than a land program, the civil and political rights Republicans established in law, had they been secured in practice, could have mitigated the discrimination that worsened their condition and constricted whatever opportunities might otherwise have existed for escape from poverty. Moreover, the extraordinary effort black men made to vote—and to vote independently in the face of white cajolery, intimidation, and economic pressure—strongly suggests that for the emancipated to cast a ballot was to affirm the reality of freedom and the dignity of black manhood.

The priority Republicans gave to civil and political rights in their fight to establish a meaningful new status for ex-slaves has been too readily discounted by historians. Small landholdings could not have protected blacks from intimidation, or even from many forms of economic coercion. They would not have brought economic power. In the face of overwhelming white opposition, they could not have safeguarded the new equality of civil and political status. Where blacks voted freely, on the other hand, there was always the potential for sharing political power and using it as a means to protect and advance their interests. There is considerable evidence that this did happen. Local officials elected by black votes during the years of Republican control upheld blacks against planters, state legislators repealed Black Codes, shifted the burden of taxation from the poor, granted agricultural laborers a first lien on crops, increased expenditures for education.

Eric Foner has concluded that at least in some areas Republican Reconstruction resulted in subtle but significant changes that protected black labor and prevented planters from using the state to bolster their position. Harold D. Woodman's study of state laws affecting agriculture confirms the generalization that a legislative priority of the Redeemer governments was passage of measures to give landowners greater control over the labor force. By the end of the century legal bonds had been so tightened that as prosperity returned to cotton culture neither cropper nor renter but only their employer was in a position to profit. In a study of rural Edgefield County, South Carolina, Vernon Burton has found that black voting made possible real gains in economic position and social status between 1867 and 1877. Howard Rabinowitz's examination of the urban South discloses that Republican city governments brought blacks a greater share of elected and appointed offices, more jobs in construction work, in fire and police departments. And beyond immediate gains, black votes meant support for educational facilities through which blacks could acquire the literacy and skills essential for advancement.

Security for black civil and political rights required acceptance by white southerners. An acquiescence induced by a judicious combination of force and consent needed for its perpetuation reinforcement by self-interest. The most effective vehicle of self-interest would have been a Union-Republican party able to command substantial continuing support from native whites. The Republican party that gained temporary dominance through the congressional legislation of 1867 enfranchising blacks failed to meet the test of substantial white support. Despite a strong white following in a few states, its scalawag component from the start was too limited to offset the opposition's attack on it as the party of the black man and the Yankee. And white participation diminished as appeals to race prejudice and sectional animosity intensified.

The potential for a major second party among southern whites existed in the aftermath of Confederate defeat. The Democratic party was in disarray, discredited for having led the South out of the Union and having lost the war. Old Whig loyalties subsumed by the slavery issue had nonetheless endured; southern unionism had survived in varying degrees from wartime adherence to the Union to reluctant support of the Confederacy. Opposition to Jefferson Davis' leadership and willingness to accept northern peace terms had grown as the hope for southern victory diminished. Such sources of Democratic opposition overlapped with the potential for ready recruits to Union-Republicanism from urban dwellers, from men whose origins had been abroad or in the North, from those whose class or intrasectional interests created hostility to the dominant
planter leadership of the Democracy. A "New South" of enterprise and industry presented an attractive vision to many a native son. And there were always those who looked to the loaves and the fishes dispensed from Washington.

Had party recruitment and organization, with full presidential support, begun at the end of hostilities and escaped the period of confusion and bitterness that thinned the ranks of the willing during the conflict between Johnson and Congress, the result could have been promising. Greater white support and the accession of black voters by increments might have eased racial tension and lessened deadly factionalism within the party. Lincoln's political skill and Whig background would certainly have served party-building well, as would the perception of presidential policy as one of moderation and reconciliation. The extent to which southern whites did in fact support the Republican party after 1867 despite its image as Radical, alien, and black-dominated, an image that stigmatized and often ostracized them, suggests the potency of a common goal, or a common enmity, in bridging the chasm between the races.

Even under the guidance of a Lincoln, the building of a permanent biracial major party in the South was by no means assured. A broad enduring coalition of disparate elements would face the necessity of reconciling sharply divergent economic interests. Agricultural workers sought maximum autonomy, more than bare necessities, and an opportunity for land ownership while planter-merchants strove to control labor and maximize profit. The burden of increased taxation to meet essential but unaccustomed social services, particularly for blacks, meant an inescapable clash of class and racial interests. Concessions by the more privileged were especially difficult in a South of limited available resources and credit, impoverished by war and enmeshed in inflated costs, crop disasters, and falling cotton prices. By the mid-1870s a nationwide depression intensified regional problems. Efforts to promote a more varied and vigorous economy by state favor, credit, and appropriation became a political liability as the primary effect appeared to be the proliferation of civic corruption and entrepreneurial plunder.

Outside the South a vigorous Republican party and two-party system managed to endure despite the clash of intraparty economic interests. A similar development in the South faced the additional and more intractable conflict inherent in the new black-white relationship. Within the Republican party that took shape after 1867, factionalism often cut between blacks and carpetbaggers, on the one hand, and scalawags on the other; but there was also a considerable amount of accommodation, not all of it from blacks. A study of the voting record of 87 Republicans, 52 of them native whites, who served in the North Carolina House of Representatives in the 1868 to 1870 session shows scalawags trailing carpetbaggers and blacks in voting on issues of Negro rights and support for public schools, yet compiling a positive overall record, a score of 61.2 and 55.9 respectively. On the few desegregation questions that came to a roll call, however, only a small minority of native whites voted favorably. In Mississippi when the black-carpetbagger faction gained control, they quietly ignored the platform calling for school integration even though black legislators were sufficiently numerous and powerful to have pressed the issue. Black officeholding was a similar matter where fair treatment held danger, and black leaders often showed restraint. Such issues were explosive. They not only threatened the unity of the party but undermined its ability to attract white votes or minimize opposition demagogy and violence. A Lincolnian approach to building an interracial party would have diminished the racial hazard, but could hardly have eliminated it.

The years of political Reconstruction, to borrow an apt phrase from Thomas B. Alexander's study of Tennessee, offered no "narrowly missed opportunities to leap a century forward in reform." Not even a Lincoln could have wrought such a miracle. To have secured something less, yet something substantially more than blacks had gained by the end of the nineteenth century, did not lie beyond the limits of the possible given a president who at war's end would have joined party in an effort to realize "as nearly as we can" the fullness of freedom for blacks. Possible is not probable. To the major obstacles must be added the hazards disclosed by the Louisiana story. Lincoln's Louisiana policy had been compromised by. Banks' blunders of
execution and attacked by Durant and fellow Radicals in part because they distrusted Lincoln's intent. The effective implementation of a president's policy by his surrogates is a problem to plague any administration. Distrust by those otherwise allied in a common goal pertained more distinctively to the man and his style of leadership. Yet Radical distrust of Lincoln may also have reflected dilemmas inherent in presidential leadership—the need for candor and for persuasion, for vision and for practicality, for courage and for flexibility, for heeding while leading a national consensus. Obscured by his characteristic self-effacement, after his own fashion Lincoln as president was both lion and fox....

Postscript: Was Reconstruction a “Splendid Failure”?

In Nothing But Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy (Louisiana State University Press, 1984), Eric Foner advances his interpretation by comparing the treatment of ex-slaves in the United States with that of newly emancipated slaves in Haiti and the British West Indies. Only in the United States, he contends, were the freed slaves given voting and economic rights. Although these rights had been stripped away from the majority of black southerners by 1900, Reconstruction had, nevertheless, created a legacy of freedom that inspired succeeding generations of African Americans. C. Vann Woodward, in “Reconstruction: A Counterfactual Playback,” an essay in his thought-provoking The Future of the Past (Oxford University Press, 1988), shares Cox's pessimism about the outcome of Reconstruction. For all its successes listed by the revisionists, he argues that the experiment failed. He challenges Foner's conclusions by insisting that former slaves were as poorly treated in the United States as they were in other countries. He also maintains that the confiscation of former plantations and the redistribution of land to the freed slaves would have failed in the same way that the Homestead Act of 1862 failed, to generate equal distribution of government lands to poor white settlers. Finally Woodward contends that reformers who worked with African Americans during Reconstruction and native Americans a decade or two later were often the same people and that they failed in both instances because their goals were out of touch with the realities of the late nineteenth century.

Thomas Holt's Black Over White: Negro Political Leadership in South Carolina During Reconstruction (University of Illinois Press, 1977) is representative of state and local studies that employ modern social science methodology to yield new perspectives. While critical of white Republican leaders, Holt (who is African-American) also blames the failure of Reconstruction in South Carolina of freeborn mulatto politicians, whose background distanced them economically, socially, and culturally from the masses of freedmen. Consequently, these political leaders failed to develop a clear and unifying ideology to challenge white Southerners who wanted to restore white supremacy. The study of the Reconstruction period benefits from an extensive bibliography. Traditional accounts of Reconstruction include William Archibald Dunning's Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865-1877 (Harper & Brothers 1907); Claude Bowers' The Tragic Era: The Revolution after Lincoln (Riverside Press 1929); and E. Merton Coulter's, The South During Reconstruction, 1865-1877 (Louisiana State University Press, 1947), the last major work written from the Dunning (or traditional) point of view. Early revisionist views are presented in W. E. B. Du Bois, Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880 (Harcourt, Brace, 1935), a Marxist analysis; John Hope Franklin, Reconstruction: After the Civil War (University of Chicago Press, 1961); and Kenneth M. Stampp, The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877 (Alfred A. Knopf, 1965). Foner's Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877 (Harper & Row, 1988) includes the most complete bibliographies on the subject. Brief overviews are available in Forrest G. Wood, The Era of Reconstruction, 1863-1877 (Harlan Davidson, 1975) and Michael Perman, Emancipation and Reconstruction, 1862-1879 (Harlan Davidson, 1987). One of the best-written