

## *The New View of Reconstruction*

ERIC FONER

*"Whatever you were taught or thought you knew about the post-Civil War era is probably wrong in the light of recent study." So went the editorial comment in the issue of American Heritage in which "The New View of Reconstruction" originally appeared. If you think that Reconstruction was a tragic time when fanatical Radicals like Old Thad Stevens and Charles Sumner took control of Reconstruction away from a moderate Andrew Johnson, sought to "put the colored people on top" in the conquered South, and turned it over to hordes of roguish carpetbaggers, traitorous scalawags, and ignorant and uppity Negroes who "stole the south blind," you will be in for a surprise. The new interpretation of Reconstruction, which broke full force in the 1960s, cast President Andrew Johnson and unrepentant southern whites as the real villains of the drama. It argues that Reconstruction, instead of being a misguided experiment in extremism, was in fact not nearly radical enough. The new view of the postwar years, and the story of how it replaced the traditional interpretation, is the subject of this selection by Eric Foner, today's foremost historian of the Reconstruction era.*

*To place his essay in historical context, it would be well to review the attitudes of southern blacks and whites as the war drew to a close, and to describe Johnson's reconstruction policy. For the deeply religious slaves, the Civil War had had profound religious meaning. Hundreds of thousands of them, writes historian Vincent Harding, "believed unswervingly that their God moved in history to deliver his people, and they had been looking eagerly, praying hourly, waiting desperately for the glory of the coming of the Lord. For them, all the raucous, roaring guns of Charleston Harbor and Bull Run, and Antietam and Fort Pillow, of Shiloh and Murfreesboro and Richmond were the certain voice of God, announcing his judgment across the bloody stretches of the South."*

Carnegie 1880s

Workers 1800s

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Resistance  
Carpet baggers 1867  
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During the course of the war, African Americans believed, God did deliver them. With the Confederacy's collapse, as one song went, "slavery chain done broke at last."

Slavery chain done broke at last!  
Broke at last! Broke at last!  
Slavery chain done broke at last!  
Gonna praise God till I die!

Some reacted to their liberation with cautious elation. When a young Virginia woman heard her former masters weeping over the capture of Jefferson Davis, she went down to a spring alone and cried out, "Glory, glory, hallelujah to Jesus! I's free! I's free!" Suddenly afraid, she looked about. What if the white folks had heard her? But seeing no one, she fell to the ground and kissed it, thanking "Master Jesus" over and over. For her, freedom meant hope — hope that she could find her husband and four children who had been sold to a slave trader.

Others celebrated their liberation in public. In Athens, Georgia, they danced around a liberty pole; in Charleston, they paraded through the streets. Many African Americans, however, were wary and uncertain. "You're joking me," one man said when the master told him he was free. He asked some neighbors if they were free also. "I couldn't believe we was all free alike," he said. Some African Americans, out of feelings of obligation or compassion, remained on the home place to help their former masters. But others were hostile. When a woman named Cady heard that the war was over, she decided to protest the cruel treatment she had suffered as a slave. She threw down her hoe, marched up to the big house, found the mistress, and flipped her dress up. She told the white woman, "Kiss my ass!"

For Cady, for the young black woman of Virginia, for hosts of other African Americans, freedom meant an end to the manifold evils of slavery; it meant the right to say what they felt and go where they wanted. But what else did freedom mean to them? As black leaders of Charleston said, it meant that blacks should enjoy full citizenship, have the right to vote, and run for political office. It meant federal protection from their former masters lest they attempt to revive slavery. And it meant economic security in the form of land, so that the blacks could exercise self-help and be economically independent of their former masters.

If the end of the war was a time of profound hope for black Americans, it was a monumental calamity for most southern whites. By turns, they were angry, helpless, vindictive, resigned, and heartsick. Their cherished South was not just defeated; it was annihilated. The South's major cities were in ruins, railroads and industry desolated, commerce paralyzed, and two-thirds of the assessed wealth, including billions of dollars in slaves,

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destroyed. As one historian says, "Many [white southerners] were already grieving over sons, plantations, and fortunes taken by war; losing their blacks was the final blow." Some masters shot or hanged African Americans who proclaimed their freedom. That was a harbinger of the years of Reconstruction, for most white southerners were certain that their cause had been just and were entirely unrepentant about fighting against the Union. A popular ballad captured the mood in postwar Dixie:

Oh, I'm a good ole Rebel, now that's just what I am  
For this fair land of freedom I do not care a damn.  
I'm glad I fit against it, I only wish't we'd won  
And I don't want no pardon for nothin' what I done. . . .

I hates the Yankee nation and everything they do  
I hates the Declaration of Independence too  
I hates the glorious Union, 'tis dripping with our blood  
And I hate the striped banner, I fit it all I could. . . .

I can't take up my musket and fight 'em now no mo'  
But I ain't gonna love 'em and that is certain sho'  
And I don't want no pardon for what I was and am  
And I won't be reconstructed and I don't care a damn.

In Washington, Republican leaders were jubilant in victory and determined to deal firmly with southern whites in order to preserve the fruits of the war. But what about the new president, Andrew Johnson? A profane, hard-drinking Tennessee Democrat who bragged about his plebeian origins, Johnson had been the only southern senator to oppose secession openly. He had sided with the Union, served as war governor of Tennessee, and became Lincoln's running mate in 1864, on a Union ticket comprising both Republicans and War Democrats. As a result of the assassination of Lincoln, Johnson was now president, and he faced one of the most difficult tasks ever to confront an American chief executive: how to bind the nation's wounds, preserve African American freedom, and restore the southern states to their proper places in the Union.

Lincoln had contemplated an army of occupation for the South, thinking that military force might be necessary to protect the former slaves and prevent the old southern leadership from returning to power. Now there was such an army in the South: some 200,000 Union troops had moved in to restore order there and to perform whatever reconstruction duties Johnson might ask of them.

Initially, Republican leaders were hopeful about Johnson, for in talking about his native region he seemed tough, even uncompromising. But as he set about restoring defeated Dixie, Johnson alarmed and then enraged congressional Republicans by adopting

Carnegie ~1880s

WORKERS' MANSION SECTION

Carpet baggers 1867

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a soft, conciliatory reconstruction policy. The president not only opposed granting blacks the right to vote but allowed former Confederates to return to power in the southern states. He stood by as they adopted black codes that reduced blacks to a virtual condition of peonage, and he hotly opposed congressional interference in the reconstruction process. He even urged southern states to reject the Fourteenth Amendment, pushed through Congress by the Republicans, which would protect southern blacks. The amendment would prevent the states from enacting laws that abridged "the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States." I would also bar the states from depriving "any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law," or from denying any person the "equal protection of the law." Johnson did more than just oppose the amendment; he damned Republican leaders like Charles Sumner of Massachusetts and Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, calling them tyrants and traitors. He even campaigned against the Republican party in the 1866 off-year elections. As a consequence, he alienated moderate as well as radical Republicans, who soon united against him. When the 1866 elections gave the Republicans huge majorities in both houses of Congress, they took control of Reconstruction and set about reforming the South themselves, enfranchising the freedmen and giving them the right to vote and hold office.

This gives you the proper historical background for Foner's lucid and judicious essay on the new view of Reconstruction and its leading participants. Foner concludes that Reconstruction was "a splendid failure," in that it did not resolve "the debate over the meaning of freedom in American life" and did not provide African Americans with the economic security they needed to be truly free in a capitalist country. Alas, that failure was to plague black Americans for generations to come. But for Foner, the "animating vision" of Reconstruction — an America in which all would enjoy "the right to rise," to go as far as their talent and toil would take them unimpeded by "inherited caste distinctions" — is profoundly relevant to a country "still grappling with the unresolved legacy of emancipation."

## GLOSSARY

**CARPETBAGGERS** Northerners, most of them former soldiers, who migrated to the South in search of economic opportunities.

**DU BOIS, W. E. B.** Great black scholar and author of a seminal work, *Black Reconstruction in*

*America* (1935), which offered "a monumental" reassessment of Reconstruction and damned the historical profession for adhering to the traditional racist interpretation of the era.

**FREEDMEN'S BUREAU** Established by congressional statute in March 1865, the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands was