
Epilogue

"The River Has Its Bend"

Thus, in the words of W. E. B. Du Bois, "the slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery." The magnitude of the Redeemer counterrevolution underscored both the scope of the transformation Reconstruction had assayed and the consequences of its failure. To be sure, the era of emancipation and Republican rule did not lack enduring accomplishments. The tide of change rose and then receded, but it left behind an altered landscape. The freedmen's political and civil equality proved transitory, but the autonomous black family and a network of religious and social institutions survived the end of Reconstruction. Nor could the seeds of educational progress planted then be entirely uprooted.

If blacks failed to achieve the economic independence envisioned in the aftermath of the Civil War, Reconstruction closed off even more oppressive alternatives than the Redeemers' New South. The post-Reconstruction labor system embodied neither a return to closely supervised gang labor nor the complete dispossession and immobilization of the black labor force and coercive apprenticeship systems envisioned by white Southerners in 1865 and 1866. Nor were blacks, as in twentieth-century South Africa, barred from citizenship, herded into labor reserves, or prohibited by law from moving from one part of the country to another. Without Reconstruction, it is difficult to imagine the establishment of a framework of legal rights enshrined in the Constitution that, while flagrantly

violated after 1877, created a vehicle for future federal intervention in Southern affairs.

Nonetheless, whether measured by the dreams inspired by emancipation or the more limited goals of securing blacks' rights as citizens and free laborers and establishing an enduring Republican presence in the South, Reconstruction must be judged a failure. Among the host of explanations for this outcome, a few seem especially significant. Conditions far beyond the control of Southern Republicans—such as the national credit and banking systems, the depression of the 1870s, and the stagnation of world demand for cotton—severely limited the prospects for far-reaching economic change. The early rejection of federally sponsored land reform left in place a planter class far weaker and less affluent than before the war, but still able to employ its prestige and experience against Reconstruction. Factionalism and corruption, although hardly confined to Southern Republicans, undermined their legitimacy and complicated their efforts to respond to attacks by resolute opponents. The failure to develop a lasting appeal to white voters made it nearly impossible for Republicans to combat the racial politics of the Redeemers. None of these factors, however, would have proved decisive without the campaign of violence that turned the electoral tide in many parts of the South and the weakening of Northern resolve, itself a consequence of social and political changes that undermined the free labor and egalitarian precepts at the heart of Reconstruction policy.

For historians, hindsight can be a treacherous ally. Enabling us to trace the hidden patterns of past events, it beguiles us with the mirage of inevitability, the assumption that different outcomes lay beyond the limits of the possible. Certainly, the history of other plantation societies offers little reason for optimism that emancipation could have given rise to a prosperous, egalitarian South, or even one that escaped a pattern of colonial underdevelopment. Nor do the prospects for the expansion of scalawag support—essential for Southern Republicanism's long-term survival—appear in retrospect to have been anything but bleak. And the nation lacked not simply the will but the modern bureaucratic machinery to oversee permanently Southern affairs. Perhaps the remarkable thing about Reconstruction was not its failure, but that it was attempted at all and survived as long as it did. Yet one can, I think, imagine alternative scenarios and modest successes: the Republican party

establishing itself as a permanent fixture on the Southern landscape, the North summoning the resolve to enforce the Constitution.

Here, however, we enter the realm of the purely speculative. What remains certain is that Reconstruction failed, and that for blacks its failure was a disaster whose magnitude cannot be obscured by the accomplishments that endured. For the nation as a whole, the collapse of Reconstruction was a tragedy that deeply affected the course of its development. If racism contributed to the undoing of Reconstruction, so also Reconstruction's demise and the emergence of blacks as disenfranchised dependent laborers accelerated racism's spread, until by the early twentieth century it pervaded the nation's culture and politics. The removal of a significant portion of the laboring population from public life shifted American politics to the right, complicating for generations the efforts of reformers. Long into the twentieth century, the South remained a one-party region ruled by a reactionary elite that continued to employ violence and fraud to stifle internal dissent. An enduring consequence of Reconstruction's failure, the Solid South helped define the contours of American politics and weaken the prospects not simply of change in racial matters but of progressive legislation generally.

The men and women who fought to remake Southern society scattered down innumerable byways after Reconstruction's demise. Most carpetbaggers returned to the North, often finding there the financial success that had eluded them in the South. Former South Carolina Gov. Robert K. Scott returned to Napoleon, Ohio, where he became a successful real estate agent—"a most fitting occupation" in view of his involvement in land commission speculations.

Republican governors who had won reputations as moderates by courting white Democratic support and seeking to limit blacks' political influence found the Redeemer South remarkably forgiving. Daniel H. Chamberlain left South Carolina in 1877 to launch a successful New York City law practice, but was well received on his numerous visits to the state. In retrospect, Chamberlain altered his opinion of Reconstruction: a "frightful experiment" that tried to "lift a backward or inferior race" to equality, it had inevitably produced "shocking and unbearable misgovernment." "Governor Chamberlain," commented a Charleston newspaper in 1904, "has lived and learned."

Not all white Republicans, however, abandoned Reconstruction ideals. Adelbert Ames, who left Mississippi in 1875 to join his

father's Minnesota flour-milling business and later settled in Massachusetts, continued to defend his Reconstruction record. Ames lived to his 98th year, never abandoning the conviction that "caste is the curse of the world." Another Mississippi carpet-bagger, Massachusetts-born teacher and legislator Henry Warren, published his autobiography in 1914, still hoping that one day, "possibly in the present century," America would live up to the ideal of "equal political rights for all without regard to race." Louis F. Post, a New Jersey-born carpetbagger who took stenographic notes for South Carolina's legislature in the early 1870s, became a follower of Henry George, attended the founding meeting of the NAACP, and as Woodrow Wilson's Assistant Secretary of Labor attempted to mitigate the 1919 Red Scare and prevent the deportation of foreign-born radicals. Texas scalawag editor Albert Parsons became a nationally known Chicago labor reformer and anarchist, whose speeches drew comparisons between the plight of Southern blacks and Northern industrial workers. Having survived the perils of Texas Reconstruction, Parsons died on the Illinois gallows after being wrongfully convicted of complicity in the Haymarket bombing of 1886.

Many black veterans of Reconstruction survived on federal patronage after the coming of "home rule." P. B. S. Pinchback and Blanche K. Bruce held a series of such posts and later moved to Washington, D.C., where they entered the city's privileged black society. Other black leaders left the political arena entirely to devote themselves to religious and educational work, emigration projects, or personal advancement. Robert G. Fitzgerald continued to teach in North Carolina until his death in 1919. Others found, in the words of a black lawyer, that "the tallest tree . . . suffers most in a storm." Former South Carolina Congressman and Lieut. Gov. Alonzo J. Ransier died in poverty in 1882, having been employed during his last years as a night watchman at the Charleston Custom House and as a city street sweeper. Robert B. Elliott, the state's most brilliant political organizer, found himself "utterly unable to earn a living owing to the severe ostracism and mean prejudice of my political opponents." He died in 1884 after moving to New Orleans and struggling to survive as a lawyer. Most local leaders sank into obscurity, disappearing from the historical record. If their descendants moved ahead, it was through business, the arts, or the professions, not politics.

By the turn of the century, as soldiers from North and South joined to take up the “white man’s burden” in the Spanish-American War, Reconstruction was widely viewed as little more than a regrettable detour on the road to reunion. To most white Southerners, it was axiomatic that Reconstruction had been a time of “savage tyranny” that “accomplished not one useful result, and left behind it, not one pleasant recollection.” In more sober language, many Northerners, including surviving architects of Congressional policy, concurred in this judgment. “Years of thinking and observation” had convinced O. O. Howard “that the restoration of their lands to the planters provided for [a] future better for the negroes.” John Sherman’s recollections recorded a similar change of heart: “After this long lapse of time I am convinced that Mr. Johnson’s scheme of reorganization was wise and judicious. . . . It is unfortunate that it had not the sanction of Congress.”

This rewriting of Reconstruction’s history was accorded scholarly legitimacy—to its everlasting shame—by the nation’s fraternity of professional historians. Early in the twentieth century a group of young Southern scholars gathered at Columbia University to study the Reconstruction era under the guidance of Professors John W. Burgess and William A. Dunning. Blacks, their mentors taught, were “children” utterly incapable of appreciating the freedom that had been thrust upon them. The North did “a monstrous thing” in granting them the suffrage, for “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.” The views of the Dunning School shaped historical writing for generations and achieved wide popularity through D. W. Griffith’s film *Birth of a Nation* (which glorified the Ku Klux Klan and had its premiere at Woodrow Wilson’s White House) and the national bestseller *The Tragic Era* by Claude G. Bowers. Southern whites, wrote Bowers, “literally were put to the torture” by “emissaries of hate” who inflamed “the negroes’ egotism” and even inspired “lustful assaults” by blacks on white womanhood.

Few interpretations of history have had such far-reaching consequences as this image of Reconstruction. As Francis B. Simkins, a South Carolina-born historian, noted during the 1930s, “the alleged horrors of Reconstruction” did much to freeze the mind of the white South in unalterable opposition to outside pressures for social change and to any thought of breaching Democratic ascendancy,

eliminating segregation, or restoring the suffrage to disenfranchised blacks. They also justified Northern indifference to the nullification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

Only in the family traditions and collective folk memories of the black community did a different version of Reconstruction survive. Growing up in the 1920s, Pauli Murray was "never allowed to forget" that she walked in "proud shoes" because her grandfather, Robert G. Fitzgerald, had "fought for freedom" in the Union Army and then enlisted as a teacher in the "second war" against the powerlessness and ignorance inherited from slavery. When the Works Progress Administration sent agents into the black belt during the Great Depression to interview former slaves, they found Reconstruction remembered for its disappointments and betrayals, but also as a time of hope, possibility, and accomplishment. "The Yankees helped free us, so they say," declared eighty-one-year-old former slave Thomas Hall, "but they let us be put back in slavery again." Yet coupled with this disillusionment were proud, vivid recollections of a time when "the colored used to hold office." Some pulled from their shelves dusty scrapbooks of clippings from Reconstruction newspapers; other could still recount the names of local black leaders. "They made pretty fair officers," remarked one elderly freedman; "I thought them was good times in the country," said another. "I does believe that the negro ought to be given more privileges in voting," echoed Taby Jones, born a slave in South Carolina in 1850, "because they went through the reconstruction period with banners flying." Younger blacks spoke of being taught by their parents "about the old times, mostly about the Reconstruction, and the Ku Klux." "I know folks think the books tell the truth, but they shore don't," one eighty-eight-year-old former slave told the WPA.

Twenty more years elapsed before another generation of black Southerners launched the final challenge to the racial system of the New South. By this time the Reconstruction generation had passed from the scene, and even within the black community memories of the period had all but disappeared. Yet the institutions created or consolidated after the Civil War—the black family, school, and church—provided the base from which the modern civil rights revolution sprang. And for its legal strategy, the movement returned to the laws and amendments of Reconstruction.

"The river has its bend, and the longest road must terminate."

Rev. Peter Randolph, a former slave, wrote these words in 1893, as the dark night of injustice settled over the South. Nearly a century elapsed before the nation again attempted to come to terms with the implications of emancipation and Reconstruction's political and social agenda. In many ways, it has yet to do so.