

RECONSTRUCTION

The Battle for Democracy

*"De bottom rail's on de top,
An' we's gwine to keep it dar."*

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RECONSTRUCTION

The Battle for Democracy

1865-1876

BY JAMES S. ALLEN



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CONTENTS

EDITOR'S FOREWORD	7
AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE 1955 EDITION	15
INTRODUCTION: First Phase of the Revolution	17
Clash of Social Systems, 17; Lincoln and Stevens: Two Courses in the Revolution, 19; Stake of the Working Class in the Revolution, 23.	
I. THE JOHNSON REACTION	29
The New Phase of Revolution, 29; The Parliamentary Struggle, 33; Lincoln's Plan of Reconstruction, 36; "Jefferson Davis Johnson," 40.	
II. FIGHTING FOR LAND	43
Land Seizures during the War, 43; Reform <i>vs.</i> Revolution on the Land Question, 46; Widespread Agitation for Land, 51; Rôle of Negro Troops, 54; The Reactionary Holiday, 56; Struggle on the Sea Islands, 61; Sporadic Battles for Land, 65; Confiscation Defeated, 69.	
III. VICTORY OF THE LEFT	73
The Negro People's Conventions, 73; Rise of the Industrial Bourgeoisie, 79; Victory of the Left in Congress, 81; The Reconstruction Acts, 86.	
IV. FIGHTING FOR DEMOCRACY	91
The Union Leagues, 91; The Republican Party, 96; The Negro Militias, 98; Registration of the New Electorate, 102; The Political Geography of the South and the Rôle of the Whites, 106.	
V. THE PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLIES	116
The Constitutional Conventions, 116; The	

Fight for the Constitutions, 122; Negro Representation in the New Governments, 126; The "Black Parliaments," 131; The Negro in Local Government, 135; Bourgeois Reforms and "Corruption," 137.	
VI. THE LABOR MOVEMENT	145
Resurgence of the Trade Unions, 145; Independent Political Action, 148; The National Labor Union and the Negro, 153; The Labor Party and Negro Labor, 158; Sylvis on Reconstruction, 163; The Colored National Labor Union, 165; The First International, 175.	
VII. REVOLUTION AND COUNTER-REVOLUTION	181
"White Superiority" as a Political Program, 181; Rupture of the Radical Republican Coalition, 186; Split of the Party in the South, 193; The Counter-Revolutionary <i>Coup d'États</i> , 197.	
VIII. SUMMARY	207
REFERENCE NOTES	216
APPENDICES	223
Special Field Orders No. 15, 225; Memorial to the Senate and House of Representatives, 228; Resolution of the Virginia Republican State Convention, 230; First Reconstruction Act, 233; Address of the Colored Convention to the People of Alabama, 236; Fourteenth Amendment, 243; Fifteenth Amendment, 245; Address of the International Workingmen's Association to the National Labor Union, 246.	
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	249
INDEX	253

ILLUSTRATIONS

The Paroquet of the White House, 28; New Orleans "Riot," 87; "One Vote Less," 127; Spirit(s) of the Democratic Party, 144; The "Bloody Shirt" Reformed, 203.
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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

UNTIL recently, the history of Reconstruction has been left to the not very tender mercies of the Bourbon and the Philistine. The result has been a completely distorted picture of one of the most significant epochs in American history. For the most part our historians have hidden the revolutionary content of Reconstruction behind a veil of vituperation, have entirely misrepresented the rôle of the Negro people and have shamefully besmirched the heroic leadership of Stevens and his Radical associates. One looks in vain to find in the writings of most American historians a recognition of the revolutionary character of the period following the Civil War. The consolidation of power by the industrial bourgeoisie, the establishment of a bourgeois-democratic dictatorship, the democratic and agrarian upsurge in the South, the forging of such revolutionary weapons as the Union League clubs and citizen militia units—all of these have been either ignored or at best glossed over.

Similarly, the part played by the Negro people in the Reconstruction of the South has been disregarded or treated with contempt. Our historians have gone out of their way to demonstrate the ignorance and stupidity of "banjo-twanging, melody-singing" Negroes, the gullible prey of "carpetbaggers" and "scalawags." They have been apparently oblivious of the

battle which the freedmen fought for democracy, land and civil rights in the South, of their active participation in the struggles of the period not as the mute followers of the bourgeoisie but as their independent allies.

The revolutionary leadership of the Radical Republicans has likewise been misrepresented by many historians and biographers, more so recently than ever before. Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner—leading representatives of the Parliamentary Left—have become the emissaries of the devil, “apostles of propaganda and hate.” In his *Age of Hate, Andrew Johnson and the Radicals* (1930), George F. Milton pictures Stevens as a drunkard and an “inveterate gambler,” and Sumner as an “eerie, evil genius . . . spinning tenuous spider-webs of . . . Negro equality.” At the same time, Milton attempts to rehabilitate the traitor of the revolution, the man whom Wendell Phillips once aptly dubbed “Jefferson Davis Johnson.”

Milton is the contemporary prototype of John W. Burgess, leading exponent of the Bourbon school. This ex-Confederate soldier consciously endeavored at the turn of the century to rewrite the history of Reconstruction from a Southern viewpoint. In his *Reconstruction and the Constitution* (1902), Burgess characterizes the period as the rule of “the uncivilized Negroes over the whites. . . .” To him, the North must admit the failure of Reconstruction if “a real national brotherhood” was ever to be achieved. The main lines laid down by Burgess have found their most nauseating expression in *The Tragic Era* (1929) of Claude Bowers. Correctly described by Dr. Du Bois as “a classic example of historical propaganda of the cheapest sort,” this work bewails the misfortunes of the Southern people who were “literally put to the torture.” The Negro is naturally excluded from the above

category. Bowers attempts to vindicate not only Andrew Johnson, but also the "brilliant" spokesmen of the old slave South. The latter are given "their proper place in the dramatic struggle for the preservation of Southern civilization...."

Besides the Bourbon, the Philistine has contributed his share to the distortion of the historiography of Reconstruction. In his *History of the United States* (1906), James F. Rhodes, for some time considered the leading historian of the period,* explicitly condemns the Northern policy of Reconstruction as "repressive, uncivilized and unsuccessful" and, as an enthusiastic exponent of "conciliation," hails the withdrawal of Federal troops from the South as essential to the overthrow of "carpet-bag-negro governments by the educated and property-holding people of the several States." Thoroughly convinced of Negro inferiority, Rhodes feels it a shame that "the most degraded Negro could vote, while Robert E. Lee, Wade Hampton [and] Alexander Stephens... could not."

The same anti-Negro bias is to be found in the work of the late Professor William A. Dunning of Columbia University. In his *Reconstruction, Political and Economic* (1907) he sees "intelligence and political capacity" on one side, and "no pride of race and no aspiration or ideal" on the other. To Dunning, the plight of decent white men trying to maintain "their rights and their property against the flood of barbarism" is most pathetic. A group of graduate students, many of whom came from the South, gathered around Dunning. State monographs appeared at Columbia and other universities. Though these treatises are, for the most part, violently anti-Negro, they nevertheless contain much valuable material for the purposes of re-

* For a critique of Rhodes and his methods, see J. R. Lynch, *Some Historical Errors of James F. Rhodes* (Boston, 1922).

interpretation. Francis B. Simkins' and Robert H. Woody's *South Carolina During Reconstruction* (1932), though at times confused, is especially worthy of mention.

Although the Bourbon and the Philistine ignore the revolutionary implications of Reconstruction, the liberal bourgeois historian does not. In his *Rise of American Civilization* (1927), Charles A. Beard, leading exponent of the school, recognizes that the revolution, released during the Civil War, continued during Reconstruction. The period completed the ruin of the former slave obligarchy and the triumph of the industrial bourgeoisie. How the latter consolidated its position is shown in detail by Howard K. Beale in his *Critical Year, A Study of Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (1930). Yet, despite a promising beginning, liberal writers see only one side of the revolutionary picture. Failing to appreciate fully the class dynamics of historical development, they do not distinguish clearly between the various class forces at work. This leads them to ignore some of the most important revolutionary phenomena of Reconstruction. Not least is the part played by the freedmen during the period. They accept uncritically the traditional rôle of the Negro people in the Reconstruction of the South. To Beard, "... the freedmen were in no way prepared to become an effective factor in the new order of society ... they were powerless in the hands of the governing group that directed the revolution and reconstruction from Washington. ..." Beale practically takes a similar view of the situation, a view strengthened by his belief that the Negro plantation hands were not only illiterate but "had no conception of ... the meaning of terms like government, morality, suffrage, or even free labor."

A refreshing antidote to the traditional acceptance of Negro inferiority and passiveness is offered by Du

Bois in his praiseworthy *Black Reconstruction* (1935). This is a spirited defense of the Negro in Reconstruction and of the Radical policies of the period. Du Bois portrays the fight of the freedmen for democracy, their work in establishing the first public school system in the South for blacks and whites, and their heroic struggle against the counter-revolution. Du Bois' failure to grasp the fundamental bourgeois character of the revolution leads him to the mistaken notion that what was occurring in the South during Reconstruction "was one of the most extraordinary experiments in Marxism that the world, before the Russian Revolution, had seen." Du Bois therefore very naturally falls into the error of characterizing the Reconstruction governments of the epoch as dictatorships of labor (that is, the proletariat) despite the fact that at the time such a type of dictatorship was out of the question. What was actually established in the South during these years was a bourgeois-democratic dictatorship varying according to specific state conditions and existing for varied lengths of time.

This point is clearly advanced in the present volume, which comes as an invigorating counteraction to the Bourbon and bourgeois distortions of the period. In Marxist fashion, the author first of all analyzes Reconstruction as the second phase of the revolution inaugurated by the Civil War and shows how (broadly speaking) the period accomplished its purpose of preventing the return of chattel slavery and of consolidating the power of the industrial bourgeoisie. Secondly, he carefully deals with the class dynamics of the era and clearly distinguishes the various class forces at play. He presents the rôle of the farmers, workers and freedmen and discusses their relationship to the dominant social phenomena of Reconstruction: the rise of

the industrial capitalists and the submergence of the old slave oligarchy.

In the third place, the present volume deals with the democratic character of the revolution and with the attempt to establish democracy in the South. The extension of civil and political rights, the participation of Negroes in state and county governments, the convocation of people's assemblies, the establishment of a public system of education for both races—all are graphically described. Similarly the forging of revolutionary weapons, such as popular government (the much maligned "carpetbag" régimes), Union League clubs and volunteer defense corps, is presented. The work of the Negro people in these revolutionary bodies as well as their conscious struggle for democracy and civil rights are also set forth. Thus, the true relationship of the Negro masses to Reconstruction clearly emerges and the freedman is shown to be the independent ally of the bourgeoisie restricted in his activities by the limits of the period and of the revolution.

Lastly, the struggle between revolution and counter-revolution is described and reasons assigned for the triumph of the latter. The author attributes the defeat of Radical Reconstruction to the vacillations of the bourgeois revolution and to the regrouping of class forces in the nation. The Northern bourgeoisie, by hesitating to confiscate the plantations of the old slavocracy and divide them up among the freedmen, permitted the emergence in the South of a semi-feudal agrarian economy based on share-cropping. This, in turn, made more difficult coöperation between Southern small white landowners and Negro share-tenants. It likewise allowed the large planters to retain their estates, thus making it easier for them to regain political power. Similarly, amnesty to ex-Confederate

leaders, toleration of the reactionary press and half-hearted measures against counter-revolutionary bands (K.K.K. and others) played into the hands of the former slave oligarchy.

The re-alignment of class forces also made possible the victory of reaction. The rise of large-scale industry shifted the attack from the old to the new oligarchy. Farmers and workers revolted attempting to strip the "bloated plutocracy of its ill-gotten gains." While this was occurring, the labor movement was reaching a high level of development in regard to national organization and independent political action. This promising beginning, however, did not prevent sections of organized labor, together with the farmers, from tending to associate themselves with the Bourbon element through the Democratic Party, instead of forming a broad progressive coalition which would include the Negro and safeguard the victories won by the revolution. The rising tide of discontent caused the industrial bourgeoisie to sacrifice the Negro in order to better defend itself. In the meantime, the reactionary Southern planting classes, realizing the plight of the freedmen, seized the opportunity offered. They split the temporary alliance between the upland white farmers of the South and the Negro masses, unleashed a White Terror, established a number of *coup d'état* governments and in 1877 came to an understanding with the industrial bourgeoisie. Counter-revolution in the South was accompanied by bourgeois reaction in the North; the suppression of the great railroad strike of 1877 stands as a bloody testimonial to the "new dispensation."

The democratic heritage of Reconstruction and the unfinished tasks of the revolution are clearly set forth in this book. From 1865 to 1876, an attempt was made to establish democracy in the South; the freedmen secured the right to vote, enjoyed civil liberties

and participated in the affairs of state. During this crucial period, the Negro was aided in his struggle by the then progressive Republican Party. The latter, however, soon shamefully deserted its ally and literally left him to the mercies of the reactionary forces. Even though democracy was destroyed in the South as a result of this perfidy, the heroic fight of the Negroes and their allies during Reconstruction still remains as one of the most brilliant chapters in American history. Today, with the help of the working class and other progressive elements, the Negro people can complete the unfinished tasks of revolutionary Reconstruction and thereby secure for themselves suffrage, civil rights and land.

The present volume is designed to introduce clearly, within the limitations of a small book, the principal revolutionary aspects of the Reconstruction period. This work does not presume to be definitive. Neither has an attempt been made to write a comprehensive history of the epoch. Consequently, the specialist and student in the field will find certain phenomena not germane to the principal tendencies discussed, ignored or only touched upon in passing. The author has devoted most of his attention to the South, but even here chiefly to those states in which the Radical Reconstruction policies were most completely applied and in which the revolution reached its highest expression. It is hoped that the present book will encourage further Marxist investigation into one of the most significant epochs in the revolutionary and democratic traditions of the American people.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE 1955 EDITION

SINCE this book was first published in 1937, it has aroused considerable discussion among the historians of Reconstruction. One of the foremost exponents of the Bourbon view, Professor E. Merton Coulter of the University of Georgia, in his book *The South During Reconstruction* (1947), cites the present work together with Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* as the best example of the recent "attempt to interpret American history, and especially the Reconstruction period, from the standpoint of the class struggle, which has been as unscientific as it has been far-fetched." Others of the same school have reacted in a similar vein, by their off-hand dismissal proving again that Bourbons never learn.

Among the liberal historians, however, the interpretation presented in this book has been given serious attention. Particularly refreshing and consequential is the view presented by Professor Howard K. Beale of the University of North Carolina, dean of the new school of Southern historians. In his oft-quoted essay on "Rewriting Reconstruction History" (*American Historical Review*, July, 1940), he acknowledges the debt to Dr. Du Bois for presenting a mass of material on the Negro's role in Reconstruction, "formerly ignored, that every future historian must reckon with." About this book, Beale says: "Allen's application of Marxian theory to the period has also forced upon us who do not accept his general interpretation certain important modifications of our point of view." In his forthright call for reexamination of the period, Beale challenges more sharply than has yet been done by liberal historians the traditional Bourbon and Dunning schools. He urges reexamination, not only within the

context of the Second American Revolution, but in terms of a "two-fold revolutionary hypothesis," arising from the change in the social order: the emancipation of the Negro and the greater political freedom won by the poor white man. The most important modification he urges upon the younger Southern historians is to recognize the justice of the Negro's demand for land as the economic base for his democratic rights, as well as the unity of interests as between the poorer white and the Negro. He also emphasizes the reforms and accomplishments of the Reconstruction governments, and counters the usual charges of extravagance and corruption directed against them by the Bourbon and Philistine historians.

This enlightened approach has borne fruit in a number of works, notably Professor Vernon L. Wharton's history of Reconstruction in Mississippi. In view of the recent trend, encouraged by the blatant reaction of the cold war period, to restore in full the Bourbon distortion of history, it is to be hoped that the new Southern historians will pursue their work with greater vigor and insight.

Rather than revise my estimates on this or that aspect of the period or to correct crudities in the text, I have let the book stand in its original form. In general, the basic interpretation has stood the test of time, and has been confirmed by the additional research of other Marxist scholars, who should continue to deepen our understanding of this most significant revolutionary-democratic period in our history. I have added to the bibliography toward the end of the book a number of recent works of significance. Meantime, the movement for Negro liberation reaches new heights in the massive effort to batter down the remaining strongholds of "white superiority" and to complete the tasks unfulfilled by the Civil War and Reconstruction.

JAMES S. ALLEN