



Reconstruction

An Anthology of Revisionist Writings

**Edited by Kenneth M. Stampp
and Leon F. Litwack**

RECONSTRUCTION

*An Anthology
of Revisionist Writings*



EDITED BY
KENNETH M. STAMPP
AND
LEON F. LITWACK

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*To W. E. B. DuBois, Alrutheus A. Taylor,
and Howard K. Beale,
three pioneer revisionists.*

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W. R. Brock, "The Waning of Radicalism," from *An American Crisis: Congress and Reconstruction, 1865-67* (London: Macmillan, 1963).

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FOREWORD

In the early twentieth century American historians generally agreed that the political reconstruction which followed the Civil War was a national tragedy. Most of them maintained that the Radical Republicans, who dominated the Congress of the United States, and the carpetbaggers, scalawags, and Negroes, who controlled the southern legislatures, by their corruption, political opportunism, and vindictiveness, made Reconstruction the most disgraceful episode in American political history. The historians of that period believed that the policies of Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson were both generous and wise, and that if they had prevailed the country would have been spared this orgy of hatred and venality; the harmony of the sections would have been restored more easily; and the South would have found a just solution to its race problem more readily.

As recently as thirty years ago nearly all the American history textbooks still presented this point of view with scarcely a reservation, and even the more detailed and specialized studies of professional historians rarely challenged it. Within the last three decades, however, a group of historians has restudied the era of Reconstruction and subjected the old interpretation to critical scrutiny. These revisionists have by no means repudiated all of the traditional story, but they have corrected many errors and misconceptions. Moreover, the new picture of the period that has taken form from their investigations has greater variety, a richer texture, more subtlety of shading and nuance, and much better perspective.

At the present time it would be far from the truth to

describe the revisionists of Reconstruction history as a small band of martyrs struggling against an establishment of professional historians, for revisionism has won the day and bids fair to become the new orthodoxy. Revisionism draws its strength from three decades of hard research, from an impressive array of scholarly articles and monographs, from modified ideas about race, and from a changed social climate. Rarely does a present-day historian defend the traditional interpretation of Reconstruction. Perhaps the surest sign of the triumph of revisionism is that it is now finding its way into the textbooks and into the writings of nonprofessional historians.

This anthology, therefore, is not so much an attempt to plead the case for revisionism as it is to record what historians today generally accept as an accurate portrait of the Reconstruction years. We are aware that the portrait is not yet finished. For example, no satisfactory full-scale studies of the carpetbaggers, the scalawags, or the southern Negroes of the post-emancipation period have yet been published; Lincoln's role would bear further study; and some of the Radical Republicans still need biographers. Moreover, it would be folly to assume that the revisionism of today will altogether satisfy the historians of tomorrow, for as long as this period of American history is the subject of active historical inquiry revisionism will be an endless process. Nevertheless, a significant change of interpretation has taken place during the past generation, and the new body of historical literature is formidable enough to justify an anthology of revisionist writings.

Indeed, the corpus of revisionist literature is now so large that we are able to provide only a small, but we hope representative, sample. Even though the Louisiana State University Press generously permitted us to submit a manuscript considerably longer than the one originally contemplated, we were still unable to find room for all the selections we hoped to include. The resulting omissions will be painfully obvious to those familiar with recent Reconstruction historiography, and

our explanation doubtless will not satisfy those who are disappointed by the omission of selections from their favorite books or articles.

Some of the omissions are the result of deliberate policy. Except for the introductory chapter we decided to exclude purely historiographical essays. Accordingly, we have not included Howard K. Beale's early protest against the traditional interpretation or Bernard Weisberger's excellent recent essay.* That we do not consider it necessary to include Beale's influential article indicates how much has been accomplished since its publication almost three decades ago. What Beale and a few others called for in early historiographical critiques of the old interpretation has now largely been achieved.

We have also decided to omit what appears now to be a rather primitive form of revisionism—one that offered an economic interpretation of Reconstruction as a substitute for the earlier emphasis on political opportunism and vindictiveness. We believe that the economic interpretation presented in the 1920's and 1930's by historians such as Charles A. Beard, Howard K. Beale (before he changed his mind), Matthew Josephson, and William B. Hesseltine is now as much discredited as the former political interpretation. We are not suggesting the absence of either political or economic motives, but only the insufficiency of an interpretation that excludes humanitarianism, ideals, and ideology. The appreciation of the complexity of motivation and a more sophisticated approach to problems of human behavior are the very essence of Reconstruction revisionism.

What follows, then, is what present-day historians have been saying about the Reconstruction roles of Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson; about the character and motives of

* Howard K. Beale, "On Rewriting Reconstruction History," *American Historical Review*, XLV (1940), 807-27; Bernard Weisberger, "The Dark and Bloody Ground of Reconstruction Historiography," *Journal of Southern History*, XXV (1959), 427-47.

FOREWORD

the Radical Republicans; about the behavior of Negroes in the years immediately after emancipation; about the southern "carpetbag governments"; and about the reasons for the eventual collapse of Radical Reconstruction. We have made our selections relatively long in order to give each historian space enough to make his case. Taken together we hope that they will form a reasonably coherent whole.

K.M.S.
L.F.L.

Berkeley, July, 1968

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RECONSTRUCTION

An Anthology of Revisionist Writings

THE TRAGIC LEGEND OF RECONSTRUCTION

Kenneth M. Stamp

In much serious history, as well as in a durable popular legend, two American epochs—the Civil War and the Reconstruction that followed—bear an odd relationship to one another. The Civil War, though admittedly a tragedy, is nevertheless often described as a glorious time of gallantry, noble self-sacrifice, and high idealism. Even historians who have considered the war “needless” and have condemned the politicians of the 1850’s for blundering into it, once they passed the firing on Fort Sumter, have usually written with reverence about Civil War heroes—the martyred Lincoln, the Christlike Lee, the intrepid Stonewall Jackson, and many others in this galaxy of demigods.

Few, of course, are so innocent as not to know that the Civil War had its seamy side. One can hardly ignore the political opportunism, the graft and profiteering in the filling of war contracts, the military blundering and needless loss of lives, the horrors of army hospitals and prison camps, and the ugly depths as well as the nobility of human nature that the war exposed with a fine impartiality. These things cannot be ignored, but they can be, and frequently are, dismissed as something alien to the essence of the war years. What was real and fundamental was the idealism and the nobility of the two contending forces: the Yankees struggling to save the Union,

dying to make men free; the Confederates fighting for great constitutional principles, defending their homes from invasion. Here, indeed, is one of the secrets of the spell the Civil War has cast: it involved high-minded Americans on both sides, and there was glory enough to go around. This, in fact, is the supreme synthesis of Civil War historiography and the great balm that has healed the nation's wounds: Yankees and Confederates alike fought bravely for what they believed to be just causes. There were few villains in the drama.

But when the historian reaches the year 1865, he must take leave of the war and turn to another epoch, Reconstruction, when the task was, in Lincoln's words, "to bind up the nation's wounds" and "to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace." How, until recently, Reconstruction was portrayed in both history and legend, how sharply it was believed to contrast with the years of the Civil War, is evident in the terms that were used to identify it. Various historians have called this phase of American history "The Tragic Era," "The Dreadful Decade," "The Age of Hate," and "The Blackout of Honest Government." Reconstruction represented the ultimate shame of the American people—as one historian phrased it, "the nadir of national disgrace." It was the epoch that most Americans wanted to forget.

Claude Bowers, who divided his time between politics and history, has been the chief disseminator of the traditional picture of Reconstruction, for his book, *The Tragic Era*, published in 1929, has attracted more readers than any other dealing with this period. For Bowers Reconstruction was a time of almost unrelieved sordidness in public and private life. Whole regiments of villains march through his pages: the corrupt politicians who dominated the administration of Ulysses S. Grant; the crafty, scheming northern carpetbaggers who invaded the South after the war for political and economic plunder; the degraded and depraved southern scallwags who betrayed their own people and collaborated with

the enemy; and the ignorant, barbarous, sensual Negroes who threatened to Africanize the South and destroy its Caucasian civilization.

Most of Bowers' key generalizations can be found in his preface. The years of Reconstruction, he wrote, "were years of revolutionary turmoil, with the elemental passions predominant. . . . The prevailing note was one of tragedy. . . . Never have American public men in responsible positions, directing the destiny of the nation, been so brutal, hypocritical, and corrupt. The constitution was treated as a doormat on which politicians and army officers wiped their feet after wading in the muck. . . . The southern people literally were put to the torture . . . [by] rugged conspirators . . . [who] assumed the pose of philanthropists and patriots." The popularity of Bowers' book stems in part from the simplicity of his characters. None are etched in shades of gray; none are confronted with complex moral decisions. Like characters in a Victorian romance, the Republican leaders of the Reconstruction era were evil through and through, and the helpless, innocent white men of the South were totally noble and pure.

If Bowers' prose is more vivid and his anger more intense, his general interpretation of Reconstruction is only a slight exaggeration of a point of view shared by most serious American historians from the late nineteenth century until very recently. Writing in the 1890's, James Ford Rhodes, author of a multivolumed history of the United States since the Compromise of 1850, branded the Republican scheme of reconstruction as "repressive" and "uncivilized," one that "pandered to the ignorant negroes, the knavish white natives and the vulturous adventurers who flocked from the North." About the same time Professor John W. Burgess, of Columbia University, called Reconstruction the "most soul-sickening spectacle that Americans had ever been called upon to behold." Early in the twentieth century Professor William A. Dunning, also of Columbia University, and a group of tal-

ented graduate students wrote a series of monographs that presented a crushing indictment of the Republican reconstruction program in the South—a series that made a deep and lasting impression on American historians. In the 1930's, Professor James G. Randall, of the University of Illinois, still writing in the spirit of the Dunningites, described the Reconstruction era “as a time of party abuse, of corruption, of vindictive bigotry.” “To use a modern phrase,” wrote Randall, “government under Radical Republican rule in the South had become a kind of ‘racket.’” As late as 1947, Professor E. Merton Coulter, of the University of Georgia, reminded critics of the traditional interpretation that no “amount of revision can write away the grievous mistakes made in this abnormal period of American history.” Thus, from Rhodes and Burgess and Dunning to Randall and Coulter the central emphasis of most historical writing about Reconstruction has been upon sordid motives and human depravity. Somehow, during the summer of 1865, the nobility and idealism of the war years had died.

A synopsis of the Dunning school's version of Reconstruction would run something like this: Abraham Lincoln, while the Civil War was still in progress, turned his thoughts to the great problem of reconciliation; and, “with malice toward none and charity for all,” this gentle and compassionate man devised a plan that would restore the South to the Union with minimum humiliation and maximum speed. But there had already emerged in Congress a faction of Radical Republicans, sometimes called Jacobins or Vindictives, who sought to defeat Lincoln's generous program. Motivated by hatred of the South, by selfish political ambitions, and by crass economic interests, the Radicals tried to make the process of reconstruction as humiliating, as difficult, and as prolonged as they possibly could. Until Lincoln's tragic death, they poured their scorn upon him—and then used his coffin as a political stump to arouse the passions of the northern electorate.