

The
ROAD

— to —

REDEMPTION

Southern Politics, 1869-1879

Michael Perman

The Road to Redemption

Southern Politics, 1869–1879

by Michael Perman

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The Road to Redemption

White Democrats will not train in parti-colored regiments, and every attempt to enlist black recruits in our ranks, will drive more white soldiers away than gain black ones. . . . The road to redemption is under the white banner.

—*Mobile Register*, editorial, 13 January 1871

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To Benjamin & Sarah

Acknowledgments

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M. P.

Chicago, December 1983

Introduction

The history of southern Reconstruction is currently attracting a great deal of attention. After a period of comparative quiet following the excitement generated by the revisionism of the 1960s, the post-Civil War era in the South is experiencing a revival of interest. The reason for this renewed fascination is that the same kinds of concerns and techniques which have, in the past decade, been applied to slavery and the antebellum South are being transferred to the postwar situation. Econometricians are using quantitative methodology to discover the nature of the postbellum economy; historians employing Marxist analysis are investigating the system of class relations that prevailed after the planters had been defeated in war and deprived of their slaves; social and economic historians are examining the complexities and subtleties of the land and labor system of the late-nineteenth-century South; and, lastly, cultural historians are discovering the ethos and attitudes of the freedmen and their landlords in the world of the plantation after emancipation.¹

While the social, economic, and cultural history of the Reconstruction South is being reexamined, the same cannot really be said for its politics. In fact, as it happens, politics both before the war as well as after it has received very little attention of late. Yet, the politics of the postwar South certainly does need reinvigoration, and it is my hope that *The Road to Redemption* may help make a start in this direction. But should it do so, it will not be because it is based on newly discovered sources of evidence. Nor will it be because it reintroduces topics previously overlooked or ignored. Rather, its

contribution will lie in the perspectives and approaches that it brings to the study of southern politics in the postwar era.

These are essentially three in number. The first is that the entire South is covered here, not just a single state as has so often been the case in southern historical writing generally and in writing about the Reconstruction in particular. This has made it possible to discern patterns and trends across the region which might otherwise remain undetected. The second perspective has been to consider Reconstruction as an episode in southern political history, rather than as a discrete event cut out of the normal flow of the region's political development. Reconstruction was not imposed on the South and then later removed without leaving a trace. The formation of the Republican party and the creation of a vast new black electorate affected decisively the course of the South's politics. Indeed, both remained for several decades after Reconstruction had ended. But the process also worked in the other direction. For the existing political system in turn affected the Republican party and, to a large extent, shaped the way it functioned. Thus, there was a dynamic relationship between the Republican party and the political system in which it was forced to exist and operate. Reconstruction was not, therefore, played out against the background of the southern political system but was an essential part of it. What this means, in effect, is that the politics of southern Reconstruction cannot be understood without an appreciation of the role of Reconstruction in southern politics.

Because historians have usually conceived of Reconstruction as a discrete and self-contained occurrence, they have also fitted it into a rigid chronological mold marked out from 1868, when it began, to 1876, when it was effectively over. As a result, their studies have concluded with the overthrow of Reconstruction and so have not investigated the political universe that took its place. Because of this, Reconstruction and Redemption have been separated from each other, and whatever continuities and connections there were between these two worlds have been lost sight of. In addition, by compartmentalizing Reconstruction in this way, historians have focused their attention on what transpired during it without much consideration for what occurred beyond and after. This concentration on Reconstruction itself, without paying much attention to the context in which it took place, has resulted in a preoccupation with

explaining its dramatic collapse. Since it was all over by 1876, the need to explain why it failed has been overwhelming, with the result that most of the history of the period has been written with this question in mind. And this leads directly to the third of the perspectives I have taken in this book. I have approached Reconstruction in the South, not in terms of why it failed but of how it worked, seeing it as a process to be described and analyzed rather than as a problem to be solved, a question to be answered.

Because Reconstruction was so anomalous and unsettling, it could be that the political process was likewise abnormal. To discover whether this was so has required me to examine the political parties to see what they were like and what they did. To this end, attention has been focused, in the first case, on the composition of both parties and on the images they projected and identities they assumed. To discover what they did, I have examined the way they formulated issues, mobilized voters, and conducted campaigns. Naturally enough, this kind of approach deals with both parties and the dynamics of their competitive relationship. It is not concerned only with the Republicans as is usually the case when the failure of Reconstruction is the focus of interest. Indeed, because the Democrats, unlike the Republicans, had already been in existence in the South for many decades and would, as events transpired, also outlive Reconstruction and later dominate the region's political life, more attention has been devoted to them than to their opponents. But their importance is greater than that, because, in effect, the Democrats embodied the continuities and the elements of persistence in southern politics with which the Republicans had to deal if they were to endure.

Interestingly enough, this focus on the two major parties has dramatized a development during the era which has often passed unnoticed but which was of great significance at the time. Despite the obvious contrast between the Republicans who were the agents of Reconstruction and their opponents who were committed to its defeat, there later developed, once the effort to prevent Reconstruction had failed by 1868, a tendency in which both parties deemphasized their formal differences and adopted policies and platforms that were similar. As both parties began to compete in this way for the political center, the differences between them became not only less evident but also of less significance in determining the course of

southern politics. Of more importance were the internal divisions within the parties as they began to polarize into divergent factions that differed about the wisdom and expedience of the direction in which their parties were being led. The outcome of these contests affected, to a considerable extent, the way in which Redemption occurred and what its aftereffects were to be. These internal factions, or intraparty tendencies, were, in fact, the fulcrum on which southern politics turned in the 1870s. Furthermore, as we shall see, they were not without impact on the region's economic life as well.

During Reconstruction, an attempt was made in the South to return its politics to the two-party system that it had experienced during the Jacksonian era. *The Road to Redemption* is a study of that experiment in party formation. As such, it attempts to explain how this system operated, what brought about its collapse, and what took its place. After all, Reconstruction was not embarked upon solely to round out and settle the sectional conflict. Far more important was its purpose of establishing a new political order, even a new economic direction, for the South, and that is what this book is about.

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction xi

PART I.

The Politics of Convergence: Reconstruction, 1869–1873

1. The Contest for the Political Center, 1869–1870 3

2. Republican Factionalism 22

3. The Democratic-Conservatives and the New
Departure 57

4. The Whigs: Fulcrum of Faction and Party 87

5. Climax of Convergence: The Election of 1872 108

PART II.

The Politics of Divergence: Redemption, 1874–1879

6. The Collapse of the Center, 1873–1875	135
7. The Forked Road to Redemption, 1873–1876	149
8. The Return of the Bourbons	178
9. The Bourbon Constitutions	193
10. The Resurgence of the Agricultural Interest	221
11. The Agrarian Reaction	237
12. The Democracy Restored and Readjusted	264
Notes	281
Bibliography	325
Index	341

Part I

The Politics of Convergence: Reconstruction, 1869–1873

I. The Contest for the Political Center, 1869–1870

It will require a few years longer to wear away all the bitter memories of the great war of the Rebellion. But since the election of Grant a happy change has come over the spirit of their dreams. They are feeling better; they are looking forward to a bright and glorious future, and, indeed, evincing a little too much impatience for an overload of Northern men, with money and skill.

—Joseph Medill, reporting from the South, in *Chicago Tribune*, 9 April 1869

In the presidential election of 1868, the Republicans campaigned as the party of stability, peace, and sectional concord. By contrast, their Democratic opponents were identified with turmoil and disruption, even revolution. This was a surprising and sudden reversal of the roles assumed by the major parties, for during the previous few years, and even before the war as well, the voters had come to regard the new Republican party as the advocate and agent of change and the Democrats as a force for conservatism and continuity.

These public perceptions were not incorrect. The parties had not changed; it was just that the set of issues over which they had battled since the war were now placed in a different context. The changes that Republicans had been proposing for the South were no longer impending. Instead, the electorate was being asked to