



Reconstruction changed the tax structure of the South. In the U.S. from the earliest days until today, a major source of state revenue was the property tax. In the South, wealthy landowners were allowed to assess the value of their own land. These assessments were almost valueless and the pre-war tax rate was almost nothing. Pre-war southern states did not educate their citizens or build and maintain any infrastructure. State revenues came from fees and from sales taxes on slave auctions. Some states assessed property owners by a combination of land value and a capitation tax, a tax on each worker employed. This tax was often assessed in a way to discourage a free labor market, where a slave was assessed at 75 cents, while a free white was assessed at a dollar or more, and a free African American at \$3 or more. Some revenue also came from poll taxes. These taxes were more than poor people could pay, with the designed and inevitable consequence that they did not vote.

During Reconstruction, new spending on schools and infrastructure, combined with fraudulent spending and a collapse in state credit because of huge deficits, forced the states to dramatically increase property tax rates. In places, the rate went up to ten times higher” despite the poverty of the region. The infrastructure of much of the South—roads, bridges, and railroads—scarce and deficient as it was—had been destroyed during the war. In part, the new tax system was designed to force owners of large estates with huge tracts of uncultivated land either to sell or to have it confiscated for failure to pay taxes. The taxes would serve as a market-based system for redistributing the land to the landless freedmen and white poor.

Now that they were called upon to pay a tax on their property, angry plantation owners revolted, and the conservatives shifted their focus away from race to taxes. Former Congressman John Lynch, a black Republican leader from Mississippi, concluded, “The argument made by the taxpayers, however, was plausible and it may be conceded that, upon the whole, they were about right; for no doubt it would have been much easier upon the taxpayers to have increased at that time the interest-bearing debt of the State than to have increased the tax rate. The latter course, however, had been adopted and could not then be changed.”

The white Southerners who lost power reformed themselves into “Conservative” parties that battled the Republicans throughout the South. The party names varied, but by the late 1870s, they simply called themselves “Democrats.” Historian Walter Lynwood Fleming describes mounting anger of Southern whites: “The Negro troops, even at their best, were everywhere considered offensive by the native whites... The Negro soldier, impudent by reason of his new freedom, his new uniform, and his new gun, was more than Southern temper could tranquilly bear, and race conflicts were frequent.”

While both the planter-business class and the common farmer class of the South both opposed black suffrage, they did so for different reasons. These common farmers were now competing economically with the recently freed blacks and wanted to keep them inferior. They opposed black suffrage for racial reasons. On the other

hand, the planter-business class opposed black suffrage for economic reasons, not racial reasons. Any laboring class, no matter what race, given universal suffrage could lead to an attack on the property that the planter class loved so much. These conservatives felt that their property interests were now in danger because the laboring class was ignorant and would vote to raise taxes significantly. After being faced by these taxes, the planter-business class that by teaming up with the blacks they could lift the tariffs and further their own political agendas. The Democrats nominated blacks for political office as well as tried to steal other blacks from the Republican side. But when these attempts to combine with the blacks failed, the planters joined the common farmers in simply trying to displace the Republican governments.”

Fleming is a typical example of the conservative pro-white interpretation of Reconstruction. His work defended some roles of the KKK but denounced its violence; Fleming accepted as necessary the disenfranchisement of African Americans because he thought their votes were bought and sold. Fleming described the first results of the movement as “good” and the later ones as “both good and bad.” According to Fleming (1907) the KKK “quieted the Negroes, made life and property safer, gave protection to women, stopped burnings, forced the Radical leaders to be more moderate, made the Negroes work better, drove the worst of the Radical leaders from the country and started the whites on the way to gain political supremacy.” The evil results, Fleming said, was that lawless elements “made use of the organization as a cloak to cover their misdeeds... the lynching habits of today [1907] are largely to conditions, social and legal, growing out of Reconstruction.”

Ellis Oberholtzer (a northern scholar) in 1917 explained:

Outrages upon the ex-slaves in the South there were in plenty. Their sufferings were many. But white men, too, were victims of lawless violence, and in all portions of the North as well as in the late “rebel” states. Not a political campaign passed without the exchange of bullets, the breaking of skulls with sticks and stones, the firing of rival club-houses. Republican clubs marched the streets of Philadelphia, amid revolver shots and brickbats, to save the negroes from the “rebel” savages in Alabama... The project to make voters out of black men was not so much for their social elevation as for the further punishment of the Southern white people””for the capture of offices for Radical scamps and the entrenchment of the Radical party in power for a long time to come in the South and in the country at large.”

Reaction by conservatives included the formation of violent secret societies, especially the Ku Klux Klan. Violence occurred in cities and in the countryside between white former Confederates, Republicans, African-Americans, representatives of the federal government, and Republican-organized armed Loyal Leagues. The victims of violence were overwhelmingly African Americans, although white supporters were also attacked.

As early as 1868 Supreme Court Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase, a leading Radical during the war, concluded that:

Congress was right in not limiting, by its reconstruction acts, the right of suffrage to whites; but wrong in the exclusion from suffrage of certain classes of citizens and all unable to take its prescribed retrospective oath, and wrong also in the establishment of despotic military governments for the States and in authorizing military commissions for the trial of civilians in time of peace. There should have been as little military government as possible; no military commissions; no classes excluded from suffrage; and no oath except one of faithful obedience and support to the Constitution and laws, and of sincere attachment to the constitutional Government of the United States.

By 1872, President Grant had alienated large numbers of leading Republicans, including many Radicals by the corruption of his administration and his use of federal soldiers to prop up Radical state regimes in the South. The opponents, called “Liberal Republicans”, included founders of the party who expressed dismay that the party had succumbed to corruption. They were further wearied by the continued insurgent violence of whites against blacks in the South, especially around every election cycle, which demonstrated the war was not over and changes were fragile . Leaders included editors of some of the nation’s most powerful newspapers. Charles Sumner, embittered by the corruption of the Grant administration, joined the new party, which nominated editor Horace Greeley. The badly organized Democratic party also supported Greeley. Grant made up for the defections by new gains among Union veterans, as well as strong support from the

“Stalwart” faction of his party (which depended on his patronage), and the Southern Republican parties. Grant won a smashing landslide, as the Liberal Republican party vanished and many former supporters””even ex-abolitionists””abandoned the cause of Reconstruction.

In the South, political””racial tensions built up inside the Republican party. In 1868, Georgia Democrats, with support from some Republicans, expelled all 28 black Republican members (arguing blacks were eligible to vote but not to hold office.) In several states the more conservative scalawags fought for control with the more radical carpetbaggers and usually lost. Thus, in Mississippi, the conservative faction led by scalawag James Lusk Alcorn was decisively defeated by the radical faction led by carpetbagger Adelbert Ames. The party lost support steadily as many scalawags left it; few new recruits were acquired. Meanwhile, the freedmen were demanding a bigger share of the offices and patronage, thus squeezing out their carpetbagger allies. Finally some of the more prosperous freedmen were joining the Democrats, as they were angered at the failure of the Republicans to help them acquire land.

Although historians such as W.E.B. Du Bois looked for and celebrated a cross-racial coalition of poor whites and blacks, such coalitions rarely formed in these years. With long-term agricultural problems, there was an alliance later in the century between Populists and Republicans whose coalition won control in several states, especially in 1894. White Democrats reacted by creating more legislative and constitutional barriers to voter registration and voting by poor whites and blacks.

Writing in 1915 and demonstrating contemporary biases about Reconstruction, Congressman Lynch explained that,

While the colored men did not look with favor upon a political alliance with the poor whites, it must be admitted that, with very few exceptions, that class of whites did not seek, and did not seem to desire such an alliance.

Lynch explained that poor whites resented the job competition from freedmen. Furthermore, the poor whites

with a few exceptions, were less efficient, less capable, and knew less about matters of state and governmental administration than many of the ex-slaves.... As a rule, therefore, the whites that came into the leadership of the Republican party between 1872 and 1875 were representatives of the most substantial families of the land.

Thus, the Democrats encouraged the poor whites to ally with them over race. They became bitterly opposed to black Republicans. Elite white Democrats subverted any coalition threat to their control by passage of statutes and new constitutions from 1890-1908 that effectively disfranchised most blacks and hundreds of thousands of poor whites.

By 1870, the Democratic””Conservative leadership across the South decided it had to end its opposition to Reconstruction as well as to black suffrage in order to survive and move on to new issues. The Grant administration had proven by its crackdown on the Ku Klux Klan that it would use as much federal power as necessary to suppress open anti-black violence. The Democrats in the North concurred. They wanted to fight the Republican Party on economic grounds rather than race. The New Departure offered the chance for a clean slate without having to refight the Civil War every election. Furthermore, many wealthy landowners thought they could control part of the newly enfranchised black electorate to their own advantage.

Not all Democrats agreed; an insurgent element continued to resist Reconstruction no matter what. Eventually, a group called “Redeemers” took control of the party in the states. They formed coalitions with conservative Republicans, including scalawags and carpetbaggers, emphasizing the need for economic modernization. Railroad building was seen as a panacea since northern capital was needed. The new tactics were a success in Virginia where William Mahone built a winning coalition. In Tennessee, the Redeemers formed a coalition

with Republican governor DeWitt Senter. Across the South some Democrats switched from the race issue to taxes and corruption, charging that Republican governments were corrupt and inefficient. With continuing decrease in cotton prices, taxes squeezed cash-poor farmers who rarely saw \$20 in currency a year but had to pay taxes in currency or lose their farm.

In North Carolina, Republican Governor William Woods Holden used state troops against the Klan, but the prisoners were released by federal judges. Holden became the first governor in American history to be impeached and removed from office. Republican political disputes in Georgia split the party and enabled the Redeemers to take over.

In the lower South, violence continued and new insurgent groups arose. The disputed election in Louisiana in 1872 found both Republican and Democratic candidates holding inaugural balls while returns were reviewed. Both certified their own slates for local parish offices in many places, causing local tensions to rise. Finally Federal support helped certify the Republican as governor, but the Democrat McEnery in March 1873 brought his own militia to bear in New Orleans, the seat of government.

Slates for local offices were certified by each candidate. In rural Grant Parish in the Red River Valley, freedmen fearing a Democratic attempt to take over the parish government reinforced defenses at the Colfax courthouse in late March. White militias gathered from the area a few miles outside the settlement. Rumors and fears abounded on both sides. William Ward, an African-American Union veteran and militia captain, mustered his company in Colfax and went to the courthouse. On Easter Sunday, April 13, 1873, the whites attacked the defenders at the courthouse. There was confusion about who shot one of the white leaders after an offer by the defenders to surrender. It was a catalyst to mayhem. In the end, three whites died and 120-150 blacks were killed, some 50 while held as prisoners. The disproportionate numbers of black to white fatalities and documentation of brutalized bodies are why contemporary historians call it the Colfax Massacre rather than the Colfax Riot, as it is known locally.

This marked the beginning of heightened insurgency and attacks on Republican officeholders and freedmen in Louisiana and other Deep South states. In Louisiana Judge T.S. Crawford and District Attorney P.H. Harris of the 12th Judicial District were shot off their horses and killed from ambush October 8, 1873 while going to court. One widow wrote to the Department of Justice that her husband was killed because he was a Union man and "...of the efforts made to screen those who committed a crime..." {US Senate Journal January 13, 1875, pp.106-107}.

In the North, a live-and-let-live attitude made elections more like a sporting contest. But in the Deep South, many white citizens had not reconciled themselves to the defeat of the war or the granting of citizenship to freedmen. As an Alabama scalawag explained, "Our contest here is for life, for the right to earn our bread...for a decent and respectful consideration as human beings and members of society."

The Panic of 1873 hit the Southern economy hard and disillusioned many Republicans who had gambled that railroads would pull the South out of its poverty. The price of cotton fell by half; many small landowners, local merchants and cotton factors (wholesalers) went bankrupt. Sharecropping, for both black and white farmers, became more common as a way to spread the risk of owning land. The old abolitionist element in the North was aging away, or had lost interest, and was not replenished. Many carpetbaggers returned to the North or joined the Redeemers. Blacks had an increased voice in the Republican Party, but across the South it was divided by internal bickering and was rapidly losing its cohesion. Many local black leaders started emphasizing individual economic progress in cooperation with white elites, rather than racial political progress in opposition

to them, a conservative attitude that foreshadowed Booker T. Washington.

Nationally, President Grant took the blame for the depression; the Republican Party lost 96 seats in all parts of the country in the 1874 elections. The Bourbon Democrats took control of the House and were confident of electing Samuel J. Tilden president in 1876. President Grant was not running for re-election and seemed to be losing interest in the South. States fell to the Redeemers, with only four in Republican hands in 1873, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina; Arkansas then fell after the Brooks-Baxter War in 1874.

Political violence had been endemic in Louisiana, but in 1874 the white militias coalesced into paramilitary organizations such as the White League, first in parishes of the Red River Valley. It was a new organization that operated openly and had political goals: the violent overthrow of Republican rule and suppression of black voting. White League chapters soon rose in many rural parishes, receiving financing for advanced weaponry from wealthy men. In one example of local violence, the White League assassinated six white Republican officeholders and five to twenty black witnesses outside Coushatta, Red River Parish in 1874. Four of the white men were related to the Republican representative of the parish.

Later in 1874 the White League mounted a serious attempt to unseat the Republican governor of Louisiana, in a dispute that had simmered since the 1872 election. It brought 5000 troops to New Orleans to engage and overwhelm forces of the Metropolitan Police and state militia in an effort to turn Republican Governor William Kellogg out of office and seat McEnery. The White League took over and held the state house and city hall, but they retreated before the arrival of reinforcing Federal troops. Kellogg had asked for reinforcements before, and Grant finally responded, sending additional troops to try to quell violence throughout plantation areas of the Red River Valley, although 2,000 troops were already in the state.

Similarly, the Red Shirts, another paramilitary group, arose in 1875 in Mississippi and the Carolinas. Like the White League and White Liner rifle clubs, these groups operated as a “military arm of the Democratic Party”, to restore white supremacy.

Democrats and many northern Republicans agreed that Confederate nationalism and slavery were dead””the war goals were achieved””and further federal military interference””was an undemocratic violation of historic Republican values. The victory of Rutherford Hayes in the hotly contested Ohio gubernatorial election of 1875 indicated his “let alone” policy toward the South would become Republican policy, as indeed happened when he won the 1876 Republican nomination for president.

An explosion of violence accompanied the campaign for the Mississippi’s 1875 election, in which Red Shirts and Democratic rifle clubs, operating in the open and without disguise, threatened or shot enough Republicans to decide the election for the Democrats. Republican Governor Adelbert Ames asked Grant for federal troops to fight back; Grant initially refused, saying public opinion was “tired out” of the perpetual troubles in the South. Ames fled the state as the Democrats took over Mississippi.

This was not the end of the violence, however, as the campaigns and elections of 1876 were marked by additional murders and attacks on Republicans in Louisiana, North and South Carolina, and Florida. In South Carolina the campaign season of 1876 was marked by murderous outbreaks and fraud against freedmen. Red Shirts paraded with arms behind Democratic candidates; they killed blacks in the Hamburg and Ellenton, SC massacres; and one historian estimated 150 blacks were killed in the weeks before the 1876 election across South Carolina. Red Shirts prevented almost all black voting in two majority-black counties. The Red Shirts were also active in North Carolina.

Reconstruction continued in South Carolina, Louisiana and Florida until 1877. The elections of 1876 were accompanied by heightened violence across the Deep South. A combination of ballot stuffing and intimidating blacks suppressed their vote even in majority black counties. The White League was active in Louisiana. After Republican Rutherford Hayes won the disputed U.S. Presidential election of 1876, the national Compromise of 1877 was reached.

The white Democrats in the South agreed to accept Hayes's victory if he withdrew the last Federal troops. By this point, the North was weary of insurgency. White Democrats controlled most of the Southern legislatures and armed militias controlled small towns and rural areas. With the white Democrats' passage of disfranchising constitutions and statues, African Americans who wanted to exercise their legal rights were repeatedly thwarted by white Democrats for most of the next 75 years. They considered Reconstruction a failure because the Federal government withdrew from enforcing their ability to exercise their rights as citizens.

The end of Reconstruction marked the beginning of a period, 1877-1900, in which white legislators passed laws and new constitutions that created barriers to voter registration and voting for African-Americans and poor whites, ushering in the nadir of American race relations. White Democrats also passed Jim Crow laws imposing segregation in public facilities and transportation, as well as other restrictions on blacks. In the 1880s and 1890s, the Populist Party in some cases allied with black Republicans. Faced with this threat, white Democrats moved to reduce the franchise among both groups. State legislatures passed laws directed at reducing voting by blacks and illiterate whites, chiefly by creating new requirements for voter registration. "It was the very success of interracial coalitions that catalyzed the disfranchisement movement among the previously ruling white class."

From 1890 to 1908, starting with Mississippi, ten of the eleven states of the Confederacy passed new constitutions or amendments that created new requirements for voter registration, such as poll taxes, literacy and understanding tests, and residency requirements. The effect on black disfranchisement was immediate and devastating. Hundreds of thousands of African Americans were removed from voter registration rolls across the South and effectively disfranchised. Tens of thousands of poor whites were also disfranchised. One-party rule under white Democrats was established. In both cases, disfranchisement lasted until deep into the 20th century.

Reconstruction civil rights legislation was overturned by the United States Supreme Court. Most notably, the court held in the Civil Rights Cases (1883), that the 14th Amendment gave Congress the power only to outlaw public, rather than private, discrimination. In *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the court went further, ruling that state-mandated segregation was legal as long as the law provided for "separate but equal" facilities.

African Americans immediately started raising legal challenges to disfranchisement. Early challenges taken to the Supreme Court over Mississippi's constitutional voter registration requirements, *Williams v. Mississippi* (1898), and Alabama's disfranchising provisions, *Giles v. Harris* (1903), were unsuccessful, which encouraged other states to adopt similar provisions. Booker T. Washington, better known for his public position as an accommodationist, used his political contacts to raise funds and arrange representation for several of these legal challenges.

In 1909 the interracial National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was established. Soon it began to participate in legal challenges, and established its Legal Defense Fund as a separate organization. In 1915, in *Guinn v. United States*, the Supreme Court ruled that the grandfather clause was unconstitutional in Oklahoma. This was the first case in which the NAACP had filed a brief with the Supreme Court. Other states using the grandfather clause also had to repeal it, but states quickly developed new

measures for continuing disfranchisement. The NAACP proceeded with litigation challenging disfranchising provisions on a case by case basis and slowly accumulated some victories.

When the Supreme Court ruled white primaries unconstitutional in *Smith v. Allwright* (1944), civil rights organizations rushed to register African-American voters. By 1947 the All-Citizens Registration Committee (ACRC) of Atlanta managed to get 125,000 voters registered in Georgia, raising black participation to 18.8% of those eligible, from 20,000 on the rolls in 1940. Georgia, among other Southern states, passed new legislation (1958) to once again repress black voter registration. It was not until African-American leadership gained passage of the Federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 that all American citizens regained the ability to exercise their suffrage, first gained by African Americans after the Civil War.

The interpretation of Reconstruction has swung back and forth several times. Nearly all historians, however, have concluded it was a failure. In the 1865-75 period, most writers took the view that the ex-Confederates were traitors and Johnson was their ally who threatened to undo the Union's Constitutional achievements. In the 1870s and 1880s many writers argued that Johnson and his allies were not traitors but blundered badly in rejecting the 14th Amendment and setting the stage for Radical Reconstruction.

Booker T. Washington, who grew up in West Virginia during Reconstruction, concluded that, "the Reconstruction experiment in racial democracy failed because it began at the wrong end, emphasizing political means and civil rights acts rather than economic means and self-determination." His solution was to concentrate on building the economic infrastructure of the black community, in part by his leadership of Tuskegee Institute. However, historians have discovered that Washington also used his significant resources and called on northern allies to secretly provide financing and representation in numerous lawsuits that challenged Southern segregation restrictions and constitutional disfranchisement, as in *Alabama's Giles v. Harris* (1903) and *Giles v. Teasley* (1904).

In popular literature two novels by Thomas Dixon—"The Clansman" and "The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden" (1865-1900)—romanticized white resistance to Northern/black coercion, hailing vigilante action by the KKK. Other authors romanticized the benevolence of slavery and the happy world of the antebellum plantation. These sentiments were expressed on the screen in D.W. Griffith's anti-Republican 1915 movie *The Birth of a Nation*.

The Dunning School of scholars based at the history department of Columbia University analyzed Reconstruction as a failure, at least after 1866, for quite different reasons. They claimed that it took freedoms and rights from qualified whites and gave them to unqualified blacks who were being duped by corrupt carpetbaggers and scalawags. As one scholar notes, "Reconstruction was a battle between two extremes: the Democrats, as the group which included the vast majority of the whites, standing for decent government and racial supremacy, versus the Republicans, the Negroes, alien carpetbaggers, and renegade scalawags, standing for dishonest government and alien ideals. These historians wrote literally in terms of white and black."

In the 1930s, "revisionism" became popular among scholars. As disciples of Charles A. Beard, revisionists focused on economics, downplaying politics and constitutional issues. They argued that the Radical rhetoric of equal rights was mostly a smokescreen hiding the true motivation of Reconstruction's real backers. Howard Beale argued Reconstruction was primarily a successful attempt by financiers, railroad builders and industrialists in the Northeast, using the Republican Party, to control the national government for their own selfish economic ends. Those ends were to continue the wartime high protective tariff, the new network of national banks, and to guarantee a "sound" currency. To succeed the business class had to remove the old

ruling agrarian class of Southern planters and Midwestern farmers. This it did by inaugurating Reconstruction, which made the South Republican, and by selling its policies to the voters wrapped up in such attractive vote-getting packages as northern patriotism or the bloody shirt. Historian William Hesselstine added the point that the Northeastern businessmen wanted to control the South economically, which they did through ownership of the railroads. However, historians in the 1950s and 1960s refuted Beale's economic causation by demonstrating that Northern businessmen were widely divergent on monetary or tariff policy, and seldom paid attention to Reconstruction issues.

The black scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, in his *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, published in 1935, compared results across the states to show achievements by the Reconstruction legislatures and to refute claims about wholesale African-American control of governments. He showed black contributions, as in the establishment of universal public education, charitable and social institutions, and universal suffrage as important results, and he noted their collaboration with whites. He also pointed out that whites benefited most by the financial deals made, and he put excesses in the perspective of the war's aftermath. He noted that despite complaints, several states kept their Reconstruction constitutions for nearly a quarter of a century. Despite receiving favorable reviews, his work was largely ignored by white historians.

In the 1960s, neo-abolitionist historians emerged, led by John Hope Franklin, Kenneth Stampp and Eric Foner. Influenced by the Civil Rights Movement, they rejected the Dunning school and found a great deal to praise in Radical Reconstruction. Foner, the primary advocate of this view, argued that it was never truly completed, and that a Second Reconstruction was needed in the late 20th century to complete the goal of full equality for African Americans. The neo-abolitionists followed the revisionists in minimizing the corruption and waste created by Republican state governments, saying it was no worse than Boss Tweed's ring in New York City.

Instead they emphasized that suppression of the rights of African Americans was a worse scandal and a grave corruption of America's republican ideals. They argued that the real tragedy of Reconstruction was not that it failed because blacks were incapable of governing, especially as they did not dominate any state government, but that it failed because whites raised an insurgent movement to restore white supremacy. White elite-dominated state legislatures passed disfranchising constitutions from 1890-1908 that effectively barred most blacks and many poor whites from voting. This disfranchisement affected millions of people for decades into the 20th century, and closed African Americans and poor whites out of the political process in the South.

Re-establishment of white supremacy meant that within a decade, people forgot that blacks were creating thriving middle classes in many states of the South. African Americans' lack of representation meant they were treated as second-class citizens, with schools and services consistently underfunded in segregated societies, no representation on juries or in law enforcement, and bias in other legislation. It was not until the Civil Rights Movement and the passage of Federal legislation that African Americans regained their suffrage and civil rights in the South, under what is sometimes referred to as the "Second Reconstruction."

More recent work by Nina Silber, David Blight, Cecelia O'Leary, Laura Edwards, LeeAnn Whites, and Edward J. Blum, has encouraged greater attention to race, religion, and issues of gender while at the same time pushing the "end" of Reconstruction to the end of the nineteenth century, while monographs by Charles Reagan Wilson, Gaines Foster, W. Scott Poole have offered new views of the southern "Lost Cause".

David Wiegand
Executive Datebook Editor
The San Francisco Chronicle