question of state interest.”17 In this prediction to the governor of South Carolina in late 1865, William H. Tresco, a planter, isolated the fundamental issue in the postwar politics of the South. Control over the labor power that slavery had reserved for the masters was now the issue, because most planters believed that blacks would not work without compulsion—and without black labor, the plantation economy could never be rebuilt. Slavery had been justified as a necessary, Christian system of labor that had extracted productive work from an inferior, childlike race that was naturally lazy. Unless Southern whites admitted that they had been lying to themselves and to the outside world, there was now no reason to expect the freed blacks to embrace honest labor. This belief that the former slaves would have to be forced to work resulted in the Black Codes of 1865 and 1866.

By blatantly invoking the legal power of the state in the Black Codes, the planters raised the stakes of political involvement for the other two groups most interested in controlling black labor—Northern entrepreneurs and the freedmen themselves. Whereas the planters had little faith in the ability of market forces to discipline black labor, Northern entrepreneurs were confident that the spread of market relations and free-labor values would usher in a new age of prosperity and racial harmony for the South. Divided over the issue of incentives and controls for black labor, these two groups of whites were united in their insistence that the blacks had to be brought into a market economy for the production of plantation staples. The freedmen joined the Northern entrepreneurs resident in the postwar South in an effort to convert the Republican promise of civil equality into a political reality, but most of them rejected the Yankee commitment to market involvement. The goal of the former slaves was freedom from both market controls and white supervision. What was freedom and how was it to be exercised? Who would define the new political economy of the postwar South, control access to its resources, and decide how its rewards were to be distributed?

Answers to these questions broke along lines of race, class, and section. The success and durability of the new state governments set up under congressional Reconstruction would depend upon their ability to fashion answers that could forge and hold together a voting majority of freedmen and common whites.

Blacks in Reconstruction

The mass voting base of political reconstruction was the freed population. By their political activism, perceptions of their own best interests, and determination to use their labor power as a leverage to exact concessions from their former masters, Southern blacks exposed the myths of both the proslavery and the antislavery advocates. Slavery had produced neither a class of lazy, irresponsible “Sambos,” the purported existence of whom was essential to the master’s self-image of a beloved patriarch, nor, as the abolitionists believed, a class of uprooted, passive individuals so brutalized by slavery and so lacking in any culture of their own, that they had no choice but to turn to their Northern benefactors for guidance. To an extent that Northern and Southern whites found difficult to grasp, because each had a psychological investment in black dependency, Afro-Americans emerged from slavery with an inner strength and cultural resiliency that enabled them to set much of the reconstruction agenda. More so than whites could admit, reconstruction was a response to black demands and actions.

The goal of securing freedom for their families was the most immediate concern of
blacks as slavery began to collapse during the war. In contrast to the prewar pattern, in which young males acting alone comprised most of the runaways, slave escapes during the war were organized along family lines. After the arrival of Federal troops and blockading vessels off the Georgia coast in late 1861, some 2,500 slaves reached Union lines by the fall of 1864. Despite the greater risk of detection and capture incurred by moving in large groups, over eighty percent of the slaves who organized their own escape plans were members of groups of three or more, including women and children.

Loyalty to family and group also motivated blacks to join the Union army. The military recruiters on the Georgia sea islands soon discovered that there was no greater incentive for black enlistments than the personal opportunity to help gain and protect the freedom of kin and friends. A Northern official reported of one recruitment rally on St. Simons Island: 18

They were asked to enlist for pay, rations and uniforms, to fight for their country, for freedom and so forth, but not a man stirred. But when it was asked them to fight for themselves, to enlist to protect their wives and children from being sold away from them, and told of the little homes which they might secure to themselves and their families in after years, they all rose to their feet, the men came forward and said "I'll go," the women shouted, and the old men said "Amen."

The commitment of these Georgia blacks to their families was just one of the many indications of the strong bonds forged within the slave community. Contrary to the expectations of the abolitionists, the black family was not demoralized and shattered by slavery. About two-thirds of the slave families were headed by both parents, a ratio that corresponded almost exactly to family patterns in preindustrial England. Although slave marriages had no legal standing in the antebellum South, slave unions did produce stable, long-lasting commitments and a supportive moral code for family members. During marriage ceremonies conducted late in the war by Federal officials in Concordia Parish, Louisiana, 454 former slaves acknowledged a previous slave marriage. Nearly 90 percent of these unions had remained intact until death or forcible separation (such as the sale of husband or wife) ended the partnership. Although, in accord with African tradition and the mores of peasant societies in general, premarital sexual intercourse was not uncommon, promiscuity was rare. Sexual fidelity in marriage was the norm, and the average age of slave women at the birth of their first child was twenty, indicating an abstention from sexual intercourse for an average of three years after they first became capable of bearing children.

The moral code of the stable, two-parent family was reinforced by a network of overlapping kin relationships that knitted the slave community together. These kin ties were fostered by the closing of the African slave trade, slave prohibitions against cousin marriages, and the bunching of more than half the slave population into holdings of twenty and more. Ties of blood and marriage were thickest on older plantations in which slaves remained at the same location for at least a generation. On the Good Hope Plantation in South Carolina, for example, 28 percent of the slaves were directly related to individuals in other slave families in the late antebellum period.

Wherever possible, blacks chose freedom as family units, and when they came into contact with Federal authorities during the war, they insisted that the interests of their families be recognized. Their most pressing demand was education for their
children, and to secure it blacks used the main weapon at their disposal—their labor. In its need for black laborers and troops, the Union army showed little regard for the black family. Black soldiers were, of course, separated from their families, and in the consignment of labor gangs to work on the plantations of loyal Southerners, wives and children were often divided from husbands and fathers. Quickly grasping the importance of their labor to the Union war effort, as well as the urgency with which Federal officials wanted to establish that free black labor could be as profitable and disciplined as slave labor, the blacks refused to work until they were assured that their children would receive an education.

How well this tactic worked can be seen in a circular issued by General Nathaniel P. Banks, commander of the Gulf Department centered in Union-occupied southern Louisiana. In June 1864, Banks notified all parish provost marshals “that it is indispensable to the cultivation of the soil, that schools for colored children shall be maintained.” Without such schools, he stressed, the laborers “become discontented, and will be allowed to remove to Parishes where such provisions are made.” The blacks, some of whom were reported as saying “they would sooner work for nothing, than have their children deprived of learning to read,” applied the initial pressure for schools. The Union army responded by establishing a well-organized system of black elementary education in Louisiana as early as 1864.

Apart from the paramount political objective of proving that plantations could be efficiently operated with a stable supply of free black labor, army commanders were motivated to provide schools by the basic tenets of Northern liberalism. Perceiving former slaves as a class of desperate poor, driven, as were all the poor, by the base...
passions of animal instincts, the commanders believed that education offered the best means of teaching blacks the self-control to be civilized and the self-motivation to be productive workers in a free labor system. Most of the Northern teachers in the freedmen's schools agreed. One, after working with the blacks, put it starkly: "If we do not teach them, they will be a terrible power."\(^{20}\)

At the war's end, the emancipated slaves needed no whites to give them an agenda for freedom. They immediately seized freedom as the opportunity to build an autonomous black community anchored in the values and institutions that had sustained them under slavery. The core institution was the family. As the fugitives had shown so strikingly during the war, the first objective under freedom was the achievement of domestic security. Despite the prime importance of family ties under slavery, thousands of black families had to reconstitute themselves in 1865, because many had already been broken up before the war. Ownership of spouses by different masters was a main reason why women headed one-third of all slave households. A slave who reached the age of fifty stood a 50 percent chance of having been sold, and throughout the South one-fifth to one-third of slave marriages had ended with the sale or forced removal of one of the partners. The war years then brought on massive family disruptions as masters relocated their slaves to keep them away from the Yankees, and as Union and Confederate officials competed for able-bodied black labor. Throughout 1865, many blacks left the plantations in a search of family members.

By physically moving around in an effort to reunite their family units, the freedmen also were attempting to remove themselves psychologically from that direct white supervision that had been so integral to the slavery experience. They demonstrated this desire for their own cultural space by laying claim to full control over the key community institution of slave society, the black church.

Much as native Americans had done, Afro-Americans created a sacred world view of their own that fused Man, Nature, and God into a seamless whole. As revealed in their spirituals and folk beliefs, this world view combined elements of African and Euro-Christian cultures into an expression of personal self-worth and communal solidarity. The fusion of the sacred and the secular, the ecstatic style of worship, and the rhythms of the preaching were borrowed from African patterns. From the Christian Bible, blacks took the master's Jesus of the New Testament who preached deliverance in a world to come and transformed him into a Moses of the Old Testament who would lead his people to deliverance in this world of the here and now. For their spiritual ethos, they turned not to the calls to obedience in the Epistles of Paul but to the liberating messages of Exodus and Revelations. Their evangelical Christianity promised them that change would come and that ultimate justice was at hand. In the psychological warfare between master and slave, Afro-American Christianity gave the slaves the strength to accept what was inevitable, the master's power, and the inner dignity and autonomy to prevent that power from subsuming the slave's own being.

Driven by racial pride and their own sense of community, the freedmen pushed for separate black churches once deliverance came. The religion that had sustained them as slaves was now drawn on to inform their self-definition as a freed people. Blacks used the disciplinary structure of their churches as a community-controlled judiciary system that operated like a small-claims court in moral and economic matters. Here, free from white interference and prejudice, the freedmen set down and enforced the behavior they expected of each other. Here, organizational skills were learned, family disputes
Unrestrained, social gatherings were planned, labor meetings were held, and lessons in literacy were offered for children and adults. In the rural South, the freedmen made their churches synonymous with their communities.

The freedmen, by knitting together families separated by slavery and the war, sending their children to schools, usually at great economic sacrifice to the parents, and regulating their own affairs using their own institutions, largely reconstructed their own lives in the aftermath of emancipation. As eager as the freedmen were for domestic security and cultural independence, they also realized that the full measure of freedom could come only with economic independence. Possession of land offered the surest path to such independence for the freedman and his family.

When the Confederacy surrendered, the freedmen immediately pressed their moral claims to a share of the land they had always worked against the legal claims of their former masters. In the moral economy of the freedmen the land was already theirs by virtue of their uncompensated labor under slavery. “We has a right to the land where we are located,” proclaimed Virginia freedman Bayley Wyat in 1866, in a protest against the expulsion of a group of blacks from a contraband camp. In an economic argument that revealed that former slaves were no fools when it came to analyzing the moral costs of wealth accumulation in antebellum America, Wyat explained:

Our wives, our children, our husbands, has been sold over and over again to purchase the lands we now locates upon; for that reason we have a divine right to the land. . . . And den didn’t we clear the land, and raise de crops ob corn, ob cotton, ob tobacco, ob rice, ob sugar, ob everything. And den didn’t dem large cities in de North grow up on de cotton and de sugars and de rice dat we made? . . . I say dey has grown rich, and my people is poor.

The black claims were denied. Expectations that were high in the spring and summer of 1865 were dashed in the fall when President Johnson ordered that confiscated and abandoned lands being administered by the Freedmen’s Bureau would not be distributed to the freedmen but instead were to be returned to the pardoned owners. Still in control of the land were the same planters who had told their slaves during the war that Confederate defeat would mean the confiscation of their estates.

Barred from claiming the land, often at the point of federal bayonets, the freedmen nonetheless forced basic changes in plantation agriculture. The planters attempted to structure working conditions under freedom as closely as possible to the labor regime under slavery. What the planters wanted, and what they generally reconstructed in the planting seasons of 1865 and 1866, was the centralized control of the prewar years. The freedmen were organized into labor gangs, directly supervised by an overseer or resident planter, provided rations from the employer, and housed in the old slave quarters. The only difference now was the contractual obligation to pay fixed wages for the blacks’ labor. Designed to minimize change and to recreate the power relations under slavery, the wage system of 1865 and 1866 did just that. It looked as if President Johnson would be proved right. As long as they retained the land, planters would continue as masters. In his words, the former slaves “without land of their own . . . will continue to work for those who have it.”

What Johnson overlooked, and what frustrated the intentions of the planters, was the determination of the freedmen to achieve greater control over their own lives. The
freedmen rejected the personal dependency and coercive controls of the old system that had reemerged in the guise of wage labor. They hated being treated like slaves all over again. Declaring that the entire family would no longer work like slaves, they pulled their women and children from the fields. They flooded the local agents of the Freedmen’s Bureau with complaints of being cheated by employers who dismissed them without their annual wages once the harvest was in. Capitalizing on the mobility that came with emancipation, they moved in search of better working conditions. Some sought out jobs in the towns and cities, but most moved to other local, rural locations. They forced the planters to bid for their services by creating temporary shortages of labor, which they then exploited for a better contract. By 1870 the typical contract was not for cash wages but for a share of the crop. Under this arrangement the planters divided their estates into small family plots that were worked by the croppers. Depending upon the amount of food and farm supplies provided by the planter, the cropper turned over one-third to one-half of the crop as rent.

For blacks as well as whites, sharecropping became an economic trap that ensnared the tenants in a form of semifeudalism. But when first instituted, sharecropping offered blacks real advantages over what the planters had originally tried to fix upon them. Unable to acquire land of their own, blacks still sought the economic independence and social autonomy that they associated with the ownership of land. In their quest, blacks did transform the plantation. Sharecropping eliminated overseers, gang labor, and daily supervision by whites. The freedmen now had more control over their time, working conditions, and family life. They had more freedom to choose between work and leisure and, in common with other emancipated labor forces in the Western Hemisphere and the white yeomanry of the ante-bellum South, they opted, wherever possible, for self-sufficiency, a reduced work load for the family, and more leisure time for hunting and fishing. They also had the pride of knowing that they were not wage laborers who could be ordered about by whites. If they wanted to leave the plantation to attend a political meeting, that was their business, not the planter’s. “I am not working for wages,” an Alabama freedman told an employer who questioned his right to leave for a political rally, “but am part owner of the crop and as I have all the rights that you or any other man has I shall not suffer them abridged.”

Sharecropping was in place by the end of the 1860s because blacks wanted it. Typical was the comment of D. Wyatt Aiken, a South Carolina planter: “In 1868, hands could not be hired for wages. The custom of the country was to ‘give a part of the crop.’ I had to yield, or lose my labor.” Planters surrendered a real measure of their control and lost the flexibility of a wage system. After emancipation, the planter’s capital was tied up in his land, not in his labor, and he no longer had the same economic incentive to maximize his use of labor. It made good economic sense to limit his hiring and lay off laborers during the slack agricultural seasons. Black sharecroppers were hardly an independent yeomanry, but they were better off than they would have been had they not resisted being coerced into the status of an agrarian proletariat. The planters grudgingly gave in to black demands. Most of them were short on capital after the war, and the failure of the plantation economy to revive quickly left them scrambling for credit. Despite their concerns that sharecropping left the freedmen with too much independence, planters recognized the advantages for them in an economic arrangement that conserved their scarce capital by not requiring that it be spent on wages.
By the time congressional Reconstruction got under way, blacks had already made significant gains since emancipation. The earnest enthusiasm with which the freedmen registered to vote, and the speed with which a new political class of blacks arose, were the best evidence that the freedmen realized that these gains could ultimately be protected and extended only through political mobilization. If land could not be acquired, then the legal protection of their right to a share in the crops they produced became an even more vital political objective. Economic and political power in the cash-starved postwar South was a matter of controlling the crops. Agricultural credit took the form of advances secured by a lien upon the crops. In order to ensure that the sale of the crop would cover their advances, plus interest, planters and merchants vied with one another to establish a superior legal claim on the crops. The freedmen, supported by the Freedman’s Bureau, insisted that their claims for wages or shares should take precedence. The struggle to gain economic justice by establishing their rights under the crop-lien system shaped much of the freedman’s political experience. Other major goals included public support for schools and the recognition by Southern courts of black equality under the law. Shortly after receiving the vote, blacks put together a political program that focused on their economic, educational, and legal needs in the communities in which they lived.

Although the freedmen supplied 80 percent of the vote for the Southern Republican parties, they held only 15 percent to 20 percent of the political offices. At the upper echelon of leadership, federal offices, black politicians were literate, well-educated men drawn primarily from a Northern-born professional class of ministers, lawyers, and teachers. State and local offices were filled predominately by former slave ministers and artisans, those who had held positions of leadership and trust in the slave community. The tendency of the freedmen to turn to those who had been free before the war or had acquired some measure of literacy and independence as slave artisans was illustrated in the makeup of the 74 black delegates at the South Carolina Constitutional Convention in 1868. About one-fifth of these blacks were born in the North. Most of the native South Carolinians had had experience as tradesmen, and one-third had been antebellum free men. We still know little of the blacks who did the grassroots organizing, those who mobilized the plantation workers, spoke at meetings of the local Republican clubs, the Union Leagues, got out the vote, and led protests against white economic pressure. At this level of political activity, where the basic issue was one that all blacks could understand—the right of the freedmen to work the land free from white harassment—leadership probably came straight from the ranks of the field hands.

Blacks supplied the votes, but white politicians held the power. With the exception of South Carolina, and to a lesser extent in Mississippi, blacks did not come close to filling offices in proportion to their numbers in the population. This imbalance between black voting power and officeholding meant that the attainment of black political goals was dependent on the Northern and Southern whites who monopolized the key leadership posts within the new Republican parties. Once the unstable alliance between the Northern whites, forever stigmatized by the pejorative label “carpetbaggers,” and the Southern whites, scornfully referred to as “scalawags,” broke down, a major casualty was not just these black goals, but the very reality of meaningful black political participation in Southern civic life.