Whites in Reconstruction

At the state and federal levels, the Northern-born Republicans were the driving element in political reconstruction. Their voting strength was small, about 2 percent of the party total, but they held over half of the Republican governorships, half of the party seats in Congress, and one-third of the elected Republican offices in the South. During the state constitutional conventions of 1868, they controlled the committees that reported out the sweeping changes in education, civil rights, and the franchise. These changes were the cutting edge of the congressional program for the South. The party link between these Republicans and the freedmen was a direct one. When given a choice between supporting a Northern or a Southern-born Republican, the freedmen usually favored the former, a representative of that section that had given them citizenship and the vote. Consequently, the four reconstructed states with the largest percentages of blacks—South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Florida—were those in which the party power of the Northern Republicans was the greatest.

The Northern Republicans brought many strengths to political reconstruction, and foremost, in a material sense, was their capital. Depicted by Southern whites as carpetbaggers, footloose political adventurers who crammed their scant belongings into a carpetbag and rushed to the prostrate South to loot the section, these Republicans in fact carried badly needed capital into the South. Most of them were former Union officers who remained in the South after the war. They were young, well-educated entrepreneurs who invested their modest stakes of capital in the local economies. A profile of the 159 outside whites who served in the constitutional conventions for the new state governments revealed an economically successful group of planters, farmers, professionals, and businessmen with median property holdings of $3,500.

In combination with the more apolitical Yankee missionaries and teachers who staffed the freedmen’s schools, these entrepreneurial Republicans also had a clear vision of what they wanted the South to become under Northern guidance and leadership. The vision was that blend of materialism and moralism that the Republicans had always promoted as true Christian prosperity. The schools, churches, factories, internal improvements, pride in labor, and restless drive for self-improvement that supposedly had been ignored and blighted in the antebellum South by the withering force of slavery would be regenerated under the guidance of the Republican party. The South would be ushered into the modern age. With their program of legal equality, economic opportunity, and education, these Republicans were convinced that in time white Southerners, as well as the freedmen, would realize that the party offered them a newer and better world.

Well aware of how their stand on black civil rights aroused the fury of Southern whites, the so-called carpetbaggers stressed the conservative, producer side of their racial ideology. They argued that equality before the law did not mean an end to white superiority. In a free-labor society, all classes, spurred by an equal chance to enjoy the fruits of their labor, would improve themselves, and because the freedmen were starting at the bottom, they would remain below whites. Equal black access to education should be welcomed by all employers, nearly all of whom were whites. Educated labor was more productive labor. It knew the value of work and was no longer deluded into wasting time by superstitious follies. As a Republican judge explained in a speech:25
Education enhances the value of labor. The workman who is so ignorant that he cannot kill his pig because the moon is not of the right age, will lose two days waiting for fear the meat will shrink, or he will not set his fence at another time of the moon for fear the bottom rail will sink into the ground, and so he waits a week; or perhaps he fancies he is bewitched, wears salt in his boots, and spends much time visiting a conjuror. Such labor is not valuable.

Educated labor would also help stabilize the social order. Like the immigrants in the Northern cities, the freedmen would be taught the values of thrift, self-reliance, and temperance that would cure them of their degraded licentiousness. Black revolutionary schemes for land confiscation were labeled a product of ignorance. Schooling would replace such wild ideas with self-restrained virtues of an obedient, productive citizenry who would ask only for fair compensation for their labor.

Northern Republicans had the seed capital to establish themselves in Southern communities, and their free-labor ideology seemingly promised all Southerners a future of progress and material betterment. Yet, these very strengths also worked against them. The relative wealth of these Republicans, when measured against the precipitous drop in the wealth of Southern whites because of uncompensated emancipation and the destruction of the war, made it all the easier to depict them as the agents of Yankee economic imperialism. For example, the plunge between 1860 and 1870 in the per-capita wealth of white males in Alabama ranged from 50 percent in the mountains to almost 90 percent in the plantation counties. Ethnic Yankees were now often the wealthiest group in Southern communities. Their wealth, though usually modest, was bitterly resented. Meanwhile, their value system aroused the same hostility in most Southern whites as it had in 1860. Where a Yankee Southerner saw progress in the bridges, railroads, and schools to be built with state assistance, native Southern whites saw higher taxes and growing indebtedness. Where the Yankee praised the material benefits of industrialization, his rural Southern counterpart damned the loss of economic independence for factory labor.

The Yankees had won the war, they had the money, and now they wanted to go into Southern politics to take away what little money Southerners had left. They had killed the sons of the South and freed the slaves, and now they wanted to make the freedmen independent when most Southern whites wanted to make them dependent. All the while, they arrogantly proclaimed their cultural superiority. This was the image of the Yankees in the postwar South, and it was encapsulated in the hateful stereotype of the carpetbagger. Because this image was so pervasive and so convincing, the carpetbaggers absolutely had to create a lasting alliance with at least a minority of Southern whites if the Republican party were to remain a vital force in the former Confederacy.

This minority of Southern whites became known as scalawags, a term used for the scrawny, biologically inbred cattle and horses on the Scottish island of Scalaway. As applied by the enemies of congressional Reconstruction, the term instantly conveyed an image of sleazy, filthy, and mean poor whites who prostituted their racial pride for a chance to profit from the plight of the defeated South. The term has stuck because it was so politically valuable to the Southern Democrats in regaining and holding power in the 1870s and after, but it was as intentionally misleading as was the carpetbagger label.

Close to 20 percent of Southern whites became Republicans in the late 1860s.
They were almost as divided between themselves as they were from the majority of Southern whites. Most had been Unionists during the war. As such, they had harsh memories of being vilified and persecuted for their failure to support the Confederacy. Atrocities, such as the virtual lynching of forty-four Unionists in Gainesville, Texas, by a white mob in September 1862, and the execution-style murder of thirteen suspected Unionists guerrillas in Shelton Laurel, North Carolina, by Confederate troops in January 1863, left old scores to be settled after the war. Concentrated in the Appalachian interior of the Confederacy, a region of disloyal Confederates bounded on the north by the mountains of western Virginia and in the south by the highlands of Alabama, these Unionists had traditionally distrusted and opposed the rule of the planter elite in the black belts. The disastrous war transformed that distrust into a commitment to the Republicans. Not only had Lincoln’s party smashed the power of the slaveholding aristocracy, but its emphasis on free homesteads and the dignity of labor were inherently popular in the egalitarian Appalachian society of small propertyholders.

Although most Southern white Republicans were yeomen from the mountainous and hilly counties, the leadership of these native Republicans came from their old class opponents in the plantation South, planters and businessmen. Whiggish in their politics, these conservative, upper-class Republicans had been reluctant secessionists. They supported the war effort out of a need to maintain political and civic influence, but they were concerned more with goals of economic development and social order than the quest for Southern independence. They turned to Republicanism in an effort to achieve these goals. They were vain enough to think that, as former masters, they could control the freedmen’s vote, and they were ambitious enough to believe that they could emerge as the economic leaders of a New South if only they could gain access to Northern capital through the Republican party. By making an accommodation with the victors, they hoped to both unseat the Democrats in power and fulfill the economic goals of their antebellum Whiggery.

The Biracial Alliance Crumbles

The freedmen supplied the mass vote, the Northerners controlled most of the key offices, and former Southern Whigs provided the indispensable link to the native white communities. This was the basic functional division of power and influence within the Southern Republican parties. At the birth of these parties in 1867 and 1868, such a division enabled the Republicans to command real majority support. Blacks comprised about 40 percent of the population in the reconstructed South, and their solidly Republican vote, when added to the 20 percent of the native whites who joined the party, left the Republicans representing most Southerners. The majority, however, did not hold for very long. The Democrats, often just calling themselves the Conservative party, regained power by 1874 in all but four of the former Confederate states. The remaining four, not surprisingly those with the largest black populations—South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Florida—were lost by the Republicans in 1876 and 1877. Thus, congressional Reconstruction lasted less than a decade.

It is tempting to dismiss political reconstruction as an ill-fated experiment in biracial democracy that had little, if any, chance for permanent success. Only the truly extraordinary circumstances of 1866 and 1867, and particularly the bludgeon-like way
in which Johnson deprived the Republicans of any middle ground in reaching a compromise with him on a political settlement for the South, made political reconstruction possible in the first place. Its distinguishing feature—black suffrage—was anathema to most Southern whites, who, once they regrouped as the political disqualifications in the Fourteenth Amendment were quickly lifted by Congress, rallied behind the cry of racial solidarity. They then reclaimed the state governments that they felt had been unjustly taken away from them. "SHALL NEGROES or WHITE MEN RULE NORTH CAROLINA?"26 was indicative of the Democratic campaign appeals that were used effectively against the Republicans throughout the South. Once everything was reduced to a matter of race, the Republicans were inevitably cast aside by an avalanche of white Democratic votes.

To be sure, the race issue explains much of the failure of congressional Reconstruction, but it is only part of that failure. White racism was always there; it was there at the beginning in 1867 and 1868. Moreover, however extraordinary were the political conditions that culminated in congressional Reconstruction, even more extraordinary was the temporary coalition of freedmen and white yeomen that represented the best opportunity for the survival of Republicanism in the South. Frederick Douglass was right: a class alliance between blacks and lower-class whites had the potential to transform power relations in the postwar South. It was the failure of the Republicans to solidify and extend that alliance, not the race issue alone, that doomed political reconstruction.

As in any partnership, each side had certain expectations. The freedmen were Republicans for the most obvious of reasons. The party of freedom and suffrage offered them their best, indeed their only, opportunity to protect their civil rights, educate their children, move into local offices, and perhaps acquire or rent land. The freedmen perceived the Republican party as helping them on their way up. The yeomanry, on the other hand, turned to it to help them from slipping down any further. The war had dealt a devastating blow to the subsistence family economy of the Southern yeomanry. The family was their labor, and the war losses of able-bodied males—25 percent of all white males between the ages of 20 and 40—were irreplaceable. Moreover, if the war destroyed the planters' capital in slaves, it also destroyed much of the yeoman's capital in the form of livestock. Even by 1870, five years after the fighting stopped, per-capita supplies of hogs, cattle, and horses were but half those of 1860. The consequences were less food for the family, shortages in the draft power needed for agricultural production, and a rise in economic dependency. Per-capita food production dropped by 50 percent in the Civil War decade, and a formerly independent class now had to depend on outside sources for food. Just as the capacity of the yeomen to supply their own family needs declined, claims on their property and cash rose. The public debts of the Confederacy were repudiated in the terms of readmission to the Union, but private debts, often contracted at highly inflated Confederate prices, remained legally binding. Personal bankruptcies soared after the war, and common white farmers were hard pressed to hold on to their land. Farm tenancy in Mississippi, as estimated by Governor James Alcorn in 1871, doubled among whites during the 1860s.

Blacks on the way up and whites on the way down temporarily met in the Republican party. The white farmers wanted debt-relief legislation, stay laws for the collection of back taxes, and exemption of homesteads from debt collections. The blacks, an agrarian class struggling to achieve what the whites were in danger
of losing, supported this economic program, both out of their own economic interests and in return for white support for state-funded social programs, especially for education. This black-white alliance was a tenuous one, but it might well have held, had the Republicans delivered on their initial promises of economic relief for the yeomen. But no relief came. The leadership of the Southern white Republicans was too often comprised of the very planters and creditors against whom the Southern white directed his Republican vote. Unwilling to sacrifice their own economic interests in legislation for working-class agrarians, these upper-class Republicans instead preached the gospel of economic development. Northern capital, they told the voters, would unleash the untapped mineral and timber resources of the South, build railroads to haul the coal and lumber, and provide jobs for both races in cotton mills and steel factories. In the meantime, in order to attract this capital, property rights in the South had to be protected from lower-class agitation. Nonetheless, no large amounts of Yankee capital flowed South. The Republican governments in the South were then thrown back on their own war-gutted resources. When the Republicans squeezed these resources for desperately needed tax revenues, they gave common whites every reason to leave the party and join the Democrats.

The emancipation of the slaves eliminated the major source of state revenue in the South, the slave tax. About 60 percent of the revenues in South Carolina had come from the tax on slaves. In the rest of the lower South the figure was between 30 percent and 40 percent. At the same time, emancipation tremendously increased the size of the population to be served in social-service programs by the Republican governments. In South Carolina, for example, 20,000 children—all white—were enrolled in public schools in 1860. An expanded commitment to public education under congressional Reconstruction resulted in an enrollment of 120,000 children in 1870—50,000 whites and 70,000 blacks. In addition to the new fiscal burden of providing social services for both races, the Republicans also had the responsibility for rebuilding property destroyed during the war and restoring capital investment in the depleted Southern economy.

The total wealth of the South, independent of the loss of slave property, declined by some 40 percent between 1860 and 1870. Faced with a drastically reduced tax base and an immediate need of cash for large capital projects, the Republican governments borrowed money in order to raise capital. Above all, capital was needed to rebuild and expand the South’s railroads, which were considered the key to reviving prosperity. More than three-fourths of the increase in the total indebtedness of the eleven states of the former Confederacy, from $175 million in 1867 to $305 million in 1871, took the form of state-endorsed bonds for railroad construction. Debt service (or interest charges) on these bonds was a huge financial drain. Northern financiers, burnt once in 1862 by Confederate repudiation of debts owed them, and half expecting to be burned again by future Democratic governments in the South who would repudiate state debts incurred by their Republican predecessors, charged annual interest of 15 percent to 20 percent on bonds issued at a large discount to their face value. South Carolina’s bonds raised only thirty-three cents in cash for each dollar of bonds sold.

The daily governmental expenses for the Republicans came from taxes on land. Only about one-third of antebellum tax receipts had come from the land. Now, most of them did. Because the war had reduced land values by one-half, assessments had to be doubled just to raise the same amount of revenue. They went up even more, by an
Table 7.1 Southern Millage Rates for Land Taxes

<table>
<thead>
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<th>STATE</th>
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<th>RATE</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>1873</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>1860</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>1870</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>1860</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>1872</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1860</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
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<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


average factor of three to four, to cover the enlarged demands on the Republican governments. As illustrated in Table 7.1, white farmers were hit with what seemed to them to be exorbitant increases in taxes. These farmers were steeped in a republican tradition that associated taxation with tyranny. They were accustomed to the very low taxes of the prewar years, and now they were struggling to maintain their economic independence after the war. Under these conditions, the yeomen who had broken racial ranks by joining the Republicans soon felt they had been betrayed. The Republicans, far from giving them an economic stake in the party, were giving them an economic reason to leave it.

The black-white alliance quickly cracked open from the economic tensions inherent in the demands of white farmers for relief from taxation and the desire of the freedmen for revenue from taxation. In an obvious legacy of slavery, the vast majority of freedmen entered political reconstruction with no property. Consequently, the black 40 percent of the population paid less than 10 percent of the state taxes. Yet, if the freedmen were to acquire property, they had to overcome another legacy of slavery— their own and their children’s illiteracy. This goal could be achieved only through the support of public monies derived from taxes on whites who owned property. In order to gain security in their daily lives and the equality under the law promised them, blacks also had to gain political offices. But in pushing for political power within the Republican party, the freedmen only hastened the flight out of the party of those Southern whites who already believed they were being crushed by taxes to support a propertyless class racially inferior to themselves.

As a result of the defection of Southern whites from the Republican party, the first wave of states to be regained by the Democrats were those where the combined Republican strength of Northern whites and the freedmen was the weakest. These
states—Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia—were all back under white Democratic control by 1871. Elsewhere, the Republican loss of native white support stripped away the thin buffer of community protection that had shielded the freedmen from the worst excesses of white landlords determined to regain control over their labor supply.

The excesses were most vicious in the upcountry counties in which the Ku Klux Klan and a host of other paramilitary organizations flourished. The Klan, the best known of these groups, tended to operate as the military arm of local Democratic clubs and as a terroristic weapon of labor discipline on behalf of local planters. The targets of violence could be any active Republicans, but the freedmen were usually singled out, both as voters and as workers. The violence was a savage testimonial to the early successes of political reconstruction. Unwilling to offer the freedmen any meaningful rights or privileges that could wean them from the Republicans, and infuriated by the victories won by the freedmen in securing the best possible labor arrangements for themselves as renters, the planters resorted to violence to regain the control they had lost after emancipation. In the South Carolina upcountry, the major goals were to prevent the freedmen from renting land and to force them into surrendering part of their wages to help pay the land tax. If these goals were not met for 1871, warned George D. Tillman, one of the leaders of the white vigilantes, “We have but one other resource left—the Ku Kluxer’s power—the assassin’s privilege.”

Like all successful guerrilla movements, the Klan had community support in the countryside. Particularly in racially balanced areas in which common whites were losing their land the fastest—that is, in counties in which white farm tenancy rose most rapidly after the war—the planters could count on embittered white farmers to carry
out the cabin burnings, whippings, and murders. Where the size of the economic “pie” was shrinking the most, nearly all whites had a common interest in assuring that the portion left over for the freedmen would be as small as possible. It was no wonder that the poorer whites followed the lead of the men with the land.

By the mid-1870s, the North was barraged with reports of violence, political instability, and impending financial ruin in the Southern states still under Republican rule. Crippled from within by Democratic tactics that combined economic pressure, social ostracism, and terror with calls for tax relief and a return to “good government,” the Republican governments were weakened from without by the Panic of 1873. Northern capital that had flowed South dried up when a major industrial depression set in and lasted until 1878. T tering railroad projects, heavily promoted by Republican state leaders in the South, collapsed. Most of the Northern planters who had survived the labor disorganization and poor crops of 1866 and 1867 now permanently left the South. The depression also wiped out the Republican majority in the North. The Democratic party, having already eliminated the Republicans’ two-thirds majority in Congress by 1870, regained control of Congress in 1874 for the first time since the late 1850s. Political reconstruction in the South had always been critically dependent on Northern support exercised through Republican majorities in Congress. That majority had passed the Enforcement Acts of 1870 and 1871, which provided the freedmen with some protection against Klan violence, notably in the South Carolina upcountry. Without that Republican majority, and with the Supreme Court ruling in 1873 that major portions of the Enforcement Acts were unconstitutional, even that protection was now gone.

What is known as the Compromise of 1877 traditionally marks the end of congressional Reconstruction. The Republicans, in return for Democratic support of the claim of Rutherford B. Hayes to the presidency in the disputed election of 1876—one in which two rival sets of electoral votes were cast in South Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida—agreed to remove the last federal troops from the South. To use the political language of the victorious Southern Democrats, South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana were finally “redeemed.” In a mutually advantageous bargain, the Republicans received the presidency and the Southern Democrats got white home rule in racial matters.

**Ordered Liberty and the End of Reconstruction**

With the formal end of political reconstruction in 1877, a crisis of disorder that had existed in the minds of the Northern middle class since the 1850s came to its natural conclusion. From its birth, the Republican party focused on the South the themes of social disorder and loss of self-mastery that the middle class so feared, both in others and in themselves. Secession seemingly confirmed the worst to be expected from the Slave Power. Secession then led to the Civil War, because the Northern middle class refused to let the South depart in peace. Equated with anarchy and a breakdown of all civilized restraints on individual action, secession had to be denied. Otherwise, Northerners told themselves, all forms of socially rebellious behavior would go unpunished. The rallying cry of the Union was “ordered liberty”; unless fused with stable institutional structures, the greatest of which was the Union itself, liberty would be just another name for individual license.
As long as it believed that ordered liberty was threatened by Southern disloyalty, the Northern middle class was willing, even eager, to sanction the measures needed to force loyalty upon the South. This belief held, in varying degrees of intensity, from secession through the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. But once a new and biracial loyal majority had been created in the South, the Union was deemed safe. Thereafter, during the course of congressional Reconstruction, the disruptive threat to ordered liberty was increasingly identified not with the former rebels, but with the former slaves. The freedmen, after all, were the very propertyless masses whom republican ideology had always warned against entrusting with political power. Northerners quickly concluded that the difficulties of the Republican governments in the South were the inevitable result of separating property from political office.

If the traditional republican fear of the ignorant mob seizing power predisposed the North to accept exaggerated Democratic charges of corruption in the Republican South, the bourgeois definition of freedom that had emerged in the nineteenth century left the Northern middle class unsympathetic to the demands of the Southern poor for economic independence. The freedmen and the poorer white farmers defined freedom in its original republican form of the eighteenth century: the ability to lead a life of self-sufficiency based upon the ownership of property. In contrast, control of self, not economic independence, was the essence of bourgeois freedom. That control, when affixed to the fundamental right of equality before the law, guaranteed an individual’s chance to acquire property in the marketplace. The bourgeois definition of freedom was also posited on a clean break between public power and the private economy. Any governmental interference with property rights was regarded as a potential loss of liberty for the individual who had proved his moral worth by accumulating property. Although often violated on behalf of capital, particularly in promotional schemes such as the granting of public land to the transcontinental railroads, this belief in laissez-faire (“hands off”) economics assured that the federal government would play no economic role in political reconstruction. Federal aid to the economy of the prostrate South was not even considered.

The Republicans thus offered as the climax of reconstruction the constitutional principle of equality before the law. The Southern poor accurately saw that this was only the beginning. But when these poor agrarians pushed for a democratic linkage between political and economic reconstruction in the South, they soon became a political liability to the Republican party in the North. Lincoln’s party of political antislaveryism was rapidly being transformed into Grant’s party of corporate capitalism. Whether for blacks or whites, Northern Republicans could hardly push a program of economic democracy in the South. By so doing they would have run the real risk of worsening class tensions in the industrial North and of alienating their business support within the party.

Limits of class and capitalism, not just of race, aborted the democratic promise of reconstruction. Class divided the Southern Republicans from within and from their larger base of support in the North. Consistent with its retreat from Northern working-class reform in the 1870s, the Republican party also retreated from Southern agrarian reform. The immigrant factory worker and the black field hand were both feared by the Northern middle class in the 1870s as part of the faceless mob of poor who wanted to storm the ramparts of republican order and individual property rights. The Slave Power, the first great enemy of middle-class liberalism, had been vanquished.
cerns over impending chaos and tyranny that had been projected onto Southern planters during the secession crisis were now associated with black reconstruction and labor unrest. Southern whites were given a free hand to deal with the blacks. The Northern middle class, jolted to attention by the great rail strike of 1877, turned its attention to defending liberal capitalism from the challenge of labor. Northern workers, not Confederate soldiers, were now thought to be the major enemies of republicanism.

SUGGESTED READING

