

History 225

Re: Notes w/ Reconstruction: The Setting


The questions that became the essence of Reconstruction:

On what terms should the former Confederate states be admitted back into the Union.

Who should establish these terms, Congress or the President?

What system of labor should replace the former plantation system?

What should be the place of blacks in the political and social life of the South and the nation at large?



Source: K. Stampp, Era of  
Reconstruction

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Re: Notes w/ Tragic Legend of Reconstruction

However historians regard the coming of the Civil War--whether it was the result of a blundering generation or a necessary war to preserve the Union and ultimately to eradicate slavery--a vast moral sin. . . When it comes to writing the history of the war a spell of reverence takes over their writing.

The martyred Lincoln. The christlike Lee. The intrepid Stonewall. The steady and unobtrusively brilliant strategist Grant. . . and many other demigods in this galaxy of national heroes.

On the other side, there was, of course, the graft and profiteering in filling war contracts, the military blundering and needless loss of lives, the horrors of the military hospitals and prison camps, and the ugly racism we see, for example, in the Fort Pillow massacre.

But the persistent theme that rides above all the rest was the idealism and nobility of the two contending forces: the Yankees struggle to save the Union; the Confederates fighting for constitutional principles, defending their homes against invasion. High-minded Americans on both sides of the issue with enough glory to go around.

This is the sort of grand synthesis of Civil War historiography and the necessary balm that healed the nation's wounds. There were few villains in the drama.

But the history of the war's aftermath--the Era of Reconstruction--became a dark and bloody ground, a battlefield upon which historians have struggled to carry the day for the view of Reconstruction they champion.

The view of Reconstruction that held the field for most of the period after the Civil War until the 1960s when it began to be systematically challenged and pushed aside can be called The Tragic Legend of Reconstruction.

[Note: Make clear that Foner is not Tragic Legend school. Foner represents that best synthesis of the revisionist view].

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Re: Note w/ Tragic Legend

Basic view of this school of thought is that Reconstruction represents the ultimate shame of the American people, "the nadir of national disgrace"--an epoch that most American want to forget.

Historians of this school have characterized this period(1865-1877) as "The Tragic Era," "The Dreadful Decade," "The Age of Hate," and the "Blackout of Honest Government."

#### Basic Ingredients of this View

One of the chief protagonists of this view was Professor William A. Dunning of Columbia University. Dunning taught US History at Columbia at the turn of the century. His seminars on Reconstruction cranked out a flood of graduate students whose dissertations became published works on the subject. While Dunning was a northerner, many of his young Ph.D.s were from the South. His imprint on interpreting the Era of reconstruction was immense. So what were the ingredients of the Tragic Legend or the Dunning School of Reconstruction?

1. Lincoln: He is treated as a merciful, compassionate, and charitable war hero intent on bringing the South back into the Union as quickly and painlessly as possible. His assassination was the first tragic step in this whole tragic episode.

2. Andrew Johnson is seen as a small "d" democrat who tried to put into effect Lincoln's mild plan for reconstruction. Johnson's reconstruction policy is celebrated as a smashing success. Southerners under Johnson's guidance organized loyal state governments, showed a willingness to deal fairly with their former bondsmen, and, in general, accepted the outcome of the Civil War in good faith. But Johnson's plans went awry when Congress reconvened in December 1865 and all his sincere efforts came under attack by vindictive and blood-thirsty Radicals in the Republican party. The Radicals had their own sinister purposes: they repudiated the Johnson governments, refused to seat Southern Senators and congressmen, and then directed their fury at the new President.

3. The Radicals were fanatical and dedicated to imposing a harsh scorched-earth peace on the South. In the Tragic Legend view they are depicted as arch villains and hypocrites who conspired together to destroy Johnson's governments and the Johnson presidency. What they really wanted was to turn the South into an economic colony for northern



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capitalist exploitation. To do this they cynically used the former slaves under the promise of seeking their equality, etc.

Thaddeus Stevens as the arch criminal. Vindictive: the Confederacy had burned down his mills in Pennsylvania. Stevens whig and clubbed foot (an early Dr. Strangelove) who, it was alleged, had a Negress as a paramour. (Wow! Kitty Kelly where are you when we need you). When he died he insisted in his will that he be buried in a black cemetery.

4. The newly freed slaves are treated as voting cattle. The Radicals maneuvered to extend suffrage to blacks to use them to build a political base in order to carry out their nefarious schemes of prostrating the South and turning it into an economic colony for northern exploitation. Blacks are dismissed as one-dimensional figures with no concept of their own self-interest and absolutely no capacity for civil government.

5. Scalawags and Carpetbaggers are terms of opprobrium. These elements--newly enfranchised bondsmen, scalawags (base betrayers of their section) and carpetbaggers (northern pillagers) are the corruptionists who make up the new Radical governments in the South after the loyal and fair-minded Johnson governments are overthrown. Not satisfied with reducing the South to political slavery and financial bankruptcy, the vindictive and bloody-minded Radicals even lay unclean hands on the pure fabric of the Constitution. They impeach Johnson and came within one vote of removing Lincoln's gentle successor from office, even though they have no legal grounds for this action.

What follows is "Black Reconstruction," an unbroken period of horror and hopeless repression of white southerners. An era that continues its orgy of corruption and political prostitution until 1877.

6. The Redeemer Myth--The last chapter in this Tragic Legend view is the story of ultimate redemption. Decent southern white Democrats, their patience exhausted, chaffing under the yoke of this "foreign rule," provoked beyond all human endurance, finally mobilize to drive out these abominable Radical governments from power, peacefully if possible, forcefully if necessary. One by one the Southern states are redeemed, honesty and virtue triumph, and the South's natural leaders returned to power. Finally, in 1877 the Tragic Era comes to an end when President Hayes withdraws the last federal troops from the South and home rule is restored. (and the heavens are finally calmed. The end).

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This view of Reconstruction held the nation in its grip until the 1960s. (It had its challengers beginning in the 1930s to be sure). One of the most forceful was W. E. B. DuBois, Black Reconstruction. [Not even reviewed in the American Historical Review]. Other works that attacked the traditional view of this period. But the Tragic Legend view still dominated the field as late as the 1960s.

By that I mean it was not limited to a small fraternity of professional historians. Historians wrote the college textbooks and influenced the way the nation viewed the history of this period down into the high schools and the teachers who were themselves influenced by this view who interpreted to their students.

We can afford to tolerate the romantixzation of the Civil War story. The dripping sentimentality and historic distortions that go into the maythology of the "Lost Cause". This folklore is essentially harmless.

But the tragic legend of Reconstruction has serious consequences because it exerted a powerful influence upon the political behavior of many whites, North and South.