

History 225

Re: Notes w/ Congressional Reconstruction

Source: Holt article in Perman

Fit into Outline under Not-so-black-Reconstruction
with title: So. Carolina--a test case

A. So. Carolina--A Test Case

Were freeborn blacks and those just out from under the regime of slavery too weak and incapable of carrying out the political role they were called on to play in the new congressional government in the South?

The failure of Reconstruction in So. Carolina cannot be laid to political incapacity and inexperience of the black masses. They were uneducated and inexperienced to be sure. But they overcame these handicaps to forge a formidable political majority in the very state that had led in the secession movement. During Reconstruction 60% of the population of the Palmetto State were blacks. This popular majority was turned into a functioning political majority as soon as Reconstruction legislation was put into effect in 1867.

Black legislators made up about 50% of the senate in the state's General Assembly and at least 56% in the lower house or the House of Representatives. For former slaveholders the very idea of any blacks holding office meant that these new govts. were illegitimate from the outset.

Most of these black legislators in the General Assembly were literate and men of taxable property, and most were skilled employed in skilled or professional occupations after the war.

Those freedmen who were slaves before the war moved aggressively to narrow the gap between themselves and the freeborn blacks. They took advantage of the missionary societies that came South after the war to educate the newly freed slaves, the Freedmen's Bureau education opportunities to become literate; some even emerged from chattel slavery to become property holders.

While there were differences between the freeborn and the freedmen among African Americans in the legislature they did not conform to the traditional stereotypes of ignorant, penniless sharecroppers fresh from the cotton fields to despoil then legislature and plunder the state. The white southern argument about the "Blackout of Honest Government," the "Africanization of society", "Civilization in Peril" kind of attacks levelled against the So. Carolina legislature were without merit. This black legislative phalanx could more accurately be described as "middle" class.

What they did lack was previous political experience that was hardly corrected when we consider the rapid turnover in the

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legislature (typical throughout these Reconstructions govts. throughout the South). This was still not the sticking point; the major problem.

The basic problem was lack of party solidarity. This is at first glance rather strange because given the local and state circumstances under which these govts. tried to function unity was an obvious incentive. Yet a check of the crucial roll calls in the General Assembly show that the minority Democratic party was more solid in casting its votes than was true of the embattled Republicans. Why?

Factionalism (as Foner points out). There were splits between white Republican leaders and their black colleagues. White Republicans battled over patronage and over the recruitment of more and more southern whites into the party. Blacks were made to step aside and acquiesce in the party leadership's efforts to attract whites w/ patronage and offices. This points to a residue of racism and the conservative nature of most white Republicans.

There was internal party discord between the freeborn blacks (many were mulattoes) and the darker freedmen over the spoils of office, patronage, and over crucial issues like land reform, confiscation issues, poll tax and literacy test for the franchise. These divisions among black leaders reflected not mainly gradation of skin color but mostly class differences and social status.

These differences split the party on crucial votes. More to the point given the numbers of blacks delegates, especially in the House of Representatives in the General Assembly, prevented the blacks from politically controlling the work of the General Assembly.

To be sure there was a consensus among Republicans white and black; freeborn and freedman on the question of civil rights, free public education, expanded social services and state-sponsored economic development. Black and white Republicans generally shared these "progressive" desires. . . . But the failure of black and white leadership in the party produced, this failure of will and inability to mobilize stern collective discipline, led to a politics of paralysis.

It wasn't the black masses who failed in Reconstruction days. Despite the economic threats and the physical terrors of the KKK (generic usage) black voters braved all this to return Republicans to office year after year (until 1876). It was failure of the Republican leadership--white and black--to use the power entrusted to them by the black community to carry forward programs that were clearly articulated by the black electorate.

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You have to say that the freedmen made an amazing transformation after the Civil War; former slaves became political men determined to make a better life for those from the lower orders who had endured the burdeens of slavery. The tragedy of Reconstruction is that they received so much less than they gave.