

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## Memory and Legacy of Reconstruction

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In 1930, a group of white scholars and writers based at Vanderbilt University made an impassioned defense of what they understood to be the traditions and values of the rural South that were quickly giving way to modernity. One of those writers, the historian Frank Lawrence Owsley, described Reconstruction:

But after the military surrender at Appomattox there ensued a peace unique in history. There was no generosity. For ten years the South, already ruined by the loss of nearly \$2,000,000,000 invested in slaves, with its lands worthless, its cattle and stock gone, its houses burned, was turned over to the three millions of former slaves, some of whom could still remember the taste of human flesh and the bulk of them hardly three generations removed from cannibalism. These half-savage blacks were armed. Their passions were roused against their former masters by savage political leaders like Thaddeus Stevens, who advocated the confiscation of all Southern lands for the benefit of the negroes, and the extermination, if need be, of the Southern white population; and like Charles Sumner, whose chief regret had been that his skin was not black. Not only were the blacks armed; they were upheld and incited by garrisons of Northern soldiers, by Freedmen's Bureau officials, and by Northern ministers of the gospel, and at length they were given the ballot while their former masters were disarmed and, to a large extent, disfranchised. For ten years ex-slaves, led by carpetbaggers and scalawags, continued the pillages of war, combing the South for anything left by the invading armies, levying taxes, selling empires of plantations under the auction hammer, dragooning the Southern population, and visiting upon them the ultimate humiliations.<sup>1</sup>

This basic story was told hundreds and thousands of times across the South in the century after the end of Reconstruction in the mid-1870s. It was couched in the style of nineteenth-century melodrama, with evil villains (Yankee politicians, carpetbaggers, scalawags, freedpeople) and long-suffering heroes (the white folk of the South who resisted efforts towards racial equality) who eventually triumphed. This white

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Lawrence Owsley, "The Irrepressible Conflict," in Twelve Southerners, eds., *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, 75th Anniversary. Ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006 [1930]), 62-63.

supremacist narrative of Reconstruction dominated public memory of Reconstruction in the South—and in the rest of the country, for that matter—until the civil rights movement, and it was a readily available tool for anyone in the South who wanted to resist political and social change. Yet when Owsley wrote this in 1930, the power of the white supremacist narrative of Reconstruction was beginning to be challenged. African Americans, of course, had always known better, but they had limited ability to present their views in the public sphere. A few mainstream academic historians—white historians writing and teaching at mostly all-white universities—were just about to challenge these views, and by the end of the decade, it was clear that the next generation of professional historians would overturn them. That revisionist view of Reconstruction, though, would take a much longer time to be widely accepted outside academia.

In the decades immediately after the end of Reconstruction, the era's greatest legacy was its effects on the politics of the South. Alabama politician Hilary A. Herbert explained the situation well in the preface to his 1890 book *Why the Solid South? or, Reconstruction and its Results*. This book, with chapters on each of the southern states, was a response to the threat of federal interference with elections via the Lodge Elections Bill. Herbert's book was meant "to show to the public . . . the consequences which once followed an interference in the domestic affairs of certain states by those, who either did not understand the situation or were reckless of results."<sup>2</sup> Once the Republican state governments of Reconstruction had been replaced by Democrats, the memory of Reconstruction became a powerful tool for consolidating white support behind the Democrats and creating the one-party political system that dominated the South for nearly a century. The only question then became just which Democrats would rule.

Bourbon Democrats (members of the Democratic Party who were liberals in the classic sense of the term) who had led the revolt against Reconstruction quickly became enmeshed in much the same kind of corruption they had criticized, and poor whites realized the Bourbons were less interested in taking care of their needs than collaborating with wealthy industrialists and railroad barons. Worse than that, it turned out that Bourbons, whose power base usually lay in the wealthy Black Belt sections of the southern states (those sections characterized by plantation agriculture and a large African American population), were not above using African American votes to fend off challenges from insurgent white Democrats. After the Populist Party briefly threatened to unseat the Bourbons with an alliance of poor whites and African Americans, a consensus emerged between poor and elite whites that African Americans should be disfranchised in order to prevent their votes being used by one group of whites against another. In most of the southern states, the rhetoric behind the disfranchisement campaigns emphasized the 'horrors of Reconstruction,' made possible by allowing African Americans to vote.

In Alabama, the disfranchising constitution was put to a referendum, and the supporters of the constitution repeatedly referred to Reconstruction in speeches and

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<sup>2</sup> Hilary A. Herbert, *Why the Solid South? Or, Reconstruction and its Results* (Baltimore: R. H. Woodward, 1890), xvii.

newspaper articles as a reason for voters to approve disfranchisement. The argument worked, with poor whites voting for the new constitution even though it would also disfranchise many of them. The memory of Reconstruction was a powerful political tool.

Damning Reconstruction was popular not just in down and dirty political campaigns but in the highest seats of learning and in the nascent forms of popular culture that would define the twentieth century. By the late 1890s, professional historians had begun to write about Reconstruction using the new methods of scientific history, yet their conclusions were in line with the popular white supremacist narrative. At Columbia University, John W. Burgess and William A. Dunning gave academic legitimacy to these ideas, and many students came from the South to study with Dunning and then went on to influential careers in universities across the country, especially in the South. Popular magazines gave the reading public more stories about the woes of Reconstruction. The *Atlantic Monthly* ran a series of articles in 1901 by authorities such as Dunning, Woodrow Wilson, and Daniel H. Chamberlain, the repentant Republican who had served as South Carolina's governor at the end of Reconstruction. Fiction blended with fact, and Reconstruction became a popular theme for novels. Publishers realized there was money to be made from Reconstruction with the 1898 publication of Thomas Nelson Page's *Red Rock: A Chronicle of Reconstruction*. It ran in serial format in *Scribner's Magazine* in 1898 and then, published as a book later that year, sold 100,000 copies in two years. Page's story popularized the idea that giving political power to African Americans during Reconstruction had unleashed their uncivilized instincts and led to the rape of white women later in the century. Even more influential was *The Clansman*, a novel written by Thomas Dixon, Jr. in 1903 that became the film *The Birth of a Nation* by D. W. Griffith in 1915. Dixon's novel linked the story of a young Confederate officer from South Carolina with the children of a northern politician (modeled on Thaddeus Stevens). As with *Red Rock*, political power pushes African Americans to rape white women, and in Dixon's novel, the Ku Klux Klan lynch the rapist and then drive the carpetbaggers from the state.<sup>3</sup>

It would be a mistake to think that the scholarly opinions on Reconstruction offered by the Dunning School and writers for high-minded journals influenced the novelists and filmmakers of the era, who then shaped public memory of Reconstruction. Rather, a vast mélange of white supremacist stories about Reconstruction circulated in many forms—oral tradition within local communities, speeches at political rallies and veterans' reunions, newspaper articles, novels, memoirs, and so on—and these all influenced one another. In the early years of the twentieth century, it was difficult to be in the public sphere in the United States without hearing about the destructive effects of Reconstruction, and it was harder still to raise a voice to oppose that story.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Nelson Page, *Red Rock: A Chronicle of Reconstruction* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898); Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Doubleday, 1905).

Throughout all this, African Americans maintained a distinct memory of Reconstruction, though they often had to do so in more covert ways. Historical memory of Reconstruction for African Americans always oscillated between joy and pride at emancipation and the acquisition of political rights and sorrow over the violence they faced. The more public side of black counter-memory tended to celebrate emancipation since it was too controversial to celebrate their political accomplishments at the height of the Jim Crow era. Starting during the Civil War itself and continuing through much of the twentieth century, African American communities across the South celebrated Emancipation Day, January 1, the day the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect in 1863. Religious and educational leaders made speeches emphasizing the progress the race had made since emancipation, and parades brought African Americans into the streets.

When World War I broke out, W. E. B. Du Bois, who was then editor of the NAACP magazine *The Crisis*, urged African Americans to “close ranks” and support the war effort on the assumption that military service and patriotism would lead to civil rights. This did not happen; the end of the war in 1919 brought instead a wave of racial violence worse than anything in the previous several years. Not unrelated to this, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, founded in 1915 by Carter G. Woodson, began to turn its attention to Reconstruction. Documents highlighting the role of African Americans in Reconstruction were published in the *Journal of Negro History*, and the journal's readers contributed their own documents and recollections. In 1922, a grant from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial allowed the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) to hire historian A. A. Taylor to write a history of African Americans in South Carolina during Reconstruction. This was particularly significant, since a scurrilous depiction of black legislators in South Carolina written by James S. Pike in 1874 had helped turn national opinion against Reconstruction. Taylor's study emphasized the positive contributions of African Americans and challenged many aspects of the white supremacist narrative of Reconstruction. Even though it made little impression on the white historical profession, it had laid the groundwork and proven, in contradiction to the Dunning School, objective historical scholarship would show that Reconstruction had not been an evil scheme by the North to humiliate the South and that African Americans had done as good or bad a job in that period as whites.<sup>4</sup>

The period between the beginning of the 1930s and the beginning of the Cold War in the late 1940s saw significant change in the memory of Reconstruction. Within academic circles, this began when Francis Butler Simkins, a white South Carolinian who had studied history at Columbia University, and Robert H. Woody, a white North Carolinian whose forebears had been Unionists, published *South Carolina During Reconstruction* in 1932. Through the 1920s, Simkins had been impressed by Woodson's work, and it showed in his discussion of Reconstruction, which drew on sources from

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<sup>4</sup> James S. Pike, *The Prostrate State: South Carolina Under Negro Government* (New York: D. Appleton, 1874).

both African Americans and northern whites. African Americans were given credit for progress in religion and education and not given an undue portion of blame for the problems of Reconstruction. To make this message more palatable, Simkins and Woody denied that African Americans had sought social equality, only political rights. By the end of the decade, other revisionist scholars called for a new history of Reconstruction that did not start with the prejudices and assumptions about racial hierarchy that tainted the work of the Dunning School.<sup>5</sup>

Some people took this changed attitude to Reconstruction even further, using Reconstruction as a positive model of social change. The onset of the Great Depression shook confidence in capitalism and brought increased interest in socialism and communism, and American Communists and fellow travelers found in Reconstruction a model for the sort of social, economic, and political revolution they hoped to foster. James Allen, a Communist labor organizer working the dangerous territory of the South in the early 1930s, realized that it would be difficult to get white and black workers to organize unions together unless he could overcome traditional antagonisms. He argued in his 1937 book *Reconstruction: The Battle for Democracy* that Reconstruction had been a bourgeois revolution that took power from a pre-capitalist plantation class and gave it to the middle classes, setting up the 1930s for a workers' revolution. While Allen's doctrinaire application of Marxism to Reconstruction history was much derided, it is worth noting that he did put Reconstruction history in a global perspective that had been lacking, denying that American history was somehow exceptional. W. E. B. Du Bois, back at Atlanta University in the early 1930s, was strongly influenced by Marxism and over several years wrote a massive study of the period titled *Black Reconstruction* that saw the Civil War and Reconstruction as a massive uprising by the oppressed proletariat of the South, with black people in the vanguard. Though neither book made much impression mainstream scholarship at the time, they did at least raise the idea for professional historians that class could be central to an analysis of Reconstruction. In popular culture—at least that portion of popular culture in the 1930s and 1940s that was sympathetic to the goals of Communism—studies such as these created a story of Reconstruction as not a “tragic era” but a heroic time when brave working people tried to overcome false consciousness (racism) and brutal suppression to create a more democratic, more equal society. The ultimate expression of this school of thought was Howard Fast's 1944 novel *Freedom Road*. Set in South Carolina, it followed the story of a fictional slave named Gideon Jackson through freedom, military service, and eventually a seat in the state constitutional convention and legislature. Fast depicted the difficulties whites faced in overcoming their fears and prejudices, but he showed that it could be

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<sup>5</sup> Francis Butler Simkins & Robert Hilliard Woody, *South Carolina During Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1932).

done. Of course, it all ends badly with white supremacists murdering Jackson and destroying all he tried to create.<sup>6</sup>

The ending of *Freedom Road* was not that different than the stories of Reconstruction that elderly African Americans told to interviewers from the Federal Writers Project (FWP) in the late 1930s. In the midst of the Great Depression, the FWP kept unemployed writers and other white-collar workers busy, paying by the word. We usually think of one of their most significant projects as the “ex-slave interviews,” but of course those who were old enough to remember slavery could also remember Reconstruction, and interviewers also recorded the recollections of that period by many white southerners. It can be difficult to generalize about such a disparate set of materials, but these intimate, first-person memories of Reconstruction do give us a glimpse of the counter-memory of the period that African Americans maintained in the face of the overwhelming public presence of the white supremacist narrative. The FWP interviews were often very frank about the violence visited upon formerly enslaved people during Reconstruction, especially by the Ku Klux Klan. While most white supremacist accounts tended to laugh it all off, depicting the Ku Klux as slightly silly pranksters roaming around in bed sheets scaring gullible black folk but not really hurting them, the FWP interviews told another tale, with whippings, men and women dragged from their beds in the middle of the night, and black members of the newly formed southern state militias defeated by the Ku Klux Klan and lined up before impromptu firing squads. Yet even these interviews barely mentioned the sexual violence that was a key part of the Ku Klux reign of terror. The interviews also spoke of hard work and determination to make the most of their new opportunities after an emancipation that gave them nothing but freedom, no land, no reparations, and even rights that were transient and vulnerable. Some of the speakers, no doubt influenced by interviewers who were often fairly prominent local whites, and Democrats, talked about the confusing political loyalties of the Reconstruction years and the African Americans who lent their support to the Democrats rather than the Republicans, a topic historians would not take up seriously for decades. The FWP interviews are tremendously important in the history and the memory of Reconstruction because they represent the last substantial body of personal memory of Reconstruction. Before many more years, such eyewitnesses would be dead.

The beginning of the Cold War brought this period of Reconstruction memory to an end. The Taft-Hartley Act’s removal of Communists from union leaderships separated the cause of workers’ rights from the cause of racial equality, with detrimental results for both. Reconstruction could perhaps be seen as an advance for African American political and civil rights, but it could no longer be considered an era of

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<sup>6</sup> James S. Allen, *Reconstruction The Battle for Democracy 1865-1876* (New York: International Publishers, 1937); W.E.B. Dubois, *Black Reconstruction An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1935); Howard Fast, *Freedom Road* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1944).

promising changes to labor relations that could be used to challenge or inspire present practices. With the end of civil rights unionism, the civil rights movement began to work towards integration within a liberal—not radical—framework, and public memory of Reconstruction would shift accordingly. With the release of the report *To Secure These Rights* in 1948, the federal government was again involving itself in African American rights in the South, and this sounded worryingly like Reconstruction to some. While white southerners had always warned that any change to the racial status quo would be a disastrous repeat of Reconstruction, the nation’s most eminent historian of the South, C. Vann Woodward, embraced the idea in the early 1950s and turned “Second Reconstruction” into a popular and positive phrase to describe the civil rights movement<sup>7</sup>.

At the same time that the civil rights movement was beginning in the late 1940s, the Dunning School’s period of influence came to an end. It is unusual that a book review in a scholarly journal marks an intellectual turning point, but John Hope Franklin’s 1948 review of E. Merton Coulter’s *The South During Reconstruction, 1865-1877*, called “Whither Reconstruction Historiography?” almost certainly was the end of any scholarly credence for Dunning School views. Franklin, an African American historian then teaching at Howard University, meticulously critiqued Coulter’s work, not only challenging his racist assumptions (like equating the word “Southerner” with “white,” to start with) but questioning how he interpreted sources, correcting Coulter’s misquoted sources, and pointing out his sloppy reasoning throughout the book. The revisionist movement initiated at the end of the 1930s gained momentum in the 1950s and by the 1960s had become the dominant interpretation, praising the goals of Reconstruction in reconfiguring race relations in the South and celebrating the achievements of freedpeople so recently raised from slavery to political equality. By the middle of the 1960s, the Voting Rights Act brought African Americans in the South back into the political system, reversing the disfranchisement of the early twentieth century and completing the political process initiated during Reconstruction. Not surprisingly, it was about this time that the white supremacist narrative of Reconstruction really lost traction in the public life of the nation: once black people can vote, telling stories about how your great-grandfather saved the South’s white civilization by terrorizing black voters in the 1870s is no longer a winning strategy. The kinds of political speeches and historical commemorations that might have been expected to see a rehearsal of the white supremacist narrative of Reconstruction in the 1940s or 1950s by the 1970s simply failed to mention Reconstruction at all for the most part.<sup>8</sup>

While the country managed to get rid of one flawed way of remembering Reconstruction, it is not clear that it has settled on a new way to replace that old memory. In recent years, some fringe groups have tried to revive the white supremacist memory, but they usually garner little attention or enthusiasm, either for or against.

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<sup>7</sup> *To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights* (1947), Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/civilrights/srights1.htm>, accessed April 29, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> E. Merton Coulter, *The South During Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1947).

Reconstruction Republican leaders, especially African Americans, are commemorated with historical markers and the like now in many towns across the South, but it remains unclear how, or whether, memory of Reconstruction will coalesce around a coherent narrative again.

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