The years of war tried our devotion to the Union; the time of peace may test the sincerity of our faith in democracy.

_Herman Melville, c. 1866_

**Prologue:** President Johnson, a rough-hewn Tennessean, favored reconstruction of the seceded states on a "soft" basis. But he soon ran afoul of the congressional Republicans. Though divided into hard-line ("radical") and more accommodating ("moderate") factions, Republicans agreed that the seceding states should not be readmitted until they had adopted the Fourteenth Amendment. This amendment (ratified in 1868) would guarantee civil rights to the blacks while reducing congressional representation in states where the ex-slave was denied a vote. But such terms were spurned by ten of the eleven high-spirited Southern states. The Republicans in Congress thereupon passed the drastic Reconstruction Act of 1867, under which black suffrage was forced upon the white South. The Congress also came within a hairsbreadth, in 1868, of removing the obstructive President Johnson by impeachment. Meanwhile, the partly black Southern legislatures, despite grievous excesses, passed stacks of long-overdue social and economic legislation. The whites struck back through secret terrorist organizations, and ultimately secured control of their state governments by fraud, fright, and force.

A. The Status of the South

1. Black Leaders Express Their View (1865)

From the early decades of the nineteenth century, African American preachers had served as important spokesmen for the hopes and frustrations of their communities. In the document reproduced here, a group of twenty such preachers met in Savannah, Georgia, with U.S. Secretary of War Edwin McMasters Stanton and the incomparable Union general, William Tecumseh Sherman. The purpose of the meeting was to learn

the views of the “colored population . . . as to what should be done in their behalf by the Government.” Speaking for the group of clergy was Garrison Frazier, a thirty-five-year veteran of the Baptist ministry who had purchased his own freedom, as well as that of his wife, a mere eight years previously. What do his answers suggest about the political knowledge and expectations of Southern black leaders in the Civil War era?

First: State what your understanding is in regard to the acts of Congress and President Lincoln’s proclamation, touching the condition of the colored people in the Rebel States.

Answer—So far as I understand President Lincoln’s proclamation to the Rebelious States, it is, that if they would lay down their arms and submit to the laws of the United States before the first of January, 1863, all should be well; but if they did not, then all the slaves in the Rebel States should be free henceforth and forever. That is what I understood.

Second—State what you understand by Slavery and the freedom that was to be given by the President’s proclamation.

Answer—Slavery is, receiving by irresistible power the work of another man, and not by his consent. The freedom, as I understand it, promised by the proclamation, is taking us from under the yoke of bondage, and placing us where we could reap the fruit of our own labor, take care of ourselves and assist the Government in maintaining our freedom.

Third: State in what manner you think you can take care of yourselves, and how can you best assist the Government in maintaining your freedom.

Answer: The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor—that is, by the labor of the women and children and old men; and we can soon maintain ourselves and have something to spare. And to assist the Government, the young men should enlist in the service of the Government, and serve in such manner as they may be wanted. (The Rebels told us that they piled them up and made batteries of them, and sold them to Cuba; but we don’t believe that.) We want to be placed on land until we are able to buy it and make it our own.

Fourth: State in what manner you would rather live—whether scattered among the whites or in colonies by yourselves.

Answer: I would prefer to live by ourselves, for there is a prejudice against us in the South that will take years to get over; but I do not know that I can answer for my brethren. [Mr. Lynch says he thinks they should not be separated, but live together. All the other persons present, being questioned one by one, answer that they agree with Brother Frazier.]

Fifth: Do you think that there is intelligence enough among the slaves of the South to maintain themselves under the Government of the United States and the equal protection of its laws, and maintain good and peaceable relations among yourselves and with your neighbors?

Answer—I think there is sufficient intelligence among us to do so.

Sixth—State what is the feeling of the black population of the South toward the Government of the United States; what is the understanding in respect to the present war—its causes and object, and their disposition to aid either side. State fully your views.
Answer—I think you will find there are thousands that are willing to make any sacrifice to assist the Government of the United States, while there are also many that are not willing to take up arms. I do not suppose there are a dozen men that are opposed to the Government. I understand, as to the war, that the South is the aggressor. President Lincoln was elected President by a majority of the United States, which guaranteed him the right of holding the office and exercising that right over the whole United States. The South, without knowing what he would do, rebelled. The war was commenced by the Rebels before he came into office. The object of the war was not at first to give the slaves their freedom, but the sole object of the war was at first to bring the rebellious States back into the Union and their loyalty to the laws of the United States. Afterward, knowing the value set on the slaves by the Rebels, the President thought that his proclamation would stimulate them to lay down their arms, reduce them to obedience, and help to bring back the Rebel States; and their not doing so has now made the freedom of the slaves a part of the war. It is my opinion that there is not a man in this city that could be started to help the Rebels one inch, for that would be suicide. There were two black men left with the Rebels because they had taken an active part for the Rebels, and thought something might befall them if they stayed behind; but there is not another man. If the prayers that have gone up for the Union army could be read out, you would not get through them these two weeks. . . .

Eleventh: State what, in your opinion, is the best way to enlist colored men for soldiers.

Answer: I think, sir, that all compulsory operations should be put a stop to. The ministers would talk to them, and the young men would enlist. It is my opinion that it would be far better for the State agents to stay at home, and the enlistments to be made for the United States under the direction of Gen. Sherman.

In the absence of Gen. Sherman, the following question was asked:

Twelfth: State what is the feeling of the colored people in regard to Gen. Sherman; and how far do they regard his sentiments and actions as friendly to their rights and interests, or otherwise?

Answer: We looked upon Gen. Sherman prior to his arrival as a man in the Providence of God specially set apart to accomplish this work, and we unanimously feel inexpressible gratitude to him, looking upon him as a man that should be honored for the faithful performance of his duty. Some of us called upon him immediately upon his arrival, and it is probable he would not meet the Secretary with more courtesy than he met us. His conduct and deportment toward us characterized him as a friend and a gentleman. We have confidence in Gen. Sherman, and think that what concerns us could not be under better hands. This is our opinion now from the short acquaintance and interest we have had. (Mr. Lynch states that with his limited acquaintance with Gen. Sherman, he is unwilling to express an opinion. All others present declare their agreement with Mr. Frazier about Gen. Sherman.)

Some conversation upon general subjects relating to Gen. Sherman's march then ensued, of which no note was taken.

War Dept. Adjt. Gen.'s Office
Washington, Feb. 1, 1865.
Chapter 22  The Ordeal of Reconstruction, 1865–1877

2. Carl Schurz Reports Southern Defiance (1865)

President Johnson sent Carl Schurz—the lanky, bewhiskered, and bespectacled German American reformer—into the devastated South to report objectively on conditions there. But Schurz was predisposed to see continued defiance. He was on intimate terms with the radical Republican leaders, who favored a severe reconstruction of the South, and in addition he was financially obligated to the radical Charles Sumner. President Johnson, evidently hoping for evidence that would support his lenient policies, brushed aside Schurz’s elaborate report with ill-concealed annoyance. Schurz partially financed his trip by selling a series of letters under an assumed name to the Boston Advertiser, which presumably welcomed his pro-radical bias. In the following letter, which he wrote from Savannah to the newspaper, what class of people does he deem responsible for the trouble? What motivated them? Why were their outbursts not more serious?

But there is another class of people here [in Savannah], mostly younger men, who are still in the swearing mood. You can overhear their conversations as you pass them on the streets or even sit near them on the stoop of a hotel. They are “not conquered but only overpowered.” They are only smothered for a time. They want to fight the war over again, and they are sure in five years they are going to have a war bigger than any we have seen yet. They are meaning to get rid of this d——d military despotism. They will show us what stuff Southern men are made of. They will send their own men to Congress and show us that we cannot violate the Constitution with impunity.

They have a rope ready for this and that Union man when the Yankee bayonets are gone. They will show the Northern interlopers that have settled down here to live on their substance the way home. They will deal largely in tar and feathers. They have been in the country and visited this and that place where a fine business is done in the way of killing Negroes. They will let the Negro know what freedom is, only let the Yankee soldiers be withdrawn.

Such is their talk. You can hear it every day, if you have your ears open. You see their sullen, frowning faces at every street corner. Now, there may be much of the old Southern braggadocio in this, and I do not believe that such men will again resort to open insurrection. But they will practice private vengeance whenever they can do it with impunity, and I have heard sober-minded Union people express their apprehension of it. This spirit is certainly no evidence of true loyalty.

It was this spirit which was active in an occurrence which disgraced this city on the Fourth of July. Perhaps you have heard of it. The colored firemen of this city desired to parade their engine on the anniversary of our independence. If nobody else would, they felt like celebrating that day. A number will deny that it was a legitimate desire. At first the engineer of the fire department, who is a citizen of this town, refused his permission. Finally, by an interposition of an officer of the “Freedmen’s Bureau,” he was prevailed upon to give his consent, and the parade took place. In


*A federal agency designed to help the ex-slaves adjust to freedom.
the principal street of the city the procession was attacked with clubs and stones by
a mob opposed to the element above described, and by a crowd of boys all swear­
ing at the d-----d niggers. The colored firemen were knocked down, some of
them severely injured, their engine was taken away from them, and the peaceable
procession dispersed. Down with the d-----d niggers. A northern gentleman who
loudly expressed his indignation at the proceedings was in danger of being
mobbed, and had to seek safety in a house. . . .

To return to the “unconquered” in Savannah—the occurrence of the Fourth of
July shows what they are capable of doing even while the Yankee bayonets are
still here. If from this we infer what they will be capable of doing when the Yankee
bayonets are withdrawn, the prospect is not altogether pleasant, and Union people,
white and black, in this city and neighborhood may well entertain serious
apprehensions. . . .

Unfortunately, this spirit receives much encouragement from the fair sex. We
have heard so much of the bitter resentment of the Southern ladies that the tale be­
comes stale by frequent repetition, but when inquiring into the feelings of the peo­
ple, this element must not be omitted. There are certainly a good many sensible
women in the South who have arrived at a just appreciation of the circumstances
with which they are surrounded. But there is a large number of Southern women
who are as vindictive and defiant as ever, and whose temper does not permit them
to lay their tongues under any restraint. You can see them in every hotel, and they
will treat you to the most ridiculous exhibitions, whenever an occasion offers.

A day or two ago a Union officer, yielding to an impulse of politeness, handed
a dish of pickles to a Southern Lady at the dinner-table of a hotel in this city. A look
of unspeakable scorn and indignation met him. “So you think,” said the lady, “a
Southern woman will take a dish of pickles from a hand that is dripping with the
blood of her countrymen?”

It is remarkable upon what trifling material this female wrath is feeding and
growing fat. In a certain district in South Carolina, the ladies were some time ago,
and perhaps are now, dreadfully exercised about the veil question. You may ask me
what the veil question is. Formerly, under the old order of things, Negro women
were not permitted to wear veils. Now, under the new order of things, a great many
are wearing veils. This is an outrage which cannot be submitted to; the white ladies
of the neighborhood agree in being indignant beyond measure. Some of them de­
clare that whenever they meet a colored woman wearing a veil they will tear the
veil from her face. Others, mindful of the consequences which such an act of vio­
lence might draw after it, under this same new order of things, declare their resolve
never to wear veils themselves as long as colored women wear veils. This is the veil
question, and this is the way it stands at present.

Such things may seem trifling and ridiculous. But it is a well-known fact that a
silly woman is sometimes able to exercise a powerful influence over a man not half
as silly, and the class of “unconquered” above described is undoubtedly in a great
measure composed of individuals that are apt to be influenced by silly women. It
has frequently been said that had it not been for the spirit of the Southern women,
the rebellion would have broken down long ago, and there is, no doubt, a grain of
truth in it.
3. General Ulysses S. Grant Is Optimistic (1865)

President Johnson, hoping to capitalize on Grant's enormous prestige, also sent the general on a fact-finding trip to the South. Grant spent less than a week hurriedly visiting leading cities in four states. Schurz had ranged far more widely over a longer period, from July to September 1865. But just as Schurz was predisposed to see defiance, Grant was predisposed to see compliance. Bear in mind also that Schurz was an idealist, strongly pro-black, and a leading Republican politician closely in touch with the radicals. Grant was none of these. Which of their reports is more credible?

I am satisfied that the mass of thinking men of the South accept the present situation of affairs in good faith. The questions which have heretofore divided the sentiment of the people of the two sections—slavery and state rights, or the right of a state to secede from the Union—they regard as having been settled forever by the highest tribunal—arms—that man can resort to. I was pleased to learn from the leading men whom I met that they not only accepted the decision arrived at as final, but, now that the smoke of battle has cleared away and time has been given for reflection, that this decision has been a fortunate one for the whole country, they receiving like benefits from it with those who opposed them in the field and in council.

Four years of war, during which law was executed only at the point of the bayonet throughout the states in rebellion, have left the people possibly in a condition not to yield that ready obedience to civil authority the American people have generally been in the habit of yielding. This would render the presence of small garrisons throughout those states necessary until such time as labor returns to its proper channel, and civil authority is fully established. I did not meet anyone, either those holding places under the government or citizens of the Southern states, who think it practicable to withdraw the military from the South at present. The white and the black mutually require the protection of the general government.

There is such universal acquiescence in the authority of the general government throughout the portions of country visited by me that the mere presence of a military force, without regard to numbers, is sufficient to maintain order.

My observations lead me to the conclusion that the citizens of the Southern states are anxious to return to self-government, within the Union, as soon as possible; that whilst reconstructing they want and require protection from the government; that they are in earnest in wishing to do what they think is required by the government, not humiliating to them as citizens, and that if such a course were pointed out they would pursue it in good faith.

4. The Former Slaves Confront Freedom (1901)

The reactions of the freed slaves to their new liberty ran the gamut of human emotions from jubilation to anxiety. Attitudes toward former masters—and toward whites generally—ranged from resentment and fear to pity. Booker T. Washington was a young boy no more than eight years of age when the day of freedom came.

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1Senate Executive Documents, 39th Cong., 1st sess., 1, no. 2, pp. 106–107.
What was his response? From what he describes as the first reactions of his family members and other freed slaves, what might one conclude were the worst deprivations suffered in slavery?

Finally the war closed, and the day of freedom came. It was a momentous and eventful day to all upon our plantation. We had been expecting it. Freedom was in the air, and had been for months. Deserting soldiers returning to their homes were to be seen every day. Others who had been discharged, or whose regiments had been paroled, were constantly passing near our place. The “grape-vine telegraph” was kept busy night and day. The news and mutterings of great events were swiftly carried from one plantation to another. In the fear of “Yankee” invasions, the silverware and other valuables were taken from the “big house,” buried in the woods, and guarded by trusted slaves. Woe be to any one who would have attempted to disturb the buried treasure. The slaves would give the Yankee soldiers food, drink, clothing—anything but that which had been specifically intrusted to their care and honour. As the great day drew nearer, there was more singing in the slave quarters than usual. It was bolder, had more ring, and lasted later into the night. Most of the verses of the plantation songs had some reference to freedom. True, they had sung those same verses before, but they had been careful to explain that the “freedom” in these songs referred to the next world, and had no connection with life in this world. Now they gradually threw off the mask, and were not afraid to let it be known that the “freedom” in their songs meant freedom of the body in this world. The night before the eventful day, word was sent to the slave quarters to the effect that something unusual was going to take place at the “big house” the next morning. There was little, if any, sleep that night. All was excitement and expectancy. Early the next morning word was sent to all the slaves, old and young, to gather at the house. In company with my mother, brother, and sister, and a large number of other slaves, I went to the master’s house. All of our master’s family were either standing or seated on the veranda of the house, where they could see what was to take place and hear what was said. There was a feeling of deep interest, or perhaps sadness, on their faces, but not bitterness. As I now recall the impression they made upon me, they did not at the moment seem to be sad because of the loss of property, but rather because of parting with those whom they had reared and who were in many ways very close to them. The most distinct thing that I now recall in connection with the scene was that some man who seemed to be a stranger (a United States officer, I presume) made a little speech and then read a rather long paper—the Emancipation Proclamation, I think. After the reading we were told that we were all free, and could go when and where we pleased. My mother, who was standing by my side, leaned over and kissed her children, while tears of joy ran down her cheeks. She explained to us what it all meant, that this was the day for which she had been so long praying, but fearing that she would never live to see.

For some minutes there was great rejoicing, and thanksgiving, and wild scenes of ecstasy. But there was no feeling of bitterness. In fact, there was pity among the slaves for our former owners. The wild rejoicing on the part of the emancipated coloured people lasted but for a brief period, for I noticed that by the time they returned to their cabins there was a change in their feelings. The great responsibility of being free, or having charge of themselves, of having to think and plan for
themselves and their children, seemed to take possession of them. It was very much like suddenly turning a youth of ten or twelve years out into the world to provide for himself. In a few hours the great questions with which the Anglo-Saxon race had been grappling for centuries had been thrown upon these people to be solved. These were the questions of a home, a living, the rearing of children, education, citizenship, and the establishment and support of churches. Was it any wonder that within a few hours the wild rejoicing ceased and a feeling of deep gloom seemed to pervade the slave quarters? To some it seemed that, now that they were in actual possession of it, freedom was a more serious thing than they had expected to find it. Some of the slaves were seventy or eighty years old; their best days were gone. They had no strength with which to earn a living in a strange place and among strange people, even if they had been sure where to find a new place of abode. To this class the problem seemed especially hard. Besides, deep down in their hearts there was a strange and peculiar attachment to "old Marster" and "old Missus," and to their children, which they found it hard to think of breaking off. With these they had spent in some cases nearly a half-century, and it was no light thing to think of parting. Gradually, one by one, stealthily at first, the older slaves began to wander from the slave quarters back to the "big house" to have whispered conversation with their former owners as to the future.

After the coming of freedom there were two points upon which practically all the people on our place were agreed, and I find that this was generally true throughout the South: that they must change their names, and that they must leave the old plantation for at least a few days or weeks in order that they might really feel sure that they were free.

In some way a feeling got among the coloured people that it was far from proper for them to bear the surname of their former owners, and a great many of them took other surnames. This was one of the first signs of freedom. When they were slaves, a coloured person was simply called "John" or "Susan." There was seldom occasion for more than the use of the one name. If "John" or "Susan" belonged to a white man by the name of "Hatcher," sometimes he was called "John Hatcher," or as often "Hatcher's John." But there was a feeling that "John Hatcher" or "Hatcher's John" was not the proper title by which to denote a freeman; and so in many cases "John Hatcher" was changed to "John S. Lincoln" or "John S. Sherman," the initial "S" standing for no name, it being simply a part of what the coloured man proudly called his "entitles."

As I have stated, most of the coloured people left the old plantation for a short while at least, so as to be sure, it seemed, that they could leave and try their freedom on to see how it felt. After they had remained away for a time, many of the older slaves, especially, returned to their old homes and made some kind of contract with their former owners by which they remained on the estate.

My mother's husband, who was the stepfather of my brother John and myself, did not belong to the same owners as did my mother. In fact, he seldom came to our plantation. I remember seeing him there perhaps once a year, that being about Christmas time. In some way, during the war, by running away and following the Federal soldiers, it seems, he found his way into the new state of West Virginia. As soon as freedom was declared, he sent for my mother to come to the Kanawha Valley, in West Virginia. At that time a journey from Virginia over the mountains to West
Virginia was rather a tedious and in some cases a painful undertaking. What little clothing and few household goods we had were placed in a cart, but the children walked the greater portion of the distance, which was several hundred miles.

5. *Emancipation Violence in Texas (c. 1865)*

*In the following recollection by a former slave woman in Texas, what is revealed about the response of some slaveowners to emancipation? What implications did such responses have for the future of the freed slaves? for federal policy during Reconstruction?*

I heard about freedom in September and they were picking cotton and a white man rode up to master's house on a big, white horse and the houseboy told master a man wanted to see him and he hollered, “Light, stranger.” It was a government man and he had the big book and a bunch of papers and said why hadn't master turned the niggers loose. Master said he was trying to get the crop out and he told master to have the slaves in. Uncle Steven blew the cow horn that they used to call to eat and all the niggers came running, because that horn meant, “Come to the big house, quick.” The man read the paper telling us we were free, but master made us work several months after that. He said we would get 20 acres of land and a mule but we didn’t get it.

Lots of niggers were killed after freedom, because the slaves in Harrison County were turned loose right at freedom and those in Rusk County weren’t. But they heard about it and ran away to freedom in Harrison County and their owners had them bushwhacked, then shot down. You could see lots of niggers hanging from trees in Sabine bottom right after freedom, because they caught them swimming across Sabine River and shot them. There sure are going to be lots of souls crying against them in judgment!

B. The Debate on Reconstruction Policy

1. *Southern Blacks Ask for Help (1865)*

*As the smoke of war cleared, blacks throughout the South gathered in “Conventions of Freedmen” to determine the best strategies for protecting their fragile freedom. Several of these conventions formally petitioned the Congress for help. In the following petition from a convention meeting in Alexandria, Virginia, in August 1865, what forms of support are deemed most essential? What is the freedmen’s greatest fear?*

We, the undersigned members of a Convention of colored citizens of the State of Virginia, would respectfully represent that, although we have been held as slaves,
and denied all recognition as a constituent of your nationality for almost the entire
period of the duration of your Government, and that by your permission we have
been denied either home or country, and deprived of the dearest rights of human
nature; yet when you and our immediate oppressors met in deadly conflict upon
the field of battle—the one to destroy and the other to save your Government and na­
tionality, we, with scarce an exception, in our inmost souls espoused your cause,
and watched, and prayed, and waited, and labored for your success. . . .

When the contest waxed long, and the result hung doubtfuly, you appealed to
us for help, and how well we answered is written in the rosters of the two hundred
thousand colored troops now enrolled in your service; and as to our undying devo­
tion to your cause, let the uniform acclamation of escaped prisoners, “whenever we
saw a black face we felt sure of a friend,” answer.

Well, the war is over, the rebellion is “put down,” and we are declared free! Four
fifths of our enemies are paroled or amnestied, and the other fifth are being par­
doned, and the President has, in his efforts at the reconstruction of the civil govern­
ment of the States, late in rebellion, left us entirely at the mercy of these subjugated
but unconverted rebels, in every thing save the privilege of bringing us, our wives
and little ones, to the auction block. . . . We know these men—know them well—
and we assure you that, with the majority of them, loyalty is only “lip deep,” and
that their professions of loyalty are used as a cover to the cherished design of get­
ting restored to their former relations with the Federal Government, and then, by all
sorts of “unfriendly legislation,” to render the freedom you have given us more in­
tolerable than the slavery they intended for us.

We warn you in time that our only safety is in keeping them under Governors
of the military persuasion until you have so amended the Federal Constitution that
it will prohibit the States from making any distinction between citizens on account
of race or color. In one word, the only salvation for us besides the power of the
Government, is in the possession of the ballot. Give us this, and we will protect our­selves. . . . But, ’tis said we are ignorant. Admit it. Yet who denies we know a traitor
from a loyal man, a gentleman from a rowdy, a friend from an enemy? . . . All we ask
is an equal chance with the white traitors varnished and japanned with the oath of
amnesty. Can you deny us this and still keep faith with us? . . .

We are “sheep in the midst of wolves,” and nothing but the military arm of the
Government prevents us and all the truly loyal white men from being driven from
the land of our birth. Do not then, we beseech you, give to one of these “wayward
sisters” the rights they abandoned and forfeited when they rebelled until you have
secured our rights by the aforementioned amendment to the Constitution. . . .

2. The White South Asks for Unconditional
Reintegration into the Union (1866)

The Joint Committee on Reconstruction, composed of nine congressional representatives and six senators, held extensive hearings in the spring of 1866 about the condition of the South and various proposals for reintegrating the Southern states into the Union. One leading proposal was the legislation that eventually became the Four-
The Debate on Reconstruction Policy

The fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. It was designed to reduce the representation in Congress of any state that denied the freedmen the right to vote. Congressional Republicans wanted to make any state’s restoration to the Union conditional on its ratification of the amendment. In the following testimony, former Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens comments on the congressional plan. What are his main objections to it? What alternatives does he propose? Does his statement confirm or cast doubt on the concerns of blacks presented in the preceding selection?

I think the people of the State would be unwilling to do more than they have done for restoration. Restricted or limited suffrage would not be so objectionable as general or universal. But it is a matter that belongs to the State to regulate. The question of suffrage, whether universal or restricted, is one of State policy exclusively, as they believe. Individually I should not be opposed to a proper system of restricted or limited suffrage to this class of our population.... The only view in their opinion that could possibly justify the war that was carried on by the federal government against them was the idea of the indissolubleness of the Union; that those who held the administration for the time were bound to enforce the execution of the laws and the maintenance of the integrity of the country under the Constitution.... They expected as soon as the confederate cause was abandoned that immediately the States would be brought back into their practical relations with the government as previously constituted. That is what they looked to. They expected that the States would immediately have their representatives in the Senate and in the House; and they expected in good faith, as loyal men, as the term is frequently used—loyal to law, order, and the Constitution—to support the government under the Constitution.... Towards the Constitution of the United States the great mass of our people were always as much devoted in their feelings as any people ever were towards any laws or people.... they resorted to secession with a view of more securely maintaining these principles. And when they found they were not successful in their object in perfect good faith, as far as I can judge from meeting with them and conversing with them, looking to the future development of their country.... their earnest desire and expectation was to allow the past struggle.... to pass by and to co-operate with.... those of all sections who earnestly desire the preservation of constitutional liberty and the perpetuation of the government in its purity. They have been.... disappointed in this, and are.... patiently waiting, however, and believing that when the passions of the hour have passed away this delay in representation will cease....

My own opinion is, that these terms ought not to be offered as conditions precedent.... It would be best for the peace, harmony, and prosperity of the whole country that there should be an immediate restoration, an immediate bringing back of the States into their original practical relations; and let all these questions then be discussed in common council. Then the representatives from the south could be heard, and you and all could judge much better of the tone and temper of the people than you could from the opinions given by any individuals.... My judgment, therefore, is very decided, that it would have been better as soon as the lamentable conflict was over, when the people of the south abandoned their cause and agreed to accept the issue, desiring as they do to resume their places for the future in the Union, and to look to the arena of reason and justice for the protection of their rights in the Union— it would have been better to have allowed that result to take place, to follow under
the policy adopted by the administration, than to delay or hinder it by propositions to amend the Constitution in respect to suffrage. . . . I think the people of all the southern States would in the halls of Congress discuss these questions calmly and deliberately, and if they did not show that the views they entertained were just and proper, such as to control the judgment of the people of the other sections and States, they would quietly . . . yield to whatever should be constitutionally determined in common council. But I think they feel very sensitively the offer to them of propositions to accept while they are denied all voice . . . in the discussion of these propositions. I think they feel very sensitively that they are denied the right to be heard.

3. The Radical Republicans Take a Hard Line (1866)

After weeks of testimony, the Joint Committee on Reconstruction made its report. With only three Democrats among its fifteen members, and dominated by the imperious Thaddeus Stevens, the committee reflected radical Republican views on Reconstruction policy. What were its principal conclusions? In the light of the evidence provided in the previous two selections, were the committee's views justified?

A claim for the immediate admission of senators and representatives from the so-called Confederate States has been urged, which seems to your committee not to be founded either in reason or in law, and which cannot be passed without comment. Stated in a few words, it amounts to this: That inasmuch as the lately insurgent States had no legal right to separate themselves from the Union, they still retain their position as States, and consequently the people thereof have a right to immediate representation in Congress without the interposition of any conditions whatever. . . . It has even been contended that until such admission all legislation affecting their interests is, if not unconstitutional, at least unjustifiable and oppressive.

It is believed by your Committee that these propositions are not only wholly untenable, but, if admitted, would tend to the destruction of the government. . . . It cannot, we think, be denied that the war thus waged was a civil war of the greatest magnitude. The people waging it were necessarily subject to all the rules which, by the law of nations, control a contest of that character, and to all the legitimate consequences following it. One of these consequences was that, within the limits prescribed by humanity, the conquered rebels were at the mercy of the conquerors. . . .

It is moreover contended . . . that from the peculiar nature and character of our government . . . from the moment rebellion lays down its arms and actual hostilities cease all political rights of rebellious communities are at once restored; that because the people of a state of the Union were once an organized community within the Union, they necessarily so remain, and their right to be represented in Congress at any and all times, and to participate in the government of the country under all circumstances, admits of neither question nor dispute. If this is indeed true, then is the government of the United States powerless for its own protection, and flagrant rebellion, carried to the extreme of civil war, is a pastime which any state may play at, not only certain that it can lose nothing in any event, but may even be the gainer by defeat?

It is the opinion of your committee—

1Report of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction (Washington, D.C., 1866), pp. 4ff.
I. That the States lately in rebellion were, at the close of the war, disorganized communities, without civil government, and without constitutions or other forms, by virtue of which political relation could legally exist between them and the federal government.

II. That Congress cannot be expected to recognize as valid the election of representatives from disorganized communities, which, from the very nature of the case, were unable to present their claim to representation under those established and recognized rules, the observance of which has been hitherto required.

III. That Congress would not be justified in admitting such communities to a participation in the government of the country without first providing such constitutional or other guarantees as will tend to secure the civil rights of all citizens of the republic; a just equality of representation; protection against claims founded in rebellion and crime; a temporary restoration of the right of suffrage to those who have not actively participated in the efforts to destroy the Union and overthrow the government, and the exclusion from position of public trust of, at least, a portion of those whose crimes have proved them to be enemies of the Union, and unworthy of public confidence.

The necessity of providing adequate safeguards for the future, before restoring the insurrectionary States to a participation in the direction of public affairs, is apparent from the bitter hostility to the government and people of the United States yet existing throughout the conquered territory.

The conclusion of your committee therefore is, that the so-called Confederate States are not, at present, entitled to representation in the Congress of the United States.

4. President Andrew Johnson Tries to Restrain Congress (1867)

Alarmed by the outbreak of race riots in several Southern cities, and frustrated by the South’s rejection of the Fourteenth Amendment, Congress passed the Reconstruction Act on March 2, 1867. The act divided the South into military districts subject to martial law. It also stipulated that the seceding states could be restored to the Union only when they had called constitutional conventions, on the basis of universal manhood suffrage, which must guarantee black voting rights and ratify the Fourteenth Amendment. President Johnson promptly vetoed the bill, which just as promptly was passed over his veto. In his veto message, which follows, what reasons does he offer for his action? Are his arguments sound? Why might they have especially provoked the Republicans in Congress?

Washington, March 2, 1867

To the House of Representatives:

I have examined the bill "to provide for the more efficient government of the rebel States" with the care and anxiety which its transcendent importance is calculated to

awaken. I am unable to give it my assent, for reasons so grave that I hope a statement of them may have some influence on the minds of the patriotic and enlightened men with whom the decision must ultimately rest.

The bill places all the people of the ten States therein named under the absolute domination of military rulers; and the preamble undertakes to give the reason upon which the measure is based and the ground upon which it is justified. It declares that there exists in those States no legal governments and no adequate protection for life or property, and asserts the necessity of enforcing peace and good order within their limits. Is this true as matter of fact?...

Have we the power to establish and carry into execution a measure like this? I answer, Certainly not, if we derive our authority from the Constitution and if we are bound by the limitations which it imposes.

This proposition is perfectly clear, that no branch of the Federal Government—executive, legislative, or judicial—can have any just powers except those which it derives through and exercises under the organic law of the Union. Outside of the Constitution we have no legal authority more than private citizens, and within it we have only so much as that instrument gives us. This broad principle limits all our functions and applies to all subjects. It protects not only the citizens of States which are within the Union, but it shields every human being who comes or is brought under our jurisdiction. We have no right to do in one place more than in another that which the Constitution says we shall not do at all. If, therefore, the Southern States were in truth out of the Union, we could not treat their people in a way which the fundamental law forbids.

Some persons assume that the success of our arms in crushing the opposition which was made in some of the States to the execution of the Federal laws reduced those States and all their people—the innocent as well as the guilty—to the condition of vassalage and gave us a power over them which the Constitution does not bestow or define or limit. No fallacy can be more transparent than this. Our victories subjected the insurgents to legal obedience, not to the yoke of an arbitrary despotism....

Invasion, insurrection, rebellion, and domestic violence were anticipated when the Government was framed, and the means of repelling and suppressing them were wisely provided for in the Constitution; but it was not thought necessary to declare that the States in which they might occur should be expelled from the Union. Rebellions, which were invariably suppressed, occurred prior to that out of which these questions grow; but the States continued to exist and the Union remained unbroken. In Massachusetts, in Pennsylvania, in Rhode Island, and in New York, at different periods in our history, violent and armed opposition to the United States was carried on; but the relations of those States with the Federal Government were not supposed to be interrupted or changed thereby after the rebellious portions of their population were defeated and put down. It is true that in these earlier cases there was no formal expression of a determination to withdraw from the Union, but it is also true that in the Southern States the ordinances of secession were treated by all the friends of the Union as mere nullities and are now acknowledged to be so by the States themselves. If we admit that they had any force or validity or that they did in fact take the States in which they were passed out of the Union, we sweep from
under our feet all the grounds upon which we stand in justifying the use of Federal
force to maintain the integrity of the Government. . . .

The United States are bound to guarantee to each State a republican form of
government. Can it be pretended that this obligation is not probably broken if we
carry out a measure like this, which wipes away every vestige of republican gov-
ernment in ten States and puts the life, property, liberty, and honor of all the people
in each of them under the domination of a single person clothed with unlimited
authority?

The purpose and object of the bill—the general intent which pervades it from
beginning to end—is to change the entire structure and character of the State gov-
ernments and to compel them by force to the adoption of organic laws and regulat-
ions which they are unwilling to accept if left to themselves. The negroes have not
asked for the privilege of voting; the vast majority of them have no idea what it
means. This bill not only thrusts it into their hands, but compels them, as well as the
whites, to use it in a particular way. If they do not form a constitution with pre-
scribed articles in it and afterwards elect a legislature which will act upon certain
measures in a prescribed way, neither blacks nor whites can be relieved from the
slavery which the bill imposes upon them. Without pausing here to consider the
policy or impolicy of Africanizing the southern part of our territory, I would simply
ask the attention of Congress to that manifest, well-known, and universally ac-
knowledged rule of constitutional law which declares that the Federal Government
has no jurisdiction, authority, or power to regulate such subjects for any State. To
force the right of suffrage out of the hands of the white people and into the hands
of the negroes is an arbitrary violation of this principle. . . .

The bill also denies the legality of the governments of ten of the States which
participated in the ratification of the amendment to the Federal Constitution abolish-
ing slavery forever within the jurisdiction of the United States [the Thirteenth Amend-
ment] and practically excludes them from the Union. If this assumption of the bill be
correct, their concurrence can not be considered as having been legally given, and
the important fact is made to appear that the consent of three-fourths of the States—
the requisite number—has not been constitutionally obtained to the ratification of
that amendment, thus leaving the question of slavery where it stood before the
amendment was officially declared to have become a part of the Constitution.

That the measure proposed by this bill does violate the Constitution in the par-
ticulars mentioned and in many other ways which I forbear to enumerate is too
clear to admit of the least doubt. . . .

It is part of our public history which can never be forgotten that both Houses of
Congress, in July, 1861, declared in the form of a solemn resolution that the war was
and should be carried on for no purpose of subjugation, but solely to enforce the
Constitution and laws, and that when this was yielded by the parties in rebellion the
contest should cease, with the constitutional rights of the States and of individuals
unimpaired. This resolution was adopted and sent forth to the world unanimously by
the Senate and with only two dissenting voices in the House. It was accepted by the
friends of the Union in the South as well as in the North as expressing honestly and
truly the object of the war. On the faith of it many thousands of persons in both sec-
tions gave their lives and their fortunes to the cause. To repudiate it now by refusing
to the States and to the individuals within them the rights which the Constitution and laws of the Union would secure to them is a breach of our plighted honor for which I can imagine no excuse and to which I can not voluntarily become a party...

5. The Controversy over the Fifteenth Amendment
(1866, 1870)

The Fifteenth Amendment guaranteed all adult males, regardless of race, the right to vote, and the campaign to have it ratified produced bitter arguments between the radical Republicans and their opponents. The first illustration below, entitled The Constitutional Amendment, was first published during a heated election campaign in Pennsylvania in 1866. Supporters of the Democratic candidate for governor circulated this image in an attempt to defeat the Republican gubernatorial nominee. What are its most pointed arguments? The second image, The Fifteenth Amendment and Its Results, appeared in Baltimore in 1870 to celebrate the enactment of the Fifteenth Amendment. What does it find most praiseworthy about the new law? How are blacks depicted in the two prints? Were there any principled arguments against the Fifteenth Amendment?

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C. Impeaching the President

1. Johnson's Cleveland Speech (1866)

A tactless and stubborn President Johnson clashed openly with the Republicans in Congress, including the embittered Thaddeus Stevens, when he vetoed a series of reconstruction bills. Two of the measures designed to help the former slaves—the Civil Rights Bill and the New Freedmen's Bureau Bill—were speedily repassed over his veto. Undaunted, Johnson embarked on a speech-making tour to urge the election of

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congressmen favorable to his policies. But the public was in an ugly mood. Former President Jefferson Davis, though still in prison, was untried and unhanged, as were other former Confederates. A recent antiblack riot in New Orleans had resulted in some two hundred casualties. Johnson had earlier distinguished himself as a rough-and-ready stump speaker in Tennessee, but, as Secretary Seward remarked, the president of the United States should not be a stump speaker. Johnson’s undignified harangue in Cleveland contained passages (here italicized) that formed the basis of some of the impeachment charges later brought by the House. What criticisms can be legitimately leveled against this speech? Which one is the most serious?

Notwithstanding the subsidized gang of hirelings and traducers [in Congress?], I have discharged all my duties and fulfilled all my pledges, and I say here tonight that if my predecessor had lived, the vials of wrath would have been poured out upon him. [Cries of “Never!” “Three cheers for the Congress of the United States!”]

... Where is the man or woman who can place his finger upon one single act of mine deviating from any pledge of mine or in violation of the Constitution of the country? [Cheers.] ... Who can come and place his finger on one pledge I ever violated, or one principle I ever proved false to? [A voice, “How about New Orleans?” Another voice, “Hang Jeff Davis.”] Hang Jeff Davis, he says. [Cries of “No,” and “Down with him!”] ... Hang Jeff Davis. Why don’t you hang him? [Cries of “Give us the opportunity.”] Have not you got the court? Have not you got the Attorney General? ...

I will tell you what I did do. I called upon your Congress that is trying to break up the government. [Emphasis added.] [Cries, “You be d——d!” and cheers mingled with hisses. Great confusion. “Don’t get mad, Andy!”] Well, I will tell you who is mad. “Whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad.” Did your Congress order any of them to be tried? [“Three cheers for Congress.”] ...

You pretend now to have great respect and sympathy for the poor brave fellow who has left an arm on the battlefield. [Cries, “Is this dignified?”] I understand you. ... I care not for dignity. ... [A voice, “Traitor!”] I wish I could see that man. I would bet you now that if the light fell on your face, cowardice and treachery would be seen in it. Show yourself. Come out here where I can see you. [Shouts of laughter.] If you ever shoot a man you will do it in the dark, and pull the trigger when no one is by to see you. [Cheers.] ...

I understand traitors. I have been fighting them at the south end of the line, and we are now fighting them in the other direction. [Laughter and cheers.] I come here neither to criminate or recriminate, but when attacked, my plan is to defend myself. [Cheers.] ... As Chief Magistrate, I felt so after taking the oath to support the Constitution, and when I saw encroachments upon your Constitution and rights, as an honest man I dared to sound the tocsin of alarm. [“Three cheers for Andrew Johnson.”] ...

I love my country. Every public act of my life testifies that is so. Where is the man that can put his finger upon any one act of mine that goes to prove the contrary? And what is my offending? [A voice, “Because you are not a Radical,” and cry of “Veto.”] Somebody says veto. Veto of what? What is called the Freedmen’s Bureau bill? ... I might refer to the Civil Rights Bill, the results of which are very similar. I
tell you, my countrymen, that though the powers of hell and Thad Stevens and his gang were by, they could not turn me from my purpose. ...

In conclusion, beside that, Congress had taken such pains to poison their constituents against him.* But what bad Congress done? Had they done anything to restore the Union of these states? No; on the contrary, they had done everything to prevent it; and because he stood now where he did when the rebellion commenced, he had been denounced as a traitor. Who had run greater risks or made greater sacrifices than himself? But Congress, factious and domineering, had undertaken to poison the minds of the American people. [Emphasis added.]

2. Senator Lyman Trumbull Defends Johnson (1868)

Johnson’s unrestrained oratory backfired, and at the polls in November the Republicans won control of a two-thirds majority in both houses of Congress. They proceeded to pass the Tenure of Office Act, which was designed to entrap Johnson. Doubting its constitutionality (by indirection it was later judged unconstitutional) and seeking to bring a test case, he deliberately challenged it by removing Secretary William Stanton. The House thereupon impeached Johnson for “high crimes and misdemeanors.” Most of its indictment related to Johnson’s alleged violation of the Tenure of Office Act; other charges related to his “scandalous harangues.” Particularly objectionable was a speech at the White House in which the president had declared that acts of Congress were not binding upon him because the South did not enjoy proper representation in it. One of the ablest of those who spoke for Johnson was Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois, a brilliant constitutional lawyer and a former associate of Lincoln. As one who followed principle rather than partisanship, he changed parties three times during his career. In the following speech, what is his main reason for thinking that Johnson’s removal would be unfortunate?

In coming to the conclusion that the President is not guilty of any of the high crimes and misdemeanors with which he stands charged, I have endeavored to be governed by the case made, without reference to other acts of his not contained in the record, and without giving the least heed to the clamor of intemperate zealots who demand the conviction of Andrew Johnson as a test of party faith, or seek to identify with and make responsible for his acts those who from convictions of duty feel compelled, on the case made, to vote for his acquittal.

His speeches and the general course of his administration have been as distasteful to me as to anyone, and I should consider it the great calamity of the age if the disloyal element, so often encouraged by his measures, should gain political ascendancy. If the question was, Is Andrew Johnson a fit person for President? I should answer, no; but it is not a party question, nor upon Andrew Johnson’s deeds and acts, except so far as they are made to appear in the record, that I am to decide.

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*The reporter now lapses into the third person.

1Congressional Globe, 40th Cong., 2d sess. (May 7, 1868), Supplement, p. 420.
Painful as it is to disagree with so many political associates and friends whose conscientious convictions have led them to a different result, I must, nevertheless, in the discharge of the high responsibility under which I act, be governed by what my reason and judgment tell me is the truth, and the justice and law of this case.

Once set the example of impeaching a President for what, when the excitement of the hour shall have subsided, will be regarded as insufficient causes, as several of those now alleged against the President were decided to be by the House of Representatives only a few months since, and no future President will be safe who happens to differ with a majority of the House and two-thirds of the Senate on any measure deemed by them important, particularly if of a political character. Blinded by partisan zeal, with such an example before them, they will not scruple to remove out of the way any obstacle to the accomplishment of their purposes, and what then becomes of the checks and balances of the Constitution, so carefully devised and so vital to its perpetuity? They are all gone.

In view of the consequences likely to flow from this day’s proceedings, should they result in conviction on what my judgment tells me are insufficient charges and profits, I tremble for the future of my country. I cannot be an instrument or produce such a result; and at the hazard of the ties even of friendship and affection, till calmer times shall do justice to my motives, no alternative is left me but the inflexible discharge of duty.

[President Johnson escaped removal by the margin of a single vote, and only because seven conscientious Republican senators, including Trumbull, risked political suicide by refusing to go along with the majority.]

D. “Black Reconstruction”

I. Thaddeus Stevens Demands Black Suffrage (1867)

The most influential radical Republican in the House, crippled and vindictive Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, loathed slavery, slaveholders, and slave breeders. He felt a deep compassion for blacks and, in fact, arranged to be buried in a black cemetery. But in his demands for black suffrage he was motivated, like many other Republicans, by a mixture of idealism and opportunism. Of the arguments for black voting that he set forth in the following speech in the House, which ones were the most selfish? the most idealistic?

There are several good reasons for the passage of this bill [for reconstrcuting the South].

In the first place, it is just. I am now confining my argument to Negro suffrage in the rebel states. Have not loyal blacks quite as good a right to choose rulers and make laws as rebel whites?

In the second place, it is a necessity in order to protect the loyal white men in the seceded states. The white Union men are in a great minority in each of those states. With them the blacks would act in a body; and it is believed that in each of said states, except one, the two united would form a majority, control the states, and protect themselves. Now they are the victims of daily murder. They must suffer constant persecution, or be exiled. . . .

Another good reason is, it would insure the ascendancy of the Union [Republican] Party. “Do you avow the party purpose?” exclaims some horror-stricken demagogue. I do. For I believe, on my conscience, that on the continued ascendancy of that party depends the safety of this great nation.

If impartial suffrage is excluded in the rebel states, then every one of them is sure to send a solid rebel representative delegation to Congress, and cast a solid rebel electoral vote. They, with their kindred Copperheads of the North, would always elect the President and control Congress. While Slavery sat upon her defiant throne, and insulted and intimidated the trembling North, the South frequently divided on questions of policy between Whigs and Democrats, and gave victory alternately to the sections. Now, you must divide them between loyalists, without regard to color, and disloyalists, or you will be the perpetual vassals of the free-trade, irritated, revengeful South.

For these, among other reasons, I am for Negro suffrage in every rebel state. If it be just, it should not be denied; if it be necessary, it should be adopted; if it be a punishment to traitors, they deserve it.

2. Black and White Legislatures (c. 1876)

Black suffrage was finally forced on the Southern whites by their new state constitutions and by the Fifteenth Amendment to the federal Constitution (1870). Tension grew worse as designing Northern “carpetbaggers” and Unionist Southern whites (“scalawags”) moved in to exploit the inexperienced former slaves. J. W. Leigh, an English clergyman turned Georgia rice planter, recorded the following observations in a personal letter. What conditions were most galling to the former Confederates?

The fact is, the poor Negro has since the war been placed in an entirely false position, and is therefore not to be blamed for many of the absurdities he has committed, seeing that he has been urged on by Northern “carpetbaggers” and Southern “scalawags,” who have used him as a tool to further their own nefarious ends.

The great mistake committed by the North was giving the Negroes the franchise so soon after their emancipation, when they were not the least prepared for it. In

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Footnote:

1865 slavery was abolished, and no one even among the Southerners, I venture to say, would wish it back. In 1868 they [Negroes] were declared citizens of the United States, and in 1870 they had the right of voting given them, and at the same time persons concerned in the rebellion were excluded from public trusts by what was called the “iron-clad” oath. And as if this was not enough, last year [1875] the Civil Rights Bill was passed, by which Negroes were to be placed on a perfect equality with whites, who were to be compelled to travel in the same cars with them, and to send their children to the same schools.

The consequence of all this is that where there is a majority of Negroes, as is the case in the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina, these states are placed completely under Negro rule, and scenes occur in the state legislatures which baffle description.

I recollect at the beginning of 1870 being at Montgomery, the capital of Alabama, and paying a visit to the State House there, when a discussion was going on with respect to a large grant which was to be made for the building of the Alabama and Chattanooga Railway, the real object of which was to put money into the pockets of certain carpetbaggers, who, in order to gain their object, had bribed all the Negroes to vote for the passing of the bill.

The scene was an exciting one. Several Negro members were present, with their legs stuck up on the desks in front of them, and spitting all about them in free and independent fashion. One gentleman having spoken for some time against the bill, and having reiterated his condemnation of it as a fraudulent speculation, a stout Negro member from Mobile sprung up and said, “Mister Speaker, when yesterday I spoke, I was not allowed to go on because you said I spoke twice on the same subject. Now what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. Dis Member is saying over and over again de same thing; why don’t you tell him to sit down? for what is sauce for,” etc. To which the Speaker said, “Sit down yourself, sir.” Another member (a carpetbagger) jumped up and shook his fist in the speaking member’s face, and told him he was a liar, and if he would come outside he would give him satisfaction.

This is nothing, however, to what has been going on in South Carolina this last session. Poor South Carolina, formerly the proudest state in America, boasting of her ancient families, remarkable for her wealth, culture, and refinement, now prostrate in the dust, ruled over by her former slaves, an old aristocratic society replaced by the most ignorant democracy that mankind ever saw invested with the functions of government. Of the 124 representatives, there are but 23 representatives of her old civilization, and these few can only look on at the squabbling crowd amongst whom they sit as silent enforced auditors. Of the 101 remaining, 94 are colored, and 7 their white allies. The few honest amongst them see plundering and corruption going on on all sides, and can do nothing....

The Negroes have it all their own way, and rob and plunder as they please. The Governor of South Carolina lives in luxury, and treats his soldiers to champagne, while the miserable planters have to pay taxes amounting to half their income, and if they fail to pay, their property is confiscated.

Louisiana and Mississippi are not much better off. The former has a Negro barber for its Lieutenant-governor, and the latter has just selected a Negro steamboat porter as its United States Senator, filling the place once occupied by Jefferson Davis.
W. E. B. Du Bois, a Massachusetts-born black of French Huguenot extraction, received his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1895. Distinguished as a teacher, lecturer, historian, economist, sociologist, novelist, poet, and propagandist, he became a militant advocate of equal rights. A founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), he served for twenty-four years as editor of its chief organ. Du Bois, who was born the day before the House impeached Johnson, here writes as a scholar. In what important respects does he argue that Reconstruction legislatures have been unfairly represented? In what ways were these bodies responsible for significant achievements?

Undoubtedly there were many ridiculous things connected with Reconstruction governments: the placing of ignorant field-hands who could neither read nor write in the legislature, the gold spittoons of South Carolina, the enormous public printing bill of Mississippi—all these were extravagant and funny; and yet somehow, to one who sees, beneath all that is bizarre, the real human tragedy of the upward striving of downtrodden men, the groping for light among people born in darkness, there is less tendency to laugh and jibe than among shallower minds and easier consciences. All that is funny is not bad.

Then, too, a careful examination of the alleged stealing in the South reveals much. First, there is repeated exaggeration. For instance, it is said that the taxation in Mississippi was fourteen times as great in 1874 as in 1869. This sounds staggering until we learn that the state taxation in 1869 was only ten cents on one hundred dollars, and that the expenses of government in 1874 were only twice as great as in 1860, and that too with a depreciated currency.

The character of the real thieving shows that white men must have been the chief beneficiaries. The frauds through the manipulation of state and railway bonds and of banknotes must have inured chiefly to the benefit of experienced white men, and this must have been largely the case in the furnishing and printing frauds.

That the Negroes, led by astute thieves, became tools and received a small share of the spoils is true. But much of the legislation which resulted in fraud was represented to the Negroes as good legislation, and thus their votes were secured by deliberate misrepresentation.

Granted, then, that the Negroes were to some extent venal but to a much larger extent ignorant and deceived, the question is: Did they show any signs of a disposition to learn better things? The theory of democratic governments is not that the will of the people is always right, but rather that normal human beings of average intelligence will, if given a chance, learn the right and best course by bitter experience. This is precisely what Negro voters showed indubitable signs of doing. First, they strove for schools to abolish ignorance, and, second, a large and growing number of them revolted against the carnival of extravagance and stealing that marred the beginning of Reconstruction, and joined with the best elements to institute reform.
We may recognize three things which Negro rule gave to the South:

1. Democratic government.
2. Free public schools.
3. New social legislation.

In South Carolina there was before the war a property qualification for officeholders, and, in part, for voters. The [Reconstruction] constitution of 1868, on the other hand, was a modern democratic document . . . preceded by a broad Declaration of Rights which did away with property qualifications and based representation directly on population instead of property. It especially took up new subjects of social legislation, declaring navigable rivers free public highways, instituting homestead exemptions, establishing boards of county commissioners, providing for a new penal code of laws, establishing universal manhood suffrage “without distinction of race or color,” devoting six sections to charitable and penal institutions and six to corporations, providing separate property for married women, etc. Above all, eleven sections of the Tenth Article were devoted to the establishment of a complete public-school system.

So satisfactory was the constitution thus adopted by Negro suffrage and by a convention composed of a majority of blacks that the state lived twenty-seven years under it without essential change. And when the constitution was revised in 1895, the revision was practically nothing more than an amplification of the constitution of 1868. No essential advance step of the former document was changed except the suffrage article.

There is no doubt but that the thirst of the black man for knowledge—a thirst which has been too persistent and durable to be mere curiosity or whim—gave birth to the public free-school system of the South. It was the question upon which black voters and legislators insisted more than anything else, and while it is possible to find some vestiges of free schools in some of the Southern states before the war, yet a universal, well-established system dates from the day that the black man got political power.

Finally, in legislation covering property, the wider functions of the state, the punishment of crime, and the like, it is sufficient to say that the laws on these points established by Reconstruction legislatures were not only different from and even revolutionary to the laws in the older South, but they were so wise and so well suited to the needs of the new South that in spite of a retrogressive movement following the overthrow of Negro governments, the mass of this legislation, with elaboration and development, still stands on the statute books of the South.

4. Benjamin Tillman’s Antiblack Tirade (1907)

Reared in a slaveowning family, Senator Benjamin R. Tillman of South Carolina had participated in antiblack outrages during Reconstruction days. His face contorted, his one good eye glowing like a live coal, and his voice rising to a whine, “Till-

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*Congressional Record, 59th Cong., 2d sess. (January 21, 1907), p. 1440.*
man the Terrible" shocked the Senate and the nation with wild speeches in which he boasted that "we took the government away [from blacks]," "we stuffed the ballot boxes," "we used "tissue ballots," "we shot them," "we are not ashamed of it," and "we will do it again." Whom does he blame most for the alleged conditions to which he refers?

It was in 1876, thirty years ago, and the people of South Carolina had been living under Negro rule for eight years. There was a condition bordering upon anarchy. Misrule, robbery, and murder were holding high carnival. The people’s substance was being stolen, and there was no incentive to labor. Our legislature was composed of a majority of Negroes, most of whom could neither read nor write. They were the easy dupes and tools of as dirty a band of vampires and robbers as ever preyed upon a prostrate people. . . . Life ceased to be worth having on the terms under which we were living, and in desperation we determined to take the government away from the Negroes.

We reorganized the Democratic party [of South Carolina] with one plank, and only one plank, namely, that "this is a white man’s country, and white men must govern it." Under that banner we went to battle.

We had 8000 Negro militia organized by carpetbaggers. . . . They used to drum up and down the roads with their fifes and their gleaming bayonets, equipped with new Springfield rifles and dressed in the regulation uniform. It was lawful, I suppose, but these Negro soldiers—or this Negro militia, for they were never soldiers—growing more and more bold, let drop talk among themselves where the white children might hear their purpose, and it came to our ears. This is what they said: "The President [Grant] is our friend. The North is with us. We intend to kill all the white men, take the land, marry the white women, and then these white children will wait on us." . . .

We knew—who knew better—that the North then was a unit in its opposition to Southern ideas, and that it was their purpose to perpetuate Negro governments in those states where it could be done by reason of their being a Negro majority. Having made up our minds, we set about it as practical men. . . .

Clashes came. The Negro militia grew unbearable and more and more insolent. I am not speaking of what I have read; I am speaking of what I know, of what I saw. There were two militia companies in my township and a regiment in my county. We had clashes with these Negro militiamen. The Hamburg riot was one clash, in which seven Negroes and one white man were killed. A month later we had the Ellenton riot, in which no one ever knew how many Negroes were killed, but there were forty or fifty or a hundred. It was a fight between barbarism and civilization, between the African and the Caucasian, for mastery.

It was then that "we shot them"; it was then that "we killed them"; it was then that "we stuffed ballot boxes." After the [federal] troops came and told us, "You must stop this rioting," we had decided to take the government away from men so debased as were the Negroes. . . .

[President] Grant sent troops to maintain the carpetbag government in power and to protect the Negroes in the right to vote. He merely obeyed the law. . . . Then it was that "we stuffed ballot boxes," because desperate diseases require desperate remedies, and having resolved to take the state away, we hesitated at nothing. . . .
I want to say now that we have not shot any Negroes in South Carolina on account of politics since 1876. We have not found it necessary. Eighteen hundred and seventy-six happened to be the hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and the action of the white men of South Carolina in taking the state away from the Negroes we regard as a second declaration of independence by the Caucasian from African barbarism.

E. The Ku Klux Klan’s Reign of Terror

1. Alfred Richardson Testifies About Reconstruction-Era Georgia (1871)

In 1871, a special congressional committee took testimony, in hearings conducted in both Washington and the South, about the mounting violence that was being visited upon the newly freed blacks, especially by the Ku Klux Klan. The extensive record of the committee’s investigation provides grisly evidence of the dangerous situation in which black men and women found themselves in the post–Civil War South. The testimony excerpted below was given by Alfred Richardson. He was born a slave in Georgia in about 1837 and supported his wife and three children after emancipation by working as a carpenter. He was also politically active in the Republican party, an affiliation that brought down upon him the savage wrath of his white neighbors, virtually all of them Democrats. What does his testimony suggest about the political situation in the Reconstruction-era South? about the situation of black women? By what means did whites assert political and economic control over blacks? In the light of this testimony, how should the success or failure of Reconstruction policy be judged?

Washington, D.C., July 7, 1871

Alfred Richardson (colored) sworn and examined.

Question. Since you became a freeman have you voted?
Answer. Yes, sir.
Question. With what party have you voted?
Answer. The republican party.
Question. State to the committee whether you have been attacked in any way by anybody; if so, when and how. Tell us the whole story about it.
Answer. Yes, sir; I was attacked twice. The first time was just before last Christmas; I cannot recollect exactly what day.
Question. Tell us all the particulars.
Answer. There was a set of men came down to about a quarter of a mile of where I live. They were all disguised. They had taken out an old man by the name of

Charles Watson. They commenced beating him. His wife and children all ran out, and screamed and hallooed for help to stop the men from beating him to death. We, who were in town, came out to see what was the matter.

**Question.** You heard the outcry?

**Answer.** Yes, sir, and came out to see what was the matter. . . . It was the Ku-Klux, who had this old man down in the corner of the fence, knocking him and telling him he had to tell where Alfred Richardson was, and had to go with them to his house and show how he was fixed up. . . .

**Question.** They wanted him to tell where you were?

**Answer.** Yes, sir; they wanted him to tell where I was, and how I was fixed up; they said he had to go and get me out. In the mean time, while they were telling him this, a crowd of boys came on behind me, and we all ran up, after we heard what they were up to. They all broke and ran, and carried this old man with them. We followed them to the forks of the road. . . . I could not see anybody for a long time; a cloud had got over the moon. After a while I saw one fellow slipping alongside the fence. He had a pistol in his hand, as if to shoot me. When I saw him doing that, I took my pistol, and shot at him. When I shot at him there were three or four men who shot me from through the fence. I did not see them. They shot about twenty shots into my leg and hip. I went off home, and went to the doctor's office. The doctor examined me, and fixed my wounds up. In three or four days I got so that I could travel very well. Things went on till after Christ­mas. On the 18th of January a man by the name of John O. Thrasher came to me——

**Question.** Was he a white man?

**Answer.** Yes, sir; . . . This man told me, "There are some men about here that have something against you; and they intend to kill you or break you up. They say you are making too much money; that they do not allow any nigger to rise that way; that you can control all the colored votes; and they intend to break you up, and then they can rule the balance of the niggers when they get you off." He said, "They said they wanted me to join their party, but I told them I did not want to do it; I never knew you to do anything wrong, and these are a parcel of low-down men, and I don't want to join any such business; but I tell you, you had better keep your eyes open, for they are after you." . . . I talked to the ordinary, and the clerk of the court, and several other citizens. They said they didn't see why anybody wanted to interrupt me; that I had always kept the peace between the colored and the white people; that when there was a fuss I was the only man that could break it up and make the colored people behave themselves; that they hated to let me go away. . . . The same night this man was telling me that, I went to bed about 9 o'clock. Between 12 and 1 o'clock these men came; there were about twenty or twenty-five of them, I reckon. . . . [T]hey broke in the lower door and came up-stairs firing in every direction. I could not stand in the stairway to shoot at them. I had some small arms back in the garret. There was a door up there about large enough for one man to creep in. I thought I had better go in there, and maybe they would not find me—probably they would miss me, and I could make my escape. They all came up-stairs. My wife opened the window to call out for help, and a fellow shot at her some twelve or fifteen times through that window while she was hallooing. A whole
crowd came up, and when they saw that window open, they said, “He has jumped out of the window,” and they hallooed to the fellows on the ground to shoot on top of the house. Thinking I had gone out of the window, they all went down-stairs except one man. He went and looked in the cuddy-hole where I was, and saw me there. He hallooed to the rest of the fellows that he had found me; but they had got down-stairs, and some of them were on the piazza. Then he commenced firing, and shot me three times. He lodged two balls in my side, and one in the right arm. That weakened me pretty smartly. After he had shot his loads all out, he said to the rest of them, “Come back up here; I have got him; and I have shot him, but he is not quite dead; let us go up and finish him.” I crept from the door of the little room where I was to the stairway; they came up-stairs with their pistols in their hands, and a man behind with a light. I shot one of them as he got on the top step. They gathered him up by the legs; and then they all ran and left me. I never saw any more of them that night; and I have not seen them since . . .

Question. Do these bands of men ever whip women?
Answer. Yes, sir.

Question. Why do they whip women? They do not vote.
Answer. Many times, you know, a white lady has a colored lady for cook or waiting in the house, or something of that sort. They have some quarrel, and sometimes probably the colored woman gives the lady a little jaw. In a night or two a crowd will come in and take her out and whip her.

Question. For talking saucily to her mistress?
Answer. Yes, sir.

Question. Does that state of things control colored labor down there? Do these bands make the negroes work for whomever they please?
Answer. Do you mean the Ku-Klux?
Question. Yes, sir.
Answer. Well, they go sometimes so far as this: When a man is hired, if he and his employer have any dispute about the price, and there are hard words between them about the amount of money to be paid, they whip the colored man for disputing the white man’s word, or having any words with him.

Question. They whip the colored man for having any dispute with his employer about what shall be paid him?
Answer. Yes, sir.

Question. Is that common?
Answer. Yes, sir; that has been done several times. Sometimes colored people are working for a part of the crop. They work on till the crop is nearly completed and ready for gathering. Then a fuss arises between them and the employer, and they are whipped off—whipped off by these men in disguise . . . Some of the colored people swear that they do not intend to farm any more, excepting they can have peace to gather what they plant. Now, they work a part of the year and then get run off and make nothing. So they conclude it is best to go to some city and work by the day for what they can get. Every town in our State where there is any protection is overrun with colored people. Many of the farm hands are there; and there is a great mass of loafers who stand round town because they have got no work to do. Yet people’s fields around in the country
are running away with grass. Some men go to town and try to get hands. The colored men will ask, “In what part of the country do you live?” The man will mention such and such a place. They will say, “We can’t go down there; the Ku-Klux is down there. If it wasn’t for the Ku-Klux we would go down and work for you.” . . .

2. Maria Carter Describes an Encounter with the Klan (1871)

Maria Carter, a twenty-eight-year-old slave from South Carolina, lived in Georgia at the time she gave the following testimony to the Joint Select Committee at its hearing in Atlanta. She describes a Klan raid on her house and that of a neighbor, John Walthall. What was Walthall’s alleged offense? How might one account for the ferocity of the assault on Carter’s family and Walthall?

Maria Carter (colored) sworn and examined.

Question. How old are you, where were you born, and where do you now live?
Answer. I will be twenty-eight years old on the 4th day of next March; I was born in South Carolina; and I live in Haralson County now.

Question. Are you married or single?
Answer. I am married.

Question. What is your husband’s name?
Answer. Jasper Carter.

Question. Where were you on the night that John Walthall was shot?
Answer. In my house, next to his house; not more than one hundred yards from his house.

Question. Did any persons come to your house that night?
Answer. Yes, sir, lots of them; I expect about forty or fifty of them.

Question. What did they do at your house?
Answer. They just came there and called; we did not get up when they first called.

We heard them talking as they got over the fence. They came hollering and knocking at the door, and they scared my husband so bad he could not speak when they first came. I answered them. They hollered, “Open the door,” I said, “Yes, sir.” They were at the other door, and they said, “Kindle a light.” My husband went to kindle a light, and they busted both doors open and ran in—two in one door and two in the other. I heard the others coming on behind them, jumping over the fence in the yard. One put his gun down to him and said, “Is this John Walthall?” They had been hunting him a long time. They had gone to my brother-in-law’s hunting him, and had whipped one of my sisters-in-law powerfully and two more men on account of him. They said they were going to

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kill him when they got hold of him. They asked my husband if he was John Walthall. He was so scared he could not say anything. I said, “No.” I never got up at all. They asked where he was, and we told them he was up to the next house. They jerked my husband up and said that he had to go up there. I heard them up there hollering “Open the door,” and I heard them break the door down. While they were talking about our house, just before they broke open our door, I heard a chair fall over in John Walthall’s house. He raised a plank then and tried to get under the house. A parcel of them ran ahead and broke the door down and jerked his wife out of the bed. I did not see them, for I was afraid to go out of doors. They knocked his wife about powerfully. I heard them cursing her. She commenced hollering, and I heard some of them say, “God damn her, shoot her.” They struck her over the head with a pistol. The house looked next morning as if somebody had been killing hogs there. Some of them said, “Fetch a light here, quick;” and some of them said to her, “Hold a light.” They said she held it, and they put their guns down on him and shot him. I heard him holler, and some of them said, “Pull him out, pull him out.” When they pulled him out the hole was too small, and I heard them jerk a plank part off the house and I heard it fly back. At that time four men came in my house and drew a gun on me; I was sitting in my bed and the baby was yelling. They asked, “Where is John Walthall?” I said, “Up yonder.” They said, “Who lives here?” I said, “Jasper Carter.” They said, “Where is John Walthall?” I said, “Them folks have got him.” They said, “What folks?” I said, “Them folks up there.” They came in and out all the time. I heard John holler when they commenced whipping him. They said, “Don’t holler, or we’ll kill you in a minute.” I undertook to try and count, but they scared me so bad that I stopped counting; but I think they hit him about three hundred licks after they shot him. I heard them clear down to our house ask him if he felt like sleeping with some more white women; and they said, “You steal, too, God damn you.” John said, “No, sir.” They said, “Hush your mouth, God damn your eyes, you do steal.” I heard them talking, but that was all I heard plain. They beat him powerfully. She said they made her put her arms around his neck and then they whipped them both together. I saw where they struck her head with a pistol and bumped her head against the house, and the blood is there yet. They asked me where my husband’s gun was; I said he had no gun, and they said I was a damned liar. One of them had a sort of gown on, and he put his gun in my face and I pushed it up. The other said, “Don’t you shoot her.” He then went and looked in a trunk among the things. I allowed they were hunting for a pistol. My husband had had one, but he sold it. Another said, “Let’s go away from here.” They brought in old Uncle Charlie and sat him down there. They had a light at the time, and I got to see some of them good. I knew two of them, but the others I could not tell. There was a very large light in the house, and they went to the fire and I saw them. They came there at about 12 o’clock and staid there until 1. They went on back to old Uncle Charley’s then, to whip his girls and his wife. They did not whip her any to hurt her at all. They jabbed me on the head with a gun, and I heard the trigger pop. It scared me and I throwed my hand up. He put it back again, and I pushed it away again.

Question. How old was your baby?
Answer. Not quite three weeks old.

Question. You were still in bed?

Answer. Yes, sir; I never got up at all.

Question. Did they interrupt your husband in any way?

Answer. Yes, sir; they whipped him mightily; I do not know how much. They took him away up the road, over a quarter, I expect. I saw the blood running down when he came back. Old Uncle Charkey was in there. They did not carry him back home. They said, “Old man, you don’t steal.” He said, “No.” They sat him down and said to him, “You just stay here.” Just as my husband got back to one door and stepped in, three men came in the other door. They left a man at John’s house while they were ripping around. As they came back by the house they said, “By God, good-bye, hallelujah!” I was scared nearly to death, and my husband tried to keep it hid from me. I asked him if he had been whipped much. He said, “No.” I saw his clothes were bloody, and the next morning they stuck to him, and his shoulder was almost like jelly.

3. Henry Lowther Falls Victim to the Klan (1871)

Forty-one-year-old Henry Lowther was jailed on a charge of conspiring to kill a black man by the name of Rack Bell, who allegedly collaborated with the Ku Klux Klan. What does his gruesome account reveal about the Ku Klux Klan’s tactics? What role do you think the physician played?

Atlanta, Georgia, October 20, 1871

Henry Lowther (colored) sworn and examined.

I was put in jail Saturday evening; my son was put in there with me. They said they had a warrant for him, but they did not have any . . . . I said, “Tell Captain Cummins to come here.” A gentleman came with him by the name of Beaman. Captain Cummins sat down and talked with me about an hour, but there was nothing he said that I thought had any substance in it, only when he went to leave he said, “Harry, are you willing to give up your stones to save your life?” I sat there for a moment, and then I told him, “Yes.” Said he, “If they come for you will you make fight?” I said “No.” He said, “No fuss whatever?” I said, “No.” That was about an hour by sun. I lay right down then and went to sleep, and did not wake up until 2 o’clock in the morning. Then I saw one Ku-Klux in jail with a light. I raised up, and he caught my arm and told me to come out. I came out and looked around, and the whole town was covered with them.

Question. Covered with what?

Answer. Ku-Klux. There were supposed to be one hundred and eighty of them.

When they first took me out they tied me and carried me off from the jail-house about a hundred yards; they then divided into four parties, and about twenty of them carried me off into a swamp about two miles. Well, within a hundred

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yards of the swamp they all stopped and called numbers, began with number one, and went up as high as number ten. When they got to number ten they went for a rope, and I was satisfied they were going to hang me. I begged for my life. They told me if they did not kill me I would shoot into the Ku-Klux again. I told them I had not done it. They asked me who it was; I told them who I heard it was, but I did not know. One of them who was standing by told the other who was talking to me to hush up and ask no questions, because he knew more about it than I did. They went on then into the swamp, and came to a halt again, and stood there and talked awhile. There were eight men walking with me—one hold of each arm, three in front of me with guns, and three right behind me. After some conversation, just before they were ordered to march, or something was said, every man cocked his gun and looked right at me. I thought they were going to shoot me, and leave me right there. The moon was shining bright, and I could see them. I was satisfied they were going to kill me, and I did not care much then. They asked me whether I preferred to be altered [castrated] or to be killed. I said I preferred to be altered. After laying me down and getting through they said: “Now, as soon as you can get to a doctor go to one; you know the doctors in this country, and as soon as you are able to leave do it, or we will kill you next time.” I asked how long it would take to get well, and they said five or six weeks. I was naked and bleeding very much. It was two miles and a quarter to a doctor’s. The first man’s house I got to was the jailer's. I called him up and asked him to go to the jail-house and get my clothes. He said he could not go; I said, “You must; I am naked and nearly froze to death.” That was about 3 o’clock in the night. He had a light in the house, and there was a party of men standing in the door. I told him I wanted him to come out and give me some attention. He said he could not come. I could hardly walk then. I went on about ten steps further and I met the jailer’s son-in-law. I asked him to go and get my clothes; and he said, “No,” and told me to go up and lie down. I went right on and got up to a store; there were a great many men sitting along on the store piazza; I knew some of them, but I did not look at them much. They asked me what I wanted; I said I wanted a doctor. They told me to go on and lie down. I had then to stop and hold on to the side of the house to keep from falling. I staid there a few minutes, and then went on to a doctor’s house, about a quarter of a mile, and called him aloud twice. He did not answer me. The next thing I knew I was lying on the sidewalk in the street—seemed to have just waked up out of a sleep. I thought to myself, “Did I lie down here and go to sleep?” I wanted some water; I had to go about a quarter of a mile to get some water; I was getting short of breath, but the water helped me considerably. I went to a house about fifty yards further. I called to a colored woman to wake my wife up; she was in town. I happened to find my son there, and he went back for a doctor. When he got there the doctor answered the first time he called him. The reason he did not answer me was that he was off on this raid. I asked the doctor where he was when I was at his house, and he said he was asleep. I said, “I was at your house.” The men kept coming in and saying to me that I did not get to the doctor’s house, and I said that I did. After two or three times I took the hint, and said nothing more about that. But I told my son the next morning to go there and see if there was not a
large puddle of blood at the gate. They would not let him go. But some colored women came to see me and told me that the blood was all over town; at the doctor’s gate, and everywhere else. It was running a stream all the time I was trying to find the doctor, and I thought I would bleed to death. My son tended me until I got so I could travel. Doctor Cummins came there to my house on Tuesday evening, between sunset and dark, and said, “I am told you say the reason I did not come to you was that I was out on the raid with the Ku-Klux.” I said, “I did not say so.” He said, “That is what I heard,” and he seemed to be mad about it. He said, “I am a practicing physician, and am liable to be called at night, and must go; I was in my horse-lot then.” He talked a long while, and then he said he was in his stable. He kept talking, and after awhile he said he was in his drug-store. So I never knew where he was. He said the reason he was hiding about so was he was afraid of the Ku-Klux. In a day or two he came to the house and said, “The white people have got up a story here, and say I am the man who castrated you; now, this talk must stop.” I said, “Doctor, I can’t help it; I don’t know who did it; I didn’t start the story.” He said it had to be stopped; and then he began to tell me where he was; that the Ku-Klux came in, and he went right off to hide. In a few days his brother, Captain Cummins, came in and said, “Harry, I am told you make a threat of what you are going to do when you get well.” I said, “What can I do?” He shook his head. I said, “Do the people believe it?” He said, “Yes, some of the most responsible people in town do believe it.” I said, “I am very sorry.” I then said, “Do you think the Ku-Klux will bother me any more?” He said, “If this talk dies out, I do not think they will pester you any more.” I had been in the house about seventeen days; I was not able to walk, but I was uneasy; they came to me so many times that I began to be uneasy, and I left there. Just before I left they sent old man Bush and Mr. Hatfield to me to know if I would stay here and turn state’s evidence against them. I said, “I am in a close place; the Ku-Klux have ordered me to leave; but I reckon I will try and stay.” When I got so I could travel—I believe I lay there twenty-one days—I think it was the 22d of September, I left there. Now, I want you to understand that there was a man by the name of Lavender, who got up a company of men after they came to my house on a Monday night. I had run away. They told my wife to tell me that they would give me five days to leave in....

F. The Legacy of Reconstruction

1. Editor E. L. Godkin Grieves (1871)

Irish-born E. L. Godkin, a fearless liberal, founded the distinguished and long-lived New York Nation in 1865. So biting were his criticisms that the magazine was dubbed “the weekly day of judgment.” His views on the blunders of Reconstruction were aired with incisiveness. He argued that there were two ways of dealing with the
postwar South: (1) reorganize the section “from top to bottom” or (2) treat the whole community as made up of “unfortunate Americans, equally entitled to care and protection, demoralized by an accused institution for which the whole Union was responsible, and which the whole Union had connived at, and, down to 1860, had profited by.” But the North, wrote Godkin, followed neither course. Which aspects of Reconstruction does he regard as the most regrettable?

The condition of the Negro after emancipation... attracted the carpetbagger as naturally as a dead ox attracts the buzzard. The lower class of demagogue scents an unenlightened constituency at an almost incredible distance, and travels towards it over mountain, valley, and river with the certainty of the mariner’s compass.

But then we hastened his coming by our legislation. We deliberately, and for an indefinite period, excluded all the leading Southern men from active participation in the management of their local affairs, by a discrimination not unlike that which would be worked in this city [New York], but very much worse, if every man who had not at some time belonged to the Tammany Society were declared incapable of holding office.

It was before the war the time-honored custom of the Southern states, and a very good custom too, to put their ablest men, and men of the highest social standing and character, in office. The consequence was that it was these men who figured most prominently in the steps which led to the rebellion, and in the rebellion itself. When the war was over, we singled these men out, and not unnaturally, for punishment by the 14th Amendment and other legislation.

But we forgot that, as the President points out, they were no worse, so far as disloyalty went, than the rest of the community. They broke their oaths of allegiance to the United States, but the other white men of the South would have done the same thing if they had got the chance of doing it by being elevated to office, either under the United States or under the Confederacy. We forgot, too, that when putting a mutinous crew in irons, the most justly indignant captain leaves at liberty enough able-bodied seamen to work the ship... 

The results... have been positively infernal. In the idea that we were befriending the Negroes, we gave them possession of the government, and deprived them of the aid of all the local capacity and experience in the management of it, thus offering the states as a prey to Northern adventurers, and thus inflicting on the freedmen the very worst calamity which could befall a race newly emerged from barbarism—that is, familiarity, in the very first movements of enfranchisement, with the process of a corrupt administration, carried on by gangs of depraved vagabonds, in which the public money was stolen, the public faith made an article of traffic, the legislature openly corrupted, and all that the community contained of talent, probity, and social respectability put under a legal ban as something worthless and disreputable.

We do not hesitate to say that a better mode of debauching the freedmen, and making them permanently unfit for civil government, could hardly have been hit on had the North had such an object deliberately in view. Instead of establishing equal rights for all, we set up the government of a class, and this class the least competent, the most ignorant and inexperienced, and a class, too, whose history and antecedents made its rule peculiarly obnoxious to the rest of the community.
Out of this state of things Ku-Kluxing has grown... naturally.... We cannot gainsay anything anybody says of the atrocity of riding about the country at night with one's face blackened, murdering and whipping people. But we confess we condemn Ku-Kluxing very much as we condemn the cholera.... There is no more use in getting in a rage with Ku-Kluxery, and sending cavalry and artillery after it, than of legislating against pestilence, as long as nothing is done to remove the causes.

2. Frederick Douglass Complains (1882)

The incredible former slave Frederick Douglass (see p. 351) raised two famous black regiments in Massachusetts during the Civil War. Among the first recruits were his own sons. Continuing his campaign for civil rights and suffrage for the freedmen, he wrote the following bitter commentary in his autobiography. One of his keenest regrets was that the federal government, despite the urgings of Thaddeus Stevens and others, failed to provide land for the freed slaves. In the light of his observations, how would free land have alleviated the conditions he describes? Why did the former slaveowners make life extremely difficult for the former slaves?

Though slavery was abolished, the wrongs of my people were not ended. Though they were not slaves, they were not yet quite free. No man can be truly free whose liberty is dependent upon the thought, feeling, and action of others, and who has himself no means in his own hands for guarding, protecting, defending, and maintaining that liberty. Yet the Negro after his emancipation was precisely in this state of destitution.

The law on the side of freedom is of great advantage only where there is power to make that law respected. I know no class of my fellow men, however just, enlightened, and humane, which can be wisely and safely trusted absolutely with the liberties of any other class. Protestants are excellent people, but it would not be wise for Catholics to depend entirely upon them to look after their rights and interests. Catholics are a pretty good sort of people (though there is a soul-shuddering history behind them); yet no enlightened Protestants would commit their liberty to their care and keeping.

And yet the government had left the freedmen in a worse condition than either of these. It felt that it had done enough for him. It had made him free, and henceforth he must make his own way in the world, or, as the slang phrase has it, “root, pig, or die.” Yet he had none of the conditions for self-preservation or self-protection.

He was free from the individual master, but the slave of society. He had neither money, property, nor friends. He was free from the old plantation, but he had nothing but the dusty road under his feet. He was free from the old quarter that once gave him shelter, but a slave to the rains of summer and the frosts of winter. He was, in a word, literally turned loose, naked, hungry, and destitute, to the open sky.

The first feeling toward him by the old master classes was full of bitterness and wrath. They resented his emancipation as an act of hostility toward them, and, since they could not punish the emancipator, they felt like punishing the object which that act had emancipated. Hence they drove him off the old plantation, and told him he was no longer wanted there. They not only hated him because he had been freed as a punishment to them, but because they felt that they had been robbed of his labor.

An element of greater bitterness still came into their hearts: the freedman had been the friend of the government, and many of his class had borne arms against them during the war. The thought of paying cash for labor that they could formerly extort by the lash did not in any wise improve their disposition to the emancipated slave, or improve his own condition.

Now, since poverty has, and can have, no chance against wealth, the landless against the landowner, the ignorant against the intelligent, the freedman was powerless. He had nothing left him but a slavery-distorted and diseased body, and lame and twisted limbs, with which to fight the battle of life.

3. Booker T. Washington Reflects (1901)

Booker T. Washington was reared in a one-room, dirt-floored shanty and never slept on a bed until after emancipation. Obtaining an education under grave hardships, he ultimately became the head of the famed industrial institute at Tuskegee, Alabama. The acknowledged leader of his race after Frederick Douglass died in 1895, he won additional fame as an orator and as an apostle of “gradualism” in achieving equality with the whites. He believed that blacks should acquire manual skills and otherwise prove themselves worthy of a place beside whites. Black intellectuals like W. E. B. Du Bois (see p. 523) criticized this conservative “Uncle Tomism” as condemning the race to permanent inferiority. In the following selection from Washington’s justly famous autobiography, what does the author regard as the chief mistakes made by both whites and blacks in Reconstruction?

Though I was but little more than a youth during the period of Reconstruction, I had the feeling that mistakes were being made, and that things could not remain in the condition that they were in then very long. I felt that the Reconstruction policy, so far as it related to my race, was in a large measure on a false foundation, was artificial and forced. In many cases it seemed to me that the ignorance of my race was being used as a tool with which to help white men into office, and that there was an element in the North which wanted to punish the Southern white men by forcing the Negro into positions over the heads of the Southern whites. I felt that the Negro would be the one to suffer for this in the end. Besides, the general political agitation drew the attention of our people away from the more fundamental matters of perfecting themselves in the industries at their doors and in securing property.

The temptations to enter political life were so alluring that I came very near yielding to them at one time, but I was kept from doing so by the feeling that I would be helping in a more substantial way by assisting in the laying of the foundation of the race through a generous education of the hand, head, and heart. I saw colored men who were members of the state legislatures, and county officers, who, in some cases, could not read or write, and whose morals were as weak as their education.

Not long ago, when passing through the streets of a certain city in the South, I heard some brick-masons calling out, from the top of a two-story brick building on which they were working, for the "Governor" to "hurry up and bring up some more bricks." Several times I heard the command, "Hurry up, Governor!" "Hurry up, Governor!" My curiosity was aroused to such an extent that I made inquiry as to who the "Governor" was, and soon found that he was a colored man who at one time had held the position of Lieutenant-Governor of his state.

But not all the colored people who were in office during Reconstruction were unworthy of their positions, by any means. Some of them, like the late Senator B. K. Bruce, Governor Pinchback, and many others, were strong, upright, useful men. Neither were all the class designated as carpetbaggers dishonorable men. Some of them, like ex-Governor Bullock of Georgia, were men of high character and usefulness.

Of course the colored people, so largely without education, and wholly without experience in government, made tremendous mistakes, just as any people similarly situated would have done. Many of the Southern whites have a feeling that, if the Negro is permitted to exercise his political rights now to any degree, the mistakes of the Reconstruction period will repeat themselves. I do not think this would be true, because the Negro is a much stronger and wiser man than he was thirty-five years ago, and he is fast learning the lesson that he cannot afford to act in a manner that will alienate his Southern white neighbors from him. . . .

During the whole of the Reconstruction period our people throughout the South looked to the federal government for everything, very much as a child looks to its mother. This was not unnatural. The central government gave them freedom, and the whole nation had been enriched for more than two centuries by the labor of the Negro. Even as a youth, and later in manhood, I had the feeling that it was cruelly wrong in the central government, at the beginning of our freedom, to fail to make some provision for the general education of our people in addition to what the states might do, so that the people would be the better prepared for the duties of citizenship.

It is easy to find fault, to remark what might have been done, and perhaps, after all, and under all the circumstances, those in charge of the conduct of affairs did the only thing that could be done at the time. Still, as I look back now over the entire period of our freedom, I cannot help feeling that it would have been wiser if some plan could have been put in operation which would have made the possession of a certain amount of education or property, or both, a test for the exercise of the franchise, and a way provided by which this test should be made to apply honestly and squarely to both the white and black races.
Chapter 22  The Ordeal of Reconstruction, 1865–1877

Thought Provokers

1. Was the white South ever really defeated in spirit? Would the results have been more satisfactory from its point of view if it had accepted the rule of the conqueror with better grace?

2. What were the major differences between presidential and congressional Reconstruction plans? What accounts for those different approaches? Who had the better constitutional arguments? Who advocated the soundest policies?

3. It has been said that Johnson was his own worst enemy and that the white Southerners were damaged by his determination to befriend them with a “soft” policy. Comment critically.

4. Present the cases for and against immediate and gradual black suffrage. Form conclusions. Why have the excesses of the black-white legislatures been overplayed and their achievements downgraded?

5. Why did organizations like the Ku Klux Klan flourish in the Reconstruction South? In what ways did the KKK resemble a modern “terrorist” group?

6. Identify the most serious long-run mistake made during Reconstruction. What have been the effects of that mistake?