America and Reconstruction

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Reconstruction has variously been termed “repressive... uncivilized” and “a sordid time” as well as “a noble experiment.” Reflected in those judgments of the era is the dispute over the effects of Reconstruction. To be more correct, one might say that there has been much conjecture in determining what, in fact, Reconstruction was. Questioned also has been the role of the black man during the period; much of what he did, or was responsible for, has, like Reconstruction itself, been subject to many and varied accounts and evaluations. The intent of this paper is to examine several volumes concerned with blacks during Reconstruction and to reflect upon the worth of those studies.

John W. Burgess provided one of this century’s first analytical views of the era, in his examination of the constitutional aspects of Reconstruction—Reconstruction and the Constitution, 1866-1876. Burgess was concerned with congressional Republicans, though he did discuss the black man’s plight.

Burgess contends that blacks dominated the Southern Reconstruction governments—although it is not clear if “black domination” refers to black suffrage or to blacks in political office (in either case, the contention is incorrect). In granting freedmen the right to vote, says Burgess, Congress committed “one of the blunder-crimes of the century. There is something natural in the subordination of an inferior race to a superior race, even to the point of enslavement of the inferior race, but there is nothing natural in the opposite.”

Burgess, with not so affectionate alliteration, refers to black militiamen as “brutal blacks in blue,” and disposes of those blacks participating in government as “evil and corrupt,” quite susceptible to graft and responsible for the excessively heavy burdens of taxation that drove Southern whites to the point of rebellion. Regarding the Southern black dominated governments, Burgess writes: “The conduct of the men who now
appeared upon the scene as the creators of the new South was so tyrannic, corrupt, mean, and vulgar as to repel the historian from attempting any detailed account of their doings and incline him to vaguest outlines."

Thus, the discerning reader suffers what became commonplace in historical interpretation of the role of blacks in Reconstruction, and, one might add, to the place of blacks in American history generally. This is an unfounded assumption, that blacks were incapable and incompetent. In place of critical analysis and diligent research was an abnegation of the historian's traditional responsibility to sift and examine all pertinent facts relevant to his study. Moving into the void was myth. Myth became fact, and fact was perpetuated as actuality.

William A. Dunning is of crucial importance in understanding the attitudes historians held toward blacks. His thoughts influenced an entire generation of scholars. Although Reconstruction, Political and Economic was written and published in the early years of this century, his views are still widely accepted in text books and by popular misconception. Dunning writes that Reconstruction governments in the South were ruinous, corrupt and inefficient; they were controlled by "ambitious Northern whites, inexperienced Southern whites and the unintelligent blacks."

Considering the freedmen, Dunning opines: "The Negro had no pride of race and no aspiration or ideals save to be like the whites. With civil rights and political power not won but almost forced upon him, he came gradually to understand and crave those more elusive privileges that constitute social equality." What later came to be known as "Black Power," (i.e. an exercise of political strength) was "Africanization" to Dunning. The blacks, when achieving positions of political power, as in South Carolina, wrought only a "shameless caricature of government."

Dunning believed the black race to be inferior in every respect. Granting blacks the vote was simply a means whereby Radicals (those congressional Republicans who actually did seek to inflict retribution upon a war-ravaged South) could punish the South, or create a solid Republican majority. That a sense of justice might have been the basis for extending this right to blacks was not considered. Blacks were seen as incapable of anything but creating havoc and were especially dangerous in positions of political power. For Dunning, whiteness was the prerequisite of virtue and accomplishment in all but, of course, manual labor. The governments of post-war South would not be "pure" until blacks had been excluded.

In his bibliography Dunning cites several authors, including George W. Williams, Woodrow Wilson, and John W. Burgess, none of whom
would have led him to question his racist views. But to say that Dunning, or any of his contemporaries, was racist is less an indictment of the individual than of the times in which he wrote.

The Dunningites won "wide popularity," as Bernard A. Weisberger notes, with the publication in 1929 of "a zestful work of imagination, The Tragic Era," by Claude G. Bowers. Despite its imagery and inaccuracy, The Tragic Era was widely read and accepted. Howard K. Beale, in analyzing Reconstruction history, calls Bowers' work "superficial," but "based on the serious study of the [Dunningites]. It accepted their reinterpretations." Bowers' views, then, may be viewed as a synthesis of the work done by those of the Dunning school. Summarizing Bowers' thesis allows one to view the worst of the Dunningites.

It is hoped that by direct exposure to this material, one can appreciate its gross and obvious inaccuracy. Unfortunately, Burgess' "vaguest outlines" will not suffice. For in order to effectively question one's own misconceptions, a genesis of those faculty concepts must be examined. The Dunningite thesis was initially accepted because it comported with the then-current racist beliefs. It came later to be accepted as valid historical interpretation. It cannot be so accepted today.

Bowers' Preface notes that during Reconstruction, "the Southern people were literally put to the torture . . ." In all aspects, Reconstruction was seen to be a "monstrous calamity." By painting Reconstruction in harsh terms, Bowers did greater injustice to the black man than to the era itself. The Tragic Era views men and events in simplistic terms: as good or evil. Andrew Johnson and the native Southerner could do very little wrong. Blacks and Republicans did nothing that was good.

The reader sees Thad Stevens as the prime mover in Radical Reconstruction. Through Bowers' imagery one can almost visualize this evil, cunning, sinewy old man, slinking through the Halls of Congress, his singular purpose the punishment of the South. The instrument through which the Congressional Republicans could maintain control of the South was the freedmen. But "left to themselves, the Negroes would have turned for leadership to the native whites, who understood them best." To prevent this, the Radicals sent Freedmen's Bureau agents to the South "to arouse the passions of the Negroes with incendiary speeches." Soon the blacks were allied with the Republicans in creating the "monstrous and loathsome" reconstructed state governments.

Black people were seen as having done the most harm to the well-being and honor of the South through their activities in two important functions: as militiamen and office-holders. In regard to the former, Bowers contends that "nothing short of stupendous ignorance, or brutal malignity, can explain the arming and uniforming of former slaves and
setting them as guardians over the white men and their families.”10 Of their performance as militiamen: “Laughing, jeering, singing obscene songs, they lurched along the highways and through the villages on a gay lark of utter irresponsibility . . . as they swaggered along threatening to burn . . . bullying the people . . . with pistols, they were making arrests indiscriminately, with the courts wide open, and gratifying sadistic impulses by torturing prisoners.”15 “Sundays found them sitting about like tramps upon the green, playing cards, cursing their luck and insulting women on their way to church by undressing to wash in the open.”112

To counter the effect of the black militias, and to bring a return of law and order, the ingenious South devised the Ku Klux Klan, “the object [of which] was fun . . . the costuming was a natural instinct [in] a period of such masquerading . . . Everyone was merry for the moment—everyone but the freedmen, who, being superstitious, thought they had seen ghosts.”13 “At first the whites laughed over the fears of the blacks, and then, noting an improvement among them, with more industry and less pilfering, the serious possibilities of the society were envisioned . . . The original intent was to act for regulation and not for punishment, and there was desperate need for regulation. The crusade of hate and social equality, and more, was playing havoc with a [white] race naturally kind and trustful.”14 Eventually the Klan became overzealous and the “lawless element took possession and wrought deadly damage.”15 But one should note, exclaims Bowers, that important blame for the demise of the Klan should fall on those blacks who “would don the white sheet” and punish fellow blacks!

As officeholders, blacks in the legislatures often interrupted their time on the floor with frequent visits to “the whiskey barrel in the bar.” Speakers were forced to compete with “dancing on the floor, singing from the seats in maudlin tones.”16 The South Carolina legislature, it is supposed, was not atypical of other state legislatures at that time, “with members mostly brown or mahogany, some of the type seldom seen outside the Congo . . . A cozy atmosphere, too, with the members’ feet upon their desks, their faces hidden behind their soles. Chuckles, guffaws, the noisy cracking of peanuts and raucous voices disturb with the parliamentary dignity of the scene.”17

“Mingling with the negroes we see ferret-faced Carpetbaggers, eager for spoils; and in the rear. ‘Honest’ John Patterson, vulture-eyed, calculating the prices of the members . . . [who] are shouting to one another, ridiculing the man speaking, asking silly questions.”18 “And now a negro orator is speaking, fluently with many-syllabled words, ludicrously misplaced, flowing melliflously, and there is cheering, laughing . . . Meanwhile, amid the cracking peanuts, the shouting, laughing, stamp-
ing, members are seen leaving and returning in a strange state of exaltetation."20 They have been drinking the finest champagnes “supplied by the tax payers . . . The State was taxed to supply the refreshment room . . . Thus stealing was a virtue, with decent citizens submerged and silenced.”20

Bowers continues, describing the “simple” blacks who were making “belligerent demands for social equality.”21 The freedmen in general, and specifically those who occupied positions of responsibility, “were little above the intellectual level of the mules they drove. Even their jargon was unintelligible to the stranger.”22

Thus we have the Dunning view of blacks and their contribution to the “putrid” governments of Reconstruction. One cannot but help note the similarity between The Tragic Era and D. W. Griffith’s “Birth of a Nation.” Both would have a lasting effect not only on the white view of black men, but on the black’s self-conception of his own race. For this reason, Bowers’ book, much more than its subject, was tragic.

Accompanying the view that blacks cruelly dominated the South after the Civil War was the belief that Andrew Johnson had been maligned by history. Resurrecting the reputation of Johnson was as much in vogue, as was denigrating the black man. Most forceful in his defense of Johnson was George Fort Milton’s The Age of Hate.

While praising Andrew Johnson, Milton portrays the Radicals as having a bitter hatred for the South. They “enforced the rule of the most ignorant class upon those unhappy states.”23 The “prostrate” South was made to suffer under military rule . . . through the soldiery [the Radicals] forced negro supremacy upon the prostrate whites.”24 Milton speaks of “black hands” controlling the South, referring to that control as “African.” During Reconstruction whites were humiliated, their property threatened with confiscation, their personal liberties denied, bayonet rule was imposed and blacks exalted “for party ends.” So contends George Fort Milton.

Milton’s volume, while altering and improving the image of Andrew Johnson, did nothing to help students achieve a better understanding of blacks in Reconstruction. Eric McKitrick’s Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction challenges Milton’s thesis as far as Johnson is concerned. But, lamentably, he sheds no illumination upon the freedmen’s role.

In an effort to gain an understanding of the effect of the Dunningites upon general histories of the United States, four texts were examined. John D. Hicks’ The American Nation (1949) shows strong reliance upon Dunning as does Jame Pike in The Prostrate South. Hicks, after summarizing the Dunning view, does admit that Reconstruction did have some merit: blacks and lower class whites were elevated politically;
the legislatures provided for a more equitable distribution of the tax burdens; free public schools were created; and poor relief received attention. Much of this can be attributed to the fact that blacks were at last able to participate in government. Writing of their role in government, Hicks says: “Of those who participated in the work of Radical reconstruction the Negroes were the least to blame for its excesses. Only a few of them understood what was being done and only a few of those who did were shrewd enough to line their pockets with plunder. For the most part they were but helpless victims of the conscienceless rogues who controlled them.”

Randall and Donald, The Civil War and Reconstruction, state the idea of Black Reconstruction “needs major modification.” They discard many of the Dunning assumptions and replace them with a more balanced view of the performance of blacks. The Republican governments, operated with the support of a majority of whites, were never under Negro domination; although corrupt, they were not abnormally so for the time; and were expensive because so much needed to be done.

Baldwin and Kelly, in their Stream of American History (1965), emphasize the positive achievements of Reconstruction governments. Mentioning the corruption of “carpetbag rule,” they make clear radical rule “was not Negro rule.” S. E. Morison does much the same in the Oxford History of the American People (1965). The blacks who served in reconstructed governments generally did a credible, if not noteworthy, job. “. . . the Southern Negro of 1865-75 behaved like a civilized and responsible citizen. [They] did not attempt to domineer over or pass legislation against their former masters.”

Text book authors have written in recent years with more objectivity concerning the blacks’ role. But they have not been able to rid themselves completely of the Dunning interpretation. This task is left to the revisionists. Howard K. Beale, writing in the American Historical Review, 1940, recognized the need for much work and historical study on the reconstruction period. Identifying several points requiring re-interpretation, Beal writes, “It is time to forget feelings about the Negro and study Reconstruction to see what the Negro really was and why he did not gain more from Reconstruction.” He was able to discern the flaws endemic in Dunning’s work and pointed out what needed to be done. It would be for others, in later years, to examine Reconstruction in a new light, without many of the old prejudices that had hindered past historians.

Weisberger, almost twenty years after Beale, discussed the problems that faced Reconstruction historians in general, as well as those historians attempting to achieve a clearer understanding of blacks. “The Dark
and Bloody Ground of Reconstruction Historiography” reviews most of the major works in the field. He indicates that truly objective historiography would be most difficult—for the black man “is known to us almost exclusively through the writings of white men who, whether well-intentioned, or not, were interested parties to a conflict.”

Two groups of scholars, laboring for approximately thirty years, have uncovered a wealth of material that was either unavailable or was not utilized by the Dunningites. One group consists of the black historians W. E. DuBois, John Hope Franklin, and Lerone Bennett. The other, headed by Kenneth Stampp, has revised much of what was written before the mid-1930’s. Although both groups are revisionist, in respect to Dunning, they differ in the important factor of race. Black historians, having never wholly subscribed to the Dunning school of thought, ought to be considered as distinct from revisionists.

As a black, George W. Williams, writing in 1882 must be mentioned. His work preceeded DuBois’ by three decades, but his ideas belong somewhat further back in medieval thinking. Williams felt blacks had made few positive contributions when in positions of authority. They did, however, make “wonderful progress” in educating themselves. Williams could see improvement in the years ahead, as the “gentle, affectionate and faithful” would move upward from their somewhat inauspicious beginnings as free men during Reconstruction. It is perhaps best to regard, or even dismiss, Williams’ work, much as Dunning’s, as a product of his time.

In opposition is a work by DuBois that appeared in the American Historical Review in 1910. DuBois asserts the charges of corruption, theft, and extravagance were greatly exaggerated. Reconstruction governments in no way threatened “civilization or the foundation of social order.” Presented with the charges against Reconstruction governments, DuBois examines each in detail—concluding that, on balance Reconstruction was beneficial to the South. And as a tribute to their work, DuBois concludes, the Redeemers, (those ascending to power at the close of Reconstruction) often continued Radical policies.

The hatred generated by Radical governments was often expressed in racial terms, but economics was at the heart of the matter. DuBois’ thesis is profound. The Radicals did perform reasonably well and their governments were not tyrannical. Blacks, too, accounted well for themselves, but they were excoriated and made scapegoats for the excesses of Reconstruction by whites seeking to regain political power and economic advantage. The Southern aristocracy was always adept at convincing poor whites that blacks presented a real threat to the former’s social and economic well-being, and thus enlisted the aid of poor whites.
in subjugating blacks, with whom the poor had so much in common, to a position of societal inferiority. The policy of divide and conquer—dividing the poor among society along racial lines, with poor whites then allied with the white power structure—was successful in the ante-bellum South, after Reconstruction, and in large measure is successful yet today.

John Hope Franklin twice dealt with the issue now under consideration in *From Slavery to Freedom* and *Reconstruction After the Civil War*. In the former he contends that blacks performed well as members of constitutional conventions and served effectively as members of Congress and the state governments. "In the South, Reconstruction laid the foundations for more democratic living by sweeping away all qualifications for voting and holding office and by establishing a system of universal free public education." However, in the final analysis, Reconstruction failed in not providing "adequate economic security for the freedmen. [This left blacks] no alternative but to submit to their old masters." In this, Franklin foreshadowed the work of Lerone Bennett who takes a much more 'militant' stand on Black Reconstruction.

Bennett asserts "the real tragedy of Reconstruction was the failure to link bread and ballots through meaningful land reform." With the right to vote, Southern blacks asserted their new political power and brought "real democracy" to the South for the first time. While black office-holders were often outstanding, the views painted of them by historians were "white-oriented distortions of Reconstruction reality." Thus, Bennett appears to agree with Weisberger. And in Bennett, as in Franklin, one sees threads of DuBois' assertions.

In countering the Dunningites, Franklin contends that blacks "attempted no revolution in social relations of the races in the South... they did not even attempt to destroy white supremacy." The freedmen hoped merely to gain political power and to effect economic gains. Referring to atrocities committed by militia, Franklin remarks: "The strength and influence of military forces in the South between 1867 and 1877 have frequently been exaggerated." In actuality, federal military activity was "negligible."

Franklin sees corruption as providing a convenient excuse for denigrating the accomplishments of Reconstruction. In truth, graft and corruption flourished in the country, while "in the Southern states much of the graft was petty." In evaluating the total influence of blacks on Reconstruction, Franklin expresses surprise that blacks, having little training aside from that which slavery provided, conducted themselves in such a responsible manner.

Of the white historians, Kenneth Stampp's *The Era of Reconstruction* most clearly states the new thesis of Reconstruction as defined by the
Revisionists. After presenting the Dunning viewpoint, which had overlooked a great deal, Stampp states that “... Radical Reconstruction ought to be viewed in part as the last great crusade of the 19th century romantic reformers.” Stampp discredits those who attempt to ascribe sordid motives to the radical concern for blacks. “A genuine desire to do justice to the Negro, then, was one of the mainsprings of Radicalism.”

Stampp commits some errors in his attempts to understand blacks. It is probably not essential to an awareness of the role and contributions of a people in a specific period of our history to understand that people itself. Stampp’s classic, *The Peculiar Institution*, begins with the somewhat dubious premise that blacks are really white men in blacks skins. The merit of that remark need not be challenged here. But the criticism must be made that Stampp, as a white, is simply wrong in thinking that he can understand blacks. Still, an error such as this does not at all compare to the gross misrepresentations of the Dunningites.

Stampp emphasizes that high taxes, mounting debts, corruption, extravagance, and waste were not the complete record of radical regimes, which were never black regimes, and this type of activity certainly did not occur only in the South. The positive achievements of Southern governments, which included many blacks, were numerous: equitable tax systems, better schools, governmental reforms, protection of civil rights, and the most democratic state governments ever known to the South.

Otis Singletary places the Negro militia movement in proper perspective by emphasizing three facts: “... the militia was not the only instrument used by the Radicals in the South,” to perpetuate the existence of the newly created Republican state governments; “militia forces were not active in all Southern states; [and] the militia units were not made up exclusively of Negro troops.”

Southerners were hostile to the militia because it was a vehicle by which blacks were elevated socially and economically. So too, it should be added, distributed and disliked for similar reasons were the Freedmen’s Bureau and Union League. Singletary discounts much of the critical view of the militia and concludes: “... one’s reaction is not so much horror at an excessive number of unlawful acts committed as surprise that there were no more.”

Robert Cruden’s *The Negro In Reconstruction* and C. Vann Woodward’s *Burden of Southern History* serve primarily to summarize the revisionist thesis. Although neither would state in such positive terms that which the Dunningites did negatively (perhaps, that asks for too much), the revisionists have gone a long way toward rectifying the damage done by Dunning.
Of the contribution of blacks to Reconstruction, Woodward says: “To characterize the quality of the performance of this many people over a decade of time and in a multiplicity of activities with sweeping adjectives, ‘good’ or ‘bad’ or ‘indifferent,’ would be to indulge in empty generalities.”

Woodward’s remark is perhaps as accurate an assessment as has been made about the era. The Dunningites, racists, not particularly interested in accuracy, fictionalized and distorted the role that blacks played in Reconstruction. An examination of facts has led to a more balanced and less jaundiced view. It is hoped that the inaccuracies generated a half-century ago no longer find their way into, or color, students views of that important time.

The reader may return to Woodward for a modest appraisal of Reconstruction. He finds blacks to have composed themselves quite well, behaving as responsible citizens and concerned members of the electorate. “Africanization” is really a misnomer, for “[in] no state did [blacks] hold place and power in anything approaching their actual numbers and voting strength . . . In view of the subordinate role and the few offices that the freedmen took, no state in the South could properly be said to have been under Negro rule or “domination’ at any time.”

“In retrospect, one is more impressed with the success that a people of such meager resources and limited experience enjoyed in producing the number of sober, honest and capable public servants as they did.”

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