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THE DIMENSIONS OF CHANGE: THE FIRST AND SECOND RECONSTRUCTIONS

by James M. McPherson

Eight or nine years ago, during a classroom discussion of the federal government's retreat in the 1870s from its commitment to protect black civil and political rights in the South, a student offered a remark that remains etched in my memory. "This time," he said, "the story will be different." Having grown up during the civil-rights movement of the 1960s, his generation, he asserted, was "more enlightened" than its forebears and would make sure that no backsliding occurred. That attitude reflects many Americans' views of both the first and second Reconstructions.

The first Reconstruction is usually defined as the period from 1863 to 1877. It began with the Emancipation Proclamation, witnessed the conferring of equal rights to the freedmen as part of a program to restore the defeated Confederate states to the Union, and concluded with a compromise that resolved the disputed 1876 presidential election in exchange for the removal of federal troops from the South and the abandonment of the black man to his fate.

No such clear signposts mark the beginning or end of the second Reconstruction, defined as the federal effort to confront and eliminate racial discrimination in the mid-20th century. Indeed, many consider it to be still in progress; and no consensus exists on whether its beginnings should be dated from the famous report of Truman's Civil Rights Commission in 1947, the Supreme Court's *Brown* v. *Board of Education* school desegregation decision in 1954, the Montgomery bus boycott led by Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1955, or from some other event.

Whatever dates one chooses, the parallels between the two Reconstructions are obvious and striking. President Kennedy's

eloquent support for civil-rights legislation came almost exactly a century after President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation; the Civil Rights Act of 1964 reinstated many provisions of the Civil Rights Acts of 1866 and 1875; Supreme Court decisions outlawing discrimination based on the Fourteenth Amendment occurred almost on the centennial of the passage and ratification of that Amendment in 1868; the Voting Rights Act of 1965 accomplished some of the same results as the Reconstruction Acts of 1867; and the election in recent years of a number of blacks to government positions recalls the years between 1868 and 1875 when hundreds of blacks were elected county officials, state legislators, lieutenant governors, congressmen, and United States senators. Yet, despite these parallels, the first Reconstruction is generally considered a failure and the second, so far at least, a success.

Scholars' evaluations of the first Reconstruction have varied over time. For a half century after 1900, the *dominant* interpretation reflected a Southern viewpoint. It portrayed Reconstruction as an era of fraud and repression imposed on the prostrate white South—with vengeful Northern radicals and rapacious carpetbaggers using ignorant black voters as dupes in an orgy of misgovernment and plunder.

The Progressive interpretation, which enjoyed a brief vogue in the 1930s, depicted federal Reconstruction policy as a cynical plot to protect Northern industrial capitalism from a resurgent, Southern-dominated Democratic Party. Puppet governments were set up in the South, it was argued, primarily to ensure continuing Republican control in Washington; and the Fourteenth Amendment, which declared that no state could deprive "any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law," was construed by Republican Congressional leaders as shielding businesses, notably the railroads, from state regulation.

The Marxist interpretation, also popular in the 1930s, described the radical Republicans of the 1860s as bourgeois revolutionaries who destroyed the Old South's feudal organization

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and replaced it with free, democratic, capitalist institutions in step with the world-historical march toward the ultimate triumph of socialism.

During the 1960s, the Liberal interpretation came to the fore as a product of the second Reconstruction. This analysis emphasized the parallels between civil-rights legislation of the 1960s and Reconstruction measures of the 1860s. Both, it was thought, sprang from a creative alliance between egalitarian activists and political pragmatists; both attempted to extend equal rights and opportunities to black people; and both achieved triumphs of justice over oppression, of democratic nationalism over reactionary regionalism.

All of these interpretations sprang from a common perception of the 1860s as a decade of revolutionary change. The foremost proponent of the Progressive view, Charles A. Beard, called the Civil War/Reconstruction period "the Second American Revolution" because it transformed the United States from a Southern-dominated agricultural country into a Northern-dominated industrial one. The Southern, Marxist, and Liberal interpretations emphasized the revolutionary changes in the status of black people. All four considered the 1870s a decade of reaction during which most of the race-related changes of the 1860s were wiped out.

The Compromise of 1877

By 1876, the Democratic Party had regained control of the House of Representatives and of all but three Southern states (Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina) and had come close to claiming the White House in the presidential election of that year. Although the Republican Rutherford B. Hayes was inaugurated in 1877, he gained the Presidency at the price of conceding "home rule" to the South, which meant the rule of Southern states by the white-supremacist Democratic Party. In the Progressives' opinion, this represented not so much a counterrevolution as a "return to normalcy" by which Northern capitalists, who had never really believed in racial equality, made their peace with the now friendly New South.

The Compromise of 1877 was seen by the Southern school as a triumph of decency and civilization over darkness and misrule. To the Marxists and Liberals, it meant a counterrevolutionary betrayal of the gains of the 1860s.

But a fifth interpretation, espoused by some historians in the late 1960s and early 1970s, maintains that there was no counterrevolution in the 1870s because there had never been a

true revolution in the first place. This neo-Progressive reading holds that, during and after the war, the policy of the Union Army and the Freedmen's Bureau toward the emancipated slaves was to ensure "stability and continuity rather than fundamental reform." A disciplined, tractable, cheap labor force rather than an independent, landowning yeomanry was the real goal of Reconstruction. The Republicans who freed the slaves were themselves infected with racism. Their biases limited their vision of the Freedmen's place in the new order, undercut the effectiveness of Reconstruction legislation (whose revolutionary potential was largely an unwanted by-product of attempts to strengthen the Republican party), and predestined the quick and easy retreat in the 1870s from the limited gains of the 1860s. In the words of John S. Rosenberg, a pioneer neo-Progressive, the Civil War was "a tragedy unjustified by its results. . . . What little progress Negroes have been allowed to achieve has occurred almost exclusively in the past fifteen years."[1]

Reading History Backwards

Apart from its failure to acknowledge that much recent progress has been based on constitutional amendments and legislation passed during the first Reconstruction, this argument suffers from faulty logic and empirical narrowness. It reads history backwards, measuring change over time from the point of arrival rather than the point of departure.

An increase of black literacy from about 10 percent in 1860 to 20 percent in 1870 and 30 percent in 1880 may appear minimal, even shameful—from the perspective of nearly 100 percent literacy today. But for the black people of the 19th century, long denied access to education while living in the midst of one of the world's most literate populations, the sudden opportunity to learn to read and write, however limited, represented radical change. In 1860, only 2 percent of the black children in the United States attended school; by 1880, the proportion had grown to 34 percent. During the same period, the proportion of white children in school rose only slightly, from 60 to 62 percent. In no other period of American history did either the absolute or relative rate of black literacy increase so much.[2]

If one turns from education to political and economic developments, the same radical changes appear. In 1866, only one-half of 1 percent of American black adult males could vote. Yet in 1870, with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, all one million of them possessed the franchise, and at least 700,000 voted in the 1872 presidential election.

The Civil War and emancipation also accomplished the most sudden and vast redistribution of wealth in American history. Three billion dollars worth of capital were transferred from slaveholders to former slaves, who—by now owning themselves—possessed the human capital once the property of their masters. A recent study by economists Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch has attempted to calculate the economic benefits of emancipation for blacks. It concludes that the immediate benefits were dramatic. Under slavery, the slave received in the form of food, shelter, and clothing only 22 percent of the output he produced. With freedom this jumped to 56 percent. Another recent analysis by economist Robert Higgs describes even greater economic progress for blacks after emancipation. Between 1867 and 1900, according to Higgs, the per capita income of black people increased about 140 percent, a growth rate one-third greater than the increase of white per capita income during the same period.[3]

In the matter of landownership, a vital measure of wealth in an agricultural society, the picture at first glance appears bleak. In 1880, nearly a third of the blacks employed in Southern agriculture were laborers owning no property. Of the remaining two-thirds, classified in the census as farm operators, only 20 percent owned their land. At the same time, two-thirds of the white farm operators owned their land, and the average value of white-owned farms was more than double that of farms owned by blacks. Negroes were unquestionably at the bottom of the economic ladder.

An Uphill Struggle

Yet viewed another way, the 20 percent who owned their farms in 1880 represented an extraordinary increase from 1865, when scarcely any blacks owned land in the South. And while black farmers were progressing from almost nothing to 20 percent landownership, the proportion of white farm operators who owned their land was declining from about 75 percent at the end of the war to 66 percent in 1880.[4]

The point here is not that Reconstruction was a golden age in black history. Of course it was not. Despite educational gains, most blacks were still illiterate. Despite voting and holding office, they did not achieve political power commensurate with their numbers (although in South Carolina they did constitute a majority of elected officeholders from 1868 to 1876, something never again matched by blacks in any American state). And despite economic gains, most blacks were sharecroppers and wage

laborers, victims of a ruthless credit system in the poorest sector of the American economy. They were also the victims of violence and intimidation practiced by the Ku Klux Klan, the White League, and similar organizations.

Southern whites of the 1860s knew that they were living through a revolution, even if some modern scholars do not. "The events of the last five years have produced an entire revolution in the entire Southern country," declared the Memphis *Argus* in 1865. It was the "maddest, most infamous revolution in history," said an editorial in a South Carolina newspaper in 1867. Black spokesmen made the same point in reverse. "The good time which has so long been coming is at hand," said one. "We are on the *advance*," declared another.[5] Black leaders were aware that the revolution was incomplete, and modern scholars who point out the inadequacies of the Reconstruction are of course correct. But to conclude that there were no "fundamental changes," that "the new birth of freedom never occurred" is a mistake that those who lived through these events did not make.

Not all the gains of Reconstruction were eliminated immediately after the troops pulled out in 1877. The full-scale disfranchisement and legalized segregation of blacks in the South occurred in the 1890s and 1900s when a new generation of Southern whites came to power—not immediately after the withdrawal of federal troops. Negroes continued to vote in substantial numbers in most Southern states until the 1890s, and their turnout actually exceeded that of whites in some state elections during the 1880s. The Republican party, predominantly a black party in the South, garnered some 40 percent of the Southern vote in the three presidential elections of that decade.

Black men continued to be elected to Southern state legislatures *after* Reconstruction: 67 in North Carolina from 1876 to 1894; 47 in South Carolina from 1878 to 1902; 49 in Mississippi from 1878 to 1890; and similar numbers elsewhere. Every U.S. Congress but one from 1869 to 1901 had at least one black congressman from the South.

Black literacy improved steadily, from 30 percent in 1880 to 55 percent in 1900 to nearly 90 percent by 1940. In the economic sphere, the quantum leap of black per capita income may have leveled off by 1880. But by 1910, 25 percent of black farm operators in the South owned their farms, while the percentage of white owners had declined to 60 percent.[6]

What about the second Reconstruction? Have the 1970s been free of regression from the gains of the 1960s?

Consider the matters of income and employment. Between

THE BLACK OFFICEHOLDERS IN DIXIE

Several hundred black men were elected as state legislators and state officials during Reconstruction. Hundreds more—no one knows exactly how many—served in local or county offices. Most had been born slaves, but some were free-born, and a substantial number had been educated in the North.

Francis L. Cardozo, who was South Carolina's secretary of state for four years and state treasurer for another four, had attended the University of Glasgow and theological schools in Edinburgh and London. Jonathan Gibbs, secretary of state in Florida, was an 1852 graduate of Dartmouth College.

Of the 22 black men elected to the U.S. Congress—20 to the House (five of them after 1876) and 2 to the Senate (in 1870 and 1875), 10 had attended college, and all but four had gone to secondary school. This record compares well with that of white congressmen of that era.

Indeed, one black Northern-born congressman, Robert B. Elliott, was educated at Eton in England, studied law in London, and after the war moved to South Carolina, where he owned one of the finest law libraries in the state.

One of South Carolina's slave-born congressmen, Robert Smalls, achieved fame in 1862 when he took the Confederate dispatch-boat *Planter*, of which he was assistant pilot, out of Charleston harbor and turned it over to the Union navy; Smalls became a pilot and an honorary captain.

Two of the slave-born congressmen, James T. Rapier of Alabama and John M. Langston of Virginia, were the illegitimate sons of their white owners, who freed them and provided them unusual opportunities, including education in the North or abroad. In sum, the black congressmen and state officials were for the most part reasonably talented, dedicated men who provided good leadership for their race against strong odds. And, although less able, the lower-echelon black officeholders merit greater respect than most historians have given them.

—*J.M. McP.*

1958 and 1970, the median income of black families, expressed as a percentage of median white income, increased from 49 to 61 percent. Since 1970, it has declined to about 58 percent. From 1965 to 1969, the median income in constant dollars of black families increased by 32 percent. But black income barely kept pace with inflation between 1969 and 1973, and since then there has been an actual decline in real median income.[7]

From the Korean War to the mid-1960s, the unemployment

rate among blacks averaged slightly more than twice the white rate. This ratio began to decline in the late 1960s, reaching a low of 1.8 to 1 in the early 1970s. But in the last three years it has climbed again and in the final quarter of 1977 stood at a ratio of 2.3 to 1, a historic postwar high.[8]

The Compromise of the 1970s

Of course the total economic picture for blacks is not all bad. There have been significant gains in the percentage of blacks holding professional, white collar, and skilled-labor jobs. But even here the rate of gain has slowed in recent years. It seems impossible to argue that the economic improvement of the black population, measured by the degree of change, has been greater in the second Reconstruction than in the first.

Well then, what about school integration? The first Reconstruction produced nothing to match it, for outside of a few pockets—New Orleans, the University of South Carolina, and Berea College—there were virtually no integrated schools in the South during the 19th century. One might speculate that the opening of schools of any kind to blacks in the first Reconstruction was a greater achievement than desegregation in the second. But let us assume that the integration of schools in the last 20 years has been an important accomplishment. I would then insist that the much discussed "white flight" from the urban public school systems constitutes a major retreat from the goals of the second Reconstruction. If the withdrawal of troops from the South was the Compromise of 1877, the withdrawal of whites from integrated public schools is the Compromise of the 1970s.

From 1972 to 1975, some 40,000 white students left the Atlanta public schools, creating a student population now nearly 90 percent black (up from 56 percent in 1972). Public schools in Baltimore, Detroit, Newark, New Orleans, St. Louis, Chicago, and Philadelphia are 70 to 85 percent nonwhite. In three years (1973–76), half the white students vanished from the Memphis public schools, and the system went from 50 percent white to 75 percent black. More than 100,000 white students have disappeared from the Los Angeles public schools in the past six years, and the school population is now only 33 percent Anglo-Caucasian, compared with 45 percent in 1970–71.[9] At the time of the *Brown* v. *Board of Education* decision in 1954, only one of the nation's 20 largest cities, Washington, D.C., had a white minority in its public schools; today whites are a minority in the schools of 18 of the country's 20 largest cities.

Private schools have been the beneficiaries of white flight. Their enrollments tripled within three years in Memphis and doubled within five years in Charlotte, N.C., when these cities underwent court-ordered busing to achieve integration. While Pasadena's public schools have lost half their white students, its private schools are flourishing. The time is soon coming, probably within three years, when more white students in Pasadena will attend private schools than public schools. The whole state of California may eventually go the same way. The tradition and quality of public education is stronger there than in perhaps any other state. Students in California's public schools now outnumber those in private schools by more than 10 to 1. But if recent trends continue, white students in private schools will outnumber those in public schools within about 30 years.[10]

Benign Neglect

By 1877, prominent supporters of radical Reconstruction in the 1860s had come to the conclusion that the national government had tried to force too many changes too fast in the South. They called for a period of benign neglect in racial policy; they began to argue that "intractable" social problems could only work themselves out gradually, that big government and national "solutions" had failed. There is an uncanny similarity between the rhetoric of lapsed liberals of that day and their "neoconservative" counterparts today. One of the latter wrote:

> The basic lesson most of us have learned from the 1960s is that the great majority of the publicly funded programs then begun were utter fiascos. Without accomplishing anything for the poor, they enriched poverty-program bureaucrats. While crime was increasing, once-stable neighborhoods were being destroyed, schools became jungles, business left in disgust, and the middle class fled in despair.[11]

With some changes in wording but not in spirit, this statement could have appeared a century ago in *Harper's Weekly, The Nation,* or in numerous other journals that spoke for Northerners disillusioned with the first Reconstruction.

I do not mean to suggest that we are about to witness an abandonment of the second Reconstruction or that the reaction of the 1890s will repeat itself in the 1990s. I *do* mean to suggest that an interpretation of the first Reconstruction that denies the occurrence of meaningful change and contrasts that era un-

favorably with our own is off the mark. It is true that white Americans a hundred years ago were less enlightened than we are today in matters of race, economics, and the role of government in social change. Black Americans were then mostly illiterate, propertyless, and still shackled by the psychological bonds of slavery. Given this disparity in knowledge and resources, it is remarkable that our ancestors accomplished so much—and we so little.

1. John S. Rosenberg, "Toward a New Civil War Revisionism," *American Scholar*, Spring 1969, pp. 266, 271.

2. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1975, pp. 370, 382.

3. Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977, pp. 4–7; Robert Higgs, *Competition and Coercion: Blacks in the American Economy, 1865–1914*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 102.

4. Ransom and Sutch; for landholding by whites in 1860, see Frank L. Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949, Appendix, pp. 150–229.

5. Memphis *Argus*, quoted in Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1974, p. 110; a South Carolinian, quoted in Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865–1877*, New York: Knopf, 1965, p. 170; black spokesmen, quoted in James H. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1965, pp. 310, 311.

6. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, New York: Oxford University Press, 3rd rev. ed., 1974, ch. 1–2; J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaming of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880–1910*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974, passim; *Historical Statistics of the United States*, pp. 382, 465.

7. Harry A. Ploski and Warren Marr, eds., *The Negro Almanac: A Reference Work on the Afro American*, New York: Bellwether Publishing Co., 3rd rev. ed., 1976, pp. 475, 480.

8. *Negro Almanac*, pp. 450, 452, 455; *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 5, Dec. 3, 1977, Jan. 12, 1978.

9. *Newsweek*, July 12, 1976, p. 76; *Time*, Sept. 15, 1975, p. 41, Sept. 12, 1977, p. 71; *U.S. News & World Report*, Sept. 13, 1976, pp. 31-32; *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 27, Nov. 30, 1977. The second "Coleman Report" (James S. Coleman, *Recent Trends in School Integrating*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1975) generated considerable controversy over the true extent of white flight and the reasons for it. Further data on the whole issue of busing and integration can be found in a report issued by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Fulfilling the Letter and Spirit of the Law: Desegregation of the Nation's Public Schools*, Washington: 1976.

10. *Time*, Sept. 15, 1975, p. 41; *U.S. News & World Report*, May 31, 1976, pp. 51–52; *Newsweek*, Nov. 1, 1976, p. 81; *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 28, 1977; information on Pasadena schools supplied by the Department of Research, Pasadena Unified School District.

11. Letter to the *New York Times*, quoted in "The Talk of the Town," *The New Yorker*, Aug. 8, 1977, pp. 16–17.

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