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Writing Process

This paper started in the beginning of the 2018 spring semester with the reading of Eric Foner's *A Short History of Reconstruction*. This book started with a historiography, which students modeled their own off of, and continued with an extremely detailed documentation of Reconstruction. After this my instructor had the class propose a topic and choose 15 relevant sources. Then the class chose 8 sources to create an annotated bibliography with. In March I began the writing process slowly and tediously, but competition with a friend created a positive and fun environment. As we worked, we read our papers to each other, improving our papers steadily. I then met with my professor, Dr. Meisami, and polished my paper from there. The paper is an amalgamation of the semester's work and something to be proud of for all students in ASI 120.

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A Tale as Old as Time: Changing Interpretations of Democratic and Republican Polarization during Reconstruction

Dawson Vandervort

Historians from around the world may not share the same interpretations of the Reconstruction era in America, but one thought is common: Reconstruction propagated political polarization between the Democrats and the Republicans. The stark division between these two parties not only appears geographically, in terms of North vs. South, but most significantly they appear politically. When interpreting legislation enacted by each party as well as the changing perspectives of these policies over time, patterns in thought become transparent. Legislation such as the 14th Amendment and the Southern Homestead Act have been interpreted as the exploitation of Southerners for Northern capitalistic greed, or Southern buffering for dominance over freedmen. Whether laws were pushed for selfish motivations or for altruistic purposes depends on the time period of the piece as well as the author. Despite any interpretative differences in documents throughout the years, the division in America remains staunchly visible. The overwhelming pattern is that interpretations generally increase in positivity as well as neutrality. The earliest sources display vigorous partisanship and pessimism, then typically become optimistic as time passes, with the exception of one interpretation, which grew with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan.

Typically, when considering politics during any era, there is no true pattern established due to the sheer number of radicalized opinions. Patterns become visible when contrasted with historical context. The earliest interpretations, which actually occur during Reconstruction, were pessimistic for the future, as would be

expected by a generation facing such a monumental change to their everyday life style. During this time Northerners were perceived as ruthless champions of “black supremacy” in Confederate states, while Southerners were fervently advocating for the repeal of freedom for former slaves. The next wave of interpretation came during what is known as Post-Reconstruction, or around 1880 until approximately 1900. During this time Reconstruction efforts were appreciated, but often criticized for not ensuring the protection of freedmen’s rights. Those who were more optimistic were not so sanguine when considering future relations with the South, which held on to its “lost cause” with steadfast passion, determined to keep freedmen out of its government. This interpretation seems most accurate and a compelling argument. By the early 20th century, the views shifted suddenly to sentiments of sympathy for victimized white Southerners because of new Supreme Court proceedings and Civil Rights policies. Although the other schools of thought mentioned above have no name, this school has prominent roots in almost any area of Reconstruction study, therefore warranting the name “the Dunning school.” During the 1940s, a new school of thought rejected the Dunning school, arguing that partisan historians had been dominating the field and ignoring important African American interpretations, a notion in part due to the Harlem Renaissance impacting scholarly thought and trends at the time. There was a window from the 1960s to the 1980s in which sentiments of disdain for Republicans resurfaced around the centennial of Reconstruction and quickly diffused again. The latest views on Reconstruction, typically 1980s and forward, focus intensely on land distribution and enfranchisement. They argue social constructs like voting rights and how land impacted autonomy of freedmen. Historical interpretations have drastically changed over time due to dominant thoughts and dissenting voices, providing the radical separation America has been suffering for approximately 170 years.

Early sources on Reconstruction politics either libeled Republicans for craving a black dominated South to punish rebels or disparaged Democrats for purposefully ignoring the new freedoms of the black man. In his 1875 journal article “History of the Rise and Fall of Slave Power in America,” Henry Wilson argues against Democrats by citing their use of suppression toward any pro-slavery movements. Wilson notes that in the South, no press could print arguments against the slavery institution; no newspaper could speak out; no man

could display his hostility toward it without fearing for his personal safety.¹ He reflects on the development of the two parties, claiming Republicans perpetually grew their external power through the passage of new laws and the acquisition of new territory while Democrats expanded by intensifying their cause and radicalizing their members.² Wilson also discusses multiple specific policy situations prior to 1875 including the Dred Scott case. This case involved a slave, Dred Scott, suing for his family's freedom and losing at the Supreme Court 7-2. Wilson asserts his disgust with the political success in the South, calling it appalling and remolding each win into a moral loss.³ Henry Wilson's article illustrates Northern partisanship with regard to treatment of freedmen in the South.

Another early source counters Wilson's tenets, bashing Republicans instead. H.H. Chalmers, a prominent politician during and immediately following reconstruction, wrote "The Effects of Negro Suffrage" in order to criticize the enfranchisement of blacks. In the article he relays his fear for the country due to the attainment of civil and legal rights by freedmen.⁴ He goes so far as to claim, "It was intelligence dominated by ignorance, America ruled by Ethiopia."⁵ Chalmers distinctly blames Republicans for their hand in enabling freedmen to control state legislatures, often attributing it to their quest for punishing rebels. Chalmers calls upon the opposing party to never forget their actions in the South and the stupendous problem they imposed on protesting, uncooperative Southerners.⁶ Chalmers's use of vicious and critical language asserts the disputing interpretations during and directly after Reconstruction, developing foundational archetypes of both parties for future interpretations to unravel.

The next wave of interpretation revealed a self-critical Republican party, perhaps because of the dire state freedmen were in and the Southern fight for

¹ Wilson, Henry, "History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America," *The North American Review*, 120, no. 246 (1875): 82, JSTOR.

² *Ibid.*, 80.

³ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴ Chalmers, H.H., "The Effects of Negro Suffrage," *The North American Review*, 132, no. 292 (1881): 242, JSTOR.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 247.

“home rule.” An article from Claire Parfait, “Reconstruction Reconsidered: A Historiography of Reconstruction from the Late Nineteenth Century to the 1960s,” cites Frederick Douglass as criticizing the failures of Republicans to stimulate opportunities for freedmen during the Post-Reconstruction time period, saying the 14th and 15th Amendments were mocked because the old “master class” continued to prosper while African Americans were left in socioeconomic hardship hardly better than slavery.⁷ In 1885, George W. Williams wrote *History of the Negro Race in America*, a book in which he argues Reconstruction failed in every area but education.⁸ Williams’ view portrays the self-reprimanding attitude of Republicans when the failures of Reconstruction became evident. He furthers his criticisms by blaming the federal government for irresponsibly delegating power into unfit hands.⁹ The Southern populace also attempted to reinstitute “home rule,” their euphemism for white dominance, by instituting a terrorist organization called the Ku Klux Klan, and Republicans once more felt they failed the freedmen. There were attempts to solve the issue, such as the Slaughter cases, which were trials concerned with the 14th Amendment. Hollis Bailey wrote “A New Nation” in 1895 to discuss his perspectives on the Slaughter cases. Bailey set a critical tone in the beginning, one which carried on throughout. Bailey believes the decision by the Supreme Court to prioritize black citizens was unfair, as it should protect all citizens equally, and shares the opinion that the national government will in no time soon protect all people from oppression by the states.¹⁰ During Post-Reconstruction a general consensus, despite the liberation of slaves, was that the grave situation former slaves faced was due to negligence on the part of Republicans, and this denunciation ushered in a greatly radical and bigoted school of thought.

Around the turn of the century, a new school of thought—the infamous Dunning school—gained support because of newfound nostalgia for the Antebellum South, the failure of Republicans derived from the previous interpretation, and controversial proceedings from the Supreme Court on key

⁷ Parfait, Claire, “Reconstruction Reconsidered: A Historiography of Reconstruction from the Late Nineteenth Century to the 1960s,” *Études anglaises*, 60, no. 4 (2009): 443, JSTOR.

⁸ Williams, George, *History of the Negro Race in America*, (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1885), 527.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 443.

¹⁰ Bailey, Hollis, “A New Nation,” *Harvard Law Review*, 9, no. 5 (1895): 320, JSTOR.

policies. Parfait contends that the interpretation of the federal government in Reconstruction became an abusive misuse of military power to implement some form of “black supremacy” in the South.¹¹ The Supreme Court outlawed federal control over the status of former slaves, effectively nullifying the Civil Rights Act of 1875.¹² During the early 20th century, America also underwent industrialization and an immense influx of immigrants, bringing about a wave of nostalgia for the Antebellum South.¹³ An interesting note is that an old pro-slavery argument, dating back to the 1870s, began circulating again illustrating an affection held by slaves for their masters.¹⁴ Once nostalgia set in, scholars such as William Dunning and John Burgess took advantage of the fresh perspective and began publishing books that portrayed Southerners as victims and vindicated them. Burgess wrote *Reconstruction and the Constitution* in 1905 in defense of the South, and he often refers blame back to the North and the federal government. He successfully circumvents alleged state discrimination on the part of Democrats by claiming the state had been controlled by Republicans, some of whom were freed slaves.¹⁵ Burgess then writes about the failures of Republicans to secure rights for freedmen upon passing the 13th Amendment.¹⁶ Interestingly, Burgess continually puts quotation marks around that word “state” as if to mock Republican attempts to reconstruct a state that simply did not exist to the rest of the country. This school’s popularity can also be attributed to the proliferation of pop culture propaganda in the form of movies like *Gone with the Wind* and *Birth of a Nation*.

While Burgess certainly demonstrated his argument with impressive rhetoric, it was Dunning who championed the Dunning interpretation with charismatic, persuasive writings. In one of his books, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865-1877*, he compares Northern influence to being “subjugated by an alien

¹¹ Parfait, “Reconstruction Reconsidered,” 444.

¹² *Ibid.*, 444.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 444

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 445.

¹⁵ Burgess, John, *Reconstruction and the Constitution: 1866-1876*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Son, 1905), 47.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

power,”¹⁷ which is an uninvolved yet effective statement in alienating the Republicans. Dunning contends that the emancipation of slaves, whose lives were comparably better under slavery, left Southerners vying for resources in an attempt to provide for their own homes as well as their former slaves.¹⁸ The Reconstruction administrations enacted economic policies allowing for the government to spend more, but these policies only put the country in debt and increased taxation, according to Dunning.¹⁹ He calls a government controlled by negroes a “shameless caricature” of government.²⁰ Dunning’s bigoted and unverifiable interpretation of Reconstruction may not be substantive, but given the time period and sentimentality for the Antebellum South, the belief prevailed widely until African American historians and their supporters were finally given a voice.

Just before the 1930s and lasting until the 1960s, a new school of thought rejected traditional Dunning viewpoints and instead professed a partisan view of history that blatantly ignored African American viewpoints. In a review of Francis Butler Simkins and Robert Hilliard Woody’s *South Carolina during Reconstruction*, Howard Beale praises the nonpartisan elucidation of the failures of Reconstruction. The review highlights corruption on the part of both groups and an unfamiliar, objective view of the time period, one most fascinating and impressive. Beale then comments on the argument that historians ignored African Americans’ views of Reconstruction claiming that cultivated negroes were never seriously considered.²¹ An interesting side note is that Beale lived during World War II, which conceivably influenced his opinions; he held a critical viewpoint that the country’s continued segregation and second-class treatment of African Americans became a moral and a political liability for a nation that had recently

¹⁷ Dunning, William, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865-1877*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907), 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 205.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 216.

²¹ Beale, Howard, “South Carolina during Reconstruction. By Francis Butler Simkins and Robert Hilliard Woody,” *The American Historical Review*, 38, no. 2 (1933): pp. 346, JSTOR.

fought Nazi racism.²² This objective text is laudable, for it sets aside personal politics and interests for the greater good of a nation and a society.

Another interpretation that negated the Dunning school occurred after the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, which found African American historians and writers attempting to re-create the black image during Reconstruction. One of the most distinguished of these authors was W.E.B. du Bois. The Harlem Renaissance was an explosive period of artistic and social culture for African Americans, so it comes as no surprise that within a decade of its arrival, and the newfound feeling of unfair presentations of opinions, du Bois would use this attention to shed light on the achievements of African Americans during Reconstruction. In his monumental book *Black Reconstruction in America*, du Bois insists that Southern blacks were not merely ignorant, unofficial slaves for the white Southerners, but instead they aided in reinstating democracy in the South.²³ One of the other major successes in Reconstruction by African Americans, among others, was the implementation of the first public school system in the South, which, du Bois contends, allowed the African Americans of the day (1935) to intellectually surpass people in European and South American countries.²⁴ His book concludes with a satirical and creative ode to Antebellum racism; he creates a bibliography of old texts from both the North and the South titled “The Propaganda of History” and prefaces it by saying the South was ashamed of their use of human slavery, and the North was ashamed it had to call upon black folk to establish and sustain democracy.²⁵ Although this wave of thought did not provide many specific policies of Reconstruction, it did refute the traditional opinion that African Americans did not play an important role in establishing both democracy and public schooling; it also reflected on the politics of the time in a nonpartisan way, ushering in a new civil rights movement.

A resurfacing of accountability for Radical Republicans occurred around the centennial of the Civil War and Reconstruction (also in the midst of the civil rights movement), with scholars arguing for and against policies implemented by

²² Parfait, “Reconstruction Reconsidered,” 451, JSTOR.

²³ *Ibid.*, 449.

²⁴ Du Bois, W.E.B., *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1935), 637.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 611.

Republicans. The arguments built upon the foundational merit of the Dunning school but expounded upon legislation more so than a vindication of Southerners. One such book, *Civil Rights and the American Negro*, written by Albert Blaustein, claims that Republicans felt pleased with their reform when it was, in fact, sheer hypocrisy, fostering a breeding ground for anger and frustration on the part of the African American.²⁶ The 14th Amendment, to Blaustein, was an important addition to the Constitution, but after its implementation, there were no attempts to ensure its execution.²⁷ With regard to the Civil Rights Cases of 1883, Blaustein condemns Republicans in the national government saying it “was officially abandoning the Negro.”²⁸ Continuing, he lambastes the Republicans for standing idly by while Jim Crow laws overtook the South and spiraled radically out of control. Racial violence elevated from a Southern issue to a nationwide epidemic, thanks to a “generation of indifference to the Negro’s plight.”²⁹ Perhaps the increasing popularity of the civil rights movements and the realization that after one hundred years, African Americans were still discriminated against motivated Blaustein to develop this narrative, but either way, his statements are verifiable and accurate. Reconstruction was a step toward equity, followed by two quick steps back.

Given that Blaustein’s observations were irrefutable, proponents of Radical Reconstruction developed their own response, one that seems outlandish and irrelevant, and one that deflects blame back onto Democrats. During the 1950s another aspect of Reconstruction stirred disdain for Republicans: their exploitation of freedmen for pecuniary purposes. This aspect was comparably smaller, but one that could be used to support Republicans, although it seems to be an unsubstantiated prevarication. Stanley Coben explains the economic climate of the nation in his article “Northeastern Business and Radical Reconstruction: A Re-Examination.” He describes the Northern textile, oil, steel, and iron companies as a haphazard and divided mess that was in no state to exploit the Southern

²⁶ Blaustein, Albert, *Civil Rights and the American Negro: A Documentary History*, (New York: Trident Press, 1968), vii.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 226.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 283.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 284.

economy.³⁰ Coben focuses on a tariff imposed on the industries in their fight against Nova Scotia and England that instead created fighting between domestic industries, proving there was a lack of Northern motivation to influence the South.³¹ Another source that supported Republicans also found that the North did not represent a unity of economic interest and disclosed evidence which adduced the notion that Democrats used race prejudice as economic capital. John and Lawanda Cox's *Politics, Principle, and Prejudice 1865-1866* provides a substantiated rebuttal to Blaustien's argument. They argued that Andrew Johnson's administration polarized the West Wing and with it the entire federal government.³² They assert that Andrew Johnson's stubborn pursuit of political victory eradicated the possibility of a "moderate, constructive reconstruction of the Union."³³ Johnson's administration drove the wedge between the opposing parties that would only drive deeper with time. Johnson vetoed the Civil Rights Act, not to strip African Americans of their rights, but to motivate Democrats, clearly prioritizing political interests over the rights of his citizens. The Cox duo describes Johnson as a politician who "could not be driven; he would take his own course,"³⁴ and that is precisely what he did. Despite the weaker arguments of economic interest, or the lack thereof, the Cox pair successfully deflected blame back to a Democratic institution who cared only for their personal gain.

The modern interpretation of Reconstruction tends to focus on the economic side of politics, primarily on land distribution, seemingly warranting a conclusion to the "blame game" played by historians hitherto. Modern thought objectively views Reconstruction and deduces issues with policies that simply were not instituted well enough by either side. "The Politics of Reconstruction" by Armstead Robinson considers the peculiar issue of admitting 11 Confederate states back into the Union safely while securing their allegiance. There also remained the question of guaranteeing approximately 3.5 million slaves their freedom. Robinson, rather than referring to an individual party, interestingly

³⁰ Coben, Stanley, "Northeastern Business and Radical Reconstruction: A Re-Examination," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 46, no. 1, (1959): pp. 68, JSTOR.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

³² Cox, Lawanda and John, *Politics, Principle, and Prejudice 1865-1866*, (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 31.

³³ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

designates the all-encompassing title of Reconstruction when he considers the state of the Union.³⁵ He quotes Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address in which he proclaims charity for all and malice for none, which was certainly a positive sentiment, although it was not always acted upon properly.³⁶ In an attempt to solve the dispute over land distribution in the South, the Southern Homestead Act of 1866 was enacted, an extension of the Homestead Act of 1862. Michael Lanza's book *Agrarianism and Reconstruction Politics: The Southern Homestead Act* deciphers the policy enacted through an equitable lens, delegating blame to both parties as many historians did at the time. He provides a multitude of factors that contributed to the failure of the Southern Homestead Act, including the unwilling attitude of white Southerners to share "their" land, but also the failure of Northerners to appoint appropriate authorities in the execution of the act.³⁷ While Lanza agrees Republicans were not able to extend the "Jeffersonian" dream of small farmers to black Southerners, he does believe black farmers enjoyed slightly more success than whites while homesteading.³⁸ This interpretation leaves the impression of indifference, as if historians have become detached from the politics of the time, therefore giving them the ability to impartially study the era—a rare feat in the crude, intransigent political atmosphere of human affairs.

The value of a historiography is integral in the study of history, providing crucial insights into the ideology of an era. Reconstruction in America was a controversial time, perhaps the most in American history, so it is no surprise that numerous dissenting voices have vacillated between party lines during the last 170 or so years. Originating with a pessimistic, savage outlook during Reconstruction and moving into a self-critical one may have seemed progressive until the Dunning school at the beginning of the 20th century. After surviving that, historians began highlighting the influence of African Americans and the failures of Reconstruction, until arriving at a neutral, yet critical, interpretation. Scholars

³⁵ Robinson, Armstead, "The Politics of Reconstruction," *The Wilson Quarterly*, 2, no. 2 (1978): pp. 108, JSTOR.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁷ Lanza, Michael, *Agrarianism and Reconstruction Politics: The Southern Homestead Act*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 1990), 4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

may only wait to see what new viewpoints find popularity next. Writing with a fair and objective opinion on which interpretation is most accurate seems a daunting task, and it of course always has been. However, with a topic such as Reconstruction there seems to be one interpretation that provides compelling logic as to why it is the most valid: the opinion that Reconstruction did not accomplish those feats it originally promised, and that both parties are to blame. This interpretation originated in the late 19th century and re-emerged in the 1960s. This judgment notwithstanding, there is a slight nuance. Blatantly reprimanding an opposition party and choosing to remain ignorant to the hypocrisy of one's own does not make for a free, fair, and successful democracy. Moreover, failing to learn this lesson over almost two centuries makes one ponder the aptitude of the nation's political leaders and the political climate. The history of Reconstruction has been and will continue to be a divisive field of study, and the array of opinion it creates is awe-inspiring, so perhaps in the future historians will consider the schismatic pull of political polarization and instead learn from their predecessors in their own version of the history of Reconstruction politics.

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