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Radical Republicans: How Radical Were They?

Writing Process

During the Spring of 2019, I completed this paper as part of my coursework for ASI 120. To begin this project, I had to read Eric Foner's *A Short History of Reconstruction* in order to gain a better understanding of the history and politics surrounding Reconstruction. After reading this book and discussing it extensively in class, I picked a topic to research related to Reconstruction. I decided to focus on how historians' views of the Radical Republicans have changed over time. I had to write a proposal stating what I was going to research and what I hoped to achieve. I also had to attach twelve scholarly sources that I would look through for this assignment. After reading and annotating my twelve scholarly sources in depth, I wrote an annotated bibliography to help me group the sources I had found. I grouped historians according to their views of the Radical Republicans. I wrote about how the views of historians have changed over time while comparing and contrasting the views within each school of thought. I wrote a draft and revised it based on my professor's feedback. After proofreading and peer-editing several times, I had my finished product. This historiography focuses on how historians' views of the failures of the Radical Republicans shifted over time.

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During the Reconstruction era in the United States, the Republican Party faced conflict over many issues, especially over the treatment of former slaves. The Republican Party fought so frequently over these issues that division within the party was unavoidable, causing the party to split into Radical and Conservative Republicans. The Radicals gained support in the South by taking advantage of the votes of carpetbaggers, scalawags, and freedmen. The Radical Republicans claimed to support the Fourteenth Amendment, equal citizenship, and black suffrage. However, the success of the Radicals in their endeavors to attain black suffrage is debatable, especially given that blacks are still denied their rights today. In this historiography, I examine the development of views regarding the influence of Radical Republicans on black suffrage. After studying various historians' perspectives of Radical Republican impact on black rights over time, I discovered three categories to explain the evolution of these views.

Generally, historians have come to three main conclusions about the effect of Radicals on the sovereignty of former slaves. These categories can be identified as the total failure, limited success, or complete success of the Radicals in their efforts to help freedmen receive their rights. Historians including William Dunning, Howard Beale, Vincent DeSantis, and Adam Fairclough note the utter failures of the Radicals towards the cause of African American sovereignty. These scholars underscore how the Radicals were economically motivated to support African Americans, but they never actually did anything of value for blacks. Within this category, Dunning sticks out in that he does not view black suffrage as an integral part of Reconstruction. Dunning focuses more on how life in the South was impacted.

Waldo Moore, Philip Uzee, and John Matthews speak to the partial successes and attempts of the Radicals to aid blacks during Reconstruction. While these historians mention the downfalls of the Radicals, they also draw attention to small victories as the Radicals worked towards equality for blacks. Eric Foner and Michael Fitzgerald emphasize the successes of the Radicals as they fought for the rights of freed slaves. Foner and Fitzgerald mainly argue that Reconstruction was a failure due to white resistance and they break from more traditional views when they argue that the Radicals accomplished their goal of making African Americans truly free.

Historians' views of the Radicals have shifted over time, starting with historians who address the inability of Radicals to follow through with their promises to African Americans. Historians who acknowledge both the shortcomings and advances of the Radicals typically wrote during the following time period, while current research leads to historians who highlight the triumphs of the Radicals in their endeavors to enfranchise blacks, with the exception of Adam Fairclough. Among the sources included in this historiography, the approach that is most convincing in terms of accuracy and relevance is that which

emphasizes the successes of the Radical Republicans for black suffrage. This category looks at Radical action in a new light and takes into account African Americans' views, considering how they reacted to Radical efforts.

Radical Disaster

Historians who consider the Radical Republicans to be negligent of black suffrage generally argue that the Radicals used the freedmen as a way to advance their economic motives. William Dunning articulates his position in the earliest source included in this historiography. Dunning's *The Second Birth of the Republican Party* was written in 1910 and analyzes how the Republicans were not trying to emancipate slaves, they merely wanted to seize control of the South by using the freedmen to do so.¹ Dunning emphasizes how Radicals were only pretending to help African Americans in an effort to further their economic agendas. Dunning notes how former Confederates, as well as Southerners in general, were subject to the Radical's laws prohibiting ex-Confederates from voting. The Radicals were more concerned about national control, especially control of the South, and they used the freedmen as a means of achieving this goal. Radical Republicans achieved their goal by adopting black suffrage so that they could nationalize their party, therefore gaining more control and money.² Dunning underscores the notion that the Radicals were not as sympathetic to the cause of black suffrage as they seemed, especially given that they were trying to expand their influence as well as their economic profit. Dunning does not interpret Radicals in terms of black struggle for freedom. Rather, Dunning sees Radical action as more of an attack on and disruption of traditional Southern life. Contrary to current scholarship as seen with Foner and Fitzgerald, Dunning does not acknowledge that Radicals were trying to fight for African American rights, and he does not consider African American citizenship to be an issue of any real importance during Reconstruction.

Howard Beale also speaks to the facade put up by the Radicals during Reconstruction. In "The Tariff and Reconstruction" from 1930, Beale argues that the Radicals used various rhetorical appeals to appear supportive of the rights of freedmen, when in reality the Radicals were monetarily motivated.³ Beale emphasizes that economics drove Radical Republicans, especially in terms of the tariff. Beale points out that the Southern states did not want to grant any sort of protection for the tariff. When the South seceded during the war, Northern Radicals saw an opportunity to place protections on the tariff to increase their profit.⁴ According to Beale, the Radicals kept the South out of Congress to protect the tariff by using black suffrage and military force. This is consistent with Dunning's point that the Radicals supported black rights as a ploy to gain more votes. Radicals were adamant about protecting the tariff because they saw enormous profit from it. The Radicals even went so far as to repeal laws prohibiting taxes on exports in order to maximize their profits.⁵ Beale highlights

the economic incentives of Radicals during Reconstruction, thus having a view of Radicals that is more consistent with Dunning's interpretation. However, Beale focuses more on the tariff and how it influenced Northern Radical rule, as well as the Radical's artificial involvement in fighting for black rights.

Vincent DeSantis builds on Beale and Dunning when he writes that Radicals were not staying true to their promises to help African Americans. In 1960, DeSantis discussed how Radicals neglected blacks during Reconstruction in "The Republican Party and the Southern Negro". DeSantis explains that the Radicals were using the freedmen to expand their party and did almost nothing to help blacks advance.⁶ This lack of action prompted black Radicals to be critical of the party, placing an extreme tension on the loyalty of former slaves towards the party.⁷ Republicans promised to protect the rights of every American citizen, and yet the party did little to remedy the current situations of freedmen.⁸ DeSantis accentuates that no one wanted to help African Americans, including the Radicals who were supposedly fighting for freedmen. DeSantis concludes that the Radicals had abandoned African Americans, thus losing an ally during Reconstruction. DeSantis depicts the Radicals as individuals who made empty promises to former slaves with no intention of addressing them after they won the negro vote. This contrasts slightly with Dunning and Beale, who emphasize Radical adoption of black suffrage for economic gain, while DeSantis focuses more on political gain.

Adam Fairclough, a contemporary historian, argues that the enactment of black suffrage was a failure. In 2012, Fairclough voiced his disappointment in "Was the Grant of Black Suffrage A Political Error? Reconsidering the Views of John W. Burgess, William A. Dunning, and Eric Foner on Congressional Reconstruction". Fairclough disagrees with revisionists such as Foner and Fitzgerald when he argues that the efforts to enforce black suffrage damaged more than it helped.⁹ Fairclough views the Radicals as a group who failed to enforce the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Fairclough also articulates that part of the Radical failure lay in their inability to effectively use national power. The Radicals overpowered state governments at the beginning of Reconstruction rather than fighting directly for change.¹⁰ Radicals assumed that state governments, under Radical leadership, would fulfill the agenda of the Radicals. However, Fairclough states that Radicals did not establish power effectively, meaning that they did not establish powers that would administer the social changes they wanted, thus dooming their black suffrage efforts. Fairclough notes similarities between his more post-revisionist view and revisionists when he writes that both schools of thought recognize white opposition to black suffrage as the overarching barrier between political equality.¹¹ This view differs from traditionalists who prioritized opposition to transformations in traditional Southern society rather than acknowledging the role of white opposition in relation to black suffrage. Black enfranchisement failed because both Radicals

and Democrats alike did not see African Americans as fit to be in the political realm.

Incomplete Efforts

Other historians see more of a middle ground between success and failure of the Radicals during Reconstruction. One such historian is Waldo Moore, who highlights both the pitfalls and partial victories of the Radicals in his 1966 article, "Louisiana Reconstruction - Dream and Reality". Moore portrays the Radicals as a vengeful political group that established military control in a way that was almost tyrannical.¹² Moore discusses the way that Radicals acted during presidential elections noting that they were vicious and sneaky in terms of their campaign strategies. Moore also writes about Radicals who appropriated large sums of money during elections in order to reap profits for themselves.¹³ Moore highlights the corruption of the Radicals, thus reiterating what traditional historians have claimed to be the number one motivator of the Radicals: money. However, Moore does draw attention to ways that Radicals supported African Americans, even if the advances were small. For example, African Americans were elected to office and gained power in the South.¹⁴ Overall, Moore understands the Radicals as power-hungry politicians who only helped blacks when it was advantageous for them. Moore represents a shift from the last category because he does not write off the Radicals, instead he mentions several successful steps taken to advance black lives during Reconstruction. This view differs from Dunning in that Moore acknowledges black rights as a real issue during Reconstruction, versus Dunning who dismisses the fight for black rights while emphasizing the Radical threats to Southern society.

Philip Uzee's interpretation of Radical Republican impact on black suffrage elaborates on the progress made for African Americans. Uzee portrays the Radicals as sympathetic to blacks in his 1971 article called "The Beginnings of the Louisiana Republican Party". Radicals did not approve of African Americans being reduced to semi-slavery positions after they had been freed. Radicals claimed they stood for the truths in the Declaration of Independence and used the tenets of universal suffrage as a basis for the political party.¹⁵ In an effort to keep their promises to blacks, Radicals wrote new constitutions to secure the black vote and guarantee blacks the ability to hold office and live as freedmen.¹⁶ In addition to political and civil progress, African Americans made small strides in education as well. However, Uzee argues that due to the corruption and violence rooted in the Republican Party, progress was limited.¹⁷ Similar to Moore, Uzee acknowledges that the Radicals had strengths and weaknesses, which influenced the partial success of black suffrage. This view of the Radicals challenges the more traditional views that claim the Radicals completely abandoned blacks since Uzee notes that while the Radicals were not perfect, they did take initiative in helping blacks during the struggle for rights.

John Matthews recognizes more Radical failures than successes in “Negro Republicans in the Reconstruction of Georgia” from 1976. This source articulates several failures of the Radicals, including their lack of inspirational leadership, corruption, fraud, and divisions in the party that led to failures of the party as a whole.¹⁸ Matthews views the Radical Republicans as a political party that did not deliver on its commitments to African Americans. The Radicals did not attempt to make any offers in exchange for blacks’ political support.¹⁹ Similar to Moore, Matthews argues that Radicals wanted black votes but had no intention of rewarding them for their patronage. This source differs from the other two in this category in that Matthews shifts focus from white Radicals and emphasizes the struggles of black Republicans and how they reacted to white Radical rule. Matthews also speaks to the limited triumphs of black Radicals during Reconstruction when he mentions that African Americans small strides in government as they were elected to small positions of power, but they never had political control that was proportional to their numbers in the Republican Party.²⁰ Matthews emphasizes that the enthusiasm and energy of black Radicals was not met with the same fervor by white Radicals, thus limiting the progress that could be made by black Radicals during Reconstruction.

Acknowledging Success

More contemporary historians such as Eric Foner believe that the Radical Republicans helped African Americans increase political influence and universal suffrage. Foner’s interpretation represents a shift in the historiography of this topic based on how he understands the Radicals and what they accomplished. In 1997, Foner wrote “Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction”, in which he argues mainly that Reconstruction efforts did not go far enough in regards to helping blacks after the war.²¹ Foner’s view of Reconstruction differs from other historians in that he examines the extent to which blacks shaped change in the North and the South. Radical Republicans tried to influence this change by starting programs to give more opportunities to blacks and white alike.²² Radical programs aimed at providing newly freed slaves with the chance to start over after slavery ended. Thanks to Radical Republican efforts, blacks had more of a voice in public affairs with representation that actually wanted to serve their interests.²³ Foner marks Reconstruction as a time of immense change for former slaves as they enjoyed the long-overdue benefits of universal suffrage. Foner acknowledges the flaws of Radical Republicans, but overall Foner recognizes the dramatic shift that blacks experienced when they finally had access to civil and political rights. Dunning’s early scholarship on the subject of Radical Republicans contrasts greatly with Foner in that Dunning clearly argues that Southern society was under attack during Reconstruction, paying no mind to the issues of black suffrage. Foner’s view represents a drastic shift and almost complete turnaround from the

early views of Dunning since Foner highlights that blacks actually did matter during Reconstruction and they did gain civil and political rights.

Michael Fitzgerald is another historian who highlights the advancement of African Americans during Reconstruction. His 1998 piece called “Republican Factionalism and Black Empowerment: The Spencer-Warner Controversy and Alabama Reconstruction, 1868-1880” focuses on tensions between political leadership while also underscoring the agency of African Americans.²⁴ Fitzgerald takes a different approach to the Republican Party when he explains that the divisions within the Party actually helped blacks in the struggle for voting rights. The split empowered blacks to vote because both groups within the Republican Party were vying for the black vote in order to stay in power.²⁵ During Reconstruction, African Americans were inspired to take power that belonged to them while expanding politically and socially. However, these adjustments did not come without consequences. Black equality was met with an equal amount of resistance and violence between Republican Party factions and political parties in general. Fitzgerald’s perspective contrasts with earlier historians such as Moore, who argued that Radicals were looking for power instead of trying to help blacks, thus limiting black advancement. Overall, Fitzgerald emphasizes how Radicals assisted African Americans as they fought for political leverage and equality.

The group that illustrates an up-to-date, convincing, and accurate interpretation is the group that recognizes the successes of the Radicals because it demonstrates that the Radicals did have flaws, but all in all they helped African Americans tremendously in their struggle for rights during Reconstruction. Published in the 1990s, these sources demonstrate a shift in the view of Radicals, especially in terms of their goals and what they accomplished. This interpretation of the Radicals is the most accurate because the earlier sources mostly examine Radicals in terms of economic and political motivations, whereas the success category examines Radical achievement through the eyes of African Americans. Examining the achievements of the Radicals through different lenses can shed light on the ways in which Radicals were perceived by people of the time, which influence historians’ interpretations and further research. In terms of where historians should look next, it would be interesting to consider Radical rule in relation to ex-Confederates, specifically how the Radicals impacted the Southern population and how that may have affected African Americans. The Republican Party during Reconstruction is an important area of historical study because it illuminates issues regarding party conflicts that we still see today. When looking at the party system through a historical lens, the reliability and integrity of the party system itself can be called into question.

Endnotes

1. William A. Dunning, "The Second Birth of the Republican Party." *American Historical Association* 16, no. 1 (1910): 62, doi: 10.2307/1834308.
2. *Ibid.*, 61.
3. Howard K. Beale, "The Tariff and Reconstruction." *American Historical Review* 35, no. 2 (1930): 276. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1837439>.
4. *Ibid.*, 277.
5. *Ibid.*, 279.
6. Vincent P. Desantis, "The Republican Party and the Southern Negro." *The Journal of Negro History* 45, no. 2 (1960): 71. doi: 10.2307/2716571.
7. *Ibid.*, 72.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
9. Adam Fairclough, "Was the Grant of Black Suffrage a Political Error? Reconsidering the Views of John W. Burgess, William A. Dunning, and Eric Foner on Congressional Reconstruction." *Journal of the Historical Society* 12, no. 2 (2012): 159. DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-5923.2012.00361.x.
10. *Ibid.*, 182.
11. *Ibid.*, 166.
12. Waldo W. Moore, "Louisiana Reconstruction - Dream and Reality." *North Louisiana Historical Association Newsletter* 6, no. 4 (1966): 13. <http://libproxy.udayton.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edo&AN=45453552&site=eds-live>.
13. *Ibid.*, 21.
14. *Ibid.*, 20.
15. Philip D. Uzee, "The Beginnings of the Louisiana Republican Party." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 12, no. 3 (1971): 206. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4231198>.
16. *Ibid.*, 210.
17. *Ibid.*, 211.
18. John M. Matthews, "Negro Republicans in the Reconstruction of Georgia." *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (1976): 145. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40580272>.
19. *Ibid.*, 148.
20. *Ibid.*, 158.
21. Eric Foner, "Slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction," in *The New American History*, ed. Eric Foner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 98.
22. *Ibid.*, 100.
23. *Ibid.*, 101.

24. Michael W. Fitzgerald, "Republican Factionalism and Black Empowerment: The Spencer-Warner Controversy and Alabama Reconstruction, 1868-1880." *Journal of Southern History* 64, no. 3 (1998): 473. doi: 10.2307/2587791.
25. Ibid., 479.

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