

December 2019

The Changing Tides of the Republican Party during Reconstruction

Nicholas Panson
University of Dayton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Panson, Nicholas (2019) "The Changing Tides of the Republican Party during Reconstruction," *Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/lxl/vol6/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Line by Line: A Journal of Beginning Student Writing by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

The Changing Tides of the Republican Party during Reconstruction

Writing Process

I wrote the following essay throughout the semester in my ASI 120 course in multiple stages. My reading of Eric Foner's *A Short History of Reconstruction* helped me generate my topic of interest and contextualize my historiographical argument. My instructor assigned the class reading responses to Foner's historiography, which exercised my skills in writing explanatory summaries and academic responses. I next drafted my formal topic proposal to serve as the basis of my descriptive argument, the first paragraph of my introduction. I gathered a collection of eight historiographical sources and summarized each of them, while drawing upon the skills I practiced and developed throughout ASI 110 and in the Foner Response assignments. After writing the Annotated Bibliography, I examined each of the sources to construct my own historiographical argument. During the writing process, I consulted my instructor, Dr. Mackay, and the CORE Write Place consultants to polish my essay. Dr. Mackay also gave my seminar writing workshops for practice in historiographical statements and Chicago footnotes.

Course

ASI120

Semester

Spring

Instructor

Elizabeth Mackay

Year

2019

The Changing Tides of the Republican Party during Reconstruction

Nicholas Panson

During Congressional Reconstruction, the Republican Party substantially shifted away from its former radical ideological orientation. Republicans notably abandoned their expansive, prized social policies such as the “labor question” and freedmen’s rights. The party once strongly clung to radicalism during the Civil War, which supported equality before the law, Unionist governments, and black suffrage. President Grant’s 1868 election marked the beginning of this decisive ideological transition to conservatism. Since 1868, intraparty conflict, economic expansion goals, the 1873 depression, and differing political attitudes explained in part radicalism’s demise within the moderate Republican camp. With these contextual factors, I closely review Republicans’ political realignment during Reconstruction, with a glance on the ideologies, figures, policies, and events involved. I am interested in this topic due to my extensive coursework in political science, where both state and non-state actors’ roles and actions influenced Republican realignment. The extent of this political change is debatable, given that some aspects changed, and others remained intact. My historiographical argument addresses how historians’ interpretations of Republican realignment have transformed over time. I more specifically utilize scholarly articles and monographs from various periods to discuss changing interpretations of realignment’s effects on freedmen.

Republicans’ realignment characterizes a drastic point in Reconstruction. Tailoring these factors to my argument, I rely on the following sources to evaluate the prevalence of these attributes in several historiographical explanations. Each source finds the Grant presidency as the definitive point of conservatism’s replacement of radicalism. Earlier sources concentrate on broad ideological shifts and political events, but evidence since the 1960s mainly focuses on economics,

race, and specific political positions. While investigating these articles, I find the extent of realignment to be questionable and subjective based on context. Historians studying realignment attributed this extent to either a single factor, a principal factor with some background influences, or multiple factors. I organize my historiographical argument into three thematic categories of interpretation. The first group of historians includes William Dunning, William Hesselstine, and C. Vance Woodward. They view realignment as occurring due to a single overarching factor, with little discussion relative to other factors and issues like freedmen's rights. Brooks Simpson and Nicholas Barreyre also posit that a single reason explains the Republican reversal, yet they also consider background factors in the shadow of the main explanation. As with Patrick Riddleberger's interpretation in 1960, Stephen Prince and Lewis Gould's recent historiographical arguments constitute the multifaceted nature of studying realignment, where factors encompass economics, civil rights, politics, and public opinion. I apply the latter groups' interpretations to argue Republican realignment during Reconstruction occurred via multiple avenues. However, historians have considerable disagreement on dating Republican realignment according to the sequence of Reconstruction events. This conflict over dating yields to the complex and gradual characteristic of realignment. Its effects on freedmen must also be accounted for to better understand how realignment impacted not only those in the party but also people of color. With the sources used, Lewis Gould's interpretation grasps concision, accuracy, and comprehensiveness to best demonstrate realignment as a multifaceted event, showing connections between national politics and freedmen's rights.

The Lone Transformation

Historians before the 1960s approached Republican realignment as a noteworthy political event explained best by single, broad factors while overlooking other crucial considerations found in later interpretations. Discussion of realignment's ramifications on freedmen's rights is noticeably absent among these sources. In "The Second Birth of the Republican Party," William Dunning evaluates the continuity of the Republican Party's ideology since the Civil War through Reconstruction.¹ First, Dunning writes that Republicans by the Civil War's end, along with "War Democrats," were essentially a "Union" party

¹ William A. Dunning, "The Second Birth of the Republican Party," *The American Historical Review* 16, no. 1 (1910): 56. doi:10.2307/1834308.

supporting the Union's maintenance against Southern rebellion. Nevertheless, factions among them in 1866 took shape, where conservatives supported the Johnson administration's Reconstruction plan, and radicals protested amnesty and espoused freedmen's suffrage. Radicalism "nationalized" among Republicans in the 1866 elections, where it aimed to abandon Civil War era "sectionalism" in preference for African- American enfranchisement unifying the national party.² Dunning points that radicalism was an extreme ideology that manipulated the race issue out of "ignorance" to gain national popularity.³ By 1868, radicalism waned nationally because conservatism emerged as the dominant ideology among moderates. This additionally meant that the Republican Party no longer was the "Union" party. Dunning next states that this "rebirth" of Republicans' core ideology of anti-slavery was manifested in the 1872 election, where their mission of emancipation and reunification was complete.⁴ While he finds that radicalism was a politically expedient war-time response in a divided country, Dunning only defines realignment as the abandonment of "sectionalism" and not in terms of deserting social policies.

William Dunning's interpretation of realignment, in light of an opportune political moment, is further elaborated by William Hesseltine as a response to failed economic policies. Hesseltine writes in "The Economic Factors in the Abandonment of Reconstruction" about Reconstruction faltering in the process of Republican realignment during this time.⁵ He argues that Republicans reneged on their core radical values because their political program failed to reap economic results for the South. Congressional Reconstruction originally came with the mindset that the South would repudiate its past views for industrial development and Northern investment, but it also "forced" black suffrage.⁶ In turn, investors could not prosper as they intended because of violence and feeble property rights protection. President Grant after 1868 permitted some states to remove disenfranchisement clauses of ex-Confederates from their constitutions.⁷ As Hesseltine demonstrates, Republican politicians switched positions because they

² *Ibid.*, 61.

³ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁵ William B. Hesseltine, "Economic Factors in the Abandonment of Reconstruction," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 22, no. 2 (1935): 191.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 197.

were beholden to the “masters of capital” and wished to retain power.⁸ During the 1874 congressional elections, Republicans acknowledged their defeat to Democrats by taking a less- interventionist stance in the South while also relegating their concern for the “race question” and support of carpetbagger governments.⁹ In comparison to Dunning, Hesselstine’s interpretation more accurately reflects how and why realignment occurred but only mentions economics as the main driving force behind the shift.

C. Vann Woodward offers a slightly different explanation of realignment based on Republicans’ sympathies for the former Confederacy, instead of broad economic and ideological factors in Dunning and Hesselstine’s writings. In his monograph, *Reunion & Reaction*, Woodward studies the attitudes and rhetoric of the period leading up to the Compromise of 1877.¹⁰ First, the Compromise entailed Southern congressmen relinquishing their support for Samuel J. Tilden in the 1876 presidential election for Rutherford B. Hayes, but Hayes in return had to withdraw all federal troops in the South and give Democrats control over two state governments in the South. Next, Woodward writes that Hayes and the Republicans had to reverse their Southern policy because of public disapproval for intervention and “habitual” use of force in Reconstruction. However, he states that the 1876 election still positively portrayed Radical Reconstruction and waved the “bloody shirt,” which cried that Union blood was on Southerners’ hands.¹¹ Republicans only deserted their radical heritage for the Compromise because it was an opportune moment for political power. Furthermore, Woodward writes that Republicans saw “the Southern problem with new eyes” and began to resurrect their Hamiltonian Federalist and Whig ancestry.¹² The author also depicts Republicans in “alliance with ex-rebels and ex-slaveholders.”¹³ Woodward continues that this alliance “revealed the party of Carpetbaggers repudiating the Carpetbaggers, the party of emancipation and freedmen’s rights abandoning the Negro to his former master. It only meant that the Carpetbaggers had proved an ineffective means of controlling [freedmen’s] votes and it was hoped that the old masters might be more resourceful in accomplishing the same

⁸ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁰ C. V. Woodward, *Reaction & Reunion* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 1-3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹² *Ibid.*, 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 228.

end.”¹⁴ The Republicans adapted the Redeemers’ policy for economic conservatism to form a new coalition. On the contrary, Hayes made the Compromise nuanced when he appointed both Democrats and Carpetbagger Republicans to state election offices. President Hayes, who was a conservative Republican with southern sympathies, was a key figure in finishing President Grant’s Southern policy. Woodward’s interpretation, along with Dunning and Hesselstine, picture Reconstruction-era Republicans as a party that swiftly responded to challenges out of the desire to maintain political power. All historians disagree on why and how specifically the Republican party abandoned radicalism, essentially Reconstruction as a political program.

The Nuanced Transformation

The next group of historians switch from an earlier focus on broad explanatory factors to a more expansive understanding that considers numerous background factors under a primary reason for realignment. Brooks Simpson researches reconciliatory attitudes toward the South with a narrower scope on several background factors, while the former historians have negated this approach. In “Ulysses S. Grant and the Failure of Reconstruction,” Simpson examines President Grant’s attitude of reconciliation and his role in shaping the demise of radicalism within the mainstream Republican Party.¹⁵ First, Simpson writes that radicals’ extreme view of progress was challenged by President Grant’s view in 1873 that freedmen’s safety was now a priority, not “social equality” through legislation.¹⁶ The author then gives a brief overview of General Grant’s reconciliatory attitude toward the South, where he first opposed President Johnson’s trial of Confederate officials, embraced amnesty, and removed black troops and Freedmen’s Bureau officials from their posts. Yet, Grant witnessed that Southerners were undeserving of complete amnesty because of violence and hateful rhetoric they incited against freedmen and Unionists.¹⁷ As President, Grant signed the Enforcement Acts that permitted the federal government to protect Southern blacks against violence.¹⁸ Also, he simultaneously protected the ex-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 229.

¹⁵ Brooks D. Simpson, “Ulysses S. Grant and the Failure of Reconciliation,” *Illinois Historical Journal* 81, no. 4 (1988): 269.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 278.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 279.

rebels by stripping the Fourteenth Amendment's punishments inflicted on them.¹⁹ Above all, Simpson describes how President Grant fused his reconciliation approach with federal interventionism to appeal to moderates since he felt Radical Republicans in the South were inefficient and corrupt. This historiographical argument represents an individual level of analysis when examining realignment, where President Grant was at the center of Republican politics in the early 1870s and numerous background factors were considered under his strong influence. Simpson clearly connects national politics with freedmen's rights but fails to equally weight other causal factors in realignment. He only introduces freedmen's rights as a background factor.

Nicolas Barreyre offers a more recent interpretation of Republican realignment. He follows Simpson's reasoning in "The Politics of Economic Crises: The Panic of 1873, the End of Reconstruction, and the Realignment of American Politics," attributing a single casual factor to this shift.²⁰ He studies the Panic of 1873 as a crucial point in Reconstruction history, which first established "Gilded Age" issues of class tensions, labor unrest, and the "money question" during the post-war era. Barreyre writes that Republicans lost the 1874 congressional elections largely because of their unpopular stance on the "money question" intertwined with other social and economic policies under Reconstruction. The "money question" involved the option either to expand credit access by printing more paper money or to restrict paper money in preference for gold reserves. Specifically, the 1873 depression harmed Southern Republicans because northern investment stagnated and the recently passed Civil Rights Act triggered Southern fury. Moreover, President Grant's veto of the "Inflation Bill," which would have circulated more paper money, significantly harmed Northern Republicans' electoral prospects in 1874, where they lost Midwestern and Western turnout because of the "money question."²¹ With Southern discontent and division within their own party, the Republicans had to push Reconstruction off their political agenda because of a newly elected Democratic Congress's adamance against their policies.²² For Republicans, they had to realign ideologically by avoiding polarizing issues such as Reconstruction and the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 279.

²⁰ Nicolas Barreyre, "The Politics of Economic Crises: The Panic of 1873, the End of Reconstruction, and the Realignment of American Politics," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 10, no. 4 (2011): 403.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 415.

²² *Ibid.*, 420.

“money question,” which once united their party but now divided it. Barreyre particularly claims, “the 1873 crisis ended Reconstruction not so much because northerners had other things in mind (although shifting priorities did play a role), but because Republicans translated the crisis into the money question and proved utterly unable to convince voters they were doing anything meaningful to solve the problem.”²³ Regarding Liberal Republicans, Barreyre states they were not a sufficient example of Republican realignment because they were a third party that simply and unsuccessfully reacted to economic crises. This historian’s argument draws upon evidence from the later years of Reconstruction, where economics was a propellant of political change. Although Barreyre considers factors outside the purview of economics, he does not seriously examine realignment’s comprehensive nature based on multiple causal factors because he still gives weight to economics as the overarching factor. A detailed look on economics may drive attention away from other factors of equal importance in Reconstruction.

Change from All Sides

While the previous two groups of historians formulated singular explanations on the Republican reversal, Patrick Riddleberger closely reviews the multifaceted nature of this political transformation. Riddleberger specifically explores the reasons and rhetoric behind the radicals’ reorientation of their stance on freedmen in “The Radicals’ Abandonment of the Negro During Reconstruction.”²⁴ First, he finds that Radical Republicans significantly changed when they fractured into Stalwarts and Liberals in 1872. Even though both groups disassociated themselves from the “race question,” Riddleberger argues Liberal Republicans experienced a more extreme political transformation because of their departure from radical policies of federal intervention, land confiscation and redistribution, and black suffrage. Compared to their prior rhetoric and policies at the onset of Reconstruction, liberals during the early 1870s lamented corruption of radical-controlled governments, the exploitation of the freedman as a “political issue,” and President Grant’s Southern policy.²⁵ In turn, they embraced amnesty for Southerners, supported local governance, and rallied for the completion of

²³ *Ibid.*, 420.

²⁴ Patrick W. Riddleberger, “The Radicals’ Abandonment of the Negro During Reconstruction,” *The Journal of Negro History* 45, no. 2 (1960): 88, doi:10.2307/2716572.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

Reconstruction with the ratified constitutional amendments protecting basic black rights. For the 1872 presidential election, Riddleberger claims Stalwarts still prioritized the freedman politically and defended his rights while liberals appealed to Southerners by advocating less government regulation for Southern control and Northern investment. Overall, this evaluation details how the Liberal Republican movement shaped post-Reconstruction Republican ideology, including the retreat on the freedmen's political salience. Interpretations at this stage begin to acknowledge the complicated nature of realignment in having multiple causal factors. The only aspect Riddleberger falls short of is a detailed study of other factors besides liberals and Stalwarts.

Lewis Gould next adds a more comprehensive dimension to Republican political realignment in showing the multiple factors involved in changing historical interpretations. He usefully presents most of the factors shown in previous interpretations but synthesizes those factors with the effects on freedmen's rights. In a chapter entitled, "Republicans and Reconstruction, 1865-1877," in his monograph, *Grand Old Party*, Gould details the events, figures, policies, and ideologies that initiated Republicans' flee from Reconstruction.²⁶ Following the Civil War, congressional Republicans varied on economic issues but were united in their reproach against the South and its treatment of former-slaves. This party cohesion prompted them to oppose President Johnson's efforts to derail Radical Reconstruction, where they overrode his veto of the Civil Rights Act of 1866.²⁷ By 1867, the electorate grew disillusioned with the radicals' plans, especially when Northern states rejected freedmen's suffrage.²⁸ Republicans during the 1868 election shied away from freedmen's suffrage in their party platforms and grew more concerned about economic issues, such as tariffs and business growth. President Grant's scandal-ridden administration and intervention to protect Southern blacks thrust the Liberal Republicans into the national spotlight. Even though Liberal Republicanism faded after 1872, their ideology of *laissez-faire* capitalism and social conservatism outlasted their electoral defeat and motivated Republicans to abandon freedmen.²⁹ The Panic of 1873 and growing social problems affected both parties, and the Compromise of 1877 officially ended Reconstruction and turned Republicans away from civil rights.

²⁶ Lewis L. Gould, *Grand Old Party* (New York: Random House, 2003), 42.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

Most certainly, Gould notes the difficulty in studying this ideological transformation: “Although the outcome in 1877 did not signify complete Republican abandonment of black Americans, it did mark an important turning point in the nation’s approach to race. The South became less Republican and more segregated. Civil Rights would not return to the region for seventy-five years. In the America of 1877, there was little that Republicans could have done to avert this result. After a generation of trying to build a freer and more open society for all its citizens, the United States lapsed back into the customs and prejudices of the old.”³⁰ Gould’s argument most successfully conceptualizes the complex and comprehensive character of realignment, recognizing that no individual factor can accurately describe the breadth of this crucial political event. Most significantly, comprehensiveness in Gould’s interpretation also gives way to accuracy and concision. The author’s argument holistically studies the multiple reasons involved in realignment and strategically organizes his claims in a detailed, concise manner. Gould uniquely captures all of the criteria I defined in my main argument, while other historians only view realignment from one angle.

Although Gould’s interpretation is the most comprehensive and compelling work in this thematic group, Stephen Prince considers similar issues in the face of carpetbagger governments in the South propelling the Republican shift. In “Legitimacy and Interventionism: Northern Republicans, the ‘Terrible Carpetbagger,’ and the Retreat from Reconstruction,” Prince evaluates Northern Republicans’ change of rhetoric concerning carpetbaggers and how it shaped their abandonment of radicalism.³¹ Carpetbaggers, Northern Republicans who immigrated to the South for political influence, were once hailed as heroes that civilized the devastated former Confederacy with their ideologies and business ties.³² This group facilitated Radical Reconstruction, while in the midst of criticism from Democrats. However, Prince suggests Northern Republicans rebuked carpetbaggers after the 1872 presidential election when the Liberal Republicans disintegrated. Liberal Republicans emerged in the mainstream Republican wing when they decried federal intervention policies and corrupt carpetbagger governments.³³ In turn, this realignment was symbolic because

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

³¹ Stephen K. Prince, “Legitimacy and Interventionism: Northern Republicans, the ‘Terrible Carpetbagger,’ and the Retreat from Reconstruction,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 2, no. 4 (2012): 538.

³² *Ibid.*, 542.

³³ *Ibid.*, 548.

Republicans felt that Reconstruction could no longer transform the South, given liberals' compelling arguments.³⁴ This reversal also hurt freedmen's quest for security and civil rights because they relied on carpetbagger governments for these demands. Prince states the carpetbagger issue was how Republicans pushed radicalism and Reconstruction off their party agenda because of public backlash they received from politicians and newspapers. When evaluating the scope of this interpretation, recurring themes of rhetoric, public outcry, and influential ideologies are present in explaining realignment along with its effects on freedmen. Nevertheless, unlike Gould, Prince has not included economics as a factor and has not used a wider-spanning timeline to study realignment. Prince, along with Riddleberger, tends to give a wholesome view on realignment but his heavy weight for carpetbaggers makes his argument void of complete accuracy and concision.

In studying realignment during Reconstruction, historians have proposed a swath of conclusions on when, how, and why Republicans' political goals and approaches diverged from their strong heritage in radicalism. Historians before the 1960s theorize Republicans reformed their party in terms of singular reasons, including economics, ideology, and rhetoric and attitudes of "Southern sympathies." These historians reflect a simpler understanding of realignment as a one-sided event best explained by a dominant factor. Sources from the 1960s and beyond address a combination of interpretations rooted in principal factors with background details and equally-weighted factors. Most importantly, these recent sources reveal the true value of history as a discipline: telling stories from multiple perspectives in a comprehensive fashion that upholds accuracy and showcases connections between seemingly different factors.

Nonetheless, Lewis Gould's interpretation of the multifaceted character of this topic, along with a detailed look at freedmen's rights, adds another dimension to modern historical study that is not conspicuous in other sources. In addition, his wide-ranging historiographical argument does not sacrifice a descriptive explanation for the sake of concision but rather upholds both criteria. Gould enmeshes most of the factors considered by other historians to portray realignment's complicated and gradual nature. He recognizes the equal role economics, political decisions, and public opinion played in this event. The latter group's historians cannot compete with Gould's level of analysis since they omit

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 552.

economics as a causal factor, making their accounts less accurate and concise. This author's work sufficiently weighs the multiple factors and avoids giving preference to some factors over others. On a larger scale, Gould's argument not only meets the specified criteria, but it also adheres to modern historical study's emphasis on unraveling complexities in a complete, unbiased manner. History aspires to effectively explain complete stories and identify involved factors. Gould's essay on realignment best fulfills the mission modern historians have long desired to achieve.

Bibliography

- Barreyre, Nicolas. "The Politics of Economic Crises: The Panic of 1873, the End of Reconstruction, and the Realignment of American Politics." *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 10, no. 4 (2011): 403-23.
- Dunning, William A. "The Second Birth of the Republican Party." *The American Historical Review* 16, no. 1 (1910): 56-63. doi:10.2307/1834308.
- Gould, Lewis L. *Grand Old Party*. New York: Random House, 2003.
- Hesseltine, William B. "Economic Factors in the Abandonment of Reconstruction." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 22, no. 2 (1935): 191-210.
- Prince, Stephen K. "Legitimacy and Interventionism: Northern Republicans, the 'Terrible Carpetbagger,' and the Retreat from Reconstruction." *Journal of the Civil War Era* 2, no. 4 (2012): 538-63.
- Riddleberger, Patrick W. "The Radicals' Abandonment of the Negro During Reconstruction." *The Journal of Negro History* 45, no. 2 (1960): 88-102. doi:10.2307/2716572.
- Simpson, Brooks D. "Ulysses S. Grant and the Failure of Reconciliation." *Illinois Historical Journal* 81, no. 4 (1988): 269-82.
- Woodward, C. V. *Reaction & Reunion*. Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956.