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Reconstruction Out West: The State of Postwar Texas

Writing Process

Editor's note: This paper is the recipient of the Barbara Farrelly Award for Best Writing of the Issue.

I studied Eric Foner's historiography: *A Short History of Reconstruction: 1863-1877*. I then used my knowledge on the era to focus on the role of politics during Reconstruction in the state of Texas. I gathered sources from Roesch Library and JSTOR that covered many different aspects of Reconstruction Texas and used those sources to build a history of how historians' perspectives on the topic have changed over the last century.

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Reconstruction Out West: The State of Postwar Texas

Kevin O'Connell

In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, the United States confronted the national and regional project of Reconstruction, with Texas standing out as a unique case of readmission to the Union. The state's political turmoil during Reconstruction exemplified the disastrous effects of partisan politics. Although both Democrats and Republicans wanted to rebuild Texas into a healthy member of the Union, the two factions violently disagreed on strategies of doing so, which only led to further disfunction. The beliefs of these two factions have dominated historical interpretations of the Reconstruction in Texas in the decades since. In my research, I gathered sources that analyze the state of Texas politics throughout Reconstruction, ranging from 1910 to 2021. The sources are divided into two interpretive categories and are listed in chronological order within each category. Over the last century, historical research has developed with two interpretations standing out: one focuses on the issues with radical Republicanism in Texas, and the other attributes Reconstruction failures to Democratic adherence to pre-Civil War values, with the latter interpretation having more credence due to its socially objective examination of the era.

The first interpretation, The "Evil" of Radical Rule, begins with Charles Ramsdell's *Reconstruction in Texas* and traces the failure of Reconstruction back to radical Republican greed and despotism. Sources from this era echo traditional Southern belief in the slave system and white supremacy. The second interpretation, *Racism: Roadblock to Reconstruction*, focuses on the impact of Democratic opposition to deviations from antebellum society and how that stance distorted early histories of Reconstruction in Texas. This view, which developed after the civil rights movement began America's reckoning with racism, is the stronger of the two due to its authentic acknowledgement of how racist tradition in Texas impacted written histories.

The relationship between these interpretations and their publication dates highlights the progression of historical thought concerning the Reconstruction era in Texas. As a modern historian, I aim to understand the motivations behind policies in this era. Such research is necessary to create effective political, social, and cultural progress in the modern world. Neglecting the study of Reconstruction, and the Texas experience specifically, jeopardizes social advancement by preserving racism in academia. When considering the past decade's racial and civil unrest, recognizing the historical trends built by racism is crucial to building an America that truly embodies its ideals. The topic of Reconstruction in Texas offers a glimpse of America in its most polarized state and serves as a microcosm of how history can be impacted by cultural dispositions.

The “Evil” of Radical Rule

Written in 1910, Charles W. Ramsdell's *Reconstruction in Texas* studies the differences between Presidential and Congressional Reconstruction in Texas, specifically their different motives. President Andrew Johnson's Reconstruction program occurred between the immediate end of the war and Johnson's impeachment and was a true attempt to fully readmit Texas to the Union, according to Ramsdell.¹ Congressional Reconstruction began when Republicans established a majority in Congress and implemented their own program, which Ramsdell references in a chapter title as “The Undoing of Civil Government.” Ramsdell credits radical Republicans with running a campaign of political greed meant to reshape Texas into a radical stronghold, corrupting the state in the process. He cites disenfranchisement of former Confederates and enfranchisement of freedmen as evidence that radicals hoped to upend the Texan way of life. Chapter XII, “Radical Rule and its Overthrow,” describes the progressive policies of the final radical majority as a strategy meant to subvert the state to Governor E.J. Davis's militia.² Ramsdell chronicles the era with emphasis on Republican methods of consolidating political power, which he deems the main fault of Reconstruction.

As Ramsdell's history was one of the first comprehensive histories written about Reconstruction, its impact still resonates in modern interpretations, albeit as an opposing analysis to the modern view. His study considers most Republican actions to have been done with malicious intent, echoing the resurgent conservatism of the early 20th century. The struggles of Reconstruction in Texas were legitimate, but Ramsdell's history paints them as products of a political

¹ Ramsdell, Charles W., *Reconstruction in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1910).

² Ramsdell, *Reconstruction in Texas*, 295-301.

invasion meant to uproot civil liberty. This account diminishes the true plight of Americans living in a young state recently consumed by war and promotes the idea that a return to antebellum Texas was the only way to recover from the war.

L.W. Newton and H.P. Gambrell offer useful context for Texas's Reconstruction era in Chapter XVII of *Social and Political History of Texas* entitled, "Texas Leaves and Returns to the Union." The two authors describe Congressional Reconstruction as a despotic attempt to create a new South in line with the radical North. According to their 1935 history, the implementation of military and Negro rule would achieve this Republican goal.³ Newton and Gambrell place blame for the beginnings of radical rule on the freedmen's belief that the government would gift them with their masters' lands, which prompted the new labor system of apprenticeship, and thus the spread of radical ideas from Northern radicals to Southern blacks. The authors view Reconstruction in Texas as a freedmen and Republican ploy for domination and degradation of the state, hailing Democrats as heroes restoring order, no matter how violent their methods. According to this source, Union Leagues created a cartel of radicals and blacks under the common cause of restricting civil rights from "true" Texans. The state police garnered significant disapproval for seizing property and money from Texans, which, along with instances of martial law, strengthened Democratic resistance against Governor Davis.

Newton and Gambrell built upon Ramsdell's principles and mid-20th century racism to assign more culpability to blacks. This book serves as an early example of the American social climate's role in Reconstruction interpretations. Ramsdell set a precedent for interpreting Texas' history as a narrative that it withstood domestic growth and trauma. Newton and Gambrell published their history in the heat of the Great Depression, a time when Americans were desperate for a scapegoat. This search for blame pervaded American culture during the Depression, so it should be no surprise that Reconstruction's failures in Texas were further shifted onto Republicans and freedmen during this time. The authors chronicled Texas Reconstruction while conforming to anti-black and anti-progressive attitudes common in America, which is the defining trait of this interpretive group.

Thirty years later, W.C. Nunn promoted the perception of radical Republicans as invaders seeking to corrupt Texas politics for their own gain in *Texas Under the Carpetbaggers*.⁴ Like Ramsdell, Nunn characterizes Texas as a state paralyzed

³ Newton, L.W. and H.P. Gambrell, *Social and Political History of Texas* (Dallas: Turner Company, 1935), 299-315.

⁴ Nunn, W.C., *Texas Under the Carpetbaggers* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962).

by Northerners who did not understand Texas nor its values, while focusing on how carpetbaggers and other radicals imposed an unjust rule on the state. The author pays specific attention to the political tools of Republicans during Congressional Reconstruction, specifically the Freedmen's Bureau and Texas State Police. He also accepts the belief that radicals hoped to consolidate and control votes, and thus power, through the enfranchisement of freedmen. In Chapter Two, "The State Police," Nunn explains that because the state police force answered to the governor and not citizens, officers could abuse their power without threat of repercussion.⁵ According to this chapter, unwarranted search and seizure and police jurisdiction extending across county lines proved that the radical Davis administration ignored the state constitution. Nunn considers these and other actions of the Davis government to be the result of a carpetbagger invasion. He embraces the scapegoat tendency of previous sources by describing Republican policies as attempts to create a political machine bent on destroying the traditional Texas lifestyle.

The staunch fear of any progressive or diverse coalition, especially interracial, is prevalent in this interpretive group, as researchers adhered to social attitudes opposing any people or ideas that violated its tradition. Nunn's account reflects the traditional Dunning School belief that the Reconstruction government in Texas had no intention of re-assimilating the state into the Union. Its focus on carpetbaggers as the primary culprit for Reconstruction's failure in Texas differs from sources with similar themes. Newton and Gambrell allocated blame to freedmen who could not function in a proper society while Ramsdell references the same political figures as Nunn without dubbing them "carpetbaggers." These three books, published over a fifty-year period, each regard Reconstruction as a setback to American progress and recovery. The conservative and prejudiced themes make evident the authors endorsement of America's racial and political hierarchy. As America grew more progressive, historical interpretations of Reconstruction in Texas followed suit, a transition visible in my research.

Racism: Roadblock to Reconstruction

In her 1969 journal article, Ann Patton Baenziger provides a viewpoint different from previous historians, namely W.C. Nunn, on the role of the Texas State Police in Reconstruction. "The Texas State Police during Reconstruction: A Reexamination" tries to dispel the belief that the police were nothing more than oppressors and political instruments.⁶ Instead, she highlights important

⁵ Nunn, *Texas Under the Carpetbaggers*, 74.

⁶ Baenziger, Ann Patton, "The Texas State Police during Reconstruction: A Reexamination," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (Apr. 1969): 470-91, JSTOR.

contributions the police made to Reconstruction and states that their disbanding occurred for conservative political reasons. Baenziger contends that politics and racism caused lawless chaos in postwar Texas, a fact dismissed by conservatives. According to her, the true issue with the state police was the officers themselves—40% were black and most were Republicans.⁷ Her study contrasts with the previous sources by declaring state police were a political pawn of conservatives, not radicals. Democrats constantly lambasted the force as a radical Republican agent meant to miscarry justice and terrorize the common Texan. Baenziger recognizes this as a Democratic campaign to turn Texans against the radicals. Early histories embraced the campaign as a virtuous mission, but Baenziger and later researchers disputed this with investigation into the Republican and freedmen perspective on Reconstruction. This source marks the transition between the Dunning School and revisionism that occurred during the civil rights movement when black people began to escape responsibility for America's failures and researchers considered the role of all players in such situations.

Eleven years after Baenziger set a new interpretive precedent, Carl H. Moneyhon examined the era of Republican dominance in Texas outside the lens of antebellum tradition.⁸ In *Republicanism in Reconstruction Texas*, he recognizes Republicanism as a new view of black people and the government in society, refuting early historical tendency to equate Republicans with outsiders. Revisionists found that Republicans actually did represent many Texans, especially poor white farmers and freed blacks. The party reflected lower class interests that opposed the planter class, which inspired harsh opposition from community leaders. Planters and Democrats resorted to violence against voters to maintain the traditional state of things. Chapter Eight of Moneyhon's book, "Tyranny, Taxes, and Corruption: Crisis of the Radical Coalition," examines of the political battle between vocal Democrats and radicals at its climax: the term of Governor E.J. Davis. The Davis administration was the last radical majority in Texas and faced harsh opposition from the growing Democratic faction, primarily over high taxes. Texan disdain for the cost of Republican programs ultimately caused the party's downfall when Democrats promised tax relief.⁹ This book provides depth into Texas Republicans' management of Reconstruction issues while avoiding the prejudice common in early historical studies. Moneyhon's research on Reconstruction in Texas broke new ground on the topic and

⁷ Baenziger, "The Texas State Police during Reconstruction: A Reexamination," 475.

⁸ Moneyhon, Carl H., *Republicanism in Reconstruction Texas*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980).

⁹ Moneyhon, *Republicanism in Reconstruction Texas*, 166.

established a foundation for future historians, including Gregg Cantrell, to build upon.

Cantrell's 1990 article, "Racial Violence and Reconstruction Politics in Texas, 1867-1868," chronicles violence in Reconstruction Texas while paying special attention to the bias of Dunning School researchers.¹⁰ According to him, early histories downplayed violence perpetrated by ex-Confederates and instead blamed Republican politicians and Union soldiers. Revisionists blame disturbances on conservatives retaliating against black autonomy and trying to maintain white supremacy in Texas. He states that all violence was imposed to keep the South "a white man's country," which is proven by the correlation between Union League activity, the passing of Republican policies, and violent occurrences. Unlike most historians who came before him, Cantrell utilizes Freedmen's Bureau records when recounting violence in Texas. Because newspapers were usually partisan, revisionists look much more into military and Bureau records when analyzing Reconstruction violence. He recognizes the role of political and racial violence in Texas, as most Republican actions begot violent responses. This source demonstrates how historical perspectives change alongside the nation after major social events, this case being the civil rights movement. Cantrell's acceptance of previously ignored documents contrasts with mid-20th century researchers' habit of endorsing conventional historical theories.

In his journal article titled, "Carpetbagger Rule in Reconstruction Texas: An Enduring Myth," Randolph B. Campbell directly disputes W.C. Nunn's book, *Texas Under the Carpetbaggers*. Campbell repudiates Nunn in the 1994 publication by saying that the myth of carpetbagger rule simply serves as a scapegoat for Reconstruction's failure.¹¹ He notes that early histories, such as Ramsdell's, made no reference to carpetbagger political power. He also details how the definition of carpetbagger changed over time to essentially mean "Republican" in the eyes of Texans, with researchers of the mid-20th century considering a carpetbagger to be any Northern politician that gained power from black votes and hurt the state. Campbell cites state records to prove that only a small percentage of Texas officeholders between 1867 and 1874 were carpetbaggers. The carpetbagger faction held one executive office, one Supreme Court seat, eight District Court seats, twelve legislators, and four local officials. Scalawags, or southern-born whites, made up most of the Reconstruction government in Texas. This article supplies valuable information about how

¹⁰ Cantrell, Gregg, "Racial Violence and Reconstruction Politics in Texas, 1867-1868," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 93, no. 3 (1990): 333-55, JSTOR.

¹¹ Campbell, Randolph B., "Carpetbagger Rule in Reconstruction Texas: An Enduring Myth," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 97, no. 4 (1994): 587-96, JSTOR.

studies from different eras can dispute each other and presents another example of the interpretive transition that developed out of reexamination of the era.

The statistical evidence Campbell includes dispels any skepticism about his stance on carpetbagger rule in Texas. Like Cantrell, he rejects partisan newspapers of the era and looks only at documented facts, which pits his research directly against Nunn's. The thirty years of immense cultural change between the two historians proves that researchers respond to new concepts of the present reality. The civil rights movement and its consequences likely inspired historians to reconsider major events of America's past with institutional racism in mind.

Carl Moneyhon continues his reexamination of Reconstruction in Texas in *Texas After the Civil War: The Struggle of Reconstruction*, published in 2004. In this book, he writes with consideration of black people and Republicans as legitimate participants in Texas politics, not usurpers hoping to desecrate the Southern way of life.¹² He regards Ramsdell's history as a relic of its time that is no longer accepted by historians. Moneyhon states that the supposed radical revolution in Texas never actually happened, with the Texas of 1874 looking very close to the Texas of 1861. He dismisses the belief that black enfranchisement only gave corrupt politicians power and ignored the people and health of Texas, accrediting the lack of consequential change to antebellum tradition and racism. He cites the widespread effort by Confederates to reject the consequences of the Civil War as the primary impediment to Reconstruction progress. Moneyhon's book displays the impact of political animosity on the state of Texas and early interpretations of the era, in turn explaining the shift in blame for the failed Reconstruction from Republicans to Democrats. Once researchers began looking past political bias, new information on Texas Reconstruction arose.

Just one year ago, Moneyhon published *The Union League and Biracial Politics in Reconstruction Texas*, a specific study on the Union League's role in the politics of Reconstruction Texas.¹³ He notes the history of resentment of the Union League due to its unification of white Republicans and freedmen. Early researchers agreed with Democratic Texans in their interpretation of the League, asserting that the organization stoked political unrest through Republican manipulation of already "ignorant" blacks. The prevailing view of biracial politics followed this line of thinking and legitimized Democratic attempts to restrict freedmen's rights, with historians even accepting the Ku Klux Klan as a necessary reaction to the Union League. Moneyhon heeds revisionist themes and disputes

¹² Moneyhon, Carl H., *Texas After the Civil War: The Struggle of Reconstruction* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004).

¹³ Moneyhon, Carl H., *The Union League and Biracial Politics in Reconstruction Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2021).

many of his predecessors in his interpretation of the League's goals, members, and actions. Chapters Four, "The League and Black Agency," and Five, "Black Agency and Democratic Violence," offer valuable information on how the League impacted the lives of freedmen and the Democratic response to such impacts. For example, Moneyhon endorses the autonomy the League provided to blacks, saying, "[R]ather than being manipulated by the League, blacks in the League influenced the development of the state's Republican Party."¹⁴ In the face of the KKK and Democratic attempts at restricting black freedoms, the Union League became the final defense for black suffrage in Texas.

This source illustrates that shifts in interpretations of entire eras extend to all aspects of that era, as Moneyhon's history of the Union League in Texas renounces previous and prominent research on the organization. He completes the transition from the Dunning School to revisionism by acknowledging biracial politics in the local and state government of Texas. Moneyhon solidifies his place as the premier modern scholar of Reconstruction in Texas over four decades with research on underreported aspects of the era. His three books recognize racism's share in corrupting the historical interpretation of Reconstruction's impact on Texas, specifically in the political realm. He stands out among this interpretive group by introducing a black perspective on the era, a viewpoint neglected by historians of the first interpretation. By pushing for inclusion of unheard voices, Moneyhon builds a more thorough history of Reconstruction Texas than any researcher before him.

Since the civil rights movement, investigations into Reconstruction in Texas have reformed the historical perspective of the time period for the better. The sources analyzed in this essay take the frustrated attitude of Democrats into account. The party was eager to regain political stature in Texas and once it did, the Democratic judgment of Reconstruction influenced historians' research. Taking a modern stance on which sources to study changed historical interpretations to include varying perspectives on Reconstruction instead of a strict focus on the dominant view.

Conclusion

The above essay demonstrates the sharp transition in interpretive research on Reconstruction in Texas alongside the social and cultural development of America. The second interpretation creates a truly comprehensive history by taking an impartial approach to the era. The historians of this interpretive group, especially Carl Moneyhon, repudiate research methods rooted in social

¹⁴ Moneyhon, *The Union League and Biracial Politics in Reconstruction Texas*, 89.

perceptions on assigning blame for Reconstruction's failures in Texas. The outdated and prejudiced style of the first interpretive group stripped freedmen and Republicans of the right to be considered a Texan, which later historians sought to correct in their work. Reconstruction in Texas was a tumultuous affair that serves as a prime example of changing historical interpretations, a lesson crucial to building a complete account of any historical event.

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