

Why did Reconstruction fail to change the South after the Civil War?

The Civil War left a bitter legacy in the defeated lands of the South in that many of the former Confederates remained not only alive but even apparently unpunished - the Proclamations of Amnesty especially from Andrew Johnson's presidency left even the most famous Confederates such as Robert Lee with all their rights restored. In this way it appeared to many people that despite the South's defeat, the political elite behind the Confederacy was still in place a decade after Appomattox. White Southern attitudes had not changed greatly from those which had led to secession in the first place, of which hatred for Northerners and Negroes were pre-eminent.

For a great deal of time after the war had ended, the mutual distrust felt by Northerners and Southerners remained close to the surface. It is noticeable in the North that the successful elections fought by Republicans after the peace - especially the legislatives in 1866 and the presidentials in 1868 and 1872 - were won on the ticket of anti-Southernism or through fears over the loyalty to the Union of the Democratic party. Where this was not an issue, Republicans and especially the Radical wing of the Republicans, did badly. The Ohio state elections of 1867 - fought on the issue of Negro suffrage - show a clear example of how Republican support in the North was against the former rebels rather than for the specific policies of Reconstruction, especially when applied closer to home. On the other hand, antipathy in the Southern states towards the North was bitterer still. Thomas Conway, who previously had held a leading role in the Freedman's Bureau, felt compelled to comment that the South's 'temper of hatred for the Northern people had not abated sufficiently' and nor was there 'sufficient restoration of peace and order to justify in me the belief that they could live and safely transact business in any section of the South'.¹ The fact that Reconstructionist policies were seen to be applied on behalf of Congress - sponsored by almost entirely Northern Congressmen - reinforced the impression that foreign policies were being imposed on a helpless South in defiance of state rights. Federal interventions carried out during Grant's presidency to rescue ailing Republican regimes even from themselves - such as his sporadic support for the customhouse faction over the statehouse faction in the Louisiana Republican party - served only to remind Southern voters that federal intervention would be used in state affairs. Indeed the criticism of the Louisiana case from both Democrat and Republican newspapers specifically condemned the improper use of a federal building as the meeting place for a state party. The *New York Herald* also believed that the Grant government was keeping its factional friends in power 'regardless of the will of the people, the right of local self-government or the forms of State law'.² Here lay a crucial aspect of the conduct of Reconstruction policy which made it far harder to become acceptable to the South: it was the brainchild of the federal Congress and implemented without recourse to local and State democracy. Indeed as the experience of after the withdrawal of federal troops in 1877 shows - with 70 years of the Solid South consistently voting Democrat - the Reconstructionist ideals had been quickly discredited without federal support. Yet the reasons why this appearance came about is due not solely to Northern and Congressional interference (though the term 'carpetbagger' tried to stoke up residual distrust of all Northerners) but the failure of the Southern Republican parties to maintain their control over state assemblies and thus give Reconstruction more legitimacy. As Amos Akerman of Georgia said, 'the southern Republican party could not form a viable majority or an effective opposition 'unless it can be divested of its colonial character, and can take root in the soil.'³ This was therefore the challenge.

¹ quoted in Franklin *Reconstruction: after the Civil War* p.10

² quoted in Gillette *Retreat from Reconstruction* p.112

³ quoted in Gillette *Retreat from Reconstruction* p.183

As has been touched on previously, one of the main problems for the Southern Republicans was their capacity for internal division and factionalism. The fact that federal troops were often necessary to keep the peace at Republican meetings, as in the example of Louisiana, showed a profound difficulty in the Republican movement to keep its own supporters and discredited to a great extent the activities of their state governments. Admittedly, Republicanism started off in the South from a difficult position; invented only shortly before the war, they had gathered only a small number of supporters south of the Mason-Dixon line and the fighting against the Union again weakened the number of natural supporters. Therefore when peace returned to the South, the native Republican parties were left with neither a firm programme of action nor a reliable support-base except for the newly-emancipated slaves whose suffrage seemed likely to cause as much political damage as benefit. It is unsurprising, then that there was such a degree of fractiousness and that many Horace Greely's supporters among Republicans came from the South, including the Governor of Louisiana. The divisions among the Republicans played into the hands of the Democrats, who were easily able to exploit what they saw as an unholy alliance between 'carpet-baggers', 'scalawags' and Negroes, all of whom had different aims and intentions from Republican administrations. Class conflict did indeed play a significant part in weakening them still further, since by replicating policies that had brought success in the North, Southern Republicans found that they put unbearable pressure on their own supporters. In Mississippi for instance, in order to pay for public facilities and schools, Republicans made large tax demands in the belief that a forthcoming economic recovery would balance out taxpayers' capacity to pay - sadly, this recovery never came. According to Mills Thornton's essay, the shift in the tax burden from personal to property tax increased the total load on small land-holders (i.e. potential Republican supporters) such that in Mississippi and Alabama small farmers paid 2-4% of their cash income and 8-10% of their discretionary income in tax.⁴ Smallholders, who had previously seen their interests best served by Republicans' opposition to the Democrat planter aristocracy increasingly became disillusioned by the reality. This certainly contradicts Democrat supporters, who claimed that the Radicals were 'the party paying no taxes, riding poor horses, wearing dirty shirts and having no use for soap.'⁵ However, in fact that the Republicans were increasingly divided amongst themselves as much for social reasons as for reasons of policy, not least because of the actions of the Northern Republicans, who appeared to regard their Southern brethren as belonging to a different party. Certainly they continued their attempts to manipulate northern opinion to the detriment of their electoral fortunes in the South - the use of 'bloody shirt' propaganda continued long after this could be seen to be alienating white Republicans.

Admittedly, the actions of Republican governments also attracted their fair share of criticism for entirely legitimate reasons as well. The increase in public spending which I have referred to previously also led to charges of corruption being levelled, and as they spread, even northern opinion tended to associate them solely with the Republican administrations rather than with Southerners in general. The *New York Times* said for instance in 1874: 'these freedmen must be convinced that public affairs must not be managed solely for pillage and oppression.'⁶ The terms of 'carpet-bagger' and 'scalawag' indeed were used extensively in the north almost as confirmation of the fact that there was no obviously outstanding leadership in the South and that the Reconstruction programme was initiated in a climate of mediocrity, instability and mismanagement. By the time that Grant said in 1874 that 'There has been too much dead weight carried...all the disaffection in the Gulf States [has been imposed] on the administration. I am tired of this nonsense. I don't want any quarrel about Mississippi State matters to be referred to me'⁷ he was articulating much of the North's frustration about the permanent instability that

⁴ quoted in Anderson & Moss: *The Facts of Reconstruction*

⁵ quoted in Stamp: *The Era of Reconstruction*

⁶ quoted in Anderson & Moss: *The Facts of Reconstruction*

⁷ quoted in Gillette *Retreat from Reconstruction* p.182

appeared to require federal intervention. Yet unfortunately for the Republicans, it was this non-action which helped to bury the party's fortunes. Congress quite deliberately allotted insufficient money to federal courts and marshals, totalling just \$2m for whole nation, which the *Nation* condemned it as 'to pass bills providing for [protection from intimidation] without voting the men or money to execute them, is a wretched mockery.'⁸ As an employee of the Savannah customhouse observed in 1877, 'I never knew the National Committee to do anything sensible for the South[ern wing] and would not expect anything so unlikely now.'⁹

While Republicans remained deeply divided in the South during the period of Reconstruction, this could not be said about the Democrats, who largely retained the same supporters as they had in the time of their pre-war rule. Admittedly this did not always stand them in good stead, as can be seen in the presidential election of 1868 where the presence at the Democratic convention of many prominent Confederates infuriated many northerners, who were even more appalled by the white supremacist oratory of Francis Blair as Seymour's running-mate - which even the pro-Democrat New York *World* described as 'disastrous.' However, largely the status quo as regards land-holding and social relationships was retained. Planter lands, which seemed under threat of being redistributed to newly-emancipated slaves, remained a bedrock of Southern society, and dire threats to black workers thinking of voting Republican sapped the latter's support at the polls. They also had a solid and vigorous programme based largely on utter rejection of all the Reconstructionist aims and on increased state rights. Increasingly they also eschewed the Confederate-style, concentrating on the failures of Republican state governments, seeking to widen differences inside the Republican camp. In complaining that 'penniless blacks elected governments that taxed whites to support bloated payrolls, expensive and corrupt building programmes, inefficient & largely black schools, and unnecessary public services'¹⁰ they struck a chord with the libertarian element in Northern opinion which was slowly coming to the fore.

Most crucially, they maintained a close unity over the issue of Negro suffrage, which threatened at every turn to crucify their Republican opponents. For although the Radicals agreed that Negro suffrage was necessary, hardly any could bring themselves to think of blacks as being equal citizens with themselves. Indeed, as Thaddeus Stevens himself said he had 'never held to that doctrine of Negro equality...in all things - simply before the law.', while Ignatius Donnelly said 'if it be true that the Negro belongs to an inferior race...the more reason why he should be protected by equal laws.'¹¹ The legal entitlement to rights such as voting and education was as far as Congress could bring itself to grant to the black population, which were nevertheless the most reliable source of political support for its own ideals - redistribution of confiscated or federal land to emancipated slaves on the model of the Land Grant Acts in the West were ruled out as being indefensible in the new spirit of *laissez-faire* which was gaining hold at the time. Instead, Grant's election programme of 1868 firmly pushed the responsibility onto the shoulders of the states, where it caused a great deal of discomfort to local Republican parties: from the painful experience of the 1867 election in Ohio to the southern constitutional conventions, Democrats made hay out of the claim that Radicals were attempting to 'Africanise' the country. As Frederick Freylinghuysen, the Republican Senator for New Jersey commented 'the people have said they are not yet ready for colored suffrage'¹² and if they were not ready in the North of the USA, this was only more true for the South, and as the Democratic *New York World* commented 'How can you blame the South for hesitating when you hesitate?'¹³ Race continued to be a defining issue in

⁸ quoted in Anderson & Moss: *The Facts of Reconstruction*

⁹ quoted in Gillette *Retreat from Reconstruction* p.183

¹⁰ quoted in Anderson & Moss: *The Facts of Reconstruction*

¹¹ quoted in Anderson & Moss: *The Facts of Reconstruction*

¹² quoted in Anderson & Moss: *The Facts of Reconstruction*

¹³ quoted in Gillette *Retreat from Reconstruction* p.7

almost all Southern elections for the next decade and beyond, inasmuch as the black vote was crucial, and if they could be intimidated into not voting it would invariably swing the result. It was in this situation that the development of terrorist organisations such as the Ku Klux Klan became so important - as a symptom of the virulent Southern racism it demonstrated again and again the impossibility of the Republican position. Dependent on black support but fearing mass desertion of its white supporters if it tried to espouse full Negro rights, the Republicans were paralysed over the Klan violence - and then therefore took the blame for the apparent anarchy occurring in its areas of jurisdiction. By 1875, therefore, the Republican party had witnessed the defection of almost all of its white supporters, humiliation at the hands of the Klan and necessity for further federal intervention in the shape of the Force Bills. Although many realised that 'a white Republican party must be built up on issues above the race question, that is so powerful a lever in the hands of the Democrats', Democrats such as James Buchanan similarly realised that Democrat success 'is opposition to Negro suffrage in the south as well as the North... Abandon this and we are lost.'¹⁴ And indeed the Democrat's success in pursuing their aims in subverting Congressional policy and local Republican credibility ensured that in the South they maintained a stronghold which maintained much of the racist and particularist ideas of the ante-bellum South.

Admittedly white society was substantially unchanged through the Reconstruction period, but it would be harsh to assume that this was true for the black community, who numbered almost half of the population of the South. The Freedman's Bureau for instance, though underfunded, provided well-received advice and educational facilities, as well as settling a great deal of black families on the land, negotiating with white employers and encouraging voter registration: of approximately 1,363,000 registered voters in the former Confederacy in 1868, 703,400 were black¹⁵ Congress also passed the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution, which even though reluctantly were passed and adhered to by all States of the Union. Though the Supreme Court later refused to adjudicate on whether segregation was unconstitutional, it was still not legally founded until the 1890s - clearly in the mean time there was a great deal of experimentation on how to accommodate new civil rights in different situations: in the better-educated black and mulatto population of New Orleans for example there was a great deal of interaction, and the first black Congressmen in 1870 showed that a real change in black fortunes had come about. One must not assume that segregation was in all cases disappointed black aspirations, since the example of black schools, where white teachers were steadily replaced by black ones, showed in some circumstances a preference for separate communities. Separate-but-equal treatment, after all, was a great improvement upon the exclusion which had come before.

¹⁴ quoted in Gillette *Retreat from Reconstruction* p.8

¹⁵ Franklin: *Reconstruction: after the Civil War* p. 79