

Reconstruction: The Revolution That Failed

JAMES MACGREGOR BURNS

In the closing days of the Civil War, the pace of momentous events was almost too much to comprehend. On April 2, 1865, Confederate President Jefferson Davis fled a blazing Richmond with his family and Cabinet members; the next day Union troops occupied the rebel capital. On April 9, Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia; five days later, on Good Friday, John Wilkes Booth shot Lincoln at Ford's Theater, and Lincoln joined the 360,000 Union dead he himself had immortalized. By then, the dream of an independent slaveowning South was dead as well.

In the mansion of a Virginia plantation, a young black woman found whites crying over a report that Yankee troops had captured Jefferson Davis. The young woman went down to a spring, alone, and there cried out, "Glory, glory, hallelujah to Jesus! I's free! I's free!" Suddenly afraid, she looked about, then fell to the ground and kissed it, thanking "Master Jesus" over and over. For her, freedom meant hope — hope that she could find her husband and four children who had been sold to a slave trader.

Other blacks celebrated their liberation in public. In Athens, Georgia, they danced around a liberty pole; in Charleston, they paraded through the streets. Many blacks, however, were wary and uncertain. "You're joking me," a black man said when his master told him he was free. He asked some neighbors if they were free also. "I couldn't believe we was all free alike," he said. Some blacks, out of feelings of obligation or compassion, remained on the home place to help their former masters.

But others were hostile. Through generations of one black family comes the story of Caddy, who had been badly treated as a slave. When she heard that the war was over, she threw her hoe down, marched up to the big house, found the mistress, and flipped her dress up. She told the white woman, "kiss my ass!"

Southern whites, by turns, were angry, helpless, vindictive, resigned, and heartsick. Their cherished South was not just defeated; it was annihilated. Some 260,000 rebel soldiers, the flower of southern manhood, were dead, and thousands more were maimed and crippled for life. The South's major cities were in ruins, her railroads and industry desolated, her commerce paralyzed, and two-thirds of her assessed wealth, including billions of dollars in slaves, destroyed. As James MacGregor Burns says in *The Workshop of Democracy* (1985), from which this selection is excerpted, "Many [white Southerners] were already grieving over sons, plantations, and fortunes taken by war; losing their blacks was the final blow." Some masters shot or hanged blacks who proclaimed their freedom. That was a harbinger of what was to follow in the years of Reconstruction, for most white southerners were certain that their cause had been just and were entirely unrepentant about fighting against the Union. A popular ballad captured the current mood in conquered Dixie:

Oh, I'm a good ole Rebel, now that's just what I am
For this fair land of freedom I do not care a damn,
I'm glad I fit against it, I only wish't we'd won
And I don't want no pardon for nothin' what I done. . . .

I hates the Yankee nation and everything they do
I hates the Declaration of Independence too
I hates the glorious Union, 'tis dripping with our blood
And I hate the striped banner, I fit it all I could. . . .

I can't take up my musket and fight 'em now no mo'
But I ain't gonna love 'em and that is certain sho'
And I don't want no pardon for what I was and am
And I won't be reconstructed and I don't care a damn.

In Washington, Republican leaders were jubilant in victory and determined to deal firmly with southern whites in order to preserve the fruits of the war. But what about the new president, Andrew Johnson? A profane, hard-drinking Tennessee Democrat who bragged about his plebeian origins, Johnson had been the only southern senator to oppose secession openly. He had sided with the Union, had served as war governor of Tennessee, and had become Lincoln's running mate in 1864, on a Union ticket comprising both Republicans and War Democrats. Thanks to Booth's pistol shot,

Johnson was now president, and he faced one of the most difficult tasks ever to confront an American chief executive: how to bind the nation's wounds, preserve black freedom, and restore the southern states to their proper places in the Union.

As we saw in "Lincoln's Journey to Emancipation" (selection 27), Lincoln had contemplated an army of occupation for the South, thinking that military force might be necessary to protect the former slaves and prevent the old southern leadership from returning to power. Now there was such an army in the South: some 200,000 Union troops had moved in to restore order there and to perform whatever reconstruction duties Johnson might ask of them.

Initially, Republican leaders were hopeful about Johnson, for in talking about his native region he seemed tough, even uncompromising. But as he set about restoring defeated Dixie, Johnson alarmed and then enraged congressional Republicans by adopting a soft, conciliatory reconstruction policy. The president not only opposed granting blacks the right to vote, but allowed former Confederates to return to power in the southern states. He stood by as they adopted black codes that reduced blacks to a virtual condition of peonage, and he hotly opposed congressional interference in the reconstruction process. He even urged southern states to reject the Fourteenth Amendment, pushed through Congress by the Republicans, which would protect southern blacks. The projected amendment would prevent the states from enacting laws that abridged "the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States." It would also bar the states from depriving "any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law," or from denying any person the "equal protection of the law." Johnson did more than just oppose the amendment; he damned Republican leaders like Charles Sumner of Massachusetts and Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, calling them tyrants and traitors. He even campaigned against the Republican party in the 1866 off-year elections. As a consequence, he alienated moderate as well as radical Republicans, who soon united against him. When the 1866 elections gave the Republicans huge majorities in both houses of Congress, they set out to take control of Reconstruction and to reform the South themselves.

This sets the scene for Burns's account of Republican Reconstruction. Burns believes that it was a revolutionary experiment that failed. He does not, of course, subscribe to the outmoded interpretation of Reconstruction as a misguided attempt to "put the colored people on top" in the South and turn the region over to hordes of beady-eyed carpetbaggers and roguish scalawags intent on "stealing the South blind." In the old view, Reconstruction was "a blackout of honest government," a time when the "Southern people were put to the torch," a period so rife with "political rancor, and social violence and disorder," that nothing good came out of it. Since the 1930s, modern scholarship has systematically rejected this interpretation and the antiblack prejudice that underlay it. Drawing on modern studies of the period, Burns argues that the

Republican Congress did go too far in trying to centralize power in the legislative branch. But he is sympathetic to Republican efforts to bring southern blacks into the American mainstream, to grant them political, social, and educational opportunities for self-advancement. On this score, however, the Republicans did not go far enough, for they failed to provide blacks with the economic security they needed to be truly free in America. Alas, that failure was to plague black Americans for generations to come.

FOR A BRIEF FLEETING MOMENT in history — from late 1866 to almost the end of the decade — radical senators and congressmen led the Republican party in an audacious venture in both the organization and the goals of political power. To a degree that would have astonished the constitution-makers of earlier years, they converted the eighty-year-old system of checks and balances into a highly centralized, majoritarian system that elevated the legislative branch, subordinated the executive and judicial branches, and suspended federalism and “states’ rights” in the South. They turned the Constitution on its head. The aims of these leaders were indeed revolutionary — to reverse age-old human and class relationships in the South and to raise millions of people to a much higher level of economic, political, social, and educational self-fulfillment. That such potent means could not in the end produce such humane and democratic ends was the ultimate tragedy of this revolutionary experiment.

This heroic effort was not conducted by men on white horses, but rather by quarrelsome parliamentarians — by a Congress that seemed to one of its members as never “more querulous, distracted, in-

coherent and ignoble.” In the Senate, [Charles] Sumner had good reason to be distracted, for he had married a woman half his age shortly before the [1866] election and was preoccupied first by marital bliss and very soon by marital distress as he and his wife found themselves hopelessly incompatible. His colleagues found him more remote and unpredictable than ever. In the House, [Thaddeus] Stevens worked closely with his Radical allies, but he was now desperately anxious to move swiftly ahead, for he knew that time was running out for him and perhaps for his cause. Rising on the House floor, he now presented the countenance of death, with his dourly twisted mouth, deeply sunken eyes, parchment skin, and a body so wasted that he often conducted business from a couch just outside the chamber. But the old man never lost his ferocious drive to dominate; as he spoke, his eyes lighted up in a fierce gleam and his croaking voice turned thunderous, while he stretched his bony arm out in a wide sweep and punctuated his arguments with sudden thrusts of his long yellow forefinger.

The strength of the Republican party lay in the advanced positions of these two men but even more in the quality and commitment of other party leaders in both houses. Some of these men — John Sherman, James A. Garfield, James G. Blaine — would gain fame in the decades ahead. Others . . . would fade into the mists of history. Occupying almost

From *The Workshop of Democracy* by James MacGregor Burns. Copyright © 1981 by James MacGregor Burns. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

every hue on the party rainbow, these men differed sharply and disputed mightily, but they felt they had a clear election mandate to establish civil and other rights in the South; they had a strong sense of party solidarity; and they had the backing of rank-and-file senators and representatives and of party organizations throughout the North.

They also had a common adversary in Andrew Johnson. The President stewed over his election defeat, but he would make no fundamental change in his political and legislative strategy. Setbacks seemed only to mire him more deeply in his own resentments. . . . He received little independent advice from his Cabinet, which appeared to believe that the beleaguered President needed above all their loyalty. [Secretary of War Edwin] Stanton dissented on occasion but, characteristically, Johnson did not wholly trust him. As the President stuck to the disintegrating political center and the Republicans moved toward a radical posture, the legislative stage was set for drama and conflict.

The upshot was a burst of legislative creativity in the "hundred days" of winter 1866-67:

December 14, 1866: Congress enacts black suffrage for the District of Columbia, later reenacts it over Johnson's veto. *January 7, 1867:* the House adopts [James M.] Ashley's resolution instructing the Judiciary Committee to "inquire into the conduct of Andrew Johnson." *January 22:* Congress grants itself authority to call itself into special session, a right recognized until now as belonging only to the President. *March 2:* all on the same day, Congress passes a basic act laying out its general plan of political reconstruction; in effect deprives the President of command of the army; and enacts the Tenure of Office Act barring the Chief Executive from removing officials appointed by and with the advice of the Senate, without Senate approval. *March 23:* Congress passes a supplementary Reconstruction Act requiring military commanders to start registering "loyal" voters.

The heart of congressional strategy to democra-

tize the South lay in the first Reconstruction Act of March 2, 1867, as clarified, strengthened, and implemented in later acts. With the ostensible purpose of restoring social order and republican government in the South, and on the premise that the existing "Johnson" state regimes there could not realize these ends or even protect life or property, the South was divided into five military districts subject to martial law. The commanders were empowered not only to govern — to suppress disorder, protect life and property, remove civil officeholders — but to initiate political reconstruction by enrolling qualified voters including blacks, and excluding the disloyal. To be restored to the Union, the Southern states must call new constitutional conventions that, elected under universal manhood suffrage, in turn must establish new state governments that would guarantee black suffrage and ratify the Fourteenth Amendment. These states would be eligible for representation in the national legislature only after Congress had approved their state constitutions and after the Fourteenth Amendment had become part of the Constitution.

It was a radical's dream, a centralist's heaven — and a states'-righter's nightmare. Congress held all the governmental strings in its hands. No more exquisite punishment could have been devised for secessionists than to make them conform to national standards in reconstructing their own state governments and gaining restoration to the Union. Congress did not stop with upsetting the division of powers between nation and states; it overturned the separation of powers [between the executive and legislative branches of the national government. In 1868, congressional Republicans sought to remove Johnson by a method never before used against an American president. The Republican-controlled House impeached Johnson on various partisan charges, including his defiance of the Tenure of Office Act and his efforts to undermine the Reconstruction Act, but the Senate failed to convict him by just one vote short of the two-thirds required for

removal. Thus ended the first and last attempt to impeach an American president for political reasons. Even so, Johnson's presidency was irreparably damaged; he served out his last year in office, as truculent as ever. The Republicans, meanwhile, nominated war hero Ulysses S. Grant as their candidate in the 1868 presidential elections. Since Grant had maintained ties with congressional Republicans and seemed genuinely militant in his stance on reconstruction, congressional Republicans were certain that he would cooperate with them. That November, Grant defeated Democratic candidate Horatio Seymour by winning all but three northern states and polling 52.7 percent of the popular vote.]

Some Radical Republicans now were more optimistic than ever. Grant's election, they felt, provided a supreme and perhaps final opportunity to reconstruct the South. Now the Republicans had their own men in the White House; they still controlled both houses of Congress; they had established their supremacy over the Supreme Court; they had considerable influence over the federal military and civilian bureaucracy in the South. They still had the power to discipline the Southern states, by admitting them to the Union or expelling them. The Republicans had pushed through the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments. They still possessed the ablest, most experienced political leadership in the nation. Stevens had died during the campaign, but Sumner had been handsomely re-elected in Massachusetts. "So at last I have conquered; after a life of struggle," the senator said.

Other Radicals were less sanguine. They knew that far more than Andrew Johnson had thwarted Reconstruction. The national commitment to black equality was weak, the mechanisms of government faulty, and even with the best of intentions and machinery, the connecting line between a decision in Washington and an actual outcome affecting a black family in Virginia or Mississippi was long and fragile. Time and again, voters had opposed black wrongs without favoring black rights. Before the

war, they had fought the extension of slavery but not slavery where it existed. During the war, they had come to approve emancipation only after Lincoln issued his proclamation. After the war, in a number of state elections—especially those of 1867—Northerners had shown that they favored black suffrage in the South but not at home.

Spurred by effective leaders, Americans were moving toward racial justice, but the journey was agonizingly slow and meandering. "It took America three-quarters of a century of agitation and four years of war to learn the meaning of the word 'Liberty,'" the *American Freedman* editorialized. "God grant to teach us by easier lessons the meaning of the words 'equal rights.'" How quickly and firmly Americans moved ahead on black rights could turn significantly on continuing moral and political leadership.

The crucial issue after Grant's election was the right of blacks to vote. Republican leaders in Congress quickly pushed ahead with the Fifteenth Amendment, which declared in its final form that the "right of the citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." It was a noble sentiment that had emerged out of a set of highly mixed motives. Democrats charged, with some reason, that the majority party was far less interested in legalizing the freedman's vote in the South than in winning the black vote in the North. But the Republican leadership, knowing that countless whites in the North opposed black voting there, were responding to the demands of morality as well as practicality. Senator Henry Wilson reminded his colleagues that the "whole struggle in this country to give equal rights and equal privileges to all citizens of the United States has been an unpopular one; that we have been forced to struggle against passions and prejudices engendered by generations of wrong and oppression." He estimated that that struggle had cost his party a quarter of a million

votes. Another Republican senator, however, contended that in the long run adherence to "equality of rights among men" had been not a source of party weakness but of its strength and power. . . .

If political morality in the long run meant political practicality, the Fifteenth Amendment nevertheless bore all the markings of compromise. To gain the two-thirds support constitutionally required in each chamber, the sponsors were compelled to jettison clauses that would have outlawed property qualifications and literacy tests. The amendment provided only that Congress and the states could not deny the vote, rather than requiring them to take positive action to secure black suffrage; nor was there any provision against denial of vote by mobs or other private groups. And of course the amendment did not provide for female voting — and so the National Woman Suffrage Association opposed it.

Still, radicals in and out of Congress were elated when the Fifteenth cleared Congress, elated even more when the measure became part of the Constitution in March 1870, after Republican state parties helped drive it through the required number of legislatures. . . .

The legal right of blacks to vote soon produced a phenomenon in Southern politics — black legislators, judges, superintendents of education, lieutenant governors and other state officials, members of Congress, and even two United States senators. These, however, made up only a fraction of Southern officeholders: in none of the legislatures did blacks hold a majority, except briefly in South Carolina's lower house. Usually black leaders shared power with "carpetbaggers" — white Northerners who came south and became active in politics as Republicans — and "scalawags" — white Southerners who cooperated with Republicans and blacks. While many black leaders were men of "ability and integrity," in [historian] Kenneth Stampp's view, the whites and blacks together comprised a mixed lot of the corrupt and the incorruptible, moderate

and extreme, opportunistic and principled, competent and ignorant. The quality of state government under such leadership also was mixed, but on the whole probably no worse than that of many state and local governments of the time. The state governments in the South bore unusually heavy burdens, moreover — demoralization and poverty in the wake of a devastating war, the need to build or rebuild public services throughout the region, the corrupting influence of contractors, speculators, and promoters seeking subsidies, grants, contracts, franchises, and land.

Far more important than the reality of black-and-white rule in the South was the perverted image of it refracted through the distorted lenses of Southern eyes. It was not easy for the white leadership to see newly freed men . . . occupy positions of prestige and power; and it was perhaps inevitable that they would caricature the new rulers to the world. A picture emerged of insolent boors indulging in legislative license, lording it over downtrodden whites, looting the public treasury, bankrupting the state, threatening white traditions, womanhood, and purity. . . .

The worst fear of the old white leadership — that black-and-white rule would produce a social revolution — turned out to be the least warranted of all. The mixed rule of blacks, scalawags, and carpetbaggers produced a few symbolic and actual changes: rhetoric drawn directly from the Declaration of Independence proclaiming liberty, "equality of all persons before the law," various civil and political rights; a mild effort in two or three states to integrate certain educational institutions; a feeble effort at land reform. [Southern state] constitutions were made somewhat more democratic, legislative apportionment less discriminatory, more offices elective; "rights of women were enlarged, tax systems were made more equitable, penal codes were reformed, and the number of crimes punishable by death was reduced," in Stampp's summation. The constitution of South Carolina — the state that had served

as the South's political and ideological heartland, and the state that now paradoxically had elevated the most blacks to leadership positions — was converted almost into a model state charter, with provisions for manhood suffrage, public education, extension of women's rights, and even the state's first divorce law. . . .

But what the black-and-white leadership failed to do was of far more profound consequence than what it did. Both radicals and moderates understood that education was a fundamental need for Southern blacks, but the obstacles were formidable and progress slow. Even the best educational system could hardly have compensated for decades of illiteracy and ignorance. "The children," James McPherson noted, "came from a cultural environment almost entirely devoid of intellectual stimulus. Many of them had never heard of the alphabet, geography, or arithmetic when they first came to school. Few of them knew their right hand from their left, or could tell the date of their birth. Most of them realized only vaguely that there was a world outside their own plantation or town." In the early years, teachers sponsored by "Freedmen's Aid" and missionary groups met the challenge, often finding to their surprise that black children had a passion to learn, could be taught to read as quickly as white children, and might be found laboriously teaching their own parents the alphabet and the multiplication table.

These private educational efforts were never adequate, however, to teach more than a fraction of the South's black children. The question was whether the reconstructed black-and-white state governments would take over the task in a comprehensive way, and here they failed. The difficulties were at least as great as ever: inadequate facilities, insufficient money, lack of teachers, inadequate student motivation, discipline problems (black teachers tended to be the harsher disciplinarians). But the biggest hurdle was the constant, pervasive, and continuing hostility of many Southern whites to school-

ing for blacks. "I have seen many an absurdity in my lifetime," said a Louisiana legislator on observing black pupils for the first time, "but this is the climax of absurdities." A Southern white woman warned a teacher that "you might as well try to teach your horse or mule to read, as to teach these niggers. They *can't* learn."

Behind these white Southern attitudes toward schooling for black children lay a host of fears. One was their old worry that blacks would be educated above their station and out of the labor supply. "To talk about educating this drudge," opined the Paducah (Kentucky) *Herald*, "is to talk without thinking. Either to 'educate,' or to teach him merely to read and write, is to ruin him as a laborer. Thousands of them have already been ruined by it." Even more pervasive was the white fear of integration, although most black leaders made it clear that their main interest was education, whether segregated or not. Southern fears often took the form of harassing and humiliating teachers or, more ingeniously, depriving them of white housing so that some teachers lived with blacks — and hence could be arrested as vagrants. Defending the arrest of a freedmen's teacher, the mayor of Enterprise, Mississippi, said that the teacher had been "living on terms of equality with negroes, living in their houses, boarding with them, and at one time gave a party at which there were no persons present (except himself) but negroes, all of which are offenses against the laws of the state and declared acts of vagrancy." Black-and-white governments could not overcome such deep-seated attitudes.

To many blacks, even more important than education was land — "forty acres and a mule." During the war, when workers on a South Carolina plantation had rejected a wage offer from their master, one of them had said, "I mean to own my own manhood, and I'm goin' on to my own land, just as soon as when I git dis crop in. . . ." Declared a black preacher in Florida to a group of field hands: "It's de white man's turn ter labor now. He ain't

got nothin' lef' but his lan', an' de lan' won't be his'n long, fur de Guverment is gwine ter gie ter ev'ry Nigger forty acres of lan' an' a mule." Black hopes for their own plots had dwindled sharply after the war, when Johnson's amnesty proclamation restored property as well as civil rights to most former rebels who would take an oath of allegiance. His expectations dashed, a Virginia black said now that he would ask for only a single acre of land — "ef you make it de acre dat Marsa's house sets on."

Black hopes for land soared again after the congressional Republicans took control of Reconstruction in the late 1860s, only to collapse when Republican moderates — and even some radicals — refused to support a program of land confiscation. Black hopes rose still again when black-and-white regimes took over state governments; some freedmen heard rumors that they need only go to the polls and vote and they would return home with a mule and a deed to a forty-acre lot. But, curiously, "radical" rule in no state produced systematic effort at land redistribution. Some delegates to the Louisiana constitutional convention proposed that purchases of more than 150 acres be prohibited when planters sold their estates, and the South Carolina convention authorized the creation of a commission to buy land for sale to blacks, but little came of these efforts. One reason was clear: Southern whites who had resisted black voting and black education would have reacted with even greater fury to as radical a program as land redistribution, with all its implications for white pride, white property — and the white labor supply.

Black leaders themselves were wary of the freedmen's lust for "forty acres and a mule." In part, this caution may have been due to the class divisions between the black Southern masses and their leaders, many of whom had been artisans or ministers, had been free before the war, and had never experienced plantation life and closeness to the soil. Some of these leaders were, indeed, virtually middle-class in their attitudes toward property, frugality, "nega-

tive" liberty, and hard work, and in their fear that radical blacks might infuriate white power elites by talking "confiscation." Such leaders preferred to bargain with the white power structure rather than threaten its control over land and other property. Prizing liberal values of individual liberty, the need for schooling, and above all the right to vote, they played down the economic and social needs of the blacks. And they based their whole strategy on the suffrage, arguing that all the other rights that blacks claimed — land, education, homes — were dependent on their using the potential power inherent in their right to vote.

Would black voting make the crucial difference? Of the three prongs of black advance in the South — schools, land, and the vote — the limited success of the first and the essential failure of the second left black suffrage as the great battlefield of Southern reform. Certainly Southern whites realized this and, as the Republican commitment faltered during the Grant Administration, they stepped up their efforts to thwart black voting. They used a battery of stratagems: opening polling places late or closing them early or changing their location; gerrymandering districts in order to neutralize the black vote; requiring the payment of a poll tax to vote; "losing" or disregarding black ballots; counting Democratic ballots more than once; making local offices appointive rather than elective; plying blacks with liquor. These devices had long been used against white Americans, and by no means did all Southern whites use them now, but fraud and trickery were especially effective against inexperienced and unlettered blacks.

When nonviolent methods failed, many Southern whites turned to other weapons against voting: intimidation, harassment, and terror. Mobs drove blacks away from the polls. Whites blocked polling entrances or crowded around ballot boxes so blacks could not vote. Rowdies with guns or whips followed black voters away from the polling place. When a group of black voters in Gibson County,

Tennessee, returned the fire of a band of masked men, the authorities put the blacks in jail, from which an armed mob took them by force to a nearby riverbank and shot them down. Fifty-three defendants were arrested by federal authorities and tried, none convicted.

Some of this violence erupted spontaneously as young firebrands, emboldened by liquor, rode into polling areas with their guns blazing. But as the stakes of voting rose, terrorists organized themselves. Most notable was the Ku Klux Klan, with its white robes and hoods, sheeted horses, and its weird hierarchies of wizards, genii, dragons, hydras, ghouls, and cyclopes. Proclaiming its devotion to "Chivalry, Humanity, Mercy, and Patriotism," the Klan proposed to protect the "weak, the innocent, and the defenseless" — and the "Constitution of the United States." The Klan had allies in the Knights of the White Camelia, the White Brotherhood, and other secret societies.

Incensed by mob violence, the Republicans in Washington tried to counter it with legislation. The Enforcement Act of May 1870 outlawed the use of force, bribery, or intimidation that hindered the right to vote because of race in state and local elections. Two more enforcement acts during the next twelve months extended and tightened enforcement machinery, and in April 1871 Congress in effect outlawed the Klan and similar groups. But actual enforcement in the thousands of far-flung polling places required an enormous number of marshals and soldiers. As army garrisons in the South thinned out, enforcement appropriations dwindled, and the number of both prosecutions by white prosecutors and convictions by white juries dropped, black voting was more and more choked off.

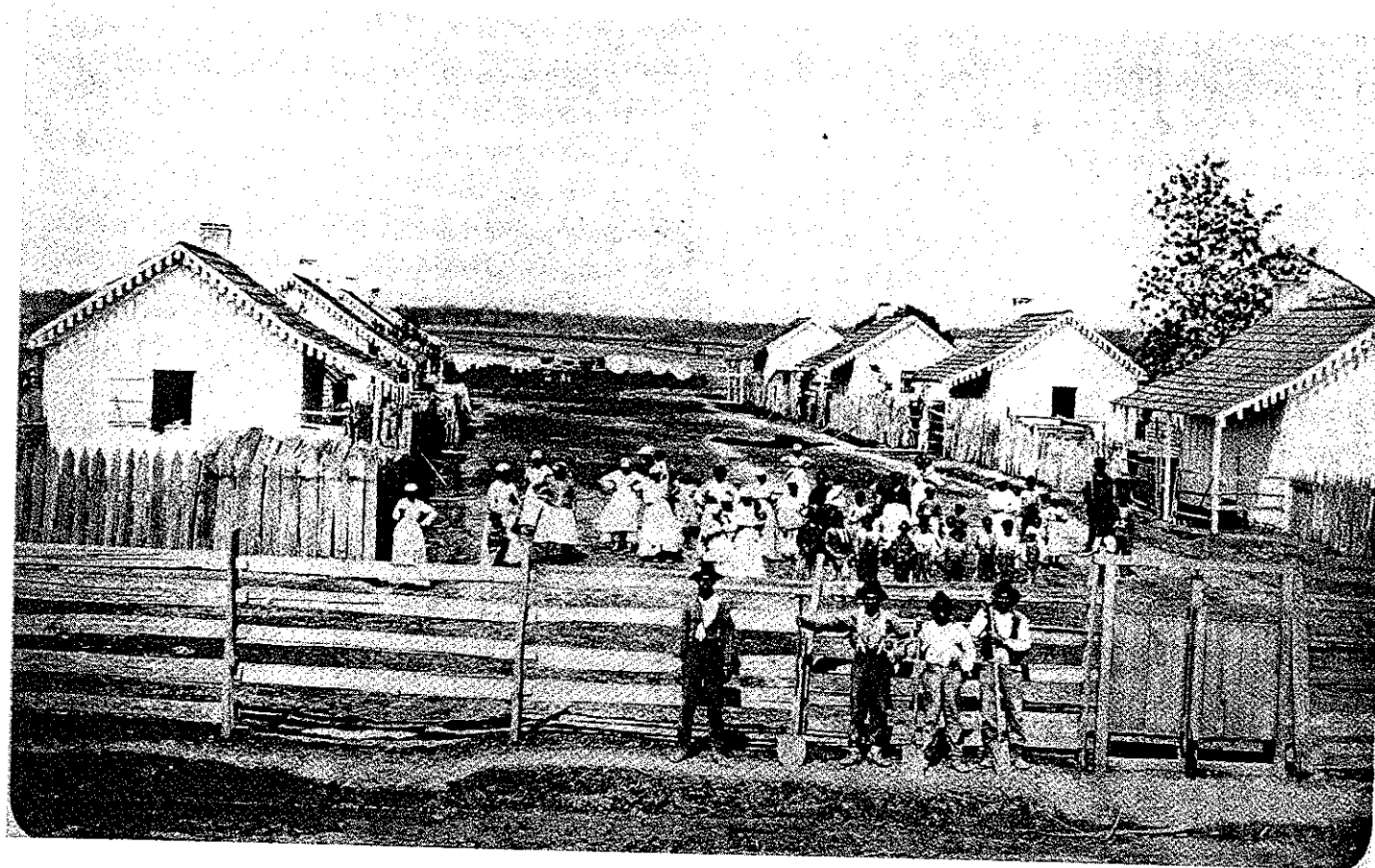
After his election to a second term Grant tried vigorously though spasmodically to support black rights for the sake of both Republican principle and Republican victories. In a final effort, the Republicans were able to push through the Civil Rights Act of 1875, designed to guarantee equal rights for

blacks in public places, but the act was weak in coverage and enforcement, and later would be struck down by the Supreme Court.

By the mid-seventies Republicanism, Reconstruction, and reform were all running out of steam. Southern Democrats were extending their grip over political machinery; the Republican leadership was shaken by an economic panic in 1873, and the party lost badly in the 1874 midterm elections. The *coup de grâce* for Reconstruction came after Rutherford Hayes's razor-thin electoral-college victory in 1876 over [Democrat] Samuel J. Tilden. Awarded the office as a result of Republican control over three Southern states where voting returns were in doubt, and as a result too of a Republican majority on the Electoral Commission, Hayes bolstered his position by offering assurances about future treatment of the South. While these were in the soft political currency of veiled promises and delphic utterances, the currency was hard enough for the Democrats — and for Hayes as well. Within two months of his inauguration, he ordered the last federal troops out of the South and turned over political control of Louisiana, South Carolina, and Florida to the Southern [Democrats].

* * *

And what of the objects of this long political struggle — the black people of the South? The vast majority were in the same socioeconomic situation as ten years before, at the end of the war. They had gained certain personal liberties, such as the right to marry, and a modicum of legal and civil and political rights, including the right to vote in certain areas; but their everyday lot was much the same as before. Most still lacked land, property, money, capital; they were still dependent on the planters, sometimes the same old "massa." It was not a black man but a prominent white Georgian who said of the freedman late in 1865: "The negro's first want is, not



When the war ended, most of the former slaves owned little more than the skin on their backs. To secure their liberty, they needed their own land, schools, and the right to vote. During Reconstruction, they did gain personal liberties like the right to marry and a modicum of political, civil, and legal rights. But

their every-day lot improved little. When Reconstruction ended, as James MacGregor Burns says, most southern blacks "still lacked land, property, money, capital; they were still dependent on the planters, sometimes the same old 'massa.'" (Collection of William Gladstone)

the ballot, but a chance to live, — yes, sir, *a chance to live*. Why, he can't even live without the consent of the white man! He has no land; he can make no crops except the white man gives him a chance. He hasn't any timber; he can't get a stick of wood without leave from a white man. We crowd him into the fewest possible employments, and then he can scarcely get work anywhere but in the rice-fields and cotton plantations of a white man who has owned him and given up slavery only at the point of the bayonet. . . . What sort of freedom is that?"

Many a freedman had exchanged bondage for a kind of bargaining relationship with employers, but his bargaining position was woefully weak. If he

held out for better terms, he could be evicted; if he left, he might be denied work elsewhere and arrested for vagrancy; if he struck, he had no unions or money to sustain him. So the "bargains" were usually one-sided; contracts sometimes literally required "perfect obedience" from employees. Some blacks had had the worst of both worlds — they had left the security of old age and sickness in bondage, under masters who cared for them because they were valuable property, for a strange "free-market" world in which they developed new dependencies on old masters.

Could Reconstruction have turned out differently? Many have concluded that the impotence of the

blacks was too deeply rooted, the white intransigence too powerful, the institutions of change too faulty, and the human mind too limited to begin to meet the requirements of a genuine Reconstruction. Yet the human mind had already conducted a stupendous social revolution with the blacks. For a hundred years and more, Southern planters, assisted by slave recruiters in Africa, masters of slaving ships, various middlemen, auctioneers, and drivers, had been uprooting blacks by the hundreds of thousands out of far-off tribal civilizations, bringing most of them safely across broad expanses of water, establishing them in a new and very different culture, and converting them into productive and profit-creating slaves. Somehow the human mind seemed wholly capable of malign "social engineering," incapable of benign.

Yet there were some Americans who did understand the kind of broad social planning and governmental action that was needed to reconstruct genuine democracy in the South and truly to liberate the freed people. [Abolitionist] Wendell Phillips understood the depth of the problem, the need for a "social revolution." He said: "You must plant at the South the elements which make a different society. You cannot enact four millions of slaves, ignorant, down-trodden, and despised, into personal equals of the old leaders of the South." He wanted to "give the negroes land, ballot and education and to hold the arm of the Federal government over the whole Southern Territory until these seeds have begun to bear fruit beyond any possibility of blighting." We must see to it, said Senator Henry Wilson, that "the man made free by the Constitution is a free-man indeed; that he can go where he pleases, work when and for whom he pleases; that he can sue and be sued; that he can lease and buy and sell and own property, real and personal; that he can go into the schools and educate himself and his children. . . ." [Black leader Frederick] Douglass and Stevens and Sumner took similar positions.

These men were not typical of Republicans or

even of Radical Republicans, but many other radicals and moderates recognized that the freed people needed an array of economic, political, social, and legal supports, and that these were interrelated. Congressman George Hoar lamented that blacks had been given universal suffrage without universal education. Some radicals believed that voting was the black's first need and others that land or sustenance came first, but most recognized that no single "solution" was adequate. Antislavery men, said Phillips, "will believe the negro safe when we see him with 40 acres under his feet, a schoolhouse behind him, a ballot in his right hand, the sceptre of the Federal Government over his head, and no State Government to interfere with him, until more than one-half of the white men of the Southern States are in their graves." . . .

The critical failure of Reconstruction probably lay . . . in the realm of leadership — especially that of opinion-makers. Editors, ministers, and others preached liberty and equality without always comprehending the full dimensions of these values and the means necessary — in the South of the 1870s — to accomplish such ends. The radicals "seemed to have little conception," according to Stamp, "of what might be called the sociology of freedom, the ease with which mere laws can be flouted when they alone support an economically dependent class, especially a minority group against whom is directed an intense racial prejudice." Reconstruction could have succeeded only through use of a strategy employed in a number of successful postwar reconstructions of a comprehensive nature — a strategy of combining ideological, economic, political, educational, and institutional forces in such a firm and coordinated way as truly to transform the social environment in which Southerners, both black and white, were trying to remake their lives after the Civil War. And such a strategy, it should be noted, would have imposed heavy intellectual, economic, and psychological burdens on the North as well.

Not only would such a strategy have called for

rare political leadership — especially for a leader, in William Gillette's words, able to "fashion a means and then persevere in it, bending men to his purpose by vigorous initiative, skillful influence, and masterful policy." Even more it called for a rare kind of *intellectual* leadership — political thinkers who could translate the component elements of values such as liberty and equality into policy priorities and operational guidelines. But aside from a few radicals such as Phillips, most of the liberals and many of the radicals had a stunted view of the necessary role of public authority in achieving libertarian and egalitarian purposes. *The Nation*, the most influential liberal weekly in the postwar period, under Edwin L. Godkin shrank from using the only means — government — that could have marshaled the resources necessary for genuine reconstruction. "To Govern Well," *The Nation* proclaimed, "Govern Little." A decisive number of otherwise liberal-minded and generously inclined intellectual leaders held similar views. . . . There were many reasons for the failure of Reconstruction, but the decisive one — because it occurred in people's conceptualizing and analyzing processes and not merely in ineluctable social and economic circumstances — took place in the liberal mind. Most of the liberals were effective transactional leaders, or brokers; few displayed transforming leadership.

That liberal mind seemed to have closed itself off even to the results of practical experimentation. During the war, General Sherman had set aside for freedmen several hundred thousand acres on the Sea Islands south of Charleston and on the abandoned rice lands inland for thirty miles along the coast. Each black family was to receive its forty acres until Congress should rule on their final disposition. Federal officials helped settle 40,000 blacks on these lands. When the whole enterprise was terminated by Johnson's pardon and amnesty program, and land turned back to former owners, the black farmers were incredulous. Some had to be driven off their land by force. The program had lasted long

enough, however, to demonstrate that freed people could make a success of independent farming, and that "forty acres and a mule" could serve as the foundation of Reconstruction. But the lesson seemed lost on Northerners who shuddered at the thought of "land confiscation."

Thus the great majority of black people were left in a condition of dependency, a decade after war's end, that was not decisively different, in terms of everyday existence, from their prewar status. They were still landless farm laborers, lacking schooling, the suffrage, and self-respect. They achieved certain civil and legal rights, but their expectations had been greatly raised too, so the Golden Shore for many seemed more distant than ever. Said a black woman: "De slaves, where I lived, knowed after de war dat they had abundance of dat somethin' called freedom, what they could not eat, wear, and sleep in. Yes, sir, they soon found out dat freedom ain't nothin', 'less you is got somethin' to live on and a place to call home. Dis livin' on liberty is lak young folks livin' on love after they gits married. It just don't work."

Or as an Alabama freedman said more tersely when asked what price tag he bore — and perhaps with two meanings of the word in mind:

"I'se free. Ain't wuf nuffin."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 Why does Burns call Reconstruction a revolution? Why does he consider the actions of federal officials, especially congressmen, to be revolutionary? What happened to the Constitution during Reconstruction? Why was Reconstruction "a radicalist's dream, a centralist's heaven, and a states'-righter's nightmare"?
- 2 What compromises and weaknesses vitiated the strength of the Fifteenth (voting rights) Amendment?
- 3 Reconstructionists realized that blacks needed education, land, and the vote if equality was to be

come a reality in the South. What fundamental fears and racist attitudes in both the South and the North kept these goals from being realized? What practical steps does Burns feel ought to have been taken to ensure the success of Reconstruction policies? ~~Do you see any potential problems in aggressive governmental policies temporarily adopted to make Reconstruction work? Or do you think the Constitution is strong enough to protect us from government excesses?~~

4 Discuss Burns's contention that the failure of liberal intellectual leaders to shape public opinion was responsible for the failure of Reconstruction.

Were the leaders more to blame than the weak enforcement policies of the federal government or the repressive, sometimes violent reactions of white southerners?

X Imagine for a moment that Reconstruction was a success, that American blacks in the late nineteenth century achieved lives founded on a sound economic and legal base, with equal access to land, education, and the franchise. How would the United States be different today? Would Americans have elected a black president by now? How might other issues of social justice, such as women's rights, have been affected?