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Forever Free

THE STORY OF EMANCIPATION AND
RECONSTRUCTION

ERIC FONER

FOREVER FREE

“A cogent and gripping account aimed at a wide audience ... makes the long-term resonances and contemporary significance of Reconstruction more apparent than ever.”

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“For too long and in too many places, it has been intellectually fashionable to teach the Civil War as a cataclysmic collision to save the Union, with the liberation and uplifting of enslaved black millions as a sentimental byproduct. *Forever Free* is an eloquent corrective—painful, inspiring, and compelling.”

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“No historian has done more to explain the importance of the Civil War and Reconstruction than Eric Foner. In *Forever Free*, he has accomplished a miracle of compression, distilling this epic story and exploring the profound consequences of the era for our own times. Equally remarkable is the collection of rare, compelling illustrations. This book is both a narrative and a visual tour de force.”

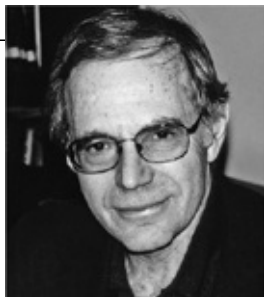
—T. J. Stiles, author of *Jesse James: Last Rebel of the Civil War*

“Foner balances his passion for racial equality and social justice with disciplined scholarship. His book is a valuable, fluid introduction to a complex period.”

—Publishers Weekly (starred review)

“This crisply written and beautifully illustrated book brings together the greatest historian of Reconstruction, Eric Foner, with period art and photographs skillfully selected by Joshua Brown, to provide the finest narrative yet crafted of this complex and pivotal era for a broad audience. This volume belongs in every book club and reading group in America.”

—David W. Blight, author of *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*



ERIC FONER

FOREVER FREE

Illustrations edited and with commentary by Joshua Brown

Eric Foner, a winner of the Bancroft Prize and the Francis Parkman Prize, is the DeWitt Clinton Professor of History at Columbia University and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His books include *The Story of American Freedom* and *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War*. He lives in New York City.

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BY ERIC FONER

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Beyond the Lines:

Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America

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THE STORY OF EMANCIPATION
AND RECONSTRUCTION

ERIC FONER

Illustrations edited and with commentary by
Joshua Brown

FOREVER FREE PROJECT
Peter O. Almond & Stephen Brier
Senior Producers
Christine Doudna, *Editor*



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To the late

*W. W. Law of Savannah, Georgia, historian, citizen, activist,
whose life and work embody the first and second Reconstructions;*

and to

Herbert Gutman, scholar, mentor, enthusiast;

and to

Sergei Bodrov, Jr.;

and to

*Cornelia Bailey and the Bailey family of Sapelo Island, Georgia,
who live the tradition of Emancipation and Reconstruction*

The most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history is the transportation of ten million human beings out of the dark beauty of their mother continent into the newfound Eldorado of the West. They descended into Hell; and in the third century they arose from the dead, in the finest effort to achieve democracy for the working millions which this world had ever seen.

• • •

The unending tragedy of Reconstruction is the utter inability of the American mind to grasp its real significance, its national and world-wide implications.... This problem involved the very foundations of American democracy, both political and economic.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, 1935

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Acknowledgments

The struggle for equality in America, like that of the ancient Israelites, is of biblical proportions. The story of four million slaves and their transformation from bondage to citizenship is one of the great and inspiring events in world history. We were compelled by this history because it revealed a little recognized commitment to and embrace of freedom by the nation's African American population before, during, and in the immediate aftermath of slavery's demise. And yet this critical moment in our nation's history has failed to establish itself in the national memory, at least with any accuracy or full depth of understanding. Here was a critical and revolutionary moment of change that was essentially unknown to most Americans, a period that involved not only the destruction of slavery, but also a dozen-year period, known as Reconstruction, of profound political, legal, economic, and racial transformation that followed the end of the Civil War.

The understanding of the Civil War and of the war's root causes reveals the contested meaning of the era of emancipation and Reconstruction. What had the war accomplished? Who had benefited and who had suffered? What had freedpeople sought and what had they and their allies achieved in the aftermath of freedom? David Blight argues, in his influential book *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (2001), that the desire in the half-dozen decades following the Civil War to obscure the real causes of the war—the emancipation of four million slaves—led to the “denigration of black dignity and the attempted erasure of emancipation from the national narrative of what the war had been about.” W. E. B. Du Bois drew similar conclusions sixty-six years earlier in *Black Reconstruction*: “Little effort has been made to preserve the records of Negro effort and speeches, action, work and wages, homes and families. Nearly all of this has gone down beneath a mass of ridicule and caricature, deliberate omission and misstatement.”

As a result, one of the great triumphs for equal rights in American history was obliterated or overwhelmed by a fascination with the valor of combat. That undue fascination tended to reduce the war to a noble tragedy, pitting “brother against brother.” Whether in novels, popular histories, feature films, or television series such as *The Civil War*, the tragedy and glory of armed combat overrode the central fact that, by its end, the war was about the future of the institution of slavery and the people whom it enslaved. Because such attitudes continue to dominate the historical consciousness of most Americans—and because the “facts” of Reconstruction remain largely unknown—we felt both humbled and challenged by the opportunity to tell this story anew.

The great irony about the titanic struggles that took place during emancipation and Reconstruction is the nature of the role that the freedpeople played. Rather than passive recipients of freedom bestowed upon them by the Union army and the federal government, millions of African Americans actively sought their own freedom during the war by running away from slavery, by sabotaging Confederate efforts on the plantations, and by fighting valiantly as Union soldiers. The freedpeople also asserted their new-won freedoms in the war's immediate aftermath. A rich array of documents from the period reveals that African Americans embraced the simple rights of citizenship and its responsibilities: they wanted

vote, sit on juries, marry, worship as they chose, ride public conveyances, and own land. They wanted, in short, the chance to participate in the American dream.

The violent suppression of that dream haunts us to this day. The “what-ifs” of the story are legion: What if the brief flowering of equality in the war’s immediate aftermath had been allowed to flourish rather than being brutally suppressed? What if the federal government had upheld the Constitution and guaranteed the rights of all its citizens? The story is at once poignant and urgent. The complex legacy of Reconstruction is lived every day in America. Until Americans understand that history, we are, as the saying goes, condemned to repeat it.

The book, and the project from which it emerged, grows out of a long-standing collaboration among historians, writers, and filmmakers. We began work in the late 1980s on film projects about “ordinary” people and their impact on American history intended for a broad popular audience. We set out to produce a pilot episode for a television series that would focus on the years immediately following the revolutionary transformations ushered in by the North’s victory in the Civil War. In Savannah, Georgia, where we were filming the pilot, we met Wallace Westley Law (W. W. Law). “Mr. Law,” as we came to know him, was the living embodiment of the civil rights history of his beloved city and the carrier of its civil rights tradition extending all the way back to the first days of emancipation. Mr. Law spoke eloquently about the “Colloquy,” a little-known encounter in January 1865 between two of the highest-ranking figures in the U.S. government—Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and Union army general William Tecumseh Sherman—and representatives of Savannah’s African American community. Mr. Law communicated a reverence for the Colloquy to everyone who had the privilege of meeting him, including those of us working on the *Forever Free* television project. It is the clarity and sheer scope of the vision that “ordinary” black Americans, recently liberated from slavery, revealed in their exchange with Stanton and Sherman that gave us the central idea for the television series and this book.

Our colleague and the author of the central narrative in this volume, Eric Foner, has spent two decades on the history of this critical era, most expansively in his critically acclaimed book *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (1988). In this book, Foner synthesizes the recent scholarship on slavery, emancipation, and Reconstruction into an accessible narrative. In doing so, he makes a powerful case that history is as much about the present as it is about the past. To this end, Foner carries the story forward from slavery to our current era, exploring the many ways in which ideas about race and rights have shaped and continue to shape our experience as citizens.

Joshua Brown’s essays, interspersed with Foner’s chapters, illuminate several themes of the *Forever Free* project. They are called *visual essays* in this book because Brown analyzes the impact of race on the rapidly expanding visual culture that suffused American society throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In that sense, Brown’s essays literally and figuratively illustrate a central theme about American popular culture: it is and always has been a battleground on which cultural attitudes are contested and through which popular attitudes are influenced and shaped.

The shape and structure of this book deserve some explanation. The Foner chapters and Brown essays interact in ways perhaps more akin to jazz than to a standard historical narrative supplemented by traditional “illustrations.” Each stands on its own; but each also enhances the overall argument of the book, playing off the others in considering common

themes and the larger meaning of American history.

When we brought our editor at Knopf a proposal for a book with visual essays embedded within the narrative, he did not flinch. *Forever Free* the book got to the finish line before our planned television series. It remains a story that we believe needs to reach the widest possible audience.

Peter O. Almond

Stephen Brier

December 2004

SEEING RACE AND RIGHTS: A NOTE ABOUT THE VISUAL ESSAYS

The six visual essays that appear in this book chart the ways American visual culture embraced, ignored, and distorted issues of race and equality from the 1840s to the 1920s. In the last thirty years, scholars have recovered the suppressed history of emancipation and Reconstruction. That rediscovered past is in part based on a vast visual record of the people, places, events, experiences, and ideas that shaped the era. It is a record that was the result of an antebellum pictorial revolution that itself helped spur the Civil War and transform American society. With the invention and rapid adoption of photography, innovations in printing, the rise of a national illustrated press, and the ever-expanding system of roads, canals, and railroad lines, pictures became a standard part of the news that Americans previously had obtained solely through the closely packed print in their daily or weekly papers. Methods of pictorial reproduction were labor intensive and not always reliable—photographic reproduction would not be perfected until the end of the nineteenth century—but by the middle of the nineteenth century the American public could see reasonably accurate depictions of the people, locations, and issues that were inevitably moving sections of the nation toward all-out war.

To our twenty-first-century sensibilities, the stiff photographic poses, regimented woodcut engraved lines, crude caricatures, and other nineteenth-century visual conventions seem quaint and disconnected from the tumultuous events of war and peace. But, thanks to the recent work of history and art history scholars, we can begin to discern the ways in which the conflicts, anxieties, and profound changes of the Reconstruction era were directly and indirectly enacted in its popular visual media and fine art. To contemporary Americans, the prints they bought on the street, the news engravings and cartoons they viewed in weekly and monthly magazines, the paintings and photographs displayed in studios, and the statues erected in town squares often conveyed critically important information and ideas—and in provocative ways that we need to recover in order to fully comprehend what nineteenth-century Americans did and why.

Nowhere was the immediacy and urgency of viewing more apparent than in the ways that slavery, the Civil War, emancipation, and Reconstruction were depicted in an expanding range of visual media. Ways of seeing and understanding what one saw rapidly changed under the pressure of unprecedented events and social upheaval. The ubiquitous portraits, cartoons, and monuments became battlegrounds on which newly claimed rights of visual representation were fought. African Americans were the focal point of most of these struggles, and the fate of their visualization in popular media of the day would measure how far the nation had moved from old modes of pictorial representation. In short, pictures mattered, and part of the mission of this book is to show some of the ways those nineteenth-century images changed popular perceptions, and were in turn changed by the opportunities and limits presented and imposed.

I make no claim that these visual essays provide a comprehensive overview. But with the aid of a generation of groundbreaking studies, I have tried to convey how the visual was or

of the realms over which Americans contended in a time of social and political upheaval. The first essay, "True Likenesses," explores the ways public portraiture in the antebellum years became a significant weapon for the antislavery movement as it struggled against traditional and anti-abolitionist uses of African American caricatures. "Re-visions of War" moves to the Civil War to examine how the actions of tens of thousands of slaves combined with the changing fortunes of the Northern war effort to transform the pictorial depiction of African Americans. The third essay, "Altered Relations," takes us into the first years of Reconstruction and the possibilities for a new visual dispensation based on equality of "representation." "On the Offensive" chronicles the betrayal of that promise as the nation's commitment to Reconstruction—and reconstructing the nature of graphic representation—flagged. The Gilded Age is the focus of "Countersigns," the fifth essay, which considers the concerted effort to construct a postwar visual culture based on racial inequality—and the pockets of pictorial resistance that the creators and purveyors of the Redemptionist vision of the Southern white cause continued to encounter. The final essay, "Jim Crow," marks the nadir of U.S. race relations and the ways the nation's visual culture, comprising both old and new forms of media, helped legitimate legalized discrimination and vigilante terror. I also gesture at the end of the final essay to efforts by contemporary black artists to appropriate and reinterpret the images that helped oppress African Americans in that era.

Together, these essays demonstrate that history is not a triumphant forward march, that the visual realm was perpetually contested terrain, and that it provided Americans, black and white, with meanings and methods of expression that text could not provide. Finally, it is my hope that these essays reveal that neither the images of the past nor the people who created and viewed them should be subjected to the condescension of the present, where we, the enlightened, assume that stereotypes were never challenged or that real alternatives, even with the most limited of means and opportunities, were not being constantly sought.

Joshua Brown, December 2004

PROLOGUE

No one can argue, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, that America's long struggle with racial inequality has ended or that the contradictions created by the existence of slavery in a country that considers itself an embodiment of freedom have been fully resolved. This book examines the era of emancipation and Reconstruction, a crucial moment when conflicts over racial justice, political democracy, and the meaning of American freedom reached their greatest intensity. That era witnessed a profound experiment in reshaping the country's social and political institutions. One hundred forty years later, it remains vitally important to understand that experiment, and what one historian has called its "splendid failure," because the unresolved legacy of Reconstruction remains a part of our lives. In movements for social justice that have built on the legal and political accomplishments of Reconstruction, and in the racial tensions that still plague American society, the momentous events of Reconstruction reverberate in modern-day America.

The effort to recover the historical memory of Reconstruction has been part of the larger movement for racial equality. This book hopes to reclaim, and reintroduce to the national memory, Reconstruction's remarkable cast of characters and their enduring accomplishments. It also depicts the often violent opposition that helped to overthrow the Reconstruction experiment and contributed to the misrepresentation of its legacy. The struggles of Reconstruction remain an important part of our present and future. As James Baldwin has written, "History does not merely refer to the past ... history is literally present in all we do." In that sense, Reconstruction remains an inspiration for those who hope to build a freer and more equal America.

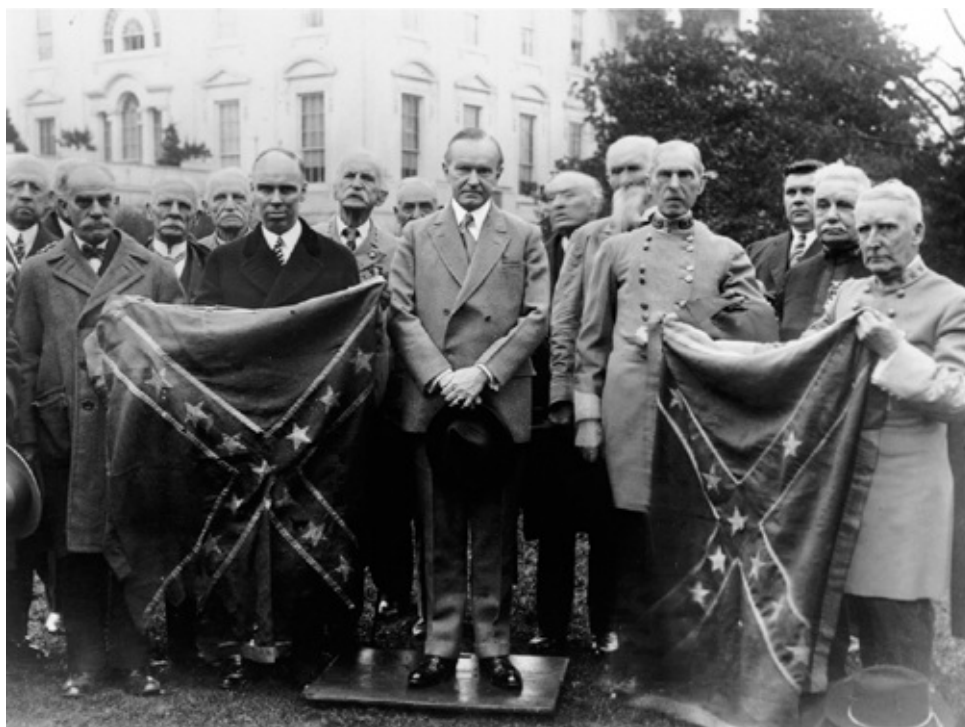
Reconstruction was a crucial chapter in the long struggle for racial justice. When the Civil War brought freedom to four million slaves, the United States underwent a profound social revolution. The vast economic and political power of the South's white elite hung in the balance, as did the lives and dreams of the former slaves. Indeed, the nature of the new social order created in the South profoundly affected the entire nation. For a brief moment, the country experimented with genuine interracial democracy. Then Reconstruction was overturned by a violent racist reaction. This book tells the story of that turbulent era, its successes and failures, and its long-term consequences up until this very day.

Reconstruction witnessed the creation of religious, educational, and political institutions for the newly freed slaves, and their entrance onto the stage of American politics as voters and officeholders. It was a period when Congress engaged in a bitter struggle with President Andrew Johnson over the definition of American citizenship, culminating in the first impeachment of a president. The United States had its first confrontation with widespread terrorism, in the form of the Ku Klux Klan. But the era also produced enduring achievements among them the ratification of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments to the Constitution.

For nearly a century, Reconstruction was tragically misunderstood by both historians and the broader popular culture. Today, it is shrouded as much in ignorance as in myth. For many decades, academic monographs, popular books, and films portrayed Reconstruction as the

lowest point in the entire American saga. According to this view, the vindictive Radical wing of the Republican Party, motivated by hatred of the South, overturned the lenient plans for national reunion designed by Abraham Lincoln and his successor, Andrew Johnson, and imposed black suffrage on the defeated Confederacy. There followed a sordid period of corruption and misrule, the argument went, presided over by unscrupulous political opportunists from the North (derisively termed “carpetbaggers”), southern whites who had abandoned their racial and regional loyalties to cooperate with the Radical Republicans (the “scalawags”), and the former slaves, who were allegedly unprepared for the freedom that had been thrust upon them and unfit to participate in government. Eventually, organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, deemed patriotic by proponents of this interpretation, overthrew the “misgovernment” and restored “home rule” (a euphemism for white supremacy) to the South.

All history, the saying goes, is contemporary history, in the sense that historical interpretation both reflects and shapes the world in which the historian lives. No period in America’s past better illustrates this idea than Reconstruction. The portrait of the era that has long held sway originated in the contemporary propaganda of southern Democrats opposed to black suffrage and officeholding after the Civil War. It gained national legitimacy when it became part of the overall process of reconciliation between North and South that gathered force in the 1880s and 1890s. In popular literature and in memoirs by participants, veterans’ reunions, and in public statuary, the Civil War came to be remembered as a tragic family quarrel among white Americans in which blacks had played no significant part, and Reconstruction as a regrettable time of “Negro rule.” This was, to say the least, a highly distorted view.



Battle flags captured by Northern troops during the Civil War are returned to aged Confederate veterans in a 1927 ceremony of reconciliation, in front of the Capitol, supervised by President Calvin Coolidge. (Illustration Credit prl.1)

The rush to forget or reinterpret the actual course of events during Reconstruction answered the immediate needs of white America, but the cost was high. Forgotten were the

promises of equality and citizenship made to the former slaves by the federal government. Forgotten, too, was the heroism of former slaves who embraced emancipation, participated actively in politics, and struggled to consolidate their families and improve their communities. Also forgotten was slavery's role in precipitating the Civil War, and the service of 200,000 African Americans in the Union army and navy. Of the hundreds of Civil War monuments erected in these years, only a handful contained any reminder of the black men who fought for the Union. The abandonment during and after Reconstruction of the nation's commitment to equal rights for the former slaves was the basis on which former white antagonists could reunite. The road to what the great black abolitionist Frederick Douglass derisively referred to as "peace among the whites" was paved with the shards of African Americans' broken dreams of genuine equality and full citizenship.

Later known as the Dunning school of Reconstruction historiography, this outlook received its scholarly expression in the early-twentieth-century work at Columbia University by the historian William A. Dunning and political scientist John W. Burgess (leading figures in their respective disciplines), and their students. Their account of the era rested, as one member of the Dunning school put it, on the assumption of "negro incapacity." Finding it impossible to believe that blacks could ever be independent actors on the stage of history, with their own aspirations and motivations, Dunning et al. portrayed African Americans either as "children" or ignorant dupes manipulated by unscrupulous whites, or as savages, their primal passions unleashed by the end of slavery. Burgess, a founder of American political science, taught that "a black skin means membership in a race of men which has never of itself succeeded in subjecting passion to reason, and has never, therefore, created any civilization of any kind."

For decades, the Dunning school shaped scholarly writing on Reconstruction. Its interpretation reached a non-academic reading public in a great best seller of the late 1920s, *The Tragic Era*, by the journalist Claude G. Bowers. In lurid prose, Bowers described how southern whites "literally were put to the torture" by "emissaries of hate" from the North who inflamed "the negroes' egotism" and inspired "lustful assaults" by blacks upon white womanhood.

But the most influential portrayal of Reconstruction appeared in D. W. Griffith's classic film *The Birth of a Nation*, released in 1915. Based on the 1905 novel *The Clansman*, by Thomas Dixon, Jr., the film glorifies the Ku Klux Klan as the savior of white civilization from black bent on appropriating white property and despoiling white women, and presents white supremacy as the underpinning of post-Reconstruction national unity. It had a screening at the White House during the administration of Woodrow Wilson. A Democrat, and the first elected president since before the Civil War who had been born in the South, Wilson shared the racial views of that region's white population. When he took office, he dismissed most of the black employees of the federal government and imposed rigid segregation in federal offices in Washington, D.C. The film quoted the president, a noted scholar of American government, several times. One quote described Reconstruction as "a veritable overthrow of civilization in the South," which "put the white South under the heel of the black South," and another Wilson statement glorified the Ku Klux Klan.



A poster for the 1922 reissue of *The Birth of a Nation* (Illustration Credit prl.2)

By this time, nearly all white Americans embraced the Dunning version of history. Even white critics of the film's racist caricatures of blacks, such as the prominent reformer James Addams, a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, accepted the accuracy of Griffith's account of Reconstruction. Blacks held a different opinion. The NAACP protested the film's showing and persuaded a few municipalities to ban it. Nonetheless, *The Birth of a Nation* played to large audiences throughout the country, and remained popular for decades. It was even viewed at a special screening by members of the Supreme Court (whose chief justice, Edward White, had once been a member of the Klan). Because of its sweeping battle scenes and complex plot development, *The Birth of a Nation* is considered a turning point in the development of American cinema, and one of the most influential films ever made. But it was blamed for touching off race riots and lynchings, and helped to instill a racist and wholly inaccurate view of blacks, and of Reconstruction, in the minds of generations of Americans.

The Birth of a Nation established the pattern for how Hollywood long dealt with slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. The most popular of all American films, *Gone With the Wind* (1939), is filled with stock characters reflecting Hollywood's view of the era's history—loyal slaves, unruly black soldiers, untrustworthy scalawags and carpetbaggers, noble Klansmen. Most viewers watch *Gone With the Wind* to follow Scarlett O'Hara's romantic adventures, not to receive a history lesson. But they imbibe a grossly distorted view of history all the same.

A less renowned film, *Tennessee Johnson*, produced in 1942 and starring Van Heflin as President Andrew Johnson, continued the Hollywood tradition of distortion evident in *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind*. During World War II, for the first time since Reconstruction, the status of African Americans became a subject of major concern to the federal government. With blacks vigorously protesting discrimination in the army and defense industries and their exclusion from the right to vote in the South, and the persistence of segregation opening the United States to charges of hypocrisy as it crusaded abroad for what President Roosevelt called the Four Freedoms, the administration took steps to ease

racial tensions at home. Along with banning discrimination in defense employment and emphasizing that ethnic and racial tolerance were what made the United States different from Nazi Germany, it sought to improve Hollywood's portrayal of blacks. Despite these efforts, *Tennessee Johnson* showed how little of substance had changed. The film portrays African Americans as little more than happy slaves, wrongly implicates Radical Republican Thaddeus Stevens in the assassination of Lincoln, and portrays Johnson as a maligned defender of national reunion and constitutional government. Alarmed that the film might stir up racial antagonism, the Office of War Information asked Walter White of the NAACP to review the script. But the studio made only a few of his recommended changes, and in the end the OVI endorsed the film as a demonstration of how change in the United States comes through the ballot box rather than violence (an ironic message at a time when millions of blacks were denied the right to vote). After viewing the film, the black sociologist E. Franklinrazier mused, "Perhaps white America needs this form of hypocrisy to survive."



Mammy (Hattie McDaniel) tends to Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh) in Gone With the Wind. (Illustration Credit prl.3)

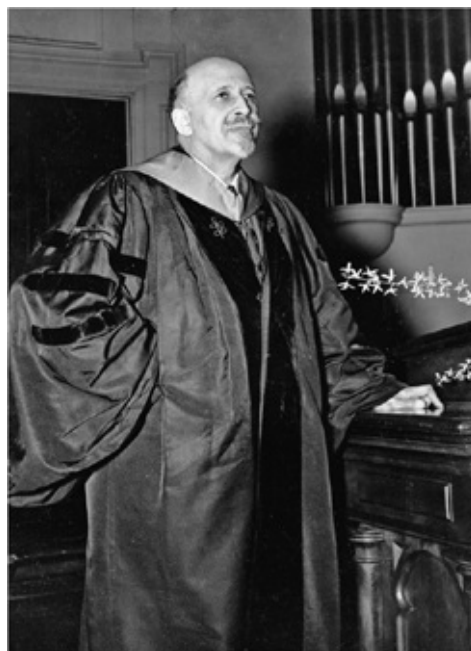
This image of Reconstruction did not go entirely unchallenged. On the margins of American society, black communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continued to celebrate emancipation, the service of black troops, and the Reconstruction principles of equal political and civil rights. During Woodrow Wilson's presidency, John R. Lynch, an African American who had represented Mississippi in Congress during the 1870s, published a series of devastating critiques of the racial biases of prominent historians and offered his own, far more favorable, account of Reconstruction's history. "I do not hesitate to assert," he wrote, "that the Southern Reconstruction governments were the best governments those States ever had."

Indeed, in black communities throughout the country, an alternative memory of Reconstruction survived well into the twentieth century. When the Works Progress Administration collected interviews with former slaves during the 1930s, they found lingering resentment over the failure of land reform and the betrayal of the promise of equality during

Reconstruction, but it was tempered by pride in the era's achievements. Black men and women, then in their eighties, could still recall the names of Reconstruction officeholders. Younger family members spoke of being taught by their parents "about the old times, most about the Reconstruction, and the Ku Klux." "I know folks think the books tell the truth, but they shore don't," one former slave told the WPA.

It was W. E. B. Du Bois who offered the first full-fledged scholarly critique of the prevailing view of Reconstruction, and whose career best epitomizes the intertwined struggle for racial equality and an accurate understanding of Reconstruction. Poet, scholar, activist, father of pan-Africanism, and founder of the NAACP, Du Bois lived from Reconstruction to the civil rights revolution, which is sometimes called the Second Reconstruction. Born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in 1868, in the midst of Reconstruction, Du Bois died in Ghana in August 1963, on the eve of the March on Washington. The unifying theme of his long career was his effort to reconcile the contradiction between what he called "American freedom for whites and the continuing subjection of Negroes."

Among Du Bois's greatest works was his monumental history *Black Reconstruction in America*, published in 1935. Although largely ignored by historians when it first appeared, *Black Reconstruction* has come to be recognized as a brilliant forerunner of modern interpretations of the entire Civil War era. Writing at a time when racial inequality was deeply embedded in American life, Du Bois insisted that Reconstruction must be understood as an episode in the struggle for genuine democracy—political and economic—in the United States. He pointed to the contest over access to land and control of the labor of the emancipated slaves as the crucial issues of Reconstruction, and explored the broad ramifications of Reconstruction's failure for the future course of American development.



W. E. B. Du Bois in 1938 (Illustration Credit prl.4)

Du Bois added a long subtitle to his book—"An essay toward a history of the part which black folk played in the attempt to reconstruct democracy in America"—for he believed that the existence of slavery challenged the democratic premises on which the country claimed to have been founded, and he saw Reconstruction as raising the fundamental question, st

relevant as he wrote, of who should rule in the United States and other countries. “What were to be the limits of democratic control in the United States?” he asked. “If all labor, black as well as white, became free, were given schools and the right to vote, what controls could or should be set to the power and action of these laborers....”

Claude Bowers had called Reconstruction a tragic era. For Du Bois, the tragedy was not that Reconstruction was attempted, but that it failed. Yet Du Bois called it a “splendid failure,” since the era demonstrated the capacity of African Americans for the full enjoyment of citizens’ rights. And, in the families, schools, and churches created or consolidated after the Civil War, and in constitutional amendments that established the principle of legal and political equality regardless of race, Reconstruction laid the foundation for future struggle. In the final chapter of *Black Reconstruction*, entitled “The Propaganda of History,” Du Bois offered a devastating indictment of a historical profession that sacrificed scholarly objectivity on the altar of racism. Any account of Reconstruction based solely on the testimony of whites alone and grounded in the assumption of black inferiority, he argued correctly, must be hopelessly flawed.

Du Bois understood that more was at stake than competing interpretations of history. There is no better illustration than Reconstruction of how historical interpretation helps to shape contemporary politics. The prevailing account of Reconstruction during the first half of the twentieth century formed an ideological pillar for the system of white supremacy. It provided justification for the white South’s unalterable opposition to change in race relations, and for decades of northern indifference to the nullification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments. Time and again, white southerners invoked the alleged horrors of Reconstruction to justify racial segregation and the disenfranchisement of the region’s black voters. The struggle for racial justice and political democracy, Du Bois believed, could not advance without a corrected understanding of Reconstruction. But in 1935, when his book appeared, these goals seemed as remote as ever.

Today, of course, we live in a different America, thanks in large part to the civil rights revolution of the 1960s. And with changes in the nation’s politics and racial attitudes have come a wholesale rewriting of the history of the Civil War era, and especially of Reconstruction. Two generations of scholars have overturned virtually every assumption of the traditional viewpoint, abandoning the racism at the base of that interpretation and presenting Reconstruction as an attempt to put into effect the principle of equal citizenship for all Americans. In this scholarship, the reputations of Andrew Johnson, the Radical Republicans, carpetbaggers, scalawags, and Klansmen have all been revised. But the most sweeping transformation has been the new emphasis on the centrality of the black experience for understanding the era. Rather than passive victims of the actions of others, a “problem” confronting white society, or an obstacle to reunion, blacks were active agents in overthrowing slavery, winning the Civil War, and shaping Reconstruction. The former slaves were thwarted in their quest for land ownership. But their demands for civil and political rights and their efforts to create schools, churches, and other institutions of freedom proved crucial for establishing the social and political agenda of Reconstruction. While previous scholars (with a few exceptions, including Du Bois) wrote of Reconstruction exclusively from white sources, more recent ones have delved into congressional documents, plantation records, army reports, black newspapers, the papers of Republican officials, and numerous

other sources to recover the voices of the emancipated slaves. Here they have found evidence of the utopian hopes and shattered dreams, the local institution-building and national political involvement that animated black activism during Reconstruction.

That same inquiry has led scholars to look to the slave experience for the antecedents of Reconstruction, and to reevaluate slave culture in light of the actions of African Americans during and after the Civil War.

The modern view of the Civil War and Reconstruction has been reflected in museum exhibitions and in films such as *Freedom Road* (1979), based on the novel by Howard Fast, and *Glory* (1989), which celebrated the accomplishments of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts, a black Civil War regiment. Cutting-edge scholarship, however, takes a long time to percolate into the broader culture. Long abandoned in the academic world, the traditional view of Reconstruction still survives in popular memory and in everyday life. In 1987, state officials in Tennessee ordered the portrait of William G. Brownlow, the state's Reconstruction governor, removed from the Capitol library because he "was not worthy of emulation" by the state's schoolchildren. Brownlow's offense was to have presided over the disenfranchisement of some Tennessee Confederates after the Civil War. Yet portraits of slaveholding governors and those who denied the right to vote to black Tennesseans, remained in place—evidently these qualities did not make them unsuitable subjects of emulation.

In 1995, during the civil war in Bosnia, a respected reporter for the *New York Times* commented that the warring sides there should learn a lesson from the United States and avoid the "ruthless" punishment of the defeated side by the victors. Even works of meticulous scholarship on other periods of American history slip into the familiar, outdated pattern when referring to Reconstruction. For example, Robert L. Caro's excellent recent volume on Lyndon Johnson, *Master of the Senate* (2002), repeats long-discarded myths and misconceptions when referring to President Andrew Johnson and his battle with the Republican Congress during Reconstruction.

The greatest obstacle to a broad appreciation of the real history of Reconstruction and its centrality to the American experience, however, is not misinformation as much as sheer ignorance. Of the hundreds of National Park Service sites that introduce visitors to one or another event or theme in American history, only one is devoted to Reconstruction, the Andrew Johnson Homestead, and its portrayal of the former president is more in keeping with Dunning and Bowers than with modern scholarship. (The NPS is today considering establishing a site at Beaufort, South Carolina, devoted to the history of Reconstruction.) In 1990, the Department of Education surveyed sixteen thousand graduating high school seniors, asking them to identify various terms or issues in American history. Reconstruction received the lowest score on the entire test—only one student in five could correctly identify it. E. D. Hirsch's 1988 best seller, *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, did not include Reconstruction on its list of one thousand things a person needs to know to be considered educated.

Occasionally, around Election Day, one hears television commentators referring to the first black person, or the first southern Republican, since Reconstruction to be elected to some office. During the Clinton administration, the impeachment of the president (although far less weighty than the issues that pitted Congress against Andrew Johnson) and the disputed presidential election in which Florida played a pivotal role, as in 1876, led to renewed references to Reconstruction. But few commentators on these events seemed to have

much of an understanding of their precursors. Indeed, print and television journalists seem unable to resist linking President Clinton and the first President Johnson—both, allegedly, good men persecuted by vindictive Republicans in Congress.

Ignorance of Reconstruction is unfortunate because, whether we realize it or not, it remains very much a part of our lives, nearly a century and a half after the Civil War ended. Every year, Congress and the Supreme Court debate issues arising from Reconstruction laws and constitutional amendments. The rights of American citizens, the proper roles of the state and federal governments, the possibility of interracial political coalitions, affirmative action, reparations for slavery, the proper ways for the government to protect citizens against terrorist violence, the relationship between political and economic democracy—these and other issues of our own time cannot be properly understood today without knowledge of how they were debated during the Reconstruction era. Versions of the past continue to shape how people think about the present. Those still influenced by the traditional view of Reconstruction often find themselves thinking of the expansion of the rights of African Americans as a punishment to whites rather than as an expansion of democracy; of the Ku Klux Klan as a well-meaning if perhaps overzealous guardian of order and civilization rather than as a homegrown exemplar of violent terrorism; of those who seek to use the power of government to effect social change as meddling outsiders rather than as idealistic reformers.

This book seeks to bring the fruits of recent scholarship on Reconstruction to a broad popular audience and in so doing to reinforce the point that knowledge of that turbulent era is indispensable to thinking about American society today. Lingering stereotypes and misconceptions need to be abandoned. I draw upon the writings of numerous recent scholars as well as my own research on the era. Ever since my Columbia University colleague Richard B. Morris asked me to write the volume on Reconstruction in the *New American Nation* series in 1975, Reconstruction has been central to my own career as a historian. Since then, I have published several books on the period, have served as curator of an exhibition, “American Reconstruction,” which traveled to several museums during the 1990s and is now available in digital form on the Internet, and have served as an advisor to a public television series on the period. I hope that this book will help to communicate an understanding of the era of emancipation and Reconstruction, and to illustrate why it remains urgently relevant for our own time.

The book begins with slavery, not only because, following Du Bois, modern historians view slavery as the fundamental cause of the Civil War, but because the institutions formerly slaves created during Reconstruction and the values and aspirations they articulated in the aftermath of emancipation had their roots in the slave experience. The book then turns to the Civil War, highlighting how the actions of African Americans helped to propel white America down the road to emancipation, and how efforts to create a new social order in the South began during the war itself. The bulk of the book examines the years from 1865 to 1877, tracing Reconstruction’s rise and fall, its accomplishments and failures. An epilogue continues on through the recent past, the era of the civil rights movement and its aftermath, to look briefly at the nation’s second major effort to come to terms with the problem of racial inequality and interracial democracy, and the ongoing efforts today. Six visual essays by Joshua Brown that accompany the text illuminate and add texture to the narrative and illustrate the changing

iconography of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction.

We live, of course, in a different world from the America of the Reconstruction era and indeed, of the civil rights movement. History never really repeats itself. Far more than in the past, the United States today is a multiracial society, not one divided between black and white. Enormous changes have taken place in race relations in the past half century. Nonetheless, in our racial institutions and attitudes, and the social dislocations around us, the unresolved legacy of emancipation is still a part of our lives. The continuing economic plight of many descendants of slavery has less to do with access to farms—the forty acres and mule demanded during Reconstruction—than to the disruptive impact of globalization and deindustrialization. Yet, in many ways, the United States, both in public memory and public policy, has yet to come to terms with the impact of slavery on its history, and the long-term consequences of the overthrow of Reconstruction. It still matters very much how we remember the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Eric Foner, December 2004

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