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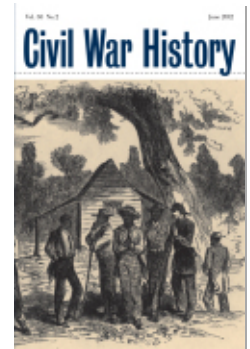
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# *Reconstruction as It Should Have Been: An Exercise in Counterfactual History*

JAMES L. HUSTON

All teachers of the Reconstruction period in U.S. history have to face “them” eventually, and there “they” sit mocking and taunting us. “They” are the Reconstruction program designed by Congress and the results of unification that by 1900 had produced Jim Crow segregation and abysmal Southern poverty instead of racial harmony and prosperity. “They” mock us partly for our belief in human agency and our faith that an alternative history existed, and “they” taunt us by daring to compose a plan of reconstruction that, on the one hand, would have fit the social, economic, political, and ideological trends of that day, and, on the other hand, would have produced a better long-term result—in other words, a demonstrable proof that, with all our knowledge and theories and time for reflection, historians today could have outdone the Republicans of the 1860s. And “they” smile back at us knowing that for once American historians have to confront the meaning of tragedy and accept a result from which there was no escape. The shadow of that realization has fallen upon scholars of the nineteenth century, for as Brooks Simpson has written, “Those historians who are critical of the performance of these four men [the Reconstruction presidents] for not achieving more for black Americans find it rather difficult to offer a historically viable alternative that improves markedly on what happened, even with the immense advantages offered by hindsight.”<sup>1</sup>

1. Brooks Simpson, *The Reconstruction Presidents* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1998), 4.

While historians have not offered an alternative plan to that of the Republicans of 1867–68, they certainly have not been lax in detailing the program's faults. Historians have produced a lengthy list of the causes for Reconstruction's failures. Several explanations have dominated the literature, and perhaps the most consistent one has been the refusal of Congress to redistribute land to ex-slaves and poor whites, thereby depriving ex-slaves an economic base for independence and inhibiting a coalition between blacks and poor whites that would have operated against a native white political backlash.<sup>2</sup> Others have claimed that nothing could have been accomplished anyway as the capitalist economy was going to doom the majority of African Americans to wage-earning subsistence of one kind or another. A version of that perspective holds that the free labor ideology was a drawback to a fair economic settlement for African Americans because the social mobility feature of the ideology made little sense for people without property, without contacts in the commercial world, and without meaningful opportunity. Moreover, on the question of "work," a cultural gap existed between the market-driven individualism of white reformers and the communitarian subsistence aspirations of the freed people.<sup>3</sup> Other historians have insisted that the original program of the Republicans was flawed in being too moderate: it required more time to operate and more political control than most Republicans were willing to consider. In this sense, Republicans were imprisoned by the existing ideals of monetary responsibility, laissez-faire government, states rights, and individualism.<sup>4</sup> The radical plan of Thaddeus

2. On land redistribution, see Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977), 81–83; Michael Les Benedict, *The Impeachment and Trial of Andrew Johnson* (New York: Norton, 1973), 27; Benedict, *The Fruits of Victory: Alternatives in Restoring the Union, 1865–1877* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1975), 19–20; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 236–37; Claude F. Oubre, *Forty Acres and a Mule: The Freedmen's Bureau and Black Land Ownership* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1978); Steven Joseph Ross, "Freed Soil, Freed Labor, Freed Men: John Eaton and the Davis Bend Experiment," *Journal of Southern History* 44 (May 1978): 213–32.

3. Barbara Jeanne Fields, "The Advent of Capitalist Agriculture: The New South in a Bourgeois World," in Thavolia Glymph and John J. Kushma, eds., *Essays on the Postbellum Southern Economy* (College Station: Texas A&M Univ. Press, 1985), 73–94. On free labor ideology, see Heather Cox Richardson, *Death of Reconstruction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002); William F. Messner, *Freedmen and the Ideology of Free Labor: Louisiana, 1862–1865* (Lafayette, La.: Univ. of Southwestern Louisiana, 1981), 184–87; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 59–60, 102–10; Julie Saville, *The Work of Reconstruction: From Slave to Wage Laborer in South Carolina, 1860–1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

4. For a discussion of the drawbacks of the congressional plan of Reconstruction as implemented, see Benedict, *Fruits of Victory*; Benedict, *A Compromise of Principle: Congressional*

Stevens, Charles Sumner, and George Washington Julian, which called for territorialization of the old Confederate states (which was the elimination of Southern state sovereignty), restrictions on white voting, installation of congressionally appointed governors, and supervision of Southern activity for thirty years, all to be enforced by the U.S. Army, was never implemented. Instead, Congress opted for a Reconstruction policy that allowed immediate reunion once Southern states agreed to a few conditions of enfranchisement of black males, disfranchisement of some white males, and new state constitutions agreeing to nonpayment of the Confederate debt. Southern blacks were to rely upon their ability to vote to protect their rights and to advance economically. Politics, however, proved to be of questionable value as a means of obtaining freedom's full promise. Part of the current assessment of the collapse of the political solution is that the Republicans were too racist to put up a real fight for black rights. Republican reluctance to deal earnestly with the question of civil liberties for blacks led to the loose, ambivalent language put into the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and civil rights legislation, resulting in their being interpreted in ways hostile to the liberties of African Americans. Moreover, within the South the Republican party was decidedly weak, the white leadership had little desire to fight for black rights, the party had no real native roots, and its leaders were given to debilitating feuds over patronage.<sup>5</sup> And for many historians, the essential problem in Reconstruction was white racism: white Southerners were willing to fight a ferocious guerrilla war for white supremacy, while Northerners

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*Republicans and Reconstruction, 1863–1869* (New York: Norton, 1974); John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction After the Civil War* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961); Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865–1877* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965). On the laissez-faire mental imprisonment of the Republicans, see Foner, *Reconstruction*, 65; Benedict, *Trial and Impeachment of Johnson*, 11–12, 21; Herman Belz, *Emancipation and Equal Rights: Politics and Constitutionalism in the Civil War Era* (New York: Norton, 1978), 116–19, 141–42.

5. Franklin, *Reconstruction*, 210–11; Stampp, *Era of Reconstruction*, 205; Terry L. Seip, *The South Returns to Congress: Men, Economic Measures, and Intersectional Relationships, 1868–1879* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1983); Stephen Cresswell, "Enforcing the Enforcement Acts: The Department of Justice in Northern Mississippi, 1870–1890," *Journal of Southern History* 53 (Aug. 1987): 421–40; William Gillette, *Retreat from Reconstruction, 1869–1879* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1979), xiv, 7, 366–79. On the loose language Republicans used in legislation and in the amendments, see Michael Vorenberg, *Final Freedom: The Civil War, the Abolition of Slavery, and the Thirteenth Amendment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 53–60; William E. Nelson, *The Fourteenth Amendment: From Political Principle to Judicial Doctrine* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), 49; Xi Wang, *The Trial of Democracy: Black Suffrage and Northern Republicans* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1997), 43–48.

and Southern Republicans cowered at the nature of the violence and the cost necessary to subdue it.<sup>6</sup>

In this issue of *Civil War History*, the challenge of offering an alternative program is accepted and the authors enter the realm of “what if” history by conjecturing a Reconstruction policy that could have produced by 1900 better economic conditions for the South and a racial situation that would not have degenerated into the abyss of violence called Jim Crow segregation. These papers were given at a session of the Social Science History Association on November 16, 2004, in Baltimore (at 8:00 A.M., morning no less), and they sparked a good discussion that easily could have lasted for another two hours. The order of the papers is the order that Robert Engs, the commentator, proposed because of the way the papers were linked by themes: Roger Ransom, Heather Cox Richardson, William Blair, James Huston, Michael Vorenberg, and a final assessment by Engs.

Because the authors are taking a bite of usually forbidden fruit in the historical profession—offering make-believe histories—the features of the exercise we are engaged in require explication before we are summarily cast out of the garden of interpretive delights. There are explicit reasons for indulging in this type of exercise, usually termed counterfactual history. Most historians offer explanations for why various processes or events occur. When they do so, their explanations (or as is usually termed in the profession, their interpretations) set up a causal model: certain things (or variables, however named) create the conditions that produce a result. That mode of analysis invites a counterfactual rendering of the history under investigation because the logical implication is that by removing some of the independent variables or changing their values, a different outcome would have been achieved. As long as historians offer interpretations, they at the same time imply that alternative paths in the history were possible and maybe even viable. Was England’s failure to place an on-site bureaucracy to govern the colonists the reason for the American Revolution? Then under certain conditions,

6. Stampp, *Era of Reconstruction*, chaps. 7, 8; on violence, see especially George C. Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1984); Ted Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction: War, Radicalism, and Race in Louisiana, 1862–1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1984), chap. 9; Simpson, *Reconstruction Presidents*, 90, 142; Michael W. Fitzgerald, *The Union League Movement in the Deep South: Politics and Agricultural Change During Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1989), chap. 7; Richard E. Beringer, Herman Hattaway, Archer Jones, and William N. Still Jr., *The Elements of Confederate Defeat: Nationalism, War Aims, and Religion* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1988), chap. 14. On the failure of politics—that is, the vote—to work for the freedman, see Gillette, *Retreat from Reconstruction*, 22–24.

perhaps prescient British leaders could have hung onto the Colonies if they had created more police authority in the Colonies between 1700 and 1764. Was the election of Lincoln responsible for Southern secession? Then perhaps the viable alternative was a fusion of the opposition parties, led by the border slave states, sometime around September 1860. Was the reason for the Great Depression the wrong policy decisions by the Federal Reserve and the immense contraction of the money supply in 1929–33? Then perhaps a more informed Federal Reserve would have made the right moves and have avoided the Great Depression—and maybe the entire New Deal as well. Any causal explanation of an event or a process in history evokes the possibility of an alternative.

Reconstruction was chosen as the subject of this counterfactual exercise because all the participants deal closely with the Civil War and Reconstruction era. Moreover, if any period in U.S. history is ripe for counterfactuals, then Reconstruction is that era. Here congressmen had to formulate explicitly a plan for reunion and for racial adjustment due to the demise of Southern slavery. A plan had to be created; reunion and race relations could not be left to the whims of impersonal forces. And that plan would have momentous consequences because it would shape race relations for decades thereafter, bestow upon the federal government long-term commitments, and partly determine the health of the Southern economy. These consequences are the incentives for conducting a counterfactual analysis and offering an alternative Reconstruction program.

Nonetheless, different methods of undertaking the exercise exist. Economics has long had a tradition of counterfactual argument, and thus economists have perhaps fewer qualms about its validity than historians. Roger Ransom comes from this tradition and has an explicit model to guide his investigation. It consists of controlling a few variables, or altering their values, and then planning out the contingencies over a period of time. The contingencies in this case mean that once a proposed alteration in the stream of history occurs, then the events upstream begin to shift and change as well, and feed-back effects have to be determined. He is currently working on a book offering a counterfactual analysis of the Civil War (letting the South win) that will spell out his procedures explicitly as well as provide the current theoretical discussions behind counterfactual presentations.<sup>7</sup>

7. For historians, the most famous counterfactual argument was presented in the 1960s by Robert Fogel, in which he stated that railroads were not indispensable to nineteenth-century U.S. economic growth, that canals could have satisfactorily stitched together the country in a large market arena: Robert W. Fogel, *Railroads and Economic Growth: Essays in Econometric*

For the other members of the panel, the counterfactual was more limited conceptually. It involved determining the key defect of the congressional plan, deciding how that flaw could have been rectified, and then assessing whether a proposed remedy was possible given the historical forces and ideas at work.<sup>8</sup> The procedure has many intellectual benefits because it makes the historian aware of the power of context in human affairs and the limits of the possible. The counterfactual analysis forces a sorting out of primary causes from less vital ones and then assesses the strengths. The critiquing of solutions makes one alive to the interconnections between the arenas of human endeavor and how intertwined and complicated any given historical reality usually is.

Finally, let me add the potential heuristic value of the counterfactual exercise to students. Teaching students the importance of context in human affairs is actually a more formidable task than many of us realize. Having students determine the historical forces at work in some time period (the parameters of the problem, so to speak), a set of potential solutions, and then sort out what was realistically possible, is a powerful exercise. Moreover, it also provides students with an insight into basic principles of historical inquiry that they can then apply to the present in which they exist: understanding the context, constructing hypothetical solutions, and then testing the proposed solutions against their understanding of the forces and ideologies at work.

We hope readers will find these essays informative and instructive, and that they may lead to further journeys into the realistic possibilities of the Reconstruction era.

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*History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1964). Currently military historians—as one might have guessed—have begun exploring the possibilities of small changes bringing about large changes in military outcomes. Roger Ransom has already contributed recently a counterfactual exercise: “Fact and Counterfact: The ‘Second American Revolution’ Revisited,” *Civil War History* 45 (Mar. 1999): 28–60. His work is currently entitled *What Might Have Been: The Confederate States of America*.

8. A current example of the counterfactual method by an historian is Gary J. Kornblith, “Rethinking the Coming of the Civil War: A Counterfactual Exercise,” *Journal of American History* 90 (June 2003): 76–105.