



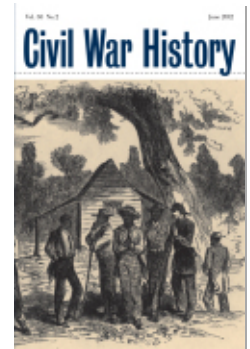
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The Missing Catalyst: In Response to Essays on Reconstructions That Might Have Been

ROBERT F. ENGS

The provocative and informed essays in this volume aptly illustrate the dilemmas of Reconstruction after the U.S. Civil War. A unifying theme that emerges from all of them reminds this author of an experience in his early youth, half a century ago. My father was an army 2d lieutenant, an officer in the Allied forces in Germany. I remember my six-year-old self going with my dad to the I. G. Farben Building in Frankfurt. That single high-rise building stood alone in the midst of bombed-out shells of buildings in every direction. My father proudly instructed me that the army had chosen the Farben Building as its future headquarters perhaps as far back as D-day, and Allied bombers had carefully avoided hitting it during their raids.

This memory speaks to our subject in three ways that differentiated the post-World War II rebuilding of Germany from the mostly unsuccessful Reconstruction in the American South nearly a century earlier. First, the U.S. government of 1945 clearly had a *plan* for what would happen in postwar Germany. Second, the United States clearly intended to remain in Germany for a while (perhaps not until the mid-1990s, but for some *considerable time*). And third, as I think back at how I marveled at the variety of national uniforms and different languages surrounding me, it is apparent that the planners of that enterprise understood that the solutions to creating a rebuilt Germany and a new Europe had to be at least as complex as the problems that had destroyed both. In short, the United States in 1945 entered the postwar era with a long-range, comprehensive plan and the resources to carry it out. Nothing of the sort existed as America began its Reconstruction in 1865.

None of the essayists in this volume could incorporate all the elements needed for an alternative outcome for Reconstruction, but their offerings—collectively—suggest that most of the required pieces were in place. And even as they propose alternatives to the outcomes we all know, the authors acknowledge the improbability of their solutions. An effective Reconstruction after the Civil War would have meant pacification of the region and security for all its inhabitants—black and white—as well as economic and political diversification, a cash economy, and some form of racial equity.

Ransom and Richardson speak effectively to some of the economic issues. The Reconstructed South needed an immediate infusion of cash and some system of land reform. But even in the speculative universe this volume proposes, it is unlikely that either of these visions could have been realized. On the one hand, Ransom's notion that the federal government might buy the planters' land suggests that the men who had caused disunion and the deaths of tens of thousands of Northern boys would be rewarded for their treason. Northerners simply would not have tolerated such a plan, nor would any Northern administration dare propose it. Still, Ransom is right about the need to get money into the hands of Southerners. But the issue remains: in which hands and how? Richardson, on the other hand, has a vision that would have been less repugnant to victorious Yankees, even if it is no more likely. It would require highly improbable changes in the ways Americans—Northern as well as Southern—understood the responsibilities and capacities of the federal government. If we reference the era during which the federal government finally began genuine reconstruction in the South, the New Deal, we can identify inspirations for both of these models. Ransom seems to propose a nineteenth-century version of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, while Richardson offers a WPA. We know both, and more, were necessary to help Southern recovery in the 1930s. Both and more would have been needed for an effective economic Reconstruction.

William Blair is clearly on the right track in his discussion of a long-term military occupation of the South. This author's studies of the African American experience in the postbellum South suggest that pacification and long-term military oversight of black rights were essential to progress for both races in the South.¹ The problem was that Northern opinion and American political tradition made a long-term occupation and a permanent standing army unacceptable.

James Huston's essay on a permanent, institutionalized bureaucracy to

1. See Robert F. Engs, *Freedom's First Generation* (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2004).

oversee the freedpeople provokes considerable trepidation. His analysis provokes us to ask whether white Southerners may *not* have been the worst possible enemies African Americans could have. If a permanent Freedmen's Bureau was managed in the way the contemporaneous Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) was, blacks were probably better off with their ex-masters. At least Southern land barons wanted blacks for their labor. The BIA basically presided over a policy of witting and unwitting genocide.²

But a BIA-style outcome need not follow from Blair's conception. Perhaps a more inclusive structure similar to the New Deal's alphabet soup of agencies or Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty could have been created. Combining the conclusions of Ransom's and Richardson's essays might suggest an umbrella agency that would have provided aid and services to whites and blacks alike and even treated the wealthy well enough to distract them from their exploitation of the poor. Nor is such a proposition as far-fetched as it might seem. After all, the initial vision of the Freedmen's Bureau was as a "Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands"—an agency that would serve poor, landless, and dislocated of both races.

Michael Vorenberg's intriguing essay reminds us of the problems that speculative history presents to constitutional scholars. They are already deeply into "what might have been" within the history of law, so it is hard to imagine how to incorporate ancillary elements into an already speculative scenario. Yet it is clear from Vorenberg's essay that Congress itself provided an alternative to the Court's reversal of the spirit and intent of the Emancipation Amendments. In that context, Vorenberg lets the other branches of the federal government off too easily. By the 1870s, the legislative branch was exhausted by battles between and within the parties, and the executive was discredited and demoralized by corruption and incompetence. The Court seized the moment *because it could*. In truth, however, Andrew Jackson's defiance of the Court in the 1830s and Roger Taney's misdeeds in the 1850s were still living memories that could have been used to rein in the Chase Court if either Congress or President Grant had had the courage.

The authors of this volume have written about tweaking the political, military, economic, and even the judicial system to change Reconstruction outcomes. What is missing, however, is a catalyst that would have forced a reluctant North into a comprehensive governmental program and kept it

2. See Robert Allen Wooster, *The Military and United States Indian Policy, 1865–1903* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1988).

involved in Southern affairs for the long term. For this reader, thinking as a social historian, that missing catalyst is to be found in the possible alternative behaviors of real people, especially black ones.

In the preceding articles, the problem of race is acknowledged, but black folks are mostly treated as ciphers or passive victims. In truth, the most significant differences between Reconstruction, 1865–77, and the *real* reconstruction, which we call the Civil Rights Movement, were black initiative, black action, and black leadership. With that stark contrast in mind, how might we have gotten the economic investment, political and economic diversity, and racial equity that the original Reconstruction lacked? Perhaps what was needed was a little bit of the political and racial astuteness that black leaders showed in the 1950s and 1960s as they played the white North against the white South. A more savvy black leadership during the first Reconstruction might have ingeniously said to Northerners, “We thank you kindly for our freedom, but the white folks down here are still so mean, we think we’ll just come on up and stay with you’ all a spell ‘til things get better!” Now *that* would have galvanized the Northern backbone for an effective Reconstruction in the South. The specter of hundreds of thousands of freed blacks headed North and West to compete for land and jobs might even have brought fiercely anti-Negro laborers and homesteaders over to the side of an effective, long-term policy to protect and support African Americans in the South.

For example: It would be better, and more constitutionally palatable to station U.S. troops in the South than along the Mason–Dixon line to prevent a black northward migration. Occupying troops would bring money and new immigrants. Their presence and protection would facilitate the evolution of a true two-party and biracial political system. This has been one of the unintentional outcomes of post–World War II America’s large standing army, much of it stationed at bases in the former Confederacy. Northern investment to provide jobs so that black workers would stay in the South would follow from civil and political pacification. And since the freedpeople so adamantly resisted growing only cotton, accommodating their wishes as a means of keeping them in the South would have halted the profitless excess production of cotton much earlier than actually occurred and might have spurred necessary agricultural diversification. The provision of social services such as an adequate education would likewise encourage blacks to stay where they were. The North would want to persuade African American youth that there was no need to go to Harvard; they could get the same curriculum at Howard or Fisk. Not many black folks would have needed to actually leave the South. Just enough to scare white voters in states like Ohio, Pennsylvania,

and New York into fully acting out their racist, separatist inclinations. Better a truly reconstructed South than a biracial North!

In the spirit of the essays above, I am obligated to speculate about why this potentially potent “race card” was not played during Reconstruction. The problem may have been that African American leaders and their freed slave constituents were the only Americans who entirely believed in the truly just nation envisioned by Lincoln at Gettysburg. Antebellum leaders like Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany, who had despaired of a black future in white America as recently as 1861, were joined after the war by younger leaders like Henry Turner. They all embraced the Republican Party and the reconstructed American political system as the solutions for the black future. The freedpeople shared this vision. They wanted the full measure of the freedom they had helped to win, but they also wanted their *homes*. They preferred to stay in the South where they had roots, and where their numbers should have given them economic and political power.³

As for the blacks’ Northern white allies, only Thaddeus Stevens dared raise the prospect of a northward migration, and he cited it only as a threat that could be countered by granting land to blacks in the South.⁴ So, belief in the integrity and fairness of the existing system by African American leaders, idealism and attachment to home among the freedpeople, and the power of racism within Northern groups supporting the freedpeople all conspired to negate the one threat—black northward migration—that could have produced long-term, effective Reconstruction in the South. It would take one hundred years, that much feared outmigration of black folk from the South, and a new generation of African American leaders and supporters to force the changes initially envisioned for the first Reconstruction.

3. For an insightful recent analysis of the freedpeople in the Reconstruction South, see Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003), especially pt. 2:163–313.

4. For the most recent biography of Thaddeus Stevens, see Hans L. Trefousse, *Thaddeus Stevens: Nineteenth-Century Egalitarian* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997). For insight into Northern hostility toward a black influx even in supposedly abolitionist Massachusetts, see V. Jacque Voegeli, “A Rejected Alternative: Union Policy and the Relocation of Southern ‘Contrabands’ at the Dawn of Emancipation,” *Journal of Southern History* 69 (Nov. 2003): 765–90.