

Nygaard Notes

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Reconstructions: Presidential and Radical

Vice President Andrew Johnson became President upon the assassination of Lincoln, so he found himself in charge of carrying out the project of putting the nation back together after the Civil War, the Project known as Reconstruction. He took on the job and, for a brief period, took leadership of it, in a process called “Presidential Reconstruction.” Why this period was brief you will see as you read the following summary, taken from the Digital History project at the University of Houston.

“The end of the Civil War found the nation without a settled Reconstruction policy. In May 1865—barely a month after Lincoln was assassinated—President Andrew Johnson offered a pardon to all white Southerners except Confederate leaders and wealthy planters (although most of these later received individual pardons), and authorized them to create new governments [in the Southern states].

“Blacks were denied any role in the process. Johnson also ordered nearly all the land in the hands of the government returned to its prewar owners – dashing black hope for economic autonomy.

“Members of the old Southern elite, including many who had served in the Confederate government and army, returned to power. The new state legislatures passed the Black Codes, severely limiting the former slaves' legal rights and economic options so as to force them to return to the plantations as dependent laborers. Some states limited the occupations open to blacks. None allowed any blacks to vote, or provided public funds for their education.

“The conduct of the governments he established

turned many Northerners against the president's policies.”

And thus was “Presidential Reconstruction” abandoned in favor of “Congressional Reconstruction.” Which, in turn, came to be known as “Radical Reconstruction.”

Radical Reconstruction

For a glimpse of what distinguished Radical Reconstruction from Presidential Reconstruction, we go to the website USHistory.org, maintained by The Independence Hall Association. The very first sentence under the heading “Radical Reconstruction” explains what was so darned radical about it:

“The Radical Republicans believed blacks were entitled to the same political rights and opportunities as whites.” In a deeply white-supremacist nation, following centuries of the dehumanization of black (and other so-called non-white) people, it was radical indeed to believe such a thing! But that wasn't the only “radical” plank in the Radicals' platform.

The Radicals “also believed that the Confederate leaders should be punished for their roles in the Civil War.” And “Americans had long been suspicious of the federal government playing too large a role in the affairs of state. But the Radicals felt that extraordinary times called for direct intervention in state affairs and laws designed to protect the emancipated blacks. At the heart of their beliefs was the notion that blacks must be given a chance to compete in a free-labor economy.

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Greetings,

This New Reconstruction series—of which the issue you are reading is Part 4—was stimulated by media reports that lots of people fear we may soon see “a new Civil War” in the United States. The fear that the nation is so divided that we might actually go to war led me to make a three-issue digression to talk about the Civil War - the first Civil War! - of 150 years ago. As you can see, the series has turned out to be less about the Civil War and more about the struggle to recover from that war, the period known as Reconstruction. Wow, why didn't I know this stuff!? There are so many lessons to be learned here!

I said when this series started that I would be looking at public attitudes about political violence, the power of symbols, the nature and causes of white terror, and what a 21st-Century Civil War might actually look like. I said I hoped to talk about the first Civil War in the United States, about the period known as Reconstruction, and about the backlash known as Redemption. I'll likely mention the Ku Klux Klan, I said, and the Proud Boys, scalawags and carpetbaggers, President Andrew Johnson and President Donald Trump, and the Colfax Massacre of 1873, which was sparked by a disputed election in 1872, exactly 150 years ago.

Well, we've covered a lot of that territory, and hopefully learned a few lessons. But are those lessons useful to us now, in the 21st Century? I think they are, starting with lessons about what can happen in a racially-stratified democracy when its elections are delegitimized.

The lessons are right in front of us, I think, but they're not always obvious, so I'll do my best in the next Nygaard Notes to point out a few of the more important ones. Starting with this one: We may or may not be headed for a New Civil War, but there is reason to believe that we are heading toward—or maybe already living through—a New Reconstruction.

I'll explain that cryptic-but-hopeful note in the concluding issue of The New Reconstruction Series, Nygaard Notes #695, coming your way soon. But for now, in this issue, I take a look at what was “radical” about Reconstruction, how the vicious white backlash to it came to be known as “Redemption,” and the construction of the enduring white fantasy—it's still with us!—known as The Lost Cause.

All of that is crammed into the Nygaard Notes you are reading right now. So get ready; here we go!

Always happy to help revise the narrative,
Nygaard

Radicals *from page 1*

In 1866, this activist Congress also introduced a bill to extend the life of the Freedmen's Bureau and began work on a Civil Rights Bill.

[I could do a whole issue of Nygaard Notes on The Freedmen's Bureau, but for now here is a brief summary courtesy of EH.net, a project of the Economic History Association: “The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, more

commonly known as the Freedmen's Bureau, was a federal agency established in 1865 to help Southern blacks transition from their lives as slaves to free individuals. The challenges of this transformation were enormous as the Civil War devastated the region – leaving farmland dilapidated and massive amounts of capital destroyed. Additionally, the entire social order of the region was disturbed as slave owners and former slaves were forced to interact with one another in completely new ways. The Freedmen's Bureau was an



→→ unprecedented foray by the federal government into the sphere of social welfare during a critical period of American history.”]

OK, back to USHistory.org: “President Johnson stood in opposition. He vetoed the Freedmen's Bureau Bill, claiming that it would bloat the size of government. He vetoed the Civil Rights Bill rejecting that blacks have the ‘same rights of property and person’ as whites.

“Moderate Republicans were appalled at Johnson's racism. They joined with the Radicals to overturn Johnson's Civil Rights Act veto. This marked the first time in history that [the veto of] a major piece of legislation was overturned. The Radicals hoped that the Civil Rights Act would lead to an active federal judiciary with courts enforcing rights.”

An Essential Ideological Vision

“Congress then turned its attention to amending the Constitution. In 1867 they approved the far-reaching Fourteenth Amendment, which prohibited ‘states from abridging equality before the law.’ The second part of the Amendment provided for a reduction of a state's representatives if suffrage was denied. Republicans, in essence, offered the South a choice — accept black enfranchisement or lose congressional representation. A third clause barred ex-Confederates from holding state or national office.

“Emboldened by the work of the Fourteenth Amendment and by local political victories in the 1866 elections, the Republicans went on to introduce the Reconstruction Act of 1867. This removed the right to vote and seek office by ‘leading rebels.’ Now the Southern Unionists —

Southerners who supported the Union during the war — became the new Southern leadership. The Reconstruction Act also divided the South into five military districts under commanders empowered to employ the army to protect black property and citizens.

“The first two years of Congressional Reconstruction saw Southern states rewrite their Constitutions and it also saw the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment. Congress seemed fully in control.”

In describing the ideology of the Radical Republicans’ Yale history professor David Blight gives credit to his fellow historian Eric Foner, telling us that Foner “said the Radical Republicans had an essential ideological vision. On the one hand it was Unionism. On the other hand it was rooted, to some extent, in trying to create racial equality, because the war had necessitated, it had forced it on them. They, therefore, were believers in this idea of guaranteed rights within the Constitution. And last but not least they were believers in positive activist central government. And you put those three or four principles together and you’ve got the package that was the civic vision of the Radical Republicans.”

That civic vision may seem like a good thing to modern readers. In fact, I hope it does. But, to a large segment of the white population in the South at the time, Radical Reconstruction was a disaster imposed on the South, a tragedy from which the South had to be delivered. And the reactionary attack on Reconstruction that resulted—and a very hateful and violent attack it was— came to be known as “Redemption.” ♦

“Redemption” in the South

Many Christians are familiar with the word “redemption.” Having received Christian training as a child, my understanding of the word fell pretty much in line with the following definition, which I

found at a random Christian website: “Deliverance of humankind from its state of alienation from God that has been accomplished through the death and resurrection of Christ.” *to page 4 →→*

Redemption *from page 3*

That's a purely religious definition, but the dictionary offers a more general definition, defining "redemption" as "the action of saving or being saved from sin, error, or evil."

Why am I talking about "Redemption"? You may wonder. Well, it has everything to do with Reconstruction, currently Topic #1 at Nygaard Notes! The New Georgia Encyclopedia (NGE) explains:

"In the context of southern politics, the term Redemption refers to the overthrow or defeat of Radical Republicans (white and Black) by white Democrats, marking the end of the Reconstruction era in the South. In addition to its biblical allusions, the term also underscores the widely held belief among white southerners of that era that the Republican state regimes that ruled during Reconstruction had been inefficient and corrupt, and that the 'Redeemers' who reestablished white Democratic control of the state also restored effective and honest government."

Seen in the context of the Lost Cause narrative that was evolving in the South at the time (which I discuss in the next essay), the idea of "Redemption" became a tale of heroic and saintly Confederate soldiers and their allies, saving the militarily defeated South from the "sin, error, or evil"—or all three!—of Reconstruction.

The saintly figures who took on the job of saving the South called themselves "Redeemers," and the project was hardly limited to Georgia, as the following entry from the Encyclopedia of North Carolina explains. This entry was written by the late Robert F. Durden, former Professor of American History at Duke University and past president of the Southern Historical Association:

"'Redeemer Democrats' was a self-imposed term used by nineteenth-century southern Democrats fond of talking about 'redeeming' their states from the alleged 'misrule and corruption' wrought by

Republican carpetbaggers, scalawags, and their black allies who assumed control as Congressional Reconstruction began in 1867-68. The Ku Klux Klan and similar domestic terrorist organizations played an important role in helping the Democrats reach their goal, which was done at different times between 1869 and 1877 in various southern states. . . . During Reconstruction, Democrats (temporarily also called 'Conservatives') sought to bring as many voters as possible into 'the white man's party.' By the 1890s the Redeemers lost control of the southern Democratic Party, and more rabid racists, intent on disfranchising black voters, gained control of the party and of the governments of southern states."

What Redemption Looked Like

Here's a little more detail from the NGE. It's specific to Georgia, but the detail helps to paint a picture of what was going on throughout the South after 1867:

"Under the terms of the federal Reconstruction Acts passed by the U.S. Congress in 1867, Georgia adopted a new state constitution granting Black suffrage in 1868 and held an election for state officers and congressmen. Republican Rufus Bullock defeated Democratic candidate John B. Gordon, and the Republicans won control of the state legislature. White Democrats wasted little time, however, in trying to undermine Republican power and Black political activism in particular. The Ku Klux Klan waged a campaign of intimidation and violence against Republicans, especially African Americans, and the Freedmen's Bureau reported that thirty-one Blacks were murdered in Georgia during the three months preceding the national elections of 1868."

After describing a massacre of mostly Black Republicans and the expulsion by the state legislature of "all twenty-eight legislators who could be definitely established as being of at least 'one-eighth Negro blood,'" the Encyclopedia explains that, "Such acts of open defiance against both the spirit and the letter of the



→→ Reconstruction Acts led Congress to suspend Georgia's representation and reinstitute military rule in the state. Military commander General Alfred H. Terry removed twenty-nine white Democrats from the state legislature, most of whom were replaced by the African American Republicans who had been expelled. In February 1870 Georgia ratified the Fifteenth Amendment, and five months later Congress once again restored Georgia to the Union."

That's a lot of resistance to Reconstruction by white Georgians, but the Encyclopedia explains that "'Redemption' truly began in Georgia with the state elections held in December 1870. . . Democrats won control of both houses of the state legislature, and in late October 1871, just before the newly elected legislators took office, [Republican] Governor Bullock resigned and fled the state. Republican Benjamin Conley, president of the state senate, succeeded Bullock, but the new legislature passed a law (overriding Conley's veto) that a special election be held in December 1871 to choose a new governor. Republicans boycotted the election and did not put forth a candidate. Democrat James M. Smith won the no-contest special election, and he went on to win the March 1872 general election in a landslide victory over Republican Dawson Walker.

"The Democrats' 'redemption' of Georgia marked the end of Reconstruction in the state and the beginning of Georgia's long reign as one of the most Democratic states of the 'Solid South.' Redemption also marked the beginning of eighteen years of political dominance [by Democrats] . . . during which the state government promoted the interests of planters and businessmen over those of small farmers and laborers, including sharecroppers, while doing virtually nothing to protect the interests of Black citizens. The resulting widespread dissatisfaction on the part of small farmers and laborers of both races would lead to the first serious challenge to Democratic rule in post-Reconstruction Georgia: the Populist revolt of the 1890s."

(I'm not about to start talking about that "Populist

revolt," so not to worry.)

Looking for examples in the mainstream of the contemporary memory of Reconstruction and Redemption, I wandered over to the website of the National Endowment for the Humanities – one can't get more mainstream than that! – and found this interesting comment: "By 1873, many white Southerners were calling for 'Redemption' – the return of white supremacy and the removal of rights for blacks – instead of Reconstruction."

I wouldn't say "instead of Reconstruction." I would say they were calling for Redemption *because* of Reconstruction. That's a rather profound distinction, if you think about it. (I'll discuss this in the next Nygaard Notes.)

The Great Nadir

This fateful struggle was to continue, formally, until 1877, when the federal government officially betrayed the newly-emancipated freedmen. What came to be known as the Compromise of 1877 was a cataclysmic moment in U.S. history. That compromise, and its tragic aftermath, was neatly summarized by renowned journalist Nikole Hannah Jones, writing in 2019.

Here's how she explained what happened in 1877, and after: "President Rutherford B. Hayes, in order to secure a compromise with Southern Democrats that would grant him the presidency in a contested election, agreed to pull federal troops from the South. With the troops gone, white Southerners quickly went about eradicating the gains of Reconstruction. The systemic white suppression of black life was so severe that this period between the 1880s and the 1920 and '30s became known as the Great Nadir, or the second slavery. Democracy would not return to the South for nearly a century."

Speaking of the 1930s, it was in 1935 that W.E.B. Du Bois tragically and poetically captured the hope of emancipation and the triumph of Redemption. He concisely summarized the brief Reconstruction

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Redemption *from page 5*

era as a period in which “The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery.”

Of course, Du Bois is not saying that the freedmen *chose* to “move back again toward slavery.” The sun in which the freedmen stood was the vision of a multi-racial democracy and, as historian David Blight reminds us, “that vision is now [in the 1870s] going to crumble as fast, almost as fast, as it ever came into existence; in fact, it’s going to crumble *faster* than it ever came into existence. It’s not just

going to crumble because Republicans sort of give up the game, and it’s not going to just crumble because . . . Radicals don’t really run this party under [President Ulysses] Grant anymore. It’s going to crumble because of the most widespread use of political violence in American history.”

The justification for the violence of the white backlash to Reconstruction was provided by the creation and wide acceptance—among white people, that is—of a narrative that grew in the soil of white supremacy and that was based on one basic idea: The South lost the Civil War, but they shouldn’t have. That narrative is known as The Lost Cause. To which we now turn. ♦

The Beleaguered Whiteness of The Lost Cause

It’s been said in regard to the Civil War that, while The North may have won the war, The South won the peace. What could this possibly mean?

To answer that question, consider this comment by Civil War historian David Blight: “Historical memory is always a contest, it’s always a struggle, it’s always a battle, a debate over who gets to own it, control it, narrate it, organize it, declare it.”

What was the Civil War all about? Who were the “Good guys”? Who were the “Bad guys”? After the military struggle ended in 1865, the struggle over the memory of that war went on for decades afterwards, and in fact is still going on. To understand how The South lost the shooting war but won the war over the memory of it, we have to talk about The Lost Cause.

Elsewhere in this series I quote W.E.B. Du Bois, who in 1935 said that “the facts of American history have in the last half century been falsified because the nation was ashamed. The South was ashamed because it fought to perpetuate human slavery.” But many people were most decidedly *not* ashamed, and they constructed a story that was intended to keep it that way.

After the war, as the Radical Republicans focused on the task of Reconstruction, “revisionist historians began to address the task of reunifying white people of the North and white people of the South following so much brutality, with a clear motivation to exonerate Southern whites.” Those are the words of Bob Cesca, whom the Huffington Post describes as “a self-educated historian and expert on the American Civil War.”

The result of this historical revisionist project was a narrative that came to be known as The Lost Cause, which Cesca describes as a “toxic revisionist history that emerged in the decades following the Civil War and continues to flourish today.” And that history, he says, “is nothing more than a series of dubiously manufactured myths — counterfactual propaganda designed to absolve southern whites of the at precipitated and fueled their separation from, and rebellion against, the United States in the name of preserving the right to own African slaves.”

When one goes online to the Library of Virginia, one finds something called the “Encyclopedia Virginia,” set up to be a “resource that tells the inclusive story of Virginia.” (Does every state have its own ‘Encyclopedia’? I had no idea.) The ↗↗↗

→→ Encyclopedia Virginia states that “The Lost Cause was largely accepted in the years following the war by white Americans who found it to be a useful tool in reconciling North and South.” It’s been “useful,” alright, and “particularly useful to white supremacists. In the 1880s and 1890s, white Southerners, decrying ‘Yankee aggression’ and black ‘betrayal,’ embarked on an effort to reverse the policies of Reconstruction. They sought to remove black office holders, disenfranchise African American men, forestall black economic advancement, and institute state-sanctioned segregation.”

The Lost Cause Narrative

So what was this story that was “largely accepted” by “white Americans”? The more-or-less official history offered up by Encyclopedia Virginia tells us that “The Lost Cause interpretation of the Civil War typically includes the following six assertions:

1. Secession, not slavery, caused the Civil War.
2. African Americans were ‘faithful slaves,’ loyal to their masters and the Confederate cause and unprepared for the responsibilities of freedom.
3. The Confederacy was defeated militarily only because of the Union’s overwhelming advantages in men and resources.
4. Confederate soldiers were heroic and saintly.
5. The most heroic and saintly of all Confederates, perhaps of all Americans, was Robert E. Lee.
6. Southern women were loyal to the Confederate cause and sanctified by the sacrifice of their loved ones.”

Now listen to the context provided in this excerpt from “The Inclusive Historian”:

“The Lost Cause maintained several basic historical claims that are now roundly disputed.” For example, “Though ex-Confederates accepted the end of slavery, the Lost Cause maintained that because slavery had been beneficial to black and white people alike, emancipation had been a grave mistake. Further, it maintained that Reconstruction had been driven by a vindictive desire to impose a

dangerous racial equality on a prostrate white South, and that the ‘redemption’ of the South by Klan violence and electoral fraud had been a heroic moment in southern history.

“By the early twentieth century, the Lost Cause had attained a status as the ‘official history’ in the former Confederate states, as its promoters created a memorial and intellectual landscape that dominated public life. [Groups like] veterans, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and countless municipalities erected monuments at a pace only outdone by the simultaneous erection of Union monuments in northern states. The UDC policed public school textbooks to ensure a history of the Confederacy that was ‘just,’ censoring lessons that might be too admiring of Abraham Lincoln and too disparaging of Jefferson Davis, or which suggested that white southerners had been cruel slave masters determined to preserve slavery. Politicians and business leaders paid fealty to Confederate memory through designation of holidays and support for monuments, while civic boosters promoted tourism that venerated elite white historic sites, such as plantations and churches...

“A new, and false, historical claim that black men served in an integrated Confederate army is both an updated version of the loyal slave trope and a completely modern attempt to make the Confederate States acceptable to the world of diversity and inclusion. Lost Cause tropes rarely appear in credible historical publications or museums, but they continue to surface in popular expressions of white racial identity politics where resentment over African American history and a sense of beleaguered whiteness continues to permeate discussions.”

Speaking of beleaguered whiteness, The Lost Cause still appears in the nation’s news cycle, more than 150 years after it was born. As evidence, consider a story that appeared on the front page of the New York Times of October 29th, just a couple of weeks ago. The headline read, “Richmond Can Remove Last Confederate Statue, Judge Rules.” The reference is to Richmond, Virginia, *to page 8*

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which was the capital of the Confederacy. The article tells of a statue of a Confederate lieutenant general named Ambrose P. Hill, built in 1892, that has “towered over a busy intersection” in that city since then. “The statue is the last Confederate monument in the city, and it could soon be gone,” the Times says, referring to a court ruling saying “that the city had the right to dismantle the statue and donate it to the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia.” The ruling “represented a victory for those in Richmond who have been fighting to rid the city of symbols of the Confederacy and the memorials, street names and markers that glorified it.”

Referring to the ruling, Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney issued a statement saying that “*This is the last stand for The Lost Cause in our city.*”

Well, I’d like to believe that (it IS 2022, after all), but I suspect that “a sense of beleaguered whiteness” will “continue to permeate discussions” for a while yet. So, even as the monuments come down, anti-racists have our work cut out for us, for the reason spelled out by historian David Blight at the beginning of this essay: “Historical memory is always a contest, it’s always a struggle, it’s always a battle, a debate over who gets to own it, control it, narrate it, organize it, declare it.”

This Reconstruction series in Nygaard Notes is a part of that struggle. ♦

“Quote” of the Week: The Reconstruction Amendments

In this series about the Reconstruction I don’t really talk about the so-called Reconstruction Amendments—also called the Civil War Amendments—to the U.S. Constitution. But these three remarkable amendments are so important to the Reconstruction story that I am making them the subject of this issue’s “Quote” of the Week. It’s not literally a quotation, as I have cut and pasted and edited the text from an interview with Eric Foner conducted in 2019 by Terry Gross, on her National Public Radio show *Fresh Air*. The words are all Foner’s, but I’ve edited them for brevity’s sake.

The 13th Amendment—passed by Congress on January 31, 1865, and ratified on December 6, 1865—irrevocably abolished slavery in the United States everywhere. Unlike the Emancipation Proclamation, which had numerous exemptions, the 13th Amendment applies to everybody in the United States. Nobody can be held as a slave anymore.

The 14th Amendment—passed by the Senate on June 8,

1866, and ratified two years later, on July 9, 1868—was the longest and most important amendment added to the Constitution since the Bill of Rights. It creates the principle of birthright citizenship. Anybody born in the United States is a citizen regardless of the status of your parents, their race, religion, national origin, et cetera, et cetera. And moreover, all those citizens are to enjoy the equal protection of the laws. No state can deny the equal protection of the laws—to any person, actually, including aliens, not just citizens. And that completely transformed the Constitution into a vehicle that people could use when they felt they were denied equality.

The 15th Amendment—passed by Congress February 26, 1869, and ratified February 3, 1870—prohibited the states from denying anyone the right to vote because of race. In other words, it enfranchised African American men throughout the entire nation, which was a revolution, really, in the body politic of the United States.

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