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POLITICS

What If Reconstruction Hadn't Failed?

The pervasiveness of white-supremacist ideology in academia gave license to Jim Crow efforts for decades after the Civil War.



At still from *Birth of a Nation*, a 1914 film

AP

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The words “tragic” and “tragedy” have long been linked to the Reconstruction era in the United States, but the reason for the association has shifted over time. In the first 50 years after the period ended, those words were most often used to lament post-Civil War attempts to change the racial

balance of power in the defeated South. According to the zero-sum game white supremacists were playing, granting black citizenship—which required ending slavery, preventing discrimination based on race, and giving black males the right to vote and govern in Southern states—stripped white people of what they believed to be their God-given right to rule over black people. A whole school of literature and history sprang up to carry the message far and wide: Terrible, terrible things had been done to the good and innocent white people of the South during Reconstruction.

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The most well-known purveyor of this notion was D.W. Griffith, whose film, *Birth of a Nation*, depicted illiterate, uncouth, and lecherous-for-white-women black men who had supposedly taken the reins of power in Southern states during Reconstruction. The film portrayed black legislators as men with their bare feet up on their desks during sessions, eating chicken and watermelon while taking the occasional swig of alcohol. These caricatures of black legislators told the story: Reconstruction was a folly; black people were unfit for American citizenship. And millions of people took the message of Griffith's grotesque masterpiece to heart.

Griffith's contemporaries in American history departments echoed his sentiments, though they generally cloaked their contempt for black people; substituting faux scholarly detachment for the director's cinematic pyrotechnics on the race question. In a blatant use of the discipline of history for reactionary ends, William A. Dunning of Columbia University created a school of historiography that seconded the notion that Reconstruction was a

grievous error. Dunning and his protégés weren't alone. In an era where scientific racism and hostility to blacks flourished openly, other historians, literary figures, and social commentators felt free to question blacks' fitness for citizenship.

In this view, President Andrew Johnson—who did everything he could to sabotage efforts on behalf of the formerly enslaved, and after his impeachment in the House of Representatives, escaped removal from office by one vote in the Senate—was portrayed as the hero who had valiantly attempted to save the country from the specter of “Negro Rule.” The men who opposed him were considered dangerous “radicals” aimed at upsetting the racial hierarchy and making inferior people citizens of the United States. Johnson, who was barely educated himself—he learned to read in his late teenage years and to write just a few years later—was held up as one of the country's great presidents.

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The urgency to limit black advancement and create doubts about the efficacy of black citizenship was derived from the doctrine of white supremacy. Blacks of the era saw *Birth of a Nation* for what it was, and organized protests in various venues where it was screened. But, as noted, it was not only that movie's presentation of Reconstruction-as-horror-show that had to be confronted. The early written history of the era put the weight of academia behind crude formulations of racially based power politics; making the pronouncements of blacks' unfitness for citizenship a matter of social science and, for some, pure science. These writings served late 19th-century and early 20th-century political and social arrangements—disfranchisement, Jim

Crow, and, for extremists, lynching. Casting doubt on blacks' innate capacities, they gave license to question whether African Americans should, or could ever, be successfully incorporated into the American polity. Very importantly, it was to be left to whites to decide the question when, and if, blacks would ever be eligible to exist with all the attributes of citizenship in the United States. Blacks resisted this idea in the streets and in scholarship.

In 1935, the eminent scholar W.E.B. Dubois produced *Black Reconstruction*, which offered a devastating corrective to Dunning and his cohort, detailing the ways in which they had distorted the record. Other historians, most notably Eric Foner, followed Dubois's course with transformative works that made it clear that the real "tragedy" of Reconstruction was the determined and sustained opposition to the program that consequently kept the goals of the farsighted men in Congress from being achieved.

It was tragic that by the 1870s, white northerners, tired of dealing with the South's racial problems and ready to move on, effectively abandoned Southern blacks to the mercies of people who had not long before thought of and treated them as chattel. Blacks' status as outside of—or somehow "alien" to—the American republic continued, and continues today. That blacks have had to "fight" for the rights of citizenship, after the Fourteenth Amendment purportedly made them citizens, reveals the disconnect.

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In the end, the opportunities for blacks, the South, and the country as a whole that were lost because of the resistance to and abandonment of Reconstruction stand as one of the great tragedies of American history. The subject naturally provokes a series of "what ifs." What if plans for land reform

had been effectuated during that time? Doing so would have helped the freedmen to become landowners, a status recognized since the country's origins as a foundation for personal independence. But black independence was exactly what white southerners didn't want. They preferred to bring things back as close to slavery as possible, ensnaring former enslaved people and their progeny in a system of share cropping and debt peonage that stymied the growth of black economic wealth for generations.

What if blacks' voting rights had not been cut off through official shenanigans and outright violence? What different political course might the South have taken? Support for public education and public works would likely have been much stronger if blacks had been active in the electorate. This, in turn, might have brought more sustained economic development, infrastructural improvements, and a higher standard of living to all in the region.

What if American historians during the aftermath of Reconstruction had not been white supremacists? A different type of society, and a different type of education about that society, would have given young blacks and whites an opportunity to learn another narrative about black people's place in America.

There is little reason to doubt that if the United States had started the process of rewriting the script on race relations during the late 19th century, instead of delaying it to the 1950s and 1960s, many problems that have their origins in the country's troubled racial history might be closer to resolution. As Justice Thurgood Marshall noted in 1978 in the affirmative action case, *The Regents of University of California v. Bakke*, America has been dealing with the tragedy of Reconstruction's failure and its aftermath for decades now. It appears that the country will likely be doing so for the foreseeable future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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