

RECONSTRUCTION

“What is known as the reconstruction of the seceded States is a very sad epoch to recall, and no American who loves his country likes to bring back its harsh memories. Yet it is a matter of history and it needs be recorded in order that the part which the North and the South played during that period should be fully understood. It began under President Lincoln before the close of the war, and was carried on by President Johnson after the assassination of President Lincoln, during the years 1865 and 1866.

Afterward there was a second phase of reconstruction, or "destruction," known as the congressional plan, which undid all that had been done by Presidents Lincoln and Johnson. This latter period was the greatest trial that the South had to bear, not excepting the terrible ordeal of war...

...The Southern people had lived with the negroes; they understood them far better than did the Northern people and the politicians of the North. Some legislatures, to meet this condition of affairs, passed certain laws known as vagrant laws... The North, however, in the desire to protect the negro from imposition, not fully understanding matters, took great offense at this, and felt that it was an effort to re-enslave the negro, and defeat the purpose of his freedom... These laws were of little import anyway, for the bureaus of refugees, freedmen and abandoned lands, backed by military force, were overriding everything in a supposed protection of the rights of the negroes, encouraging them in idleness and inculcating vicious ideas and hostility toward the Southern whites.

...The Fourteenth amendment was now presented to the Southern people again. Its behests and the reconstruction acts were carried out in legislation by the bayonet. The States were negroized in succession. "Its practical operation was of course revolutionary in its effects upon the Southern State governments. The most influential white men were excluded from voting for the delegates who were to compose the constitutional conventions, while the negroes were all admitted to enrollment. Unscrupulous adventurers appeared to act as the leaders of the inexperienced blacks in taking possession first of conventions, and afterward of State governments; and in States where the negroes were most numerous or their leaders most shrewd and unprincipled, an extraordinary carnival of public crime set in under the form of law. Negro majorities gained complete control of State governments, or rather negroes constituted the legislative majorities and submitted to the unrestrained authority of small but masterful groups of white men, whom the instinct for plunder had drawn from the North.

Taxes were multiplied, the proceeds mostly going into the pockets of the white rascals and their confederates among the negroes. Immense debts piled up by processes both legal and fraudulent, and most of the money borrowed reached the same destination.

...The Klan was..., founded in a holy object, and often prostituted to violence under great provocation... It combined the best men of the State, old, virtuous, settled, cautious citizens. Its object was the preservation of order and the protection of society. It used mystery as its weapon. It was intended to aid the law, and prevent crime. In the license of the era, it was a matter of self-defense against plunder, assassination, and rape...(I) saw the effect of it (lawlessness) in a negro county of Mississippi (Noxubee), where there were ten negroes to one white person. The lawlessness and tendency to riot and override the laws of social life, became so great that a crisis appeared to be near, as shown by abusive language, disorderly meetings, and incendiary proceedings. This

existed for months. One night about two hundred white men clothed in white sheets, in single file on horseback, without uttering a word, rode through the thickly-settled negro portions of the county. They appeared without warning at dark. They disappeared just before dawn. The effect was electrical. The negroes gave little more trouble in that county, notwithstanding the league and their secret organization...

... "His like the world has never seen from the days of Cain or of the forty thieves in the fabled time of Alf Baba. Like the wind, he blows and we hear the sound thereof, but no man knoweth whence it cometh or whither it goeth. National historians will be in doubt how to class him. Ornithologists will claim him, because in many respects he is a bird of prey. He lives only on corruption, and takes his flight as soon as the carcass is picked. He is no product of the war. He is a "canker of a calm world' and of peace, which is despotism enforced by bayonets... From that party (Republican Party) he sprung as naturally as a maggot from putrefaction. Wherever two or three or four negroes are gathered together, he, like a leprous spot, is seen, and his cry, like the daughter of the horse leech, is always, Give, give me office. Without office he is nothing; with office, he is a pest and public nuisance. Out of office he is a beggar; in office he grows rich till his eyes stick out with fatness... This is a splendid picture in general of the carpet-bagger during the days of reconstruction...

The terrible ordeal of reconstruction may be said to have lasted from 1865 to 1876, twelve years, before the whites got hold of the States again. No people had to undergo so dark a period with such complications, having 4,000,000 of slaves suddenly enfranchised, with no preliminary training to fit them for the great responsibility of the ballot. "Our ancestors placed suffrage upon the broad common-sense principle that it should be lodged in and exercised by those who could use it most wisely and most safely and most efficiently, to serve the ends for which government was instituted . . . not upon any abstract or transcendent notion of human rights, which ignored the existing facts of social life I shall not vote to degrade suffrage...

The conduct of the true citizens of the South during the days of reconstruction surpassed in wisdom, endurance, patience, and subordination to law (military law), any traits they had displayed in the war. They never yielded moral support to the corrupt legislation surrounding them, but patiently waited for the time to come when they could act together to restore local self-government. This time came when the corrupt influences of those in power had passed beyond endurance... All thinking men now saw that there was no doubt that white civilization itself, the very existence of society, was at stake. The white people arose as one man to correct the evil. They appealed to all to help (white and black), no matter what had occurred in the past. The moral pressure and presentation of the open frauds and crimes accomplished under form of law, were irresistible. It amounted almost to another revolution, and one after another, the States were recovered by the white people within their borders. Illegal and corrupt returning boards, under semblance of law, prevented the consummation for a time, as the Federal power was slow to relax its hold, but it was seen on every hand that the end was near, and that the corrupt governments, set up under the reconstruction law, remained only because held up on the points of the bayonets of the United States army."