

# RECONSTRUCTION

**DEBATE** over the nature of Reconstruction has created so much controversy over the decades that one scholar, writing in 1959, described the issue as a “dark and bloody ground.” For many years, a relatively uniform and highly critical view of Reconstruction prevailed among historians. William A. Dunning offered the principal scholarly expression of this view in *Reconstruction, Political and Economic* (1907), the first major historical interpretation of Reconstruction. Dunning portrayed Reconstruction as a corrupt outrage perpetrated on the prostrate South by a vicious and vindictive group of Northern Republican Radicals. Unscrupulous carpetbaggers flooded the South to profit from the misery of the defeated region. Ignorant, illiterate blacks were thrust into positions of power for which they were entirely unfit. The Reconstruction experiment survived only because of the determination of the Republican Party to keep itself in power. Some later writers, notably Howard K. Beale, added an economic motive—to protect Northern business interests.

Dunning’s interpretation shaped the views of several generations of historians and helped shape popular depictions of Reconstruction such as those expressed in the 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation* and then the 1936 book and 1939 movie *Gone with the Wind*.

The great African American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois was among the first to challenge the Dunning view. In *Black Reconstruction* (1935), Du Bois argued that Reconstruction politics in the Southern states had been an effort on the part of the masses, black and white, to create a more democratic society. The misdeeds of the Reconstruction governments, he claimed, had been greatly exaggerated, and their achievements overlooked. In the 1940s, the historians C. Vann Woodward, David Herbert Donald, Thomas B. Alexander, and others began to reexamine the Reconstruction governments in the South and to suggest that their records were not nearly as inaccurate and incomplete as most historians had previously assumed.

By the early 1960s, a new view of Reconstruction was emerging. The revisionist approach was summarized by John Hope Franklin in *Reconstruction after the Civil War* (1961) and Kenneth Stampp in *The Era of Reconstruction* (1965), who claimed that the postwar Republicans had been engaged in a genuine, if flawed, effort to solve the problem of race in the South by providing much-needed protection

to the freedmen. The Reconstruction governments, for all their faults, had been bold experiments in interracial politics. The congressional Radicals were not saints, but they had displayed a genuine concern for the rights of slaves. Andrew Johnson was not a martyred defender of the Constitution, but an inept, racist politician who resisted reasonable compromise and brought the government to a crisis. African Americans had played only a small part in Reconstruction governments and had generally acquitted themselves well. The Reconstruction regimes had, in fact, brought important progress to the South, establishing the region’s first public school system and other important social changes. Corruption in the South had been no worse than corruption in the North at that time. What was tragic about Reconstruction, the revisionist view claimed, was not what it did to Southern whites but, rather, what it did not do for Southern blacks. By stopping short of the reforms necessary to ensure blacks genuine equality, Reconstruction had consigned them to more than a century of injustice and discrimination.

In later years, scholars began to question the revisionist view in an attempt to draw attention to the achievements of Reconstruction. Eric Foner, in *Nothing but Freedom* (1983) and *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution* (1988), emphasized how far the former slaves moved toward freedom and independence



**THE FREEDMEN’S BUREAU** For four years after the Civil War, the Freedmen’s Bureau served newly freed slaves, helping them to get housing, food, education, and other services. This image shows African American men and women waiting for rations, most of them old and sick. (© The Granger Collection, New York)

own terms and asserting their control over family life, reproduction, and work. According to Jones in *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (1985), women in particular sought the opportunity “to labor on behalf of their own families and kin within the protected spheres of household and community.”

Some historians have begun to argue that Reconstruction was not restricted to the South alone. Heather Richardson, in *West from Appomattox* (2007) and *The Death of Reconstruction* (2001), shows how the entire nation changed during the Civil War and Reconstruction—with the South, perhaps, changing least of all. The age of Reconstruction was also the age of western expansion and industrialization. ●

## AP HISTORICAL ARGUMENTATION AND INTERPRETATION

Questions assume cumulative content knowledge from this chapter and previous chapters.

in a short time and how large a role African Americans played in shaping Reconstruction. During Reconstruction, blacks won a certain amount of legal and political power in the South; even though they held that power only temporarily, they used it to strengthen their economic and social positions and to win a position of limited but genuine independence. Though they failed to achieve equality, they won a measure of individual and community autonomy that they used as building blocks of the freedom that emancipation alone had not guaranteed. Leon Litwack argued similarly in *Been in the Storm So Long* (1979) that former slaves used the relative latitude they enjoyed under Reconstruction to build a certain independence for themselves within Southern society. They strengthened their churches; they reunited their families; by refusing to work in the “gang labor” system of the plantations, they forced the creation of a new labor system in which they had more control over their own lives. Writing from the perspective of women’s history, Amy Dru Stanley and Jacqueline Jones have both argued that the freed slaves displayed considerable independence in constructing their households on their

1. Describe the respective historical interpretations of four of the historians discussed, regarding the nature of Reconstruction. For each, identify one piece of historical evidence that could be used to support the argument and one piece of historical evidence that could be used to refute the argument.
2. In the 1960s, America experienced a significant civil rights movement, particularly for African American rights. Explain in what way this civil rights movement might have encouraged historians of the time to reexamine past historical interpretations of Reconstruction.
3. With which historical argument regarding Reconstruction do you most agree? Support your view, using historical evidence.