

The Southern Perspective of Radical Reconstruction

Part 1

The Uncivil War devastated the South. Wounds and disease killed one out of four white men. Over 40% of private property was destroyed as well as 800 churches. In one southern city, Columbia, South Carolina, over 3/5's of the city was put to the torch. As many as 50,000 Southerners, including many former slaves, were homeless refugees after the war. Famine and diseases claimed many lives.

The use of "total war" against the South not only caused logistical nightmares for the army but had demoralized the citizens of the South. "Reconstruction was an extension of total war by political means." Historian Clyde Wilson said that "the purpose of Reconstruction was to plunder, plunder, plunder." Another historian, Ludwell Johnson, said that "the cardinal underlying objective of Reconstruction was to maintain and enhance the political dominance of the Republican Party and specifically the Radical Republicans."

The republicanism of Thomas Jefferson and Ronald Reagan bears little resemblance to the Republican Party of the WBTS era. The Republican Party supported big government for big business with high protectionist tariffs and generous government subsidies. The powerful railroads, public works, and industrial interests were the recipients of such subsidies. They also believed in a national banking system as well as centralized government power. In spite of being a minority, the Radical Republicans had strong support in the northern press.

The modern Democratic Party is not the Democratic Party of the WBTS era. This Democratic Party was agrarian and socially conservative. They were strongly committed to the U. S. Constitution and its principles of decentralized and limited government.

The modern Democratic Party is often associated with liberalism. Ironically, their closest antecedent is the Radical Republicans.

It must also be noted that you cannot speak of Reconstruction without speaking of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan of the Reconstruction era was founded to protect a defenseless people and to maintain law and order. The Klan of the modern era can make no such claim. Furthermore the Klan of Reconstruction ended with Reconstruction.

It is interesting to note that the birth of the Klan in Pulaski, Tennessee, bears a resemblance to the rebirth of Mardi Gras in Mobile after the war. On Christmas Eve of 1865 a group of young Confederate veterans decided to lift the spirits of the town by forming a club or fraternity. They came up with the KKK name and

mysterious regalia. The Klan portion of the name is a tribute to the Scots-Irish heritage of the region. Then on Saturday night they dressed up and rode through town to amuse and serenade their families and sweethearts. It was a roaring success. However, former slaves thought they had seen the ghosts of Confederate soldiers and a powerful psychological weapon was born.

Later, in 1867, several former Confederate veterans in Mobile pulled a similar stunt. Joe Cain dressed up as a fictitious Chickasaw Indian by the name of Chief Slacabamorinico. Then he and his friends, the Lost Cause Minstrels, took to the streets of Mobile in a decorated coal wagon. As a result Mardis Gras was reborn in Mobile.

For a generation or more before the war the radical abolitionists and their Radical Republican allies stigmatized the South. The South was looked upon as a backward and brutal society. The pulpits of the North, especially the radical abolitionist dominated Unitarian Church, inflamed the Northerners with distortions of Southern culture and slavery. Union casualties added to the emotional component for animosity towards the South.

We are taught that Lincoln had a generous vision for bringing the South back into the Union. The Lincoln cultists certainly want us to believe this. Lincoln's assassination changed any hope of a generous reunion. The Radical Republicans were goaded by the press to seek vengeance from the South for the war and Lincoln's assassination. Johnson planned to follow Lincoln's plan but was vigorously opposed by the Republicans. The Radical Republicans would settle for nothing less than national political dominance and would use former slaves to achieve this goal. The South was demonized over war casualties and civil rights issues. The Republicans waved the "bloody shirt" and used distorted reports of disorder in the South to gain and maintain political power.

In late 1865 and early 1866 Johnson quietly concentrated on economic recovery. Things were relatively quiet in the South but the Radical Republicans were busy stirring up trouble in Congress as well as in the South. The Thirteenth Amendment and a Civil Rights Bill was passed. The Freedmen's Bureau was formed. Next came the 14th Amendment and this caused the trouble that the Radical Republicans wanted.

As proposed, the 14th Amendment would guarantee equal protection and due process under the law and yet it denied public office to former Confederates. The amendment was rejected by 10 southern states and 3 border states. The Radical Republicans were ready and had been stirring northern outrage with exaggerated reports of crimes against the blacks in the South. Over Johnson's veto the first Reconstruction Act was passed in May, 1867. When it was revoked by the legal

governments of 10 southern states and 3 border states the South was placed under martial law and became the jurisdiction of 5 military districts. The act disenfranchised Confederate veterans but gave to vote to blacks and Union soldiers stationed in the South. As a result 85% of white southerners could not vote. Ratification of the 14th Amendment was a requirement for reentry to the Union. The Freedmen's Bureau was also greatly expanded in size and power. The bureau had arbitrary police and judicial power. It also had the ability to levy fines for civil rights violations. Corrupt Freedmen's Bureau agents could now make a good living.