




RESEARCH ARTICLE

“The Dark and Sad Days of Reconstruction”: The Politics of Memory in the Civil Rights Era

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This article examines how and why many prominent white supporters of the civil rights movement either ignored or condemned the model of the Reconstruction era. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, for example, did not publicly mention Reconstruction as part of their efforts to promote civil rights, and in 1957, Hubert Humphrey, the pro-civil rights senator from Minnesota, spoke of “the dark and sad days of Reconstruction.” In contrast, as the article shows, most Black civil rights activists embraced the memory of Reconstruction. At the same time, segregationists frequently referred to and commemorated, albeit negatively, Reconstruction. Indeed, they popularized the idea that the modern civil rights movement was a “Second Reconstruction.” Through an examination of political statements, government documents, opinion columnists, historians, letters to the editor, and other sources, the article traces both the silence and condemnation of Reconstruction on the part of many civil rights supporters.

In July 1957, as the United States Senate debated a civil rights measure—one that in September of that year became the first such federal law since the Civil Rights Act of 1875, a member of that legislative body took to the floor to make a plea for caution and sensitivity in comparing the present with the past, announcing, “I personally hope that any indirect reference in the bill to that dismal period in American history, the so-called Reconstruction period, will come out of the measure.” The Senator emphasized, “I do not like to have the American people reminded in however well meaning a way, of the dark and sad days of reconstruction,” a period he labeled a “bad chapter” in American history. “As we deal with this emotional subject, let us not add unnecessarily to the emotions involved,” the Senator counseled. “Some of our friends do not like to be reminded of Reconstruction days,” he concluded. “I do not blame them. I do not like to remember those days either.”¹

The Senator who wished to forget the Reconstruction era was not Strom Thurmond (D-SC), the ardent Southern segregationist who engaged in the longest one-person filibuster in history in a vain effort to prevent passage of the bill. The speaker was Hubert H. Humphrey (D-MN), one of the leading civil rights supporters in the Democratic Party and a strong advocate for the 1957 law, who at the 1948 Democratic National Convention, when he was the Mayor of Minneapolis, burst onto the national political scene with his passionate endorsement of a civil rights plank.

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¹Hubert H. Humphrey, *Congressional Record-Senate*, July 17, 1957, 11979. I first came across this quotation in C. Vann Woodward, “Civil Rights and the Ghost of Thaddeus Stevens,” 11, folder 126, box 73, C. Vann Woodward Papers, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

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“There are those who say to you we are rushing this issue of civil rights,” he told the conventioners in Philadelphia, where he worked tirelessly to ensure the plank was included. “I say we are 172 years too late.”²

Humphrey was not an anomaly. Senator Frank Lausche (D-OH), another supporter of the law, labeled as “nefarious” a portion of the bill, Title III, which had been drafted as an amendment to the Reconstruction Acts. (This part of the bill, the same section that concerned Humphrey, was removed before the final vote.³) Seven years later, after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, for which he enthusiastically voted, Representative Charles Goodell (R-NY) asserted that “law can be very helpful in race relations,” while worrying that “if we push too fast, we will exacerbate those relations.” Goodwell, too, insisted that he did not want the present moment “to become another Reconstruction Era.”⁴

While many pro-civil rights politicians were seeking to forget Reconstruction, segregationists did not hesitate to place it at the center of their usable past. Displaying what Stephen J. Whitfield has called “the sheer tenacity of southern white consciousness,” they frequently evoked “the dark days of Reconstruction,” the same phrase used by Humphrey, which, in their view, should be remembered not in celebration but as an anti-model. They popularized the idea that the modern Civil Rights movement was a “Second Reconstruction,” and that, as with the first Reconstruction, it could, with concerted political, legal, and even vigilante action, be rolled back. “We were successful in preserving our constitutional rights in the first Reconstruction period,” said Representative James C. Davis (D-GA) in 1956, the year he signed the Southern Manifesto, a statement by Southern politicians opposing integration. “They are in the balance again.”⁵ Quoting Lord Byron, historian and advocate of the White Citizens’ Council Robert Patterson framed the fight against Reconstruction as a precursor to the battle against integration: “The best of prophets of the future is the past,” he charged.⁶

Segregationists saw themselves as inhabitants of the world remade by Reconstruction and only partially unmade by the continuing project of the Redeemers who fought against it. In 1958, Senator Sam Ervin (D-NC) noted that he was “completely convinced of the fact that the civil war is over.” He added, “My only regret, however, is that I cannot say the same thing about Reconstruction.” Ervin, who considered the Reconstruction Acts “the most monstrous and unconstitutional legislation ever enacted in this nation,” had opposed the Civil Rights Act of the previous year, and he would vote against “similar laws” passed in 1960, 1964, and 1965.⁷

²Hubert H. Humphrey’s Speech on Civil Rights before the Democratic National Convention at Philadelphia, PA, Wednesday, July 14, 1948, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/hubertthumphrey1948dnc.html> (accessed Aug. 8, 2024), supporting his civil rights amendment to the party platform.

³“Rights Leaders Ask Repeal of Reconstruction Era Law,” *Boston Globe*, Sept. 18, 1957, 1; James F. Simon, *Eisenhower vs. Warren: The Battle for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties* (New York, 2018), 284; Samuel G. Freedman, *Into the Bright Sunshine: Young Hubert Humphrey and the Fight for Civil Rights* (New York, 2023).

⁴Lausche quoted in “Civil Rights Bill Needs Further Change,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 24, 1957, 18; Ingrid Jewell called it “the real fighting section of the bill.” “Civil Rights Bill Battle Just Getting Under Way,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 22, 1957, 5. Jewell, however, also wrote that “the South suffered bitterly” under it. “Goodell Defends View on Civil Rights Plank,” *Elmira Star-Gazette*, July 20, 1964, 4. See also, R. H. N., “Take It from Here,” *Dixon (IL) Evening Telegraph*, June 15, 1963, 1, who hoped there would be “no repeat of Reconstruction Days.”

⁵Stephen J. Whitfield, “If at First You Don’t Secede: War and Remembrance,” in *The Long Civil War: New Explorations of America’s Enduring Conflict*, ed. John David Smith and Raymond Arsenault (Lexington, KY, 2020), 178. Davis is quoted in *Congressional Record: House*, Jan. 5, 1956, 163.

⁶Robert B. Patterson, “The Citizens’ Council, A History: An Address by Robert B. Patterson, Secretary, The Citizens’ Councils of America, Executive Secretary, Association of Citizens’ Councils of Mississippi, To The Annual Leadership Conference of the Citizens’ Councils of America, Jackson, Mississippi, Oct. 26, 1963,” 1.

⁷Natalie J. Ring and Sarah E. Gardner, ed., *The Lost Lectures of C. Vann Woodward* (New York, 2020), 256. Original quote can be found in *Congressional Record-Senate*, Aug. 20, 1958, 18735. The second Ervin quoted from *Congressional Record-Senate*, Feb. 5, 1964, 1806. For a similar claim, see “April 9 1865–1965,” *Lynchburg News and Advance*, Apr. 6, 1965, 6.

Many civil rights advocates agreed with their political adversaries that Reconstruction policies were misbegotten, even perverse in the sense that Albert O. Hirschman used the term in his book, *The Rhetoric of Reaction*: that it had unintended consequences and ultimately weakened rather than strengthened Black civil rights.⁸ Opposite sides of the civil rights divide converged to promulgate what Gunnar Myrdal described in his 1944 book *The American Dilemma* as the “myth of the horrors of Reconstruction.”⁹ The difference was that segregationists frequently brought up the comparison, while many pro-civil rights politicians did so reluctantly.

This article traces what appears to be paradox of misremembering on the part of many supporters of civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s. Why did many of them share their segregationist opponents’ negative assessment of the Reconstruction era, when more than 1,500 Black Americans, many of them newly emancipated, held political office and the federal government made halting but meaningful efforts to promote equality? When it was during this period that the first civil rights laws were passed and the Constitution remade to include equality? When that era marked a brief but revolutionary effort that modeled, in spite of fierce opposition, what Jefferson Cowie calls “a semifunctional multiracial democracy”?¹⁰

Alternative understandings were proposed, particularly by Black activists, but just as, to use David Blight’s framing, the radical “emancipationist” understanding of the Civil War ultimately lost out to a conception that sacrificed justice in exchange for “reconciliation on Southern ideological terms,” a conservative conception of Reconstruction memory prevailed even in the North during the height of the civil rights movement, and among many politicians, writers, and editors who supported the campaign for racial equality.¹¹ Although in recent decades, the tide has turned in what K. Stephen Prince calls “memory battles,” during the civil rights movement, the period under consideration in this article, the negative depiction of Reconstruction won in a rout.¹²

The fact that many white (and some Black) civil rights supporters either downplayed the relevance of the Reconstruction era or, with the segregationists, viewed it as a precedent to be avoided, is important for historical and for contemporary reasons. For one, the shared depiction by civil rights advocates and segregationists of Reconstruction as a painful, humiliating episode reflected what W. E. B. Du Bois condemned as “the propaganda of history,” an inaccurate view of Reconstruction that blamed the freed people for its failures. This was a perspective, held by many white Southerners and Northerners, that, in the period after the Civil War, treated interracial democracy as a monstrous inversion, posited white supremacy and racial hierarchy as natural and unchangeable, and highlighted the push for equality as either ineffectual or as likely to backfire. Reinforcing this view in the first half of the twentieth century, academic scholarship and popular history also depicted the Reconstruction era as a failure and a tragedy.¹³

⁸Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge, MA, 1991).

⁹Myrdal is quoted in David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 139. Woodward noted “the bad name Reconstruction has earned” in a 1956 article in *Commentary*, a magazine aimed at Northern intellectuals. Bruce E. Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant: Historical Memory in the American South* (Charlottesville, VA, 2007), 157.

¹⁰Eric Foner, *The Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution* (New York, 2020); Eric Foner, *Freedom’s Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1996); Jefferson Cowie, *Freedom’s Dominion: A Saga of White Resistance to Federal Power* (New York, 2022), 132.

¹¹Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 161.

¹²K. Stephen Prince, “Memory Battles: History, Memory, and the Meanings of Reconstruction,” in *The 1866 Memphis Massacre: Remembering Slavery, Emancipation, and Reconstruction in the Mississippi Valley*, ed. Beverly Greene Bond and Susan Eva O’Donovan (Athens, GA, 2020), 190–203.

¹³W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York, 1935), 711–28.

In accepting this misremembering, white advocates of civil rights, inadvertently or not, also took up the premises of the “backlash” movement against civil rights that got its name in 1963.¹⁴ Offloading responsibility for their actions, many backlashers argued that previous campaigns for equality, in moving too quickly and aggressively, made a reactionary response inevitable. Anticipating Hirschman’s “perversity thesis,” the *New York Times* columnist Arthur Krock wrote in 1964 that “the tragedy of the vengeful reconstruction laws” was that they “set back for generations the progress of the Negro,” blaming Reconstructionists, rather than the Redeemers, for Jim Crow, when it was the latter who had aggressively, and sometimes extralegally, rolled back Black equality.¹⁵ In a column on “Freedom Summer,” in 1964, the pioneering conservative thinker Russell Kirk wrote, “I wish that every college student who fell into the Mississippi Project could have read Claude G. Bowers’ book, *The Tragic Era*.” He claimed that Reconstruction “left the Southern Negro worse off than before” and that it “produced defiance, the Ku Klux Klan and general suffering.”¹⁶ Kirk thus framed Reconstruction as producing what the historians Lerone Bennett Jr. and Forrest G. Wood labeled the “first white backlash,” but he took it as a reason to advocate against the pursuit of equality.¹⁷

Memory played a key role in the strategic deployment of this history, about which, by the 1950s, few people had firsthand recollections.¹⁸ Indeed, as the people who lived through the Reconstruction period became increasingly scarce, segregationists doubled down on the mythology of Reconstruction via their “Jim Crow storytelling,” to use Elizabeth Gillespie McRae’s term.¹⁹ Opponents of integration continued to recall the trauma of Reconstruction as a training ground for combatting the civil rights revolution of the 1960s. In 1965, a Florida resident, W. M. Moulter, wrote, “There are people still living who remember the period of ‘black supremacy’ after the Civil War.” (Perhaps. Although such persons would have to have been in their mid-nineties or older.) He claimed that the Johnson administration “wants to force the white man under black reconstruction rule,” in which “white men will be slave of the negro, the master,” and also that “Martin Luther King wants to bring back reconstruction days.”²⁰ The fear of inversion—of a topsy turvy world in which white supremacy was replaced by “black supremacy”—was central to the segregationist deployment of memory in the civil rights era.

This article contains six parts. The first section highlights a divide among civil rights supporters about the salience of the Reconstruction model and the more universal (negative) commemoration of the period among segregationists. The second part examines how segregationists deployed a

¹⁴Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936–1965* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011), 54; Lawrence B. Glickman, “White Backlash,” in *Myth America: Historians Take on the Biggest Legends and Lies about Our Past*, ed. Kevin M. Kruse and Julian Zelizer (New York, 2022), 211–23.

¹⁵On the use of the term “Reconstructionist,” see Kidada E. Williams, *I Saw Death Coming: A History of Terror and Survival in the War Against Reconstruction* (New York, 2023), 242; Arthur Krock, “Who Are Republicans?” *Ottawa Journal*, July 13, 1964, 7; Hirschman, *Rhetoric of Reaction*.

¹⁶Russell Kirk, “The End of the Mississippi Project,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, Aug. 14, 1964, 18; Russell Kirk, “Ignorant, Irresponsible Voters Cannot Improve Political Order in the South,” *Helena Independent-Record*, Mar. 26, 1965, 4.

¹⁷Forrest G. Wood, *Black Scare: The Racist Response to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Berkeley, CA, 1968), viii; Lerone Bennett, Jr. “The First White Backlash: Counter-Revolutionary Campaign of Terror in the 1870s Doomed Democracy in the South,” *Ebony*, Dec. 1966, 154.

¹⁸Bruce E. Baker notes that E. Merton Coulter (b. 1890), the historian of Reconstruction, “grew up immersed in the world of Thomas Dixon, Confederate veterans, and first-hand accounts of Reconstruction.” Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant*, 161. Many Southerners, born in 1877 or later, claimed to “remember” the era. See, for example, Donald Comer, “Why Southern Democrats Are Voting for Eisenhower,” *Birmingham News*, Nov. 2, 1952, 23.

¹⁹Prince writes, “Memory does not need to be true to life; it simply needs to be useful.” Prince, *Memory Battles*, 191; Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy* (New York, 2018), 85–106, 195.

²⁰W. M. Moulter, “Reconstruction Rule,” *Fort-Myers News-Press*, Apr. 9, 1965, 4.

mythic vision of history as a political weapon, and how some civil rights supporters inadvertently recapitulated that history. The third part shows how the idea of a “Second Reconstruction,” coined and popularized by segregationists long before the term became positively associated with the civil rights movements, created connections between the reactionary campaigns against Reconstruction and contemporary struggles for equality. The fourth part examines the absence of Reconstruction commemoration and history—indeed a silence about Reconstruction, even among those political leaders most associated with civil rights legislation, including Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, whose presidency coincided with the centennial of the first phase of the Reconstruction era. The fifth section explores the lag between the new historiography of Reconstruction and the popular view of the period, an ambivalence that was often noted by the historians who produced and reviewed this new scholarship. The concluding section explores how in the 1970s, as the historiographical tide was turning, the older view of Reconstruction did not disappear, while showing that, as the gains of the civil rights movement slowed, former segregationists, like Herman Talmadge, finally began to understand the Reconstruction era as “over.”

The genesis of this article was a surprise in the archives. In visits to the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Libraries, and in exploring the rhetoric of leading liberal politicians and pundits, I expected to find abundant references to the Reconstruction era as a precursor to the modern civil rights movement. Instead, I found mostly silence or, as in the case of Humphrey and many others, disapproval and distancing—a view of the Reconstruction experiment as an example to be avoided, not emulated. Segregationist politicians, by contrast, could not stop talking about it. “One must study and be informed in the history of the Reconstruction Period,” said Fielding Wright, the Mississippi Governor, and soon-to-be the Vice-Presidential candidate of the Dixiecrats, in a 1948 address critical of Harry Truman’s civil rights proposals.²¹ As we will see, many ordinary people, like the Floridian Moulter, offered similar meditations on the memory and meaning of Reconstruction in editorials, letters to the editor, and newspaper articles. All are essential sources for this article.

We Don’t Want Another Reconstruction Down There

At the height of the modern civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, condemnation of the Reconstruction era was not exclusively white Southern and segregationist, but broadly national, and had strong roots even among politicians, editorialists, and pundits who supported the civil rights movement.²² In a September 1963 editorial denouncing the “heartless” bombing by racists of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, that murdered four Black girls attending Sunday school, the *Eugene (OR) Guard* came down hard on that state’s Governor George C. Wallace. Yet the editorialist concluded, “We don’t want another Reconstruction down there.”²³ In 1962, the Ohio native and former New Dealer Raymond Moley felt confident to generalize in his *Newsweek* column, “What historians call the Reconstruction was a period deplored by all decent Americans.”²⁴

Stressing discontinuity, most white supporters of civil rights did not seek to make the Reconstruction era part of their usable past. Quite the opposite was true. To a surprising extent, they shared the view of their political opponents, the segregationists, that the period was, to use the phrase popularized by Claude G. Bowers’s 1929 bestseller, a “tragic era,” a precedent that

²¹Robert Gray, “South Defends All 48 States in Fight on Truman Proposals, Governor Wright Tells Rotary,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, Mar. 31, 1948, 1, 10.

²²For the early years of this process, see K. Stephen Prince, *Stories of the South: Race and the Reconstruction of Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2014).

²³“Occupation Army for Alabama?” *Eugene Guard*, Sep. 17, 1963, 10.

²⁴Quoted in “South’s Not in the Bag,” *Alabama Journal*, Dec. 17, 1962, 4.

they did not wish to pursue because they believed that following the Reconstruction model would retard rather than accelerate the movement for racial equality. It is impossible to disagree with the pioneering Black historian Carter Woodson's assessment in the *Journal of Negro History* that Bowers's book was "downright propaganda" written by "an historically untrained politician with a cause to advance or an ax to grind," or with Du Bois, who called it "historical propaganda of the cheaper sort." Nevertheless, many white commentators treated it into the 1950s and 1960s as an objective account, calling it an "unbiased authority," "a comprehensive and well-documented study of the Reconstruction Period," and a "definitive work."²⁵

Many African American and leftist civil rights supporters, however, viewed the period differently, namely as the origins of the contemporary freedom struggle, and they sought to rehabilitate and commemorate the era of Reconstruction, America's pioneering, incomplete experiment with interracial democracy.²⁶ But they often felt thwarted in their pro-Reconstruction efforts, in part because some school superintendents in the segregated South forbade the teaching of Reconstruction in Black schools.²⁷ In 1963, Adolph J. Slaughter, who wrote for the Associated Negro Press, complained about the lack of funding from Congress for a proposed Emancipation Proclamation Centennial, which he contrasted with the level of support for the Civil War Centennial Commission, established in 1958, which "has been granted \$100,000 per year (until 1966) to celebrate and recreate battles which nearly destroyed the nation."²⁸ African American writers, editors, and ministers kept the history and memory of Reconstruction alive via such means as the "Things You Should Know" section of the *Louisiana Weekly*, a regular feature of the newspaper, which often highlighted Reconstruction-era political leaders, such as a brief biography of Richard T. Greener, "a holder of public office in South Carolina during the Reconstruction period," that appeared in October 1958.²⁹

Also in 1958, arguing that "the civil rights revolution," begun during the Reconstruction era, "was never completed," the Black labor and civil rights leader A. Philip Randolph rejected the discontinuities put forward by many white civil rights supporters. Sensing an incipient "revolt" against civil rights, Randolph claimed, "There are many comparisons between these two periods that require analysis and appraisal." For him, one relevant comparison was the view that the present-day attitude to civil rights, "like the one which set in during Reconstruction," could result in the nullification of the *Brown* decision.³⁰ In his speech at the March on Washington in August 1963, John Lewis, the young leader of the Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), criticized President John F. Kennedy's proposed civil rights bill for not resurrecting Title III, the section that had been excised from the 1957 Bill, and which he deemed necessary

²⁵*Journal of Negro History* 15 (Jan. 1930), 117–9 (This unsigned book review was probably written by Woodson. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 721). "How Else but with U.S. Troops," *Anniston Star*, Jan. 15, 1956, 4; William D. Workman, Jr., "Historian Points out North's Failures in Race Relations," *Greenville (SC) News*, July 14, 1957, 34; William D. Workman, Jr., *The Case for the South* (New York, 1960), 12.

²⁶"During the Jim Crow era, African Americans passed down memories of slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction," wrote William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad, the editors of *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Talk About Life in the Segregated South* (New York, 2001), 62. See also, Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed* (Berkeley, CA, 2005), xix; James S. Allen, *Reconstruction: The Battle for Democracy, 1865–1876*, foreword by Eric Foner (New York, 2021, 1937); Nina Silber, *This War Ain't Over: Fighting the Civil War in New Deal America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2018), 70.

²⁷Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York, 1988), 83.

²⁸Adolph J. Slaughter, "Congress Funded No Money for Centennial of Emancipation Signing Negligence, Confusion & Prejudice Blamed," *St. Paul Recorder*, Jan. 24, 1963, 3. Slaughter wrote for the *Associated Negro Press*, and his article was syndicated in the Black press. Robert Cook, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961–1965* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2007), 155–92; David W. Blight, *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), 17–20.

²⁹"Things You Should Know," *Louisiana Weekly*, Oct. 11, 1958, 12.

³⁰A. Philip Randolph, "Freedom Is Not Free," *New York Age*, May 24, 1958, 17, 30; "Labor Leader Says Counter Movement Affects Liberals," *Alabama Tribune*, Apr. 25, 1958, 1.

for federal enforcement.³¹ In 1966, Thurgood Marshall, Lyndon Johnson's solicitor general, proclaimed—in a speech written by the historian John Hope Franklin who had recently published, *Reconstruction After the Civil War*, a synthesis that challenged the prevailing understanding of that era—that when Congress repealed most of the Reconstruction legislation, they were “effectively withdrawing the Negro from the protection of law.” Marshall stressed the importance of not repeating that mistake.³²

Some African American civil rights leaders seemed more ambivalent about the Reconstruction model. As Eric Foner has noted, Martin Luther King Jr., the pre-eminent leader of the civil rights movement, “rarely discussed Reconstruction,” although King did note in a 1957 article that when “Reconstruction ruled,” Black people “had a brief period of eminence and political power.” In a 1965 conversation with famed Southern poet and novelist Robert Penn Warren, King called Reconstruction a “tragic period” that could have been more effective if it had been “planned properly.”³³ Yet in a lecture on W. E. B. Du Bois a few months before his assassination, King offered a different perspective, explicitly rejecting the “tragic era” historiography and calling Reconstruction a “monumental achievement” and the “only period in which democracy existed in the South.”³⁴

Throughout the modern American civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s, very few white pro-civil rights politicians, liberal columnists and editorialists, and non-Southern newspaper publishers celebrated the Reconstruction era or sought to compare it to their contemporary moment, despite the similarities identified by Randolph and many others. And no consensus counternarrative of Reconstruction emerged to challenge the view that the overall impact of the period was negative and not worth resuscitating. Comparing reminders of Reconstruction in contemporary civil rights legislation to “rubbing salt in an old wound” and “unwise and psychologically unfortunate,” Humphrey, in 1957, concluded that “reference to this unhappy period” should have “no place in the civil-rights bill.” He believed, at the same time, that “civil rights, to be meaningful, must be essentially secured by observance of law.”³⁵ For Humphrey, as for many white civil rights supporters, strong enforcement of civil rights laws did not require reference to what Senator John Sherman Cooper (D-KY), who consistently supported such legislation, called the “archaic” laws of the Reconstruction era.³⁶

Although their goals were 180 degrees divergent from the segregationist upholders of white supremacy, these civil rights proponents echoed the narrative of their opponents, which held that Reconstruction was a historic mistake, a cautionary tale, and the precipitant of a backlash

³¹Margaret Burnham, “The John Lewis Legacy: Protecting the Right to Be Free from Racist Policing,” July 30, 2020, <https://crj.org/2020/07/the-john-lewis-legacy/> (accessed Aug. 8, 2024).

³²Address by Solicitor General Thurgood Marshall, June 1, 1966, Box 28, White House Conference, “To Fulfill These Rights,” 1966, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, TX.

³³<https://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/interview/martin-luther-king-jr> (accessed Aug. 8, 2024).

³⁴Eric Foner, “Defanged,” *London Review of Books*, Oct. 5, 2023, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v45/n19/eric-foner/defanged> (accessed Aug. 8, 2024). King's comments about Reconstruction can be found in his talk “Nonviolence and Racial Justice,” *Christian Century* 74 (Feb. 6, 1957): 165–7, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/nonviolence-and-racial-justice> (accessed Aug. 8, 2024); King's speech at Carnegie Hall in New York City, February 23, 1968, on the one-hundredth birthday of W. E. B. Du Bois, <https://jacobin.com/2019/01/web-du-bois-martin-luther-king-speech> (accessed Aug. 8, 2024). K. Stephen Prince argues that Reconstruction was the unmentioned “historical ghost haunting” his 1963 “I have a Dream” speech. Prince, *Memory Battles*, 199. In “Commemoration of the Centennial of the Proclamation of Emancipation,” while noting “our Civil War was but a bloody chapter” in “the struggle for freedom,” he did not explicitly mention Reconstruction as another such “bloody chapter.” See p. 3., www.crmvet.org/info/emancip2.pdf. In 1966, he described voter registration efforts as part of a “Second Reconstruction” in “King Requests Negro Voters to Turn Out,” *Lincoln Star*, Apr. 29, 1966, 25.

³⁵Humphrey's comments can be found at *Congressional Record-Senate*, July 23, 1957, 12429; July 22, 1957, 1304; and July 15, 198.

³⁶The argument that strong enforcement of civil rights did not require reference to Reconstruction-era laws was also detailed at length in Martin Luther King's “Second Emancipation Proclamation” document. Cooper is quoted on B-12, [crmvet.org/info/emancip2.pdf](http://www.crmvet.org/info/emancip2.pdf).

that they did not wish to reignite. By and large, white civil rights supporters did not embrace what Bruce E. Baker, the leading historian of Reconstruction memory, has called the “Radicals’ Reconstruction,” an egalitarian interpretation of the period that was popular in left circles in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s that got “pushed to the margins of public life.”³⁷ Gus Hall, the leader of the Communist Party of the United States, called for a “new Reconstruction era” in 1976. But such advocacy rarely came from liberal civil rights politicians or pundits, who wished to distance and distinguish their efforts from that earlier political moment.³⁸

“History Does Repeat Itself”

For opponents of civil rights, Reconstruction was living history and the genesis of their politics of defiance.³⁹ They reviled the civil rights efforts of the federal government in the period from 1865 through the mid-1870s and celebrated the backlash against it. They frequently invoked the pattern of victimization and humiliation followed by countermobilization that they claimed was rooted in the First Reconstruction and was being repeated in the Second. For example, in advertising his 1965 pamphlet, “Can the South Survive Reconstruction II?” the Alabamian R. L. Simonton claimed that the lesson of the Reconstruction era was that “[o]ur grandfathers attacked the CAUSE and WON!”⁴⁰ The essence of Reconstruction I and II, they argued, was the same: government overreach; excessive deference to minorities; an attempt to impose a new social order that the majority was not ready for with “bayonets”; and the overriding of local opinion and custom led by political figures who were either fanatical, like the Pennsylvania representative and leader of the Radical Republican faction Thaddeus Stevens, or corrupt and completely unready for office, as they depicted the Freedman. “The fight in the second reconstruction is no more futile than it was in the first,” in which the “radicals were deposed from political power and the South’s will prevailed,” according to a Florida editorialist in 1959, who asserted, “History does repeat itself.”⁴¹

One example of how civil rights supporters mirrored segregationists in their conception of the Reconstruction era came in their shared condemnation of Thaddeus Stevens. The name was a “Dixie Swear Word,” as Dickson J. Preston wrote in a Scripps-Howard article in 1957, invoked by segregationists and massive resisters like Senator Harry F. Byrd. But leading white politicians and pundits who supported civil rights had equally harsh words for Stevens and his cause. Preston, for example, the author of a sympathetic biography of the young Frederick Douglass, referred three times in his article to Radical Reconstruction policies as “harsh.”⁴² In 1957, the columnist Stewart Alsop, a Connecticut Yankee, called Stevens “the hate-filled evil genius of the terrible reconstruction days.”⁴³ In his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Profiles in Courage*, Senator John F. Kennedy defended Andrew Johnson as “courageous” and denounced Stevens as the “crippled, fanatical personification” of Radical Republican extremism.⁴⁴

Unlike Humphrey and many white Civil Rights supporters, and like Randolph and other Black activists, segregationists, for diametrically opposing reasons, highlighted what they saw as the deep connections between the two eras. This is what the Mississippi editor Hodding Carter

³⁷Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant*, 110–44.

³⁸“Gus Hall Expecting Million Ohio Votes,” *Telegraph-Forum*, Sept. 13, 1976, 4.

³⁹The pattern of white Southern defiance can be traced back to the Nullification Crisis and, of course, secession. But opponents of Civil Rights highlighted the campaign against Reconstruction as the most significant prelude to their efforts.

⁴⁰Advertisement in *Selma Times-Journal*, Nov. 4, 1965, 12.

⁴¹“South Should Tell Its Side of Racial Story,” *Florida Times-Union*, June 9, 1959. Rep. Robert Rikes (D-FL) entered this editorial into the *Congressional Record-Appendix*, June 12, 1959, A5085.

⁴²Dickson J. Preston, “Thaddeus Stevens’ Dixie Swear Word,” *Evansville Press*, July 17, 1957, 3.

⁴³Stewart Alsop, “Historic Moment,” *Hartford Courant*, July 19, 1957, 18.

⁴⁴John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York, 1956), 147.

was referring to when he claimed in his 1959 book, *The Angry Scar: The Story of Reconstruction*, that “the North has remembered so little of Reconstruction as that the South has remembered so much.”⁴⁵ Framing their opposition to Black equality as an unbroken struggle, segregationists made Reconstruction I and II, as they liked to designate the eras into two phases of the same revolution they were seeking to reverse. An instructive statement of this continuity came in an editorial in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* in June 1964. Titled, “Presidential Civil Rights Message,” the editorial began, “Following . . . is the message of President Johnson to the Senate vetoing the civil rights bill.” What came next were the words not of the current president, Lyndon B. Johnson, but those of his predecessor Andrew Johnson, nearly a century earlier, in 1866. The *Star-Telegram*’s editors thought Johnson’s message was so relevant to the contemporary moment that they simply printed his words verbatim, appending the following clarifying statement at the end: “The push to place all power in the hands of the central government, which would spell the doom of our uniquely successful form of government, is not new.” The arguments against Reconstruction, they suggested, applied identically to the contemporary civil rights movement.⁴⁶ This was one of many examples of opponents of civil rights recalling the Reconstruction era as both a relevant historical landmark and as an ongoing, contested political struggle. “A repeat performance of one hundred years ago” should not be relegated to the past,” as Simonton put it.⁴⁷

“Tragedy”: A Call to Arms

It is worth pausing over the phrase “Second Reconstruction.” In recent decades, it has become common to associate the term with the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Many historians assume that C. Vann Woodward coined the phrase in the late 1950s as a way to link the egalitarian campaigns of the post-Civil War and post-World War II years.⁴⁸ But, as important as his writings on this topic have been in popularizing the “Second Reconstruction,” credit for coining the phrase belongs elsewhere.⁴⁹ From the 1940s through the 1960s, the term was primarily employed by segregationists to highlight both the humiliation of the Reconstruction era and the successful counter-revolution against it. After the civil rights movement, the connotation flipped and the “Second Reconstruction” became synonymous with

⁴⁵Quoted in Ann Waldron, *Hodding Carter: The Reconstruction of a Racist* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1992), 278.

⁴⁶“Presidential Civil Rights Message,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, June 1, 1964, 20.

⁴⁷R. L. Simonton, *Will the South Survive Reconstruction II?* (Selma, AL, 1965), 1. See Bruce E. Baker, “Wade Hampton’s Last Parade: Memory of Reconstruction in the 1970 South Carolina Tricentennial,” in *Remembering Reconstruction: Struggles over the Meaning of America’s Most Turbulent Era*, ed. Carole Emberton and Bruce E. Baker (Baton Rouge, LA, 2017), 262–80.

⁴⁸Eric Foner notes that people called the civil rights movement the “second reconstruction” and says, “I think it was C. Vann Woodward who coined that phrase,” at approximately the 12:30 mark of “Historian Eric Foner on *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution*,” Mar. 13, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49McvjkZmlw&t=35s>. See also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2p1_OetQu2w (accessed Aug. 8, 2024). James H. Bready, “Books and Authors,” *Baltimore Sun*, Sep. 28, 1958, 86; Thomas Ottenad, “Subtle Tactics Erode Black Gains in the South,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 9, 1982, 1, 9; “LBJ Knows His Role, Duty,” *Austin American Statesman*, Dec. 6, 1963, 1, 6. Both K. Stephen Prince and James Cobb write that Woodward “dubbed” the phrase. Prince, “Memory Battles,” 196; James C. Cobb, *C. Vann Woodward: America’s Historian* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2022), 254.

⁴⁹Randall Kennedy writes that “segregationists were among the first to analogize the Civil Rights movement to the First Reconstruction.” See Randall Kennedy, “Reconstruction and the Politics of Scholarship,” *Yale Law Journal* 98, no. 3 (Jan. 1989), 525, n. 14. Baker notes that Francis B. Simkins used the term in 1951, well before Woodward and more accurately says that Woodward “reclaimed ‘the phrase from the segregationists.’” Baker, *What Reconstruction Meant*, 157, 12; Ring and Garnder eds. *Lost Lectures of C. Vann Woodward*, 4; Bruce E. Baker, “Whom Is Reconstruction For,” in *Freedoms Gained and Lost: Reconstruction and Its Meanings 150 Years Later*, ed. Adam Domby and Simon Lewis (New York, 2022), 17–38. Stephen K. Prince says that Woodward “dubbed the period, ‘the Second Reconstruction’” in *Memory Battles*, 196. For a thoughtful meditation on Woodward and the two Reconstructions, see Ring and Garnder, *Lost Lectures of C. Vann Woodward*, 1–52.

the civil rights movement, but throughout the period highlighted in this article, it was the segregationist usage that prevailed.

As early as 1938, for example, in the wake of Roosevelt's effort to purge Southern conservatives from Congress, Rep. Carter Glass (D-VA) warned of a "new Reconstruction era." But it was Hamner Cobbs, the segregationist editor of the *Greensboro Watchman* (which in 1943 became the *Southern Watchman*), who, in 1941, first introduced the "Second Reconstruction" into the political vocabulary of white Southern resistance, and he used it regularly in almost every issue of his newspaper throughout World War II.⁵⁰ As Cobbs wrote in 1943 of Eleanor Roosevelt, the First Lady who viewed the war as an opportune moment to advance the campaign for Black equality, "She advocates a return to the First Reconstruction, or, more properly, she advocates a Second Reconstruction." Cobbs described the cautious efforts of the Roosevelt administration to weaken racial discrimination to be a "counterpart to the First Reconstruction" and said New Dealers were "thinking in the 1868 terms of Thad Stevens."⁵¹ Subsequently, and particularly after Little Rock in 1957, whenever a civil rights bill was proposed, or a court decision expanded civil rights, or the movement won local victories, segregationist politicians invoked the phrase.

Cobbs emphasized not only what he claimed were the humiliations and inversions of the first Reconstruction era, but also the counterreaction against it, which he presented as a model of resistance for contemporary white Southerners. In a review of John Witherspoon DuBose's *Alabama's Tragic Decade, 1865–1874*, published in 1940, Cobbs noted that "today, as at no other time since the Fall of 1874... Alabama is endangered by a Second Reconstruction." Cobbs believed that modern-day carpetbaggers were "waiting at our gates again," and that reading DuBose's book, which contained racist cartoons and language, would help white Alabamians remain "on guard against a repetition of the most disgraceful episode in the history of America."⁵²

The *Watchman* balanced fears of a Second Reconstruction with threats of a Second Redemption. One of its regular sections, "75 Years Ago in the Alabama Beacon," featured excerpts of columns by Col. John G. Harvey, who served as editor of the *Beacon*, a progenitor of the *Watchman*, from before the Civil War until 1890. The purpose of this feature, Cobbs maintained, was not antiquarian, "but rather to remind readers that we have already had one Reconstruction, and to let them know what might be expected if the Second Reconstruction is allowed to continue." Exhuming the arguments against Reconstruction at its high point ("75 Years Ago" was 1868, the year Alabama was readmitted to the Union with a new progressive Constitution that guaranteed equal rights to all and passed the Fourteenth Amendment), Cobbs was offering historical resources for the present-day fight against the nascent civil rights movement.

After World War II, many white Southern politicians embraced the slogan of the "Second Reconstruction," with each advance in civil rights leading to a renewed interest in the comparison and an efflorescence of the term. In 1948, after President Harry S. Truman's Executive Order 9981 called for the desegregation of the military and the Democratic Party adopted a civil rights platform, Strom Thurmond, the governor of South Carolina and

⁵⁰On Cobbs, see Glenn Feldman, "Southern Disillusionment with the Democratic Party: Cultural Conformity and 'the Great Melding' of Racial and Economic Conservatism in Alabama during World War II," *Journal of American Studies* 43, no. 2 (2009): 199–230.

⁵¹Glass is quoted in Dewey Grantham, *The Life and Death of the Solid South: A Political History* (Lexington, KY, 1988), 111. "Mrs. Roosevelt Again Takes a Shot at the South," *Southern Watchman*, July 24, 1943, 1, 8; "Mrs. Roosevelt Calls the New Deal Reconstruction What It Is," *Southern Watchman*, Oct. 28, 1944, 1.

⁵²John Witherspoon DuBose, *Alabama's Tragic Decade: The Years of Alabama, 1865–1874*, ed. James K. Greer (Birmingham, AL, 1940), 5, 121, 270. The cartoons depicted Black men as leading legislators, an interracial marriage, and a "Freedman" resting against a tree while "Old Massa" worked the land. In a 1957 letter to the editor, Bert Neville recommended this book as a "factual account." "Books on Bayonet Rule Recommended," *Birmingham News*, Oct. 18, 1957, 10.

soon-to-be Dixiecrat presidential candidate, said that “every vote for Dewey or Truman is a vote for second Reconstruction era,” and ran as the candidate of the States Rights Democratic Party, known as the “Dixiecrats.”⁵³ In 1957, when the Senate voted to take up a civil rights bill, Harry Byrd of Virginia was one of many segregationists to invoke a “second Reconstruction” and to call Chief Justice Earl Warren “a modern day Thaddeus Stevens.”⁵⁴

Segregationists who invoked the “Second Reconstruction” emphasized that their ancestors had, with persistence and patience, defeated the first one. “Remembering that Reconstruction lasted only 17 years,” editorialized the *Shreveport Journal* in 1964, shortly before the passage of the Civil Rights Act, “Mississippians plan to resist until the North again tires of crusading.”⁵⁵ Segregationists thus lost no opportunity to remember the Reconstruction era. In 1961, well before its centenary, a letter writer to an Alabama newspaper looked forward to the 100th anniversary of what he called “the Reconstruction atrocities.” “Properly researched and adroitly handled,” claimed James H. McKinney Jr., the managing editor of the *Greenville (SC) Piedmont*, “a commemoration of those dark days would prove revelation to the world in general.” His reasoning was that not only would such memorialization highlight the oppression the white South suffered a century ago, it also “would show exactly why the South reacts as it does today to Northern pressure on such items as Civil Rights.”⁵⁶ In 1963, the columnist Holmes Alexander made a similar claim, noting that African Americans commemorating the centenary of the Emancipation Proclamation “aren’t the only race with a liberation to celebrate.” He predicted that “Southern white folks” would as enthusiastically recall their defeat of “the hated Reconstruction.”⁵⁷ This understanding of Reconstruction as symbolizing less a distinct historical era than an ever-present threat of racial inversion captures the dynamic Myrdal meant to highlight when he observed that white Southerners “cherished” the memory of “the horrors of Reconstruction governments and of ‘black domination.’” Horror and subordination are not normally “cherished,” but Myrdal was astute in noting that critics of racial equality held fast to their narratives of victimization.⁵⁸

“I’m Coming to Believe that Thaddeus Stevens Was Right”

A decade after the *Brown v. Board* decision, the Illinois-born, liberal columnist Drew Pearson wrote a column on how “Negro extremists” were alienating white Northerners, and he recommended that his readers consult E. Merton Coulter’s 1947 book, *The South during Reconstruction*, which historian Bruce E. Baker deems the last academic work in the Dunning mode. Pearson, a Quaker opponent of racial bigotry, called it “the tragic story of how Negro extremists blew their tremendous reservoir of goodwill in the North by excesses in the South.” Pearson then quoted a passage from Coulter’s book in which a witness at the State House in Columbia,

⁵³“Thurmond Fears New ‘Reconstruction Era,’” *Daily News*, Aug. 27, 1948, 25.

⁵⁴William S. White, “Senate, by 71-18, Votes to Take Up Civil Rights Bill,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1957, 1; Talmadge quoted in “Real Reasons for the ‘Rights’ Fight,” *Madisonville (KY) Messenger*, Mar. 31, 1860, 6.

⁵⁵“Mississippi Marked for New Invasion,” *Shreveport Journal*, Mar. 27, 1964, 4.

⁵⁶James H. McKinney Jr., “Let’s Secede,” *Bytheville (AR) Courier News*, Apr. 25, 1961, 6. Orig. *Greenville Piedmont*.

⁵⁷Holmes Alexander, “1964 Marks Anniversary of Reconstruction’s End,” *Richmond News-Leader*, Sep. 18, 1963, 8. Sen. James O. Eastland entered this into the *Congressional Record Appendix*, Sep. 23, 1963, A5958. Lawrence N. Powell, “Reinventing Tradition: Liberty Place, Historical Memory, and Silk-Stocking Vigilantism in New Orleans Politics,” in *From Slavery to Emancipation in the Atlantic World*, ed. Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood (London, 1999), 127–49.

⁵⁸Myrdal is quoted in Mark Elliott, “The Lessons of Reconstruction: Debating Race and Imperialism in the 1890s,” in *Remembering Reconstruction: Struggles over the Meaning of America’s Most Turbulent Era*, ed. Carole Emberton and Bruce E. Baker (Baton Rouge, LA, 2017), 139; Kenneth M. Stampp made a similar point in *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865–1877* (New York, 1965), vii.

South Carolina, described interracial democracy of the Reconstruction era as “barbarism overwhelming civilization,” and the columnist concluded that “something like this is happening today.”⁵⁹

Why would so many civil rights proponents in the 1950s and 1960s not only reject but denounce Reconstruction, which was, as prominent segregationists as well as many Black activists and intellectuals believed, an obvious precedent for their times? One potential explanation is that they were not prepared to fully embrace interracial democracy, to which Reconstruction offered a template. While many white supporters of civil rights, like Pearson, worried about the dangers of an overly fast transition to racial equality, I believe other factors better explain their reluctance to embrace the Reconstruction model.

What appears to be a mystery becomes explainable when we reckon with two elements of popular understandings of the Reconstruction era in the post–World War II decades. The first was that, although there were a growing number of countervailing examples, the period was still popularly seen in the terms laid out by the so-called Dunning School, named after the Columbia University scholar William A. Dunning and his many students, including J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, who was one of Sam Ervin’s teachers at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, and whose book *Reconstruction in North Carolina* Ervin quoted from liberally on the floor of the Senate to justify his opposition to the 1964 Civil Rights Act.⁶⁰

Bowers’s popular history, *The Tragic Era*, a popularization of the Dunning School, remained in print for decades and came out in a new paperback edition in 1962, just a few years before Russell Kirk cited it as containing valuable lessons for the civil rights movement. To a remarkable extent, the view, expressed in a 1947 review of James G. Randall’s book on Lincoln, that “Reconstruction tragedies could have been avoided” if reconciliation rather than vindictiveness “by partisan radicals” had prevailed, remained dominant.⁶¹ It is notable that, other than the North Carolinian Hamilton, none of these historians was from the South: Dunning was raised in New Jersey, and Bowers and James Garfield Randall, named after a Union general and Republican president, hailed from Indiana.⁶²

A second reason for the reluctance to embrace Reconstruction was that, by and large, even civil rights–supporting Democrats interpreted Reconstruction through a partisan lens, both as a time of Republican Party “misrule” and an example of the dangers of political extremism.⁶³ They did not wish to see themselves as descendants of their contemporary Republican opponents, and radical ones at that. Bowers, for his part, was a diehard Democrat from Indiana, a journalist, and party activist, who gave an electrifying nominating speech for Al Smith, the Democratic nominee for the presidency in 1928. He also served as FDR’s Ambassador to Spain until 1939, from which post he encouraged the administration to support the antifascist forces in that nation’s civil war, the only “Republicans” he ever professed to admire.⁶⁴ When Smith, a Catholic, was nominated and some Democrats considered supporting the Republican Herbert Hoover, Joseph Brown, the former Governor of Georgia, said he would never “forsake the party that saved them from carpetbaggers, scalawags, and negro domination.”⁶⁵ Likely for the reasons Brown laid out, Smith handily carried the state.

⁵⁹Drew Pearson, “Negro Extremists Alienating North,” *Daily Sentinel*, Apr. 23, 1964, 4. For an example of his anti-bigotry activism, see Drew Pearson, “School Children Make Contributions Against Bombs of Bigotry,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, Nov. 24, 1958, 10.

⁶⁰Joseph G. de Roulhac, *Reconstruction in North Carolina* (New York, 1914).

⁶¹H.W. S., “Lincoln’s Aims Liberal, Means Patient,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, July 20, 1947, 12D.

⁶²As Baker points out in *What Reconstruction Meant* (p. 147), some of the key Dunning historians, like Walter L. Fleming and Hamilton, were from the South.

⁶³The misrule comment is from “W.A. Caldwell Urges Election Democratic Nominees in State,” *Jackson (TN) Sun*, Oct. 20, 1948, 1.

⁶⁴“Books and Authors,” *Richmond (IN) Item*, Jan. 24, 1926, 4.

⁶⁵“Jos. M. Brown Stands Loyal to Democrats,” *Atlanta Journal*, Aug. 5, 1928, 1.

Many supporters of civil rights held the view that the radicals were a negative force in history. One David Ruchman penned a missive to the *Arizona Republic* in 1963 titled “Don’t Let History Repeat,” which was critical of the anti-civil rights conservative Republicans, led by his Senator, Barry Goldwater. Goldwater supporters, he said, should be known as “Radical Republicans II,” because they had mimicked their “ancestor’s extremism,” which was implausibly to treat modern conservatism as a descendant of nineteenth-century egalitarian radicalism. Yet, Ruchman asserted that “anyone well versed in history is well aware of this,” which was an accurate state of the popular memory of Reconstruction, if not the emerging revisionist history.⁶⁶ The following year, Harold T. Ryan published a letter in *Newsday*, based in Long Island, New York, claiming that Goldwater was “a radical in the same sense that Thaddeus Stevens, the Republican boss of the Senate in reconstruction days, was a radical.”⁶⁷ This framing too elided the differences in the nature of their radicalism, particularly over the issue of the role of the federal government in promoting racial equality, an issue upon which Goldwater and Stevens held antithetical views.

The post-World War II Democratic leaders, those who helped transform the party into a pro-civil rights institution, almost uniformly condemned Reconstruction.⁶⁸ In a 1958 speech on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Andrew Johnson’s birth, Harry S. Truman, the ex-president who helped make the Democrats the party of civil rights, praised Johnson, “who believed in the sacredness of the Constitution” and denounced both Ulysses S. Grant, the president who presided over the most radical phase of Reconstruction, and Stevens, whom he called, using a troubling phrase quite similar to the one Kennedy had employed the previous year, a “crippled moron.” Truman, using the same language that the Dixiecrats had employed to oppose him in 1948, also spoke of the need to avoid “another Reconstruction era.”⁶⁹ Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic presidential nominee in 1952 and 1956, for his part, expressed concern that “anti-segregation extremists” might set off “a return of Reconstruction with federal troops quartered in the South to force desegregation . . . with consequences one shudders to think of.”⁷⁰ (The following year, President Dwight Eisenhower, who condemned the “carpetbagging governments” of the Reconstruction era as well, sent federal troops to Little Rock in order to do precisely that.⁷¹)

Lyndon Johnson, who from 1963 to 1968 pushed through a series of landmark civil rights laws, never, as far as I can determine, publicly mentioned the Reconstruction era during his presidency; when he and his colleagues used the word “reconstruction” at all, it was usually in reference to the Vietnam War or the New Deal-era Reconstruction Finance Corporation.⁷² The closest Johnson came were two references to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 in a speech

⁶⁶David Ruchman, “Don’t Let History Repeat,” *Arizona Republic*, July 29, 1963, 5.

⁶⁷Harold T. Ryan, “Letters to the Editor,” *Newsday*, July 3, 1964, 13. In this light, it is notable that one of the few pro-civil rights politicians to speak positively about the Reconstruction era was Jacob Javits. “An interesting sidelight on the Reconstruction era is that while it has been maligned as a dark period in Southern history,” he wrote in 1958, “the fact is that many liberal trends and reforms developed.” While not exactly a ringing endorsement, Javits saw it as one of the starting points for the contemporary movement. Jacob Javits, “Integration from the Top Down,” *Esquire*, Dec. 1, 1958, <https://classic.esquire.com/article/1958/12/1/integration-from-the-top-down> (accessed Aug. 8, 2024).

⁶⁸For an incisive analysis of Dwight Eisenhower’s similarly ambivalent attitude toward the Civil War and Reconstruction era, see Michael J. Birkner, “Dwight Eisenhower and Civil War Legacies,” in *The Long Civil War: New Explorations of America’s Enduring Conflict*, ed. John David Smith and Raymond Arsenault (Lexington, KY, 2020), 194–212.

⁶⁹“Text of Truman’s Speech,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, Dec. 6, 1958, 7.

⁷⁰“This Can’t Be Resolved in a Day or Even a Year,” *Durham Herald-Sun*, Feb. 11, 1956, 4.

⁷¹Quoted in Simon, *Eisenhower vs. Warren*, 345–6.

⁷²Johnson’s close advisor, Joseph Califano wrote that during the Watts uprising of 1965 Johnson confided privately to him that, “Negroes will lend up pissing in the aisles of the Senate, and making fools of themselves, the way, he told me, they had after the Civil War and during Reconstruction.” Califano, *The Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years* (New York, 1991), 62.

before the American Bar Association in New York City on August 12, 1964, one month after he signed the Civil Rights Act.⁷³ He also mentioned the Proclamation at the June 1966 White House Conference on Civil Rights that he organized the year after his famous Howard University speech, in which he endorsed “equality as a fact and equality as a result.”⁷⁴ “It was 100 years ago that a civil war was fought in this country to free the Negro from slavery,” he told the audience at the Sheraton Park Hotel. Johnson was wrong about the chronology; his speech took place during the centenary of Reconstruction, not the Civil War. Claiming that “the Negro won that war, but he lost the battle still to come,” Johnson, who proclaimed that “he did not intend for history to repeat itself,” notably did not give a name to that battle.⁷⁵

It may not be that surprising that Johnson, a Texan who cut his teeth as part of the segregationist, Southern Democratic caucus in Congress, did not highlight Reconstruction as a positive landmark. But the same was true of Johnson’s Democratic predecessors and many of his contemporaries like Humphrey, who, when they did invoke the period, did so critically. Likewise, John F. Kennedy celebrated Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation but omitted any discussion of Reconstruction in his civil rights speech of June 11, 1963.⁷⁶

Both Kennedy and Johnson changed their views about Lincoln and the post-emancipation South and, over time, became more sympathetic to the perspective of the freed people. Kennedy, who in 1962 met with the historian David Herbert Donald at the White House and was influenced by the work of C. Vann Woodward, said to Arthur Schlesinger Jr., the prominent historian who served as his advisor, “I’m coming to believe that Thaddeus Stevens was right. I have always been taught to regard him as a man of vicious bias.”⁷⁷ (As noted, Kennedy expressed that older view of Stevens in *Profiles in Courage*.) In 1967, Johnson gave a remarkable speech at the Lincoln Memorial on Abraham Lincoln’s birthday about “the development of Lincoln’s views on the race question,” in which he described Lincoln’s evolution toward racial egalitarianism, hinting that his own progression had followed the sixteenth president’s path. Johnson noted, “It has taken more than a century for us as a nation to assert the ideal that Lincoln had barely formulated.” He further claimed, against the zero-sum arguments of the backsliders, that “emancipating the Negro was an act of liberation for the whites.”⁷⁸

Yet in spite of Kennedy’s and Johnson’s strong civil rights stances and their reconsideration of the “tragic era” mythology—Kennedy told Schlesinger that he would “never believe a book on Reconstruction again”—neither of them explicitly praised the Reconstruction

⁷³Lyndon B. Johnson, “Remarks in New York City before the American Bar Association,” Aug. 12, 1964 <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-new-york-city-before-the-american-bar-association> (accessed Aug. 8, 2024).

⁷⁴Kevin L. Yuill, “The 1966 White House Conference on Civil Rights,” *Historical Journal* 41, no. 1 (Mar. 1998): 259–78, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/commencement-address-howard-university-fulfill-these-rights> (accessed Aug. 8, 2024).

⁷⁵It is notable that these comments were handwritten (with no attribution) and not in the typed draft of the speech, which was written by Harry McPherson and Bill Moyers. Statements of Lyndon Baines Johnson, President, 1963–1969, May 31, 1966–June 6, 1966, Box 189, Folder: 6/166, “Remarks of the President to the Delegates to the White House Conference ‘To Fulfill These Rights,’” LBJ Presidential Library, Austin, TX [hereafter LBJ Library]. Speeches at this conference by Thurgood Marshall and A. Philip Randolph did highlight the importance of Reconstruction. Johnson introduced Marshall’s speech.

⁷⁶Elizabeth Hinton suggests that Kennedy referred to Reconstruction in speeches from 1962 and 1963, but in neither speech did he explicitly mention the period. Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), 28, 30. John F. Kennedy, “Televised Address to the Nation on Civil Rights,” June 11, 1963, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/televised-address-to-the-nation-on-civil-rights> (accessed Aug. 8, 2024).

⁷⁷Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston, 1965), 966; Stephen F. Knott, *Coming to Terms with John F. Kennedy* (Lawrence, KS, 2022), 39.

⁷⁸Lyndon Baines Johnson, “Remarks at a Ceremony at the Lincoln Memorial,” Feb. 12, 1967, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-ceremony-the-lincoln-memorial> (accessed Aug. 8, 2024).

experiment, at least not in public. Celebrating Emancipation rather than Reconstruction served as a way to endorse strong civil rights measures without embracing the most relevant, albeit still-controversial, historical forerunner. In a 1964 press release, the Democratic National Committee said that Johnson's civil rights bill would help "finish [the] job Lincoln began" but it did not mention the work of Congress, led by the Radical Republicans, in advancing Lincoln's work after his assassination.⁷⁹

To explore the way that Reconstruction was decentered from civil rights history during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, we can examine two documents that it might be expected would have highlighted that period. In *America Is for Everybody*, a pamphlet produced by the U.S. Department of Labor in 1963 to commemorate the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, Reconstruction did not appear in the statements by President Kennedy, Vice President Johnson, or Willard Wirtz, the Secretary of Labor.⁸⁰

A much more famous publication of the Johnson administration's Labor Department was the so-called Moynihan report, formally titled, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*.⁸¹ Looking to history to find analogues for the contemporary civil rights movement, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the Assistant Secretary, identified in the first chapter of the book a number of landmarks—"the American Revolution itself, the surge of Jacksonian Democracy of the 1830s, the Abolitionist movement, and the Populist movement of the late 19th century"—but conspicuously skipped Reconstruction, the most obvious point of comparison.

Another chapter in *The Negro Family*, called "The Reconstruction," says very little about Reconstruction itself, in spite of the title. "The Negro was given liberty, but not equality," Moynihan wrote, and "became an object of intense hostility."⁸² Saying nothing about Reconstruction or about Black political action/agency inside or outside of formal politics (the term "object" here is noteworthy), the next paragraph, fast forwarding past the Reconstruction period, begins, "When Jim Crow made its appearance towards the end of the 19th century, it may be speculated that it was the Negro male who was most humiliated thereby." Moynihan's passive phrasing ("made its appearance") underemphasized that the counter-revolution against Reconstruction policies, a result of white Southern reaction and Northern connivance, produced the Jim Crow system.

As Johnson's Vice President, Hubert H. Humphrey continued, as he had as a senator, to distinguish the Reconstruction era from the Civil Rights struggle, with which he closely identified. And he continued his campaign to banish the period from contemporary memory. "All this is history," he proclaimed of Reconstruction in a 1965 speech on the 100th anniversary of the end of the Civil War. "It is behind us." Using Dunning-ite language that could easily have been employed by his segregationist opponents, Humphrey described "the radicalism that

⁷⁹DNC Press release, "President Johnson Point UP Need to Finish Job Lincoln Began," Apr. 17, 1964, LBJ Library.

⁸⁰*America Is for Everybody* (U.S. Department of Labor, 1963), 1. Kennedy also left out the Reconstruction era, moving from the Gettysburg Address to Wilson's Fourteen Points, in his discussion of expanding notions of freedom in his book, *The Strategy of Peace* (New York, 1961). To be sure, another Kennedy administration document commemorating the centennial of emancipation, *Freedom to the Free*, a report by the United States Commission on Civil Rights and drafted by John Hope Franklin (who consulted with C. Vann Woodward, among other historians in preparing the document), included a chapter on "Freedom, Reunion, and Reconstruction," with sections on "Radical Rule" and "Southern Resistance." But this was a report to the president, and not one in which he made a statement. *Freedom to the Free: Century of Emancipation, 1863–1963, A Report to the President by the United States Commission on Civil Rights* (Washington DC, 1963); Regis D. Bobonis, "Negro Progress in 100 Years Assessed at the White House," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Feb. 16, 1963, 1, 4.

⁸¹*The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Office of Policy Planning and Research United States Department of Labor, March 1965); Daniel Geary, *Beyond Civil Rights: The Moynihan Report and its Legacy* (Philadelphia, 2015). See the remarkably valuable annotated edition of the Moynihan Report edited by Geary: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/09/the-moynihan-report-an-annotated-edition/404632/> (accessed Aug. 8, 2024).

⁸²*Negro Family*, 16.

dominated the Reconstruction era” as “a vivid example of the mindless, vengeful kind of extremism that even today, if left unchecked, could bring our great democracy to its knees.”⁸³ Remarkably, he claimed that the era contributed “nothing to the general welfare of the country.”⁸⁴ Two years later, speaking at an African Methodist Episcopal Church awards dinner in Washington, DC, while praising Lincoln and the need to finish the work of emancipation, the Vice President also defended Andrew Johnson and likened what he described as the unfair criticism he encountered to the treatment his boss, Lyndon Johnson, faced.⁸⁵

“America’s Worst Mistake”

To understand why many civil rights supporters ignored or denounced Reconstruction, it is important to recognize the status of that period in mid-twentieth-century mainstream culture. From the perspective of white popular memory, Reconstruction was a sad failure, a time of incompetence, and a “tragic era.”⁸⁶ This interpretation pervaded the entire country, not just the South.⁸⁷ Yet it was never uncontested. Histories of Reconstruction by Black and leftist scholars challenged this narrative of tragedy and corruption. As early as 1909, W. E. B. Du Bois presented “Reconstruction and Its Benefits” at the 1909 American Historical Association annual meeting.⁸⁸ Du Bois wrote *Black Reconstruction*, published in 1935, in part to counter Bowers’s depiction.

Many of the historians who reassessed the Reconstruction period at the height of the civil rights movement noted the tension between the historiographical turn and popular opinion. “Though 1965 is the appropriate year, there has as yet been no proposal for Congress to establish a National Reconstruction Centennial Commission,” wrote Donald (the historian who had met with President Kennedy) in the preface to his book, *The Politics of Reconstruction*, which was published that year. “The Reconstruction drama,” he noted, seems “a dark, unpleasant interlude of failure.”⁸⁹ Yet earlier that year, Donald had referred to Reconstruction as “harsh,” and he also offered a mostly positive assessment of Dunning’s scholarship in an introduction to a collection of Dunning’s essays published that year as a Harper Torchbook edition. Donald, it seems, had some ambivalence about entirely rejecting the negative view of Reconstruction. (Indeed, in the late 1980s he offered praise for Dunning’s “old, prejudiced but nevertheless informative” scholarship.⁹⁰) In a review of Donald’s *The Politics of Reconstruction* published the following year, the historian Bell I. Wiley concurred with Donald’s prediction that “the hundredth anniversary of Reconstruction will not be observed in a manner comparable to the Civil War Centennial.” The reason for that, Wiley posited, was that the Reconstruction era did not lend itself to “romantic recollection.”⁹¹

⁸³“Humphrey Sees End to Civil Discord: Vice President Cites Lessons of Reconstruction,” *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 26, 1965, 4.

⁸⁴Address of Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, Bennett Place Commemoration, Durham, NC, Apr. 25, 1965, <http://www.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00442/pdfa/00442-01568.pdf> (accessed Aug. 8, 2024).

⁸⁵“Lincoln’s Hope Now LBJ Plan,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Feb. 25, 1967, 3. For a typical version of the comparison between the two Johnsons, see Charles O. Gridley, “No Kin—but Some Similarities,” *Tennessean*, Aug. 30, 1964, 18.

⁸⁶Claude G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era: The Revolution after Lincoln, 1865–1876* (Boston, 1929).

⁸⁷David E. Kyvig, “History as Present Politics: Claude Bowers’ The Tragic Era,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 73, no. 1 (Mar. 1977): 17–31.

⁸⁸This was later published in the *American Historical Review* 5, no. 4 (July 1910): 781–99.

⁸⁹David Donald, *The Politics of Reconstruction, 1863–1867* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1965), ix.

⁹⁰David Donald, “Andrew Johnson ‘Asked’ Impeachment Procedure,” *Morning Call*, Feb. 7, 1965, 60; David Herbert Donald, “Introduction to the Torchbook Edition,” *William A. Dunning Essays on The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, 1965), xi. In that introduction, Donald also wrote, “Belief in white supremacy . . . had very little functional relevance to Dunning’s treatment of the period” (xiii). David Herbert Donald, “The Black Side of the Story,” *New Republic*, Aug. 1, 1988, 41–4, quotation 41.

⁹¹Bell I. Wiley, “Reconstruction and Politics,” *Baltimore Sun*, Mar. 6, 1966, D5.

In the foreword to his major reinterpretation of the era, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865–1877*, also published in 1965, Kenneth M. Stampp observed that, in spite of the efforts of professional historians, the “legend” of the Reconstruction era as a catastrophic mistake “lives on.” As examples, he noted that “liberally inclined northern newspaper columnists” continue to “accept its basic tenets.”⁹² One of the columnists Stampp mentioned, James Reston, had recently described “a vicious policy of Reconstruction in the South.”⁹³ As the historian Richard Current observed in a review of Stampp’s book, most Americans continued to celebrate “the long-suffering southern whites” and denigrate “the carpetbaggers, scalawags, and Negroes.” Noting the irony, Current noted, “in the midst of the ‘second Reconstruction,’ many liberals accept this interpretation, embarrassing tho [sic] it is to the cause of civil rights.”⁹⁴ For Current, it was clear that civil rights supporters should reject the negative interpretation of Reconstruction but many of them were slow to follow.

In his “Editor’s Foreword” to John Hope Franklin’s 1961 book, *Reconstruction after the Civil War*, the historian Daniel Boorstin claimed, “Neither North nor South, neither Yankee nor Rebel, neither White nor Negro had a monopoly on virtue, ignorance, vice, greed or courage.” He praised Franklin’s “compassionate understanding” that was “especially needed if the era of ‘Reconstruction’ is ever to come to an end.”⁹⁵ In describing the book as even-handed, Boorstin might have misled some readers about to the degree to which Franklin had interpreted Reconstruction as an immense political achievement and the movement he called “Counter Reconstruction” as a sustained, antidemocratic, white backlash. In calling for the era of Reconstruction to end, Boorstin was seemingly endorsing both Ervin’s and Humphrey’s views about the desirability of situating that era in the past, rather than one of deep and ongoing relevance for the present, which is how Franklin saw it.

Through the mid-1960s, white supporters of civil rights rarely endorsed the recent work of Stampp or Franklin, or the earlier work of Du Bois. (An increasing number were influenced by C. Vann Woodward’s *Strange Career of Jim Crow*, but that was largely a work of post-Reconstruction history.) By contrast, a who’s-who of pro-civil rights columnists, editors, and journalists, most of them from the North, frequently denounced Reconstruction. For example, in 1960, as Congress considered yet another relatively weak Civil Rights bill, Anthony Lewis, the *New York Times* reporter, proclaimed, “No one in his right mind thinks such a revival of Reconstruction would constitute progress in race relations.”⁹⁶ Dorothy Thompson, the well-known liberal columnist; Charles L. Whipple, a radical journalist, former communist, and the first American journalist to pen an editorial against the Vietnam war; and the CBS correspondent Eric Sevareid made similar disparaging comments about the “harshness” of Reconstruction policies.⁹⁷ Columnists and reporters in newspapers like the *Des Moines Register*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Los Angeles Times* blamed Reconstruction politicians for the political blowback that followed.⁹⁸

⁹²Stampp, *Era of Reconstruction*, Foreword, vii.

⁹³James Reston, “Historic About-Face Embodied in Goldwater,” *Kansas City Star*, June 30, 1964, 28.

⁹⁴Richard N. Current, “Rehabilitating History,” *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 11, 1965, Sunday Books: 8.

⁹⁵Daniel Boorstin, “Editor’s Foreword,” to John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction after the Civil War* (Chicago, 1961), xii.

⁹⁶Quoted in Patricia Sullivan, *Justice Rising: Robert Kennedy’s America in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA, 2021), 48; Anthony Lewis, “Rights: Outlook for Progress,” *New York Times*, Mar. 20, 1960, E6.

⁹⁷Dorothy Thompson, “Upholding the Senate,” *Shreveport Journal*, Aug. 13, 1957, 14; Charles L. Whipple, “Johnson’s Inheritance: How Will New Man in White House Get Stalled Congress Moving?” *Boston Globe*, Nov. 24, 1963, 8; “Moderation Critically Needed in Civil Rights,” *Moline Dispatch*, Apr. 1, 1965, 54.

⁹⁸“The South Reacted to Vengeance,” *Des Moines Register*, Mar. 5, 1959, 8; Walter Trohan, “Report from Washington,” *Chicago Tribune*, Apr. 14, 1965, 63; William C. Stewart, “Causes of L.A. Riots Go Back a Century,” *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 22, 1965, 81. Days before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed, the *Wilmington Morning News* editorialized that Reconstruction was “a chapter in history of which few Americans are proud.” “Force in Mississippi,” *Wilmington Morning News*, June 30, 1964, 20.

A negative conception of Reconstruction filtered into the general culture, even among liberals. In a letter to the editor shortly before Election Day, Naomi L. McClenney, a member of the Bloomington-Normal Human Relations Council and a supporter of President Johnson who called Barry Goldwater “a friend of the heads of the Ku Klux Klan and the John Birchers,” concluded that the country “would not survive a return to the reconstruction era.”⁹⁹ Many civil rights supporters, including politicians, pundits, and government officials, also disclaimed the reconstruction model. John De J. Pemberton, the Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union, whom the *New York Times* later described as a “civil rights crusader,” wrote in a letter to the Attorney General Robert Kennedy on February 25, 1963, “We do not recommend the establishment of a second Reconstruction by any means.”¹⁰⁰

This general anti-Reconstruction sentiment might explain how in 1963, when *Newsday* sponsored an essay contest for high school students on “America’s worst mistake,” one of the winners, Rosanne Friedman, wrote about the nation’s “harsh” Reconstruction policies. Claiming that “the vindictive attitude of the Radical Republicans toward the defeated South has affected the South even today,” Friedman followed the still dominant popular view that the “Radicals were extravagant, corrupt and incompetent,” and that during the Reconstruction era, voting lists included “Negroes and excluded many honorable Southern whites.”¹⁰¹

“The Reconstruction Era Is Over”

We have explored what might appear as a profound disjunction between history and politics for many white supporters of civil rights, who saw the memory of the Reconstruction era as either irrelevant or, more commonly, detrimental to their cause. And we have highlighted the centrality of that period not only for some Black civil rights activists but for segregationists, who both, albeit for very different reasons, emphasized the continuing relevance of that era.

Well into the 1970s, this lag between historiography and popular uses of the past remained. “No one, to my knowledge, ever suggested a national commemoration of the Reconstruction Era Centennial on the order of the Civil War Centennial or the American Revolution Bicentennial of 1976,” wrote the historian James T. Currie in 1977. “Let’s face it, Reconstruction has had a bad press.”¹⁰² This “bad press” continued even after the reappraising histories of Franklin, Stamp, and others that were published in the 1960s. Gerald Ford was a Republican member of Congress (R-MI) who consistently supported civil rights. Shortly after he became president in 1974, Ford referred, in a draft of a speech distributed to the media, to the “dark days after the Civil War when a dictatorial Congress left a legacy of bitterness, poverty and humiliation that scarred the South for generations.” Ford disavowed the text and did not give the speech in public. But it is telling that his speechwriters thought to describe Republican Reconstruction policies in this way. To the *Baltimore Sun* columnist and historian of the Civil War, Ernest B. Furgurson, the initial draft was “most counterproductive” because “the dictatorial Congress that bedeviled the South was a Republican Congress.”¹⁰³ The

⁹⁹Naomi L. McClenney, “Housing One Election Issue,” *Bloomington (IL) Pantagraph*, Oct. 26, 1964, 4.

¹⁰⁰*House Judiciary Committee, Civil Rights Hearings*, Summer 1963, May 8–9, 15–16, 23–24, 28, June 13, 26–27, July 10–12, 17–19, 24–26, 31–Aug. 2, 1963, 1232; Douglas Martin, “John Pemberton Jr., Civil Rights Crusader, 90, Dies,” *New York Times*, Oct. 29, 2009, A28.

¹⁰¹“Prize-Winning Essays in Newsday Contest on the Subject, ‘America’s Worst Mistake,’” *Newsday*, Mar. 26, 1963, 28. See also Dale Allen, “One Man Blocked Impeachment of Andrew Johnson,” *Fort Lauderdale News*, June 3, 1966, 9.

¹⁰²James T. Currie, “Review: The Reconstruction Centennial: An Historiographical Commemoration,” *Journal of Mississippi History* 31, no. 1 (Winter 1977/78), 133–45, quotation 133.

¹⁰³Ernest B. Furgurson, “What Flies in Grand Rapids May Bomb in Winston-Salem,” *Daily Independent Journal*, Oct. 25, 1974, 54.

concern was that the redacted part of the speech maligned the Republican Party, not that it inaccurately described the Reconstruction era.¹⁰⁴

During his presidency, Jimmy Carter, Ford's successor, tried to strike a balance between his promotion of civil rights and attempting to keep the white South in the Democratic Party camp, as the "Solid South" began to fray. Three actions he took highlight this tension. In October 1978, little more than a century after the conclusion of the Reconstruction era, Carter signed legislation restoring the citizenship of Jefferson Davis, the traitorous president of the Confederate States of America, claiming that it would "finally set at rest the divisions that threatened to destroy our Nation" and officially complete "the long process of reconciliation that reunited our people following the tragic conflict between the states." (Three years earlier, during the Ford administration, Congress had restored citizenship to Robert E. Lee, commander of the Confederate Army.) In 1980, while on the campaign trail, Carter said he was "proud" of a Confederate Monument in Texarkana, and at a rally in New Orleans he called Benjamin Butler, the Union General and later Radical Republican member of Congress, an invader from a "foreign country." Carter apparently thought that maintaining a connection to the Old South (the reporter James P. Herzog described him as being "unapologetic for the Confederacy") and to the legacy of anti-Reconstruction feeling would help his political fortunes.¹⁰⁵

At the same time, as the revolution in Reconstruction historiography proceeded apace and as civil rights advances slowed, former segregationists began to eschew the language of the "second Reconstruction." After Carter became the Democratic nominee for the presidency in the summer of 1976, his fellow Georgian, Senator Herman Talmadge, one of the vocal promoters of the segregationist "Second Reconstruction" language in the 1950s, proclaimed, "the Reconstruction Era is over." Two decades earlier when his segregationist Senate colleague Sam Ervin feared that that era was still alive, Talmadge surely agreed with him. But at this point, Talmadge argued, the white South was no longer victimized by the federal government, as it had been for much of the previous forty years. Therefore, he no longer saw the need to highlight continuities with the Reconstruction era. As one newspaper headline put it, "Carter Finally Ends 'Reconstruction Era' for South."¹⁰⁶

As the "Second Reconstruction" came to an end, the historiographic transformation in the study of the Reconstruction era accelerated. We stand on the other end of this revolution in historiography, and that distance can make the reluctance of many civil rights supporters to embrace Reconstruction seem confounding. The political uses of the memory of the Civil War and Reconstruction eras has flipped in recent decades, with conservatives emphasizing our distance from that period and liberals stressing the continuing connections between that era and our own. "Republicans often downplay the worst components of the Civil War era, arguing that the country has moved far beyond its earlier sins and does not benefit from resurfacing them," observed the *Washington Post's* Toluse Olorunnipa in early 2024. "Democrats, by contrast, see an integral tie between America's history of racism and its modern-day reality."¹⁰⁷ During the civil rights era, as we have seen, the opposite dynamic was at work; it was the segregationists who highlighted the link between past and present. By contrast, civil rights supporters often hived off the history of Reconstruction from "modern-day reality."

¹⁰⁴For an argument that the speech was not worth being given because it highlighted irrelevant "past controversies," see "Analogies Can Be Dangerous," *Decatur Herald and Review*, Oct. 23, 1974, 6.

¹⁰⁵"Jeff Davis' Citizenship Restored by Jimmy Carter," *Santa Maria Times*, Oct. 18, 1978, 25; James P. Herzog, "Carter Stresses Ties to Southern Voters," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, Oct. 24, 1980, 1.

¹⁰⁶"Carter Finally End 'Reconstruction Era' for South," *Gallup Independent*, July 29, 1976, 7. According to Randall Kennedy, Justice Potter Stewart also said, "Reconstruction is over" in a talk at Yale Law School during the 1980–1981 academic year. Kennedy, "Reconstruction and the Politics of Scholarship," 528.

¹⁰⁷Toluse Olorunnipa, "Civil War talk in Presidential Contest Reveals Fresh Divisions on Race," *Washington Post*, Jan. 13, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/01/13/haley-trump-civil-war-history/> (accessed Aug. 8, 2024).

For much of the twentieth century, the negative view of Reconstruction as an era that should not be replicated represented the dominant view in the nation as whole. A revised view of the era was emerging, but it was probably not until the 1988 publication of Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* and the traveling public history exhibit, "America's Reconstruction," which Foner helped curate in the late 1990s, that such a perspective entered the cultural mainstream.¹⁰⁸

Only in the twenty-first century has the "tragic era" depiction of Reconstruction been largely displaced in popular culture. The first federal Reconstruction memorial in Beaufort, South Carolina, was established only in 2017.¹⁰⁹ President Joe Biden's speech in January 2024 at Charleston's Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church was probably the most forceful denunciation of the counter-revolution against Reconstruction uttered by an American president since Ulysses S. Grant presided over the federal destruction of the first Ku Klux Klan. Although, like the civil rights-era presidents before him, Biden did not mention Reconstruction, he expressed concern that "we're living in an era of a second lost cause," which suggested a parallel to the way segregationists of the 1950s and 1960s spoke about the post-civil war period.¹¹⁰ But the claim by the popular Fox News host Tucker Carlson in 2021 that Democrats want to foist a "new version of Reconstruction" on the American people, as well as the recent negative assessments of both Reconstruction and civil rights legislation by conservative intellectuals and activists, including Christopher Caldwell and Charlie Kirk, indicate that the history and meaning of the Reconstruction era remain contested and continue to be linked to the politics of civil rights and Black equality.¹¹¹

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¹⁰⁸Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York, 1988); Eric Foner and Olivia Mahoney, *America's Reconstruction: People and Politics after the Civil War* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1997). On the changing public understanding of Reconstruction after the publication of Foner's synthesis and on calls for commemoration during the sesquicentennial, see David M. Prior et al., "Reconstruction in Public History and Memory Sesquicentennial," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 7, no. 1 (Mar. 2017): 96–122, here 100–101. Eric Foner, "The Supreme Court and the History of Reconstruction—and Vice-Versa," *Columbia Law Review* 112, no. 7 (Nov. 2012): 1585–606.

¹⁰⁹Emma Dumain, "Just Under the Wire, Obama Establishes National Monument to Reconstruction Era in Beaufort County," *Charleston Post and Courier*, Jan. 12, 2017; Gregory P. Downs and Kate Masur, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1861–1900: A National Historic Landmarks Theme Study* (Washington, DC, 2017). In February 2024, the Interior Department announced five additions to the Reconstruction Era National Historic Network: <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/interior-department-announces-expansion-reconstruction-era-national-historic-network> (accessed Aug. 8, 2024).

¹¹⁰"Remarks by President Biden at a Political Event," Jan. 8, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/01/08/remarks-by-president-biden-at-a-political-event-charleston-sc/> (accessed Aug. 8, 2024).

¹¹¹Christopher Caldwell, *The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties* (New York, 2020), 11; William Turton, "How Charlie Kirk Plans to Discredit Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Act," *Wired*, Jan. 12, 2024, <https://www.wired.com/story/charlie-kirk-tpusa-mlk-civil-rights-act/> (accessed Aug. 8, 2024); Zack Stanton, "How Trumpism Is Becoming America's New 'Lost Cause,'" *Politico*, Jan. 21, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/01/21/trump-civil-war-reconstruction-biden-lost-cause-461161> (accessed Aug. 8, 2024).