US II Honors Summer Assignment
2025-2026

Welcome to US II Honors! The following summer assignment is a continuation of US I Honors content which concluded with the Civil War and the post war rebuilding phase more commonly known as Reconstruction. Reconstruction is one of the most heavily studied and revised periods of American history by scholars who consistently seek to ascertain the full extent of its impact and significance. There is no single academic who is more widely regarded with respect to this time period than Eric Foner, historian and professor of American history at Columbia University.

Foner's essay *Reconstruction: A Reinterpretation* will introduce you to the concepts of traditional, revisionist and post-revisionist histories. Revisionist history refers to the reinterpretation of historical events, oftentimes challenging and revising previously held, traditional narratives through the lens of modern times to offer new perspectives for understanding. Foner, as a revisionist historian, believes that Reconstruction is America's "unfinished revolution". You will evaluate his claims in your essay.

1) Read AMSCO 5.8-5.11 p. 363-394 (Civil War & Reconstruction)

2) Review the timeline of Reconstruction using the PBS site "Reconstruction: The Second Civil War".

3) Read and annotate Eric Foner's essay *Reconstruction: A Reinterpretation.*

4) Write an essay examining Foner's thesis regarding traditional, revisionist and post-revisionist historical interpretations of the Reconstruction era. Cite Foner and incorporate outside sources when applicable. Maintain formal writing style throughout the essay.

- 3-4 pages
- MLA format
- Double spaced
- Size 12 Times New Roman font.

Plagiarism from any source, including AI chatbots will not be tolerated and will result in a 0 with no chance of a make-up.

Essays must be printed and will be collected on the first day of class.

See you in September! ☺

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Reconstruction: A Reinterpretation

ERIC FONER

• *The phrase "radical reconstruction" once appeared in almost every textbook in American history. The general theory was that after the Civil War, a misguided nation imposed black rule on the subjugated South. The result was that ignorant "freedmen" bankrupted state treasuries by unleashing a torrent of ill-conceived legislative initiatives upon the politically disenfranchised citizenry of the old Confederacy. Fortunately, northerners soon learned the error of their ways, and cooler and wiser heads prevailed. Blacks were returned to the menial positions to which they were supposedly best suited, and educated white southerners once again took their rightful places as the political and business leaders of the region.*

Since World War II, however, this interpretation of Reconstruction has come under devastating scholarly criticism. We now know that almost no permanent changes of a radical nature resulted from Reconstruction policies. The Civil War itself led to the thirteenth amendment, which abolished slavery, and to the fourteenth amendment, which granted citizenship to anyone born or naturalized in the United States and which required states to proceed with "due process of law" (however ambiguous that may be) before depriving any citizen of life, liberty, or property. These momentous changes passed through Congress and became part of the Constitution before Reconstruction in the South even began.

After 1867, blue-uniformed military forces occupied the southern states to enforce the authority of the United States government. But in crucial areas such as social mobility, education, and occupational opportunities, little was done to help the former slaves. No major political or military figures of the Confederacy suffered anything more than temporary

imprisonment and suspension of political rights for a few years. The structure of southern society remained relatively intact, and the descendants of the pre-Civil War leaders emerged as the key personages in the post-Reconstruction South.

Professor Eric Foner of Columbia University has been the most prominent of the many scholars who have recently redefined the Reconstruction era. Although admitting that it failed in its original purposes, Foner here argues that Reconstruction nevertheless transformed southern blacks and mobilized the black community. Reconstruction, he suggests, may be thought of as America's "unfinished revolution."

In the past generation, no period of American history has been the subject of a more thoroughgoing reevaluation than Reconstruction, the violent, dramatic and still controversial era that followed the Civil War. Race relations, politics, social life, and economic change during Reconstruction have all been reinterpreted in the light of new attitudes toward the place of blacks within American society. The traditional interpretation that dominated historical writing for much of this century has finally been laid to rest.

According to the interpretation that dominated historical writing before 1960, Reconstruction was an era of unrelieved sordidness in American political and social life. When the Civil War ended, according to this view, the white South genuinely accepted the reality of military defeat, stood ready to do justice to the emancipated slaves, and desired above all a quick reintegration into the fabric of national life. Before his death, the martyred Lincoln had embarked on a course of sectional reconciliation. President Andrew Johnson, his successor, attempted to carry out Lincoln's policies, but was foiled by the Radical Republicans (also known as "Vindictives" or "Jacobins"). Motivated by an irrational hatred of "rebels" or by ties with northern capitalists out to plunder the South, the Radicals swept aside Johnson's lenient program and fastened black supremacy upon the defeated Confederacy. An orgy of corruption followed, presided over by unscrupulous carpetbaggers (Northerners who ventured south to reap the spoils of office), traitorous scalawags (Southern whites who cooperated with the new governments for personal gain) and the ignorant and childlike freedmen, who were

incapable of properly exercising the political power that had been thrust upon them. After much needless suffering, the white community of the South banded together to overthrow these "black" governments and restore Home Rule (their euphemism for white supremacy). All told, Reconstruction was the darkest page in the American saga.

Originating in anti-Reconstruction propaganda of Southern Democrats during the 1870s, this traditional interpretation achieved scholarly legitimacy around the turn of the century through the work of William Dunning and his students at Columbia University. It reached the larger public through films like *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind*, and that best-selling work of myth-making masquerading as history, *The Tragic Era*, by Claude G. Bowers, which told how Southern whites "literally were put to the torture" by "emissaries of hate" who manipulated the "simple-minded" freedmen, "inflaming the negroes' egotism" and even inspiring "lustful assaults" by blacks upon white womanhood.

The long reign of the old interpretation is not difficult to explain. It presented a set of easily identifiable heroes and villains. It enjoyed the imprimateur of the nation's leading scholars. And it accorded with the political and social realities of the first half of this century. This image of Reconstruction helped freeze the mind of the white South in unalterable opposition to any movement for breaching the ascendancy of the Democratic party, eliminating segregation, or readmitting disenfranchised blacks to the vote.

Nevertheless, the demise of the traditional interpretation was inevitable. For it ignored the testimony of the central participant in the drama of Reconstruction—the black freedman. Furthermore, it was grounded in the conviction that blacks were unfit to share in political power. As Dunning's colleague John W. Burgess put it, "a black skin means membership in a race of men which has never of itself succeeded in subjecting passion to reason, has never, therefore, created any civilization of any kind." Once objective scholarship and modern experience rendered that assumption untenable, the entire edifice was bound to crumble.

The work of "revising" the history of Reconstruction began with the writings of a handful of survivors of the era, such as former slave John R. Lynch, who had served as a Congressman from Mississippi after the Civil War. In the 1930s, white scholars like Francis Simkins

and Robert Woody carried the task forward. Then in 1935, the black historian and activist W. E. B. Dubois produced *Black Reconstruction in America*, a monumental reevaluation that closed with an irrefutable indictment of a historical profession that had sacrificed scholarly objectivity on the altar of racial bias. "One fact and one alone," he wrote, "explains the attitude of most recent writers toward Reconstruction: they cannot conceive of Negroes as men." In many ways, *Black Reconstruction* anticipated the findings of modern scholarship. At the time, however, it was largely ignored.

It was not until the 1960s that the full force of the revisionist wave broke over the field. Then, in rapid succession, virtually every assumption of the traditional viewpoint was systematically dismantled, and a drastically different portrait emerged to take its place. President Lincoln did not have a coherent "plan" for Reconstruction but, at the time of his assassination, had been cautiously contemplating black suffrage. Andrew Johnson was a stubborn, racist politician, who lacked the ability to compromise. By isolating himself from the broad currents of public opinion that had nurtured Lincoln's career, Johnson created an impasse with Congress that Lincoln would certainly have avoided, thus throwing away his political power and destroying his own plans for reconstructing the South.

The Radicals in Congress were acquitted of both vindictive motives and the charge of serving as the stalking-horses of northern capitalism. They emerged instead as idealists in the best nineteenth-century reform tradition. Radical leaders like Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens had worked for the rights of blacks long before any conceivable political advantage flowed from such a commitment. Stevens refused to sign the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1838 because it disenfranchised the state's black citizens; Sumner led a fight in the 1850s to integrate Boston's public schools. Their Reconstruction policies were based on principle, not petty political advantage, for the central issue dividing Johnson and these Radical Republicans was the civil rights of the freedmen. Studies of Congressional policy-making also revealed that Reconstruction legislation, ranging from the Civil Rights Act of 1866 to the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, enjoyed broad support from moderate and conservative Republicans. It was not simply the work of a narrow radical faction.

Even more startling was the revised portrait of Reconstruction in the

South. Imbued with the spirit of the civil rights movement and rejecting the racial assumptions that had underpinned the traditional interpretation, these historians portrayed Reconstruction as a time of extraordinary political, social, and economic progress for blacks. The establishment of public school systems, the granting of equal citizenship to former slaves, the effort to restore the devastated Southern economy, the attempt to construct an interracial political democracy from the ashes of slavery, all these were commendable achievements, not the elements of Bowers's "tragic era."

Unlike earlier writers, the revisionists stressed the active role of the freedmen in shaping Reconstruction. Black initiative established as many schools as did northern religious societies and the Freedmen's Bureau. The right to vote was not simply thrust upon them by meddling outsiders, since blacks began agitating for the suffrage as soon as they were freed. In 1865, black conventions throughout the South issued eloquent, though unheeded appeals for equal civil and political rights.

With the advent of "Radical Reconstruction" in 1867, the freedmen did enjoy a real measure of political power. But "black supremacy" never existed. In most states, blacks held only a small fraction of political offices, and even in South Carolina, where they comprised a majority of the state legislature, effective power remained in white hands. As for corruption, moral standards both in government and private enterprise were at low ebb throughout the nation in the postwar years—the era of Boss Tweed, the Credit Mobilier scandal and the Whiskey Ring. Southern corruption could hardly be blamed on the former slaves.

Other actors in the Reconstruction drama also came in for reevaluation. Most carpetbaggers were former Union soldiers seeking economic opportunity in the postwar South, not unscrupulous adventurers. Their motives, a typically American amalgam of humanitarianism and the pursuit of profit, were no more insidious than those of pioneers in the West. Scalawags, previously seen as traitors to the the white race, now emerged as "Old Line" Whig Unionists who had opposed secession in the first place, or poor whites who had long resented planters' domination of southern life, and who saw in Reconstruction a chance to recast Southern society along more democratic lines. Strongholds of Southern white Republicanism like East Tennessee and western North Carolina had been the scene of resistance to Confederate rule through-

out the Civil War; now, as one scalawag newspaper put it, the choice was "between salvation at the hand of the Negro or destruction at the hand of the rebels."

At the same time, the Ku Klux Klan and kindred groups, whose campaign of violence against black and white Republicans had been minimized or excused in older writings, were portrayed as they really were. Earlier scholars had conveyed the impression that the Klan intimidated blacks mainly by dressing as ghosts and playing on the freedmen's superstitions. In fact, black fears were all too real: the Klan was a terrorist organization that beat and killed its political opponents to deprive blacks of their newly won rights. The complicity of the Democratic party and the silence of prominent whites in the face of such outrages stood as an indictment of the moral code the South had inherited from the days of slavery.

By the end of the 1960s, the old interpretation had been completely reversed. Southern freedmen were the heroes, the "Redeemers" who overthrew Reconstruction the villains, and if the era was "tragic," it was because change did not go far enough. Reconstruction had been a time of real progress and its failure a lost opportunity for the South and the nation. But the legacy of Reconstruction—the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments—endured to inspire future efforts for civil and political equality.

The reevaluation of the first Reconstruction was inspired in large measure by the impact of the second—the modern civil rights movement. And with the waning of that movement, writing on Reconstruction underwent still another transformation. Instead of seeing the Civil War and its aftermath as a second American Revolution (as Charles and Mary Beard had), a regression into barbarism (as Bowers argued), or a golden opportunity squandered (as the revisionists saw it), many writers of the 1970s and 1980s argued that "Radical Reconstruction" was not really very radical. Since land was not distributed to the former slaves, they remained economically dependent on their former owners. The planter class survived the war and Reconstruction with its property (apart from slaves) and social prestige more or less intact.

Many historians also found little to praise in federal policy toward the emancipated blacks. A new sensitivity to the strength of prejudice and laissez-faire ideas in the nineteenth-century North led some to doubt whether the Republican party ever made a genuine commitment

to racial justice in the South. The granting of black suffrage was an alternative to a long-term federal responsibility for protecting the rights of the former slaves. Once enfranchised, blacks could be left to fend for themselves. With the exception of a few Radicals like Thaddeus Stevens, nearly all northern policy-makers and educators were criticized for assuming that, so long as the unfettered operations of the marketplace afforded blacks the opportunity to advance through diligent labor, federal efforts to assist them in acquiring land were unnecessary.

The revisionist historians of the 1960s effectively established a series of negative points: the Reconstruction governments were not as bad as had been portrayed, "black supremacy" was a myth, the Radicals were not cynical manipulators of the freedmen. Their successors rightly pointed to elements of continuity that spanned the nineteenth-century Southern experience, especially the survival, in modified form, of the plantation system. But by denying the real changes that did occur, they failed to provide a convincing portrait of an era characterized above all by drama, turmoil, and social change. Indeed, in current writing, the term "revolution" has reappeared as a way of describing the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Building on the findings of the past twenty years of scholarship, today's historians view Reconstruction not so much as a specific time period, bounded by the years 1865 and 1877, but as an episode in a prolonged historical process—American society's adjustment to the consequences of the Civil War and emancipation. The Civil War, of course, raised the decisive questions of America's national existence: the relations between local and national authority, the definition of citizenship, the balance between force and consent in generating obedience to authority. The war and Reconstruction, as Allan Nevins observed over fifty years ago, witnessed the "emergence of modern America." This was the era of the completion of the national railroad network, the creation of the modern steel industry, the conquest of the West and final subduing of the Indians, and the expansion of the mining frontier. Lincoln's America—the world of the small farm and artisan shop—gave way to a rapidly industrializing economy. The issues that galvanized postwar Northern politics—from the question of the greenback currency to the mode of paying holders of the national debt—arose from the economic changes unleashed by the Civil War.

Above all, the war irrevocably abolished slavery. Since 1619, when

"twenty negars" disembarked from a Dutch ship in Virginia, racial injustice had haunted American life, mocking its professed ideals even as tobacco and cotton, the products of slave labor, helped finance the nation's economic development. Now, the implications of the black presence could no longer be ignored. The Civil War resolved the problem of slavery but, as the Philadelphia diarist Sidney George Fisher observed in June 1865, it opened an even more intractable question: "What shall we do with the Negro?" Indeed, he went on, this was a problem "*incapable* of any solution that will satisfy both North and South."

As Fisher realized, the focal point of Reconstruction was the social revolution known as emancipation. Plantation slavery was simultaneously a system of labor, a form of racial domination, and the foundation upon which arose a distinctive ruling class within the South. Its demise threw open the most fundamental questions of economy, society, and politics.

The transition from slavery to freedom was a complex process that involved bitter conflict. Under slavery, most blacks had lived in nuclear family units, although they faced the constant threat of separation from loved ones by sale. Reconstruction provided the opportunity for blacks to solidify their preexisting family ties. Conflicts over whether black women should work in the cotton fields (planters said yes, many black families said no), and over white attempts to "apprentice" black children revealed that the autonomy of family life was a major preoccupation of the freedmen. Indeed, whether manifested in their withdrawal from churches controlled by whites, the blossoming of black fraternal, benevolent, and self-improvement organizations, or the demise of the "slave quarters" and their replacement by small tenant farms occupied by individual families, the quest for independence from white authority and control over their own day to day lives shaped the black response to emancipation.

In the post-Civil War South, the surest guarantee of economic autonomy, blacks believed, was land. To the freedmen, the justice of a claim to land based on their years of unrequited labor appeared self-evident. As an Alabama black convention put it, "the property which they [the planters]hold was nearly all earned by the sweat of *our* brows." Many freedmen in 1865 and 1866 refused to sign labor contracts, expecting the federal government to give them land. In some

localities, as one Alabama overseer reported, they "set up claims to the plantation and all on it." In the end, of course, most blacks remained propertyless and poor. Planters succeeded in stabilizing the plantation system, but only by blocking the growth of alternative enterprises, like factories, that might draw off black laborers, thus locking the region into a pattern of economic backwardness.

The United States was not the only nation to experience emancipation in the nineteenth century. Neither plantation slavery nor abolition were unique to the United States. And as in every society that abolished slavery, emancipation was followed by a comprehensive struggle over the shaping of a new labor system to replace it. The conflict between former masters aiming to recreate a disciplined labor force and blacks seeking to carve out the greatest degree of economic autonomy, profoundly affected economics, politics, and race relations in the Reconstruction South. Planters were convinced that their own survival and the region's prosperity depended on their ability to resume production using disciplined gang labor, as under slavery. To this end, the governments established by President Johnson in 1865, in which blacks had no voice, established a comprehensive system of vagrancy laws, criminal penalties for breach of contract, and other measures known collectively as the "Black Codes" and designed to force the freedmen back to work on the plantations. Blacks strongly resisted the implementation of these measures, and the evident inability of the leaders of the white South to accept the implications of emancipation fatally undermined Northern support for Johnson's policies.

Out of the conflict on the plantations, new systems of labor emerged in different regions of the South. Sharecropping—a compromise between blacks' desire for land and planters' for labor discipline, in which each black family worked its own plot of land, dividing the crop with the landlord at the end of the year—came to dominate the cotton South. In the rice kingdom, the great plantations fell to pieces, and blacks were able to acquire small plots of land and take up self-sufficient farming. And in the sugar region, gang labor survived the end of slavery. In all these cases, blacks' economic opportunities were limited by whites' control of credit and by the vagaries of a world market in which the price of agricultural goods suffered a prolonged decline. But the degree to which planters could control the day-to-day lives of their labor force was radically altered by the end of slavery.

The sweeping social changes that followed the Civil War were also reflected in the experience of the white yeomanry. Wartime devastation set in motion a train of events that permanently altered their self-sufficient way of life. Plunged into poverty by the war, they saw their plight exacerbated by successive crop failures in early Reconstruction. In the face of this economic disaster, yeomen clung tenaciously to their farms. But, needing to borrow money for the seed, implements, and livestock required to resume farming, many became mired in debt and were forced to take up the growing of cotton. A region in which a majority of white farmers had once owned their land was increasingly trapped in a cycle of tenancy and cotton overproduction, and unable to feed itself.

The South's postwar transformation proundly affected the course of Reconstruction politics. As the Black Codes illustrated, state governments could play a vital role in defining the property rights and restricting the bargaining power of planters and laborers. Not surprisingly, when Republicans came to power, largely on the basis of the black vote, they swept away measures designed to bolster plantation discipline. They also launched an ambitious program of aid to railroads, hoping to transform the region into a diversified, modernizing society with enhanced opportunities for black and white alike. But raiload aid not only failed to achieve its economic goals, but generated most of the corruption that plagued Reconstruction government in several states.

To blacks, however, Reconstruction represented the first time they had ever been given a voice in public affairs, and the first time Southern governments even attempted to serve their interests. Former slaves, less than two years removed from bondage, now debated the fundamental questions of the polity—what is a republican form of government; should the state provide equal education for all; how reconcile political equality with a society in which property was so unequally distributed? There was something inspiring in the way such men met the challenge of Reconstruction. "I knew nothing more than to obey my master," James K. Greene, an Alabama black politician later recalled. "But the tocsin of freedom sounded and knocked at the door and we walked out like free men and we met the exigencies as they grew up, and shouldered the responsibilities."

"You never saw a people more excited on the subject of politics than

are the negroes of the south," one planter observed in 1867. And there were more than a few Southern whites as well who in these years shook off the prejudices of the past to embrace the vision of a new South dedicated to the principles of equal citizenship and social justice. One South Carolinian expressed the new sense of possibility in 1868, to the state's Republican governor: "I am sorry that I cannot write an elegant stiled letter to your excellency. But I rejoice to think that God almighty has given to the poor of S. C. A Gov. to hear to feel to protect the humble poor without distinction to race or color.... I am a native borned S. C. a poor man never owned a Negro in my life nor my father before me.... Remember the true and loyal are the poor of the whites and blacks, outside of these you can find none loyal."

Few modern scholars believe the Reconstruction governments established in the South in 1867 and 1868 fulfilled the aspirations of their humble constituents. While their achievements in such realms as education, civil rights, and the economic rebuilding of the South are now widely appreciated, historians today believe Reconstruction failed to affect either the economic plight of the emancipated slave, or the ongoing transformation of independent white farmers into cotton tenants. Yet their opponents did perceive the Reconstruction governments as representatives of a revolution that had put the bottom rail, both racial and economic, on top. This perception helps explain the ferocity of the attacks levelled against them, and the pervasiveness of violence in the post-emancipation South.

The spectacle of black men voting and holding office was anathema to large numbers of southern whites. Even more disturbing, at least in the view of those who still controlled the South's wealth, was the emergence of local officials, black and white, who sympathized with the plight of the black laborer. Alabama's vagrancy law, was "a dead letter" in 1870, "because those who are charged with its enforcement are indebted to the vagrant vote for their offices and emoluments." Political debates over the level and incidence of taxation, the control of crops, the resolution of contract disputes, revealed that a primary issue of Reconstruction was the role of government in a plantation society. During Presidential Reconstruction, and after "Redemption," with planters and their allies in control of politics, the law emerged as a means of stabilizing and promoting the plantation system. If Radical Reconstruction failed to redistribute the land of the South, the ouster

of the planter class from control of politics at least ensured that the sanctions of the criminal law would not be employed to discipline the black labor force.

An understanding of this fundamental conflict over the relation between government and society helps explain the pervasive complaints concerning corruption and "extravagance" during Radical Reconstruction. Corruption there was aplenty; tax rates did rise sharply. More significant than the rate of taxation, however, was the change in its incidence. For the first time, planters and white farmers had to pay a significant portion of their income to the government, while propertyless blacks often escaped scotfree. Several states, moreover, enacted heavy taxes on uncultivated land, to discourage land speculation and force land onto the market, benefitting, it was hoped, the freedmen.

As time passed, complaints about the "extravagance" and corruption of southern governments found a sympathetic audience among influential Northerners. The Democratic charge that universal suffrage in the South was responsible for high taxes and governmental extravagance coincided with a rising conviction among the urban middle classes of the North that city government had to be taken out of the hands of the immigrant poor and returned to the "best men"—the educated, professional, financially independent citizens unable to exert much political influence at a time of mass parties and machine politics. Increasingly, the "respectable" middle classes began to retreat from the very notion of universal suffrage. The poor were no longer perceived as honest producers, the backbone of the social order; now they became the "dangerous classes," the "mob." As the historian Francis Parkman put it as Reconstruction drew to a close, too much power rested with "masses of imported ignorance and hereditary ineptitude." To Parkman, the Irish of the Northern cities and the blacks of the South were equally incapable of utilizing the ballot: "Witness the municipal corruptions of New York, and the monstrosities of negro rule in South Carolina." Such attitudes helped to justify Northern inaction as, one by one, the South's Reconstruction regimes were overthrown by political violence.

In the end, neither the abolition of slavery nor the advent of Reconstruction succeeded in resolving the debate over the meaning of freedom in American life. In the United States, as in nearly every plantation society that experienced the end of slavery, a rigid social and political

dichotomy between former master and former slave, an ideology of racism, and a dependent labor force with limited economic opportunities all survived abolition. Unless one means by freedom the simple fact of not being a slave, emancipation thrust blacks into a kind of no-man's land, a partial freedom that made a mockery of the American ideal of equal citizenship.

Yet however brief its sway, Reconstruction allowed scope for a remarkable political and social mobilization of the black community. It opened doors of opportunity that could never be completely closed. Reconstruction transformed the lives of southern blacks in ways unmeasurable by statistics and unreachable by law. It raised their expectations and aspirations, redefined their status in relation to the larger society, and allowed space for the creation of institutions that enabled them to survive the repression that followed. And it established constitutional principles of civil and political equality that, while flagrantly violated after Redemption, planted the seeds of future struggle.

Certainly, in terms of the sense of possibility with which it opened, Reconstruction failed. But, as W. E. B. DuBois observed, it was a "splendid failure." For its animating vision—a society in which social advancement would be open to all on the basis of individual merit, not inherited caste distinctions—is as old as America itself, and remains relevant to a nation still grappling with the unresolved legacy of emancipation.