

In 1935, long after reconstruction had ended, civil rights activist w. e. b. du b...

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Chuan Liu Hist 100 18 October Introduction The American civil war was the most deadly in the American history. The war was fought by the North and the South from 1861 to 1865 as a result of the South seceding from the union. The South depended on cotton plantations thus wanted to maintain slavery at all cost. The North being the stronger of the two in terms of economic and military endowment won the war. The South was destroyed and thus the period that followed was that of Reconstruction which gave hope to the African-Americans of gaining citizenship and equal rights. According to Mooney the famous reconstruction clause “ forty acres and a mule” for the freed slaves was music to the ears and was propagated by the radical Republicans. In the end, the freed people’s hopes were ruined by the failed reconstruction. This paper will argue that the attempt to make black men American citizens during Reconstruction was a splendid failure as even though black suffrage was granted, no significant land redistribution was achieved. Without land, the Blacks felt worse of than they were under slavery. The North and the South also united at the expense of blacks leaving them without any protection and reversing all the gains made. Racial inequality continued until 1960s, 100 years after the end of slavery. The goal of Radical Reconstruction from onset was racial equality. The Radical Republicans believed that all races deserved to enjoy equal rights such as voting, enjoying public services and facilities, owning land, fair trial, and education among others (Danielle 1-5). The first reconstruction efforts were led by the sitting presidents. Abraham Lincoln was for moderate Reconstruction but the radicals wanted stringent measures like seizing plantations and giving them to former slaves. The task of redistributing

confiscated land was given to freedmen bureaus. These bureaus also ensured African-American rights were not violated thus ensuring free labor, schools, giving aid to destitutes and settling disputes between races (Mooney 99). Therefore, when Andrew Johnson came to power in 1865 the Radical Republicans thought he would deliver hope for the black Americans. Johnson, though a former slave owner, hated wealthy South planters and blamed them for the secession thus deserving punishment (Mooney 98). However, Johnson viewed the African-Americans as landless and rightless laborers who had no role to play in the Reconstruction efforts. As a result, his Reconstruction efforts were aimed at uniting the North and the South and had little concern for freed people (Danielle 2). His approach entailed making it easy for the rebels to rejoin the Union and ignoring radical measures set by Radical Republicans. His support for black suffrage was very weak giving advantage to Southerners to deny the Blacks any rights. According to Mooney: “ Johnson’s plan for Reconstruction or “ restoration” as he called it... was greeted with relief by white Southerners” (Mooney 99). His Reconstruction terms were very simple and friendly to the rebel states contrary to what Radical Republicans had envisaged. First, he did not make it compulsory for the states to grant suffrage to African-Americans or to enact laws protecting the former slaves. As such, each state could enact its own laws to control voting rights. Johnson also made an amnesty proclamation thereby pardoning many confederate states. According to Mooney (99) he pardoned 100 confederates a day. These states could now have own constitutions and representation in the senate and House of Representatives. He also returned the confiscated land by the freedmen bureau to the owners

in 1865. This left the Blacks worse off than they were before abolition of slavery as now they did not have land and could only work for the Southerners under wage labor contracts negotiated by the freedmen bureau. Moreover, Black Codes were passed which further limited the rights of African-Americans. These codes dictated hours of work and behavior required of the Blacks and vagrancy was considered a criminal offense liable to fines (Mooney 100). To make matters worse, when elections were held in 1866 the Southerners elected many former high confederates to congress. As such, the presidential Reconstruction did not meet the aspirations of the Radical Republicans it only served to anger them. The Radical Republicans were fed up with the presidential Reconstruction and it was high time they took over. According to "The Radical Republicans" media clip, reconstruction in the image of the radicals "meant the increase of democracy of representation, it meant the right of suffrage"(The Radical Republicans). They were able to takeover Reconstruction efforts from the president through their power in the congress. They then introduced more radical measures such as excluding the Southern representatives from congress and demanded prove of loyalty to the union in order to be accepted (Mooney 102). The Radical Republicans extended the life of freed people bureau to assist in Reconstruction efforts. The Civil Rights Act was also passed in 1866 which overturned the Black Codes. It gave all the persons born in U. S the right to enjoy equal protection under the law. As such, the African-Americans could now engage in contracts, could be witnesses in a court, and own land just like the Americans. This was a relief for Blacks and gave them renewed hope of citizenship. According to Mooney (102) the 1866 Act "transformed

civil rights from state into a federal matter” leading to the enactment of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Fourteenth Amendment gave citizenship to “ all persons born or naturalized in the U. S and subject to jurisdiction thereof” (Mooney 102). It ensured legal protection for the Blacks as it emphasized equality before the law regardless of race. However, the Amendment did not give the Blacks a right to vote (Danielle 3). It thus did not guarantee equal suffrage. The South was not keen on enfranchising freed men leading to race riots in July 1866 (Mooney 103). The Republicans took advantage of the riots to gain the Black vote and victory in the 1866 elections. Republicans thus took control of the congress and passes the Reconstruction Acts of 1867. Under this Act, the South was put under federal military authority as now the federal government was in control of Reconstruction (103). States were also required to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment. As such, both Black and White could vote constitutional convention delegates. By 1868 when Ulysses Grant came to power, many Blacks could vote and hold offices thus enabling them to ensure fair trials and free public education and by 1870, the freed men’s bureau had established more than 4300 schools (Danielle 3). The Blacks could also demand for land leading to land reforms. However, some Northerners were against confiscation therefore, land redistribution was out of question. Instead, a system known as sharecropping emerged whereby the Blacks entered a contract with landowners to work in the land and give the landlord a fixed share of their produce (Mooney 104). In return, the Blacks got tools, farm equipments and seeds. This led to the growth of the credit system that disadvantaged the Blacks. In the end, the Republicans were unable to confiscate rebel property for former slaves. The

Reconstruction Act 1867 was followed by the Fifteenth Amendment ratified in 1870 and which abolished racial restriction on voting (Mooney 106). This allowed the Blacks freedom to vote despite their previous condition of servitude. However, this was accompanied by terror unleashed by such gangs as Ku Klux Klan and White League in the South. According to " Black Suffrage and the Ku Klux Klan" media clip, it was true for southerners that " if you grew up in a society for centuries that you have been taught that [black people] are your racial inferior, its very hard to accept the numerous social change involved in their emancipation"(Black Suffrage and the Ku Klux Klan). These terror gangs restricted the Blacks from enjoying their rights such as voting, serving on juries and holding office thus ensuring " white supremacy" was maintained. In 1870 and 1871, Enforcement Acts were passed which would ensure the states complied with the Fifteenth Amendment and to suppress the Ku Klux Klan. The Whites were bent on maintaining " white supremacy" at all cost. As such, the White conservatives insisted that the Blacks were not fit to vote or hold office (Mooney 107). They also campaigned to convince other Whites that the Republicans were corrupt thus not worthy to lead the government. Some Whites believed this especially due to the rising state taxes leading to loss of votes for the Republicans. Even the Northerners were tired of the rising state taxes to maintain blacks in the face of an economic depression in 1873. These conservatives were regarded as redeemers and their main aim was to ensure the Democratic Party ruled in all confederate states or what they called " home rule". The White League used military tactics to threaten and intimidate all Republicans voters whether Black or White in the South thus gain numerical advantage

and win elections. For example, in Mississippi the redeemers used intimidation, violence and economic coercion to win the elections (Mooney 108). Similar tactics were used by other states under Republican control in the 1876 elections to redeem themselves leading to death of Reconstruction. In this election, Democrats won most seats and the presidency but the Republicans disputed the results due to mass violence in the elections. The results were reversed and a compromise was reached to have Hayes get the presidency and in return cede control over Southern states. The election of Rutherford B. Hayes as president in 1877 through a compromise was the last blow. He made it easy for Democrats to assume control and scatter reconstruction efforts. In the end, the Northern and Southern Whites united as they realized they were more superior to Blacks thus ruining freed people's hopes of gaining racial equality. The Republicans no longer concentrated on ensuring African-Americans rights were not violated and neither did the Supreme Court. The Jim Crow laws were passed in 1883 which removed important sections from the Civil Rights Act of 1875 thus undermining the Black rights. The Act was eventually declared unconstitutional and the Supreme Court upheld these laws in the Plessy v Ferguson decision of 1896. The decision was based on the principle of "separate but equal". Having separate facilities for the Whites and Blacks did not mean inequality and as such did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment. It thus advocated racial segregation. The problem with this principle was that those separate facilities were never equal. According to Jim Crow laws, the Blacks did not deserve to enjoy equal rights and privileges as the whites. According to Mooney: " Jim Crow, blessed by the Supreme

Court of the United States, structured race relations in South until the 1960s, one hundred years after the end of slavery” (Mooney 109). Racial segregation was legalized; Blacks were disenfranchised through poll taxes and literacy tests, lynching or illegal killings increased and so did extra-legal violence. All gains made during reconstruction went down into the drain. Indeed, Reconstruction was not just a failure but a splendid failure as W. E. B. Dubois asserted. Conclusion “ The attempt to make black men American citizens was all a failure, but a splendid failure”. W. E. B. Dubois was not wrong when he made these comments. The period after the Civil war was that of Reconstruction led by the Republican presidents but propelled by the radical Republicans. The main goal of Reconstruction was to ensure equality before the law for the black citizens through the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments as well as the Civil Rights Act of 1866. The blacks were given land, rights to vote and hold office, access to public services and facilities without discrimination and free labor. However, these were short-lived as the Ku Klux Klan and the White League unleashed terror on the blacks and Republicans in the South in general. The presidents (Johnson and Hayes except Grant) who assumed office after Lincoln had no will to ensure citizenship for the African-Americans leading to unity for the North and South at the expense of blacks. Although black suffrage was enhanced, no significant land redistribution was achieved. This made the freedmen to feel worse off than they were during slavery. It also made them incur a lot of debts through the sharecropping compromise. All gains made went to the drain with the Jim Crow laws and Supreme Court decisions which enhanced segregation and white supremacy. Reconstruction was thus a total failure.



Works Cited Danielle, Alexander. "Forty Acres and a Mule: The Ruined Hope of Reconstruction". *Humanities*, 25. 1(2004): 1-6 Media Clip: "The Radical Republicans" Media Clip: "Black Suffrage and the Ku Klux Klan" Mooney, Matthew. *The Growth of American Civilization*. 2013.