

Democratic policies and the protection of white nationalism



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How did political policies by the Democratic Party force the federal government to end the reconstruction?

The purpose of the reconstruction era was to enable the United States to recover from the adverse effects of the American civil war including the death and devastation with which it was associated as provided by the first (1867), second (1867) and third (1867) reconstruction acts. The reconstruction era started in 1865 and ended in 1877, and was aimed at ending slavery as well as any remnants of the Confederate secession, as well as ensuring that the newly freed slaves became full American citizens with civil rights as established in the civil rights act of 1866 (*The Civil Rights Act 1866*). By the end of the reconstruction era, the United States was supposed to have managed to ensure constitutional equality for all African Americans as well as full citizenship and freedom. The reconstruction era also achieved the vision of white supremacist that included preservation of the traditions and cultural standards of the south, as well as ensuring racial segregation. The main reason the reconstruction era did not result in both the north and south having similar political and cultural systems was that Andrew Johnson wanted to bring the states back into the union. The need to incorporate the southern states into the union meant that the government had to make allowances like letting the southern states determine the rights of former slaves.

Although the north wanted former slaves to be upgraded to full citizens with all the rights associated with being American, Johnson took a perspective that was opposite to what Lincoln had intended before his assassination at the end of the civil war (Lincoln 1865). The approach by Johnson made it

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possible for white nationalists to work towards maintaining the racial system in the south through groups like the Ku Klux Klan. The objective of such groups was not only to instigate fear among African Americans but also to get white Americans to feel the pride of their race while at the same time assuring that they will always remain the superior race in the United States. At this time, the message being passed by the white nationalists was that, while the confederate states no longer existed, whites were superior and would always hold this status. The actions of the Democratic Party including formation of armed groups, advocacy for white nationalism resulted in the president being forced to end the reconstruction.

Southern Democrats

Although the scalawag element among the republic whites openly supported black civil rights, it was typical for conservative whites to oppose these measures, whereby some of them even supported the use of arms to suppress black power. Not only did they defend their actions by indicating that their Anglo-American discourse was in resistance against the tyrannical government, but they also managed to convince fellow white citizens that their mission was justified. In order to ensure that their mission got as much traction as possible, opponents of the reconstruction came up with state political parties that were affiliates of the national democratic party and were usually referred to as the conservative party. These political parties either tolerated or supported violent paramilitary groups like the red shirts in the Carolinas and Mississippi and the white league in Louisiana, which intimidated and assassinated both white and black republic leaders during elections. These groups were referred to by George C Rabble, a historian, as

the military arm of the Democratic Party that took forceful action that the party could not take against its opponents (Rable 2010). All democrats and conservatives had aligned with the national Democratic Party by the mid-1870s, whereby it supported their cause at a time when the national Republican Party was losing interest in the affairs of the south. By taking both a diplomatic and forceful approach in its campaigns, the Democratic Party was able to convince some people to support their mission while at the same time forcing those who opposed them through violence.

The state political parties were highly effective in their white nationalism mission, whereby they resulted in all native white people considering all Negroes to be highly offensive even in places where they were trying their best to integrate into the American society. Even when the Negroes were fighting as soldiers, their new freedom, uniforms, and guns triggered the tempers of southerners due to the far-reaching changes they symbolized. Although it was usually necessary to refer to themselves as a democratic and conservative party or a conservative party in order to gain support, these groups eventually decided to abandon their names in 1873 or 1874 after sending their delegates to the national democratic convention of 1868. White supremacy and white nationalism was supported by the ordinary farmer and planter/business classes in the south who were opposed to carpetbaggers, black power, and military rule. At first, democrats even nominated some blacks to political office in an attempt to steal more blacks from the republicans, but when attempts at combining with blacks failed, the planters worked with ordinary farmers in their mission to displace republican governments (Jones 1992). Control of the south was eventually taken by

planters who were working with their business allies in the self-professed conservative coalition that was paternalistic towards blacks but were afraid black power would be used to slow business development and raise taxes.

Although groups like the KKK are always assumed only to have had negative implications, the outcomes of the insurgent movement in the south can be classified as both good and bad. For instance, the KKK resulted in quietening of the Negroes, making life easier and property safer, giving protection to women, stopping burnings, forcing radical leaders to be moderate, making the Negroes work better, driving the worst radical leaders from the country, and starting whites on a path to political supremacy (Ward 2011). In contrast, the evil elements of the KKK are primarily how the cloak was used to cover misdeeds, and the lynching habits, most of which happened after the reconstruction, were used for intimidation and social control primarily due to economic stresses. Although outrages in the south were primarily aimed at former slaves, the suffering also extended to white people who suffered from lawless violence in all portion of the north as well as the former rebel states whose management was to be guided by the First Reconstruction Act (1867). At the time, all political campaigns were characterized with burning rival clubhouses, cracking skulls with stones and sticks, and exchanging bullets, all of which was either in support of or opposition of white nationalism. Some of the incidences that were driven by the desire to suppress black voting and run republicans out of office include the Colfax Massacre of 1873 and the Battle of Liberty place of 1874. In this case, while the Democratic Party was a political party, its policies allowed

violence to be used primarily against blacks as a means of suppressing black power and black vote.

The Redemption of 1873 to 1877

The bourbon democrats had a southern wing that was referred to as the redeemers, which was the pro-business and conservative faction of the Democratic Party whose purpose was to reestablish white supremacy, regain political power, and oust radical republicans. The redeemers were dominant in southern politics between the 1870s and 1910, and were led by professionals, business people, and wealthy former planters. In 1872, the republicans were split nationally in terms of their election choices, particularly in regard to their response to the government, and how Ulysses S. Grant had alienated many of the leading republicans, including radicals. Instead of meeting the requirements of the south of minimizing military governance, allowing unlimited suffrage to whites, and requiring the oath of only obeying the constitution and laws, Grant wanted to introduce further reforms to the south (Chin 2003). In addition to corruption in his administration, he used federal soldiers to introduce radical state-sponsored regimes to the south, which resulted in liberal republicans, the opponents, dismaying at how the party had given in to corruption. The opponents were also tired of the increased violence perpetrated against blacks by whites, particularly during election times, which showed that the war was far from over, and the changes that were introduced were fragile. Due to shortcomings of the Grant administration, such that he won the election narrowly against Greeley, the liberal Republican Party vanished, and its supporters abandoned the reconstruction. The successes of the Democratic

Party were brought about by limitations in the government, as well as disorganization in the Republican Party because it failed to exert its dominance on the political arena.

When the Republican Party was attacked by the democrats in the south, there started to develop political-racial tensions that resulted in the splintering of the Republican Party in the south. In 1868, some republicans supported Georgia democrats in expelling 28 black republicans from the statehouse based on the argument that blacks should be eligible to vote but should not hold office. In most states, there was an increased number of conservative scalawags fighting for control with an increased number of radical carpetbaggers together with their black allies. Although republican papers survived, it was only through government patronage because they were usually being boycotted by white businessmen. In any case, the increasingly bitter battles within the republican parties resulted in the loss by the scalawags with most of the disgruntled losers switching to the democratic or conservative side. In Mississippi, the radical faction under the leadership of Adalbert Ames, a carpetbagger, had a decisive victory over the conservative faction led by James Lusk Alcorn, a scalawag (Harris 1974). Since the party had few recruits and was losing support as many scalawags left it, it ended up splintering to the extent that the Democrats ended in power. At this time, although the freedmen were managing to get a more significant share of patronage and offices while squeezing out carpetbaggers allies, they never managed to achieve numbers that reflected their population proportion.

Even in the mid-1870s, whites still dominated the political environment even if it was clear that based on the hard reality of political life in the south, black constituents had to be represented by black officials. At this time, the financial depression had so much pressure on the reconstruction government, which resulted in the dissolving of the progress that had been made in the reconstruction. Since Republicans had failed to enable some prosperous freedmen to acquire land, they started joining the democrats in anger because they believed they stood better chances with their new party (*An Act to Establish a Bureau for the Relief of Freedmen & Refugees* 1865). Their anger was based on the fact that, although the south was sparsely populated and only 10% of Louisiana land was cultivated and 90% of Mississippi underdeveloped, the government failed to enable the freedmen to obtain land. In fact, among southern states, only South Carolina managed to create any form of land redistribution in its establishment of a land commission that resettled some poor whites and about 14, 000 freedmen families on land that had been purchased by the state (Verney 1983). The whites were not interested in alliances with blacks, whereby poor whites were less capable, less efficient and knew less about government and state administration than the former slaves. In this regard, the whites who were in the leadership of the republicans between 1872 and 1875 represented the most substantial families as well as their interests. Instead of being organized like the Democratic Party that had the single shared objective of promoting white nationalism, the Republican Party was driven by selfish interests.

New Departure by the Democrats

In order to survive in a way that would enable it to explore new ideas and issues like driving white nationalism, the democratic-conservative leadership in the south decided to end its opposition to black suffrage and reconstruction by 1870. The government led by Grant had managed to indicate through its crackdown of the KKK that it was willing to apply as much federal power as would be needed to suppress any open anti-black violence. Consequently, the conservative democratic leadership knew that their drive to achieve white supremacy needed to take a different path, which was a strategy that was also accepted by democrats in the north who wanted to make the fight with the Republican Party economic rather than racial. In the new departure, the party could start afresh without having to experience remnants of the civil war every time there was an election. In any case, most wealthy southern landowners believed that they would be able to control the newly enfranchised black electorate to meet their own needs and objectives. Obviously, the change was not accepted by all democrats, whereby there was an insurgent element that kept resisting the reconstruction at all costs (McGuire 2014). Control of the party in the southern states was taken over by the redeemers who believed in the modernization of politics in the United States. Part of the modernization involved shifting from violence as the main driving force for promoting white nationalism and applying new approaches like diplomacy.

Instead of basing all politics on racial differences, the redeemers formed coalitions with conservative republicans including carpetbaggers and scalawags to form a political unit whose emphasize was on economic

modernization. Since the south needed northern capital to prosper, they believed that it was vital to build the railroad. The new tactics were highly effective such that William Mahoney built an excellent coalition in Virginia while the redeemers worked with DeWitt Senter to build a coalition. In the south, some democrats shifted their focus from racial issues to corruption and taxes such that they accused the republican governments with corruption and inefficiency. As the prices of cotton reduced, the cash-poor farmers who hardly ever saw \$20 in currency per year were forced to use the currency to pay taxes or they would lose their farms. Only the major planters managed to recover their property after confiscation, even if they had never paid taxes prior to confiscation. In North Carolina, William Woods Holden became the first governed to be impeached because he used state troops to round up KKK members who were then released by federal judges (McGuire 2014). Although in the north elections had become more of sporting contests due to the live and let live attitude towards blacks, many whites in the south had yet to reconcile with their defeat in the civil war and the granting of citizenship to the freedmen.

The Panic of 1873

Southerners, particularly the Republicans, believed that investing in railroads would result in the economic salvation of the south in which people in the region were suffering from far-reaching poverty. The depression that occurred in 1873, which is referred to as the panic of 1873, had such negative impact on the southern economy that it resulted in the disillusionment of those who had gambled on the railroads. The price of cotton reduced by half to the extent that cotton factories, wholesalers, local

merchants, and small landowners went bankrupt and could no longer support their business operations. As a means of spreading the risk of owning land, sharecropping between white and black farmers became more common, which affected racial relations. With time, the abolitionist element that originated from the north started aging away as people started losing interest, as the economic conditions prevented the north from replenishing it. Many of the carpetbaggers either joined the redeemers or returned to the north, and although blacks had more voice in the Republican Party, across the south, it was divided by internal problems such that it lost most of its cohesion (Alexander 2017). Instead of depending on the government or political parties, black leaders emphasized the individual economic progress that could only be achieved if they cooperated with white elites instead of focusing on racial politics that opposed cooperation.

The increased cooperation between the whites and blacks did not reduce the push for white nationalism; just that the white elites believed that the only way to hold on to their position of power is by working with blacks in the population. At a national level, people blamed Grant for the depression, such that the Republican Party ended up losing 96 seats across the United States in the 1874 elections. At this time, the House was controlled by the bourbon democrats who were confident that Samuel J. Tilden would be elected the president of the United States in the 1876 elections (Alexander 2017). With waning popularity and support, Grant indicated that he was no longer running for elections, and, by all indications, he seemed to have lost interest in the south where he was receiving the least support. With waning support for the Grant administration, most states were taken over by the redeemers,

such that only four states in the whole country were in republican hands by 1873. The four states included South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas, although later on in 1874 Arkansas fell after the highly violent Brooks-Baxter War that ripped the Republican Party apart.

Violence

With the emergence of new insurgent groups like the white league in Louisiana and the red shirts in the Carolinas and Mississippi, there was renewed and increased violence in the lower south. In 1872, since the election in Louisiana was highly disputed, both the democratic and the republican candidates held inaugural balls even before election officials had completed the process of reviewing returns. In their hurry to declare themselves the winners, the candidates certified local parish offices across their own states in many places, which resulted in the rise of local tensions among the people. The only tiebreaker for this predicament in which politics had obscured any modicum of reason was the intervention of the federal government that ensured that the republican was certified as the governor. In order to accommodate the changing environment in which politics was becoming more competitive due to a shift from racial to economic matters, each candidate was allowed the opportunity to certify slates for local offices. In late March, the freedmen were still afraid that the democrats would attempt to take over the parish government, particularly in the rural grant parish in the red river valley, hence the measures they took to reinforce the defenses of the Colfax courthouse (Hamilton 2018). The white militias gathered a few miles from the settlement in preparation for any eventuality,

which is an indicator that both sides were driven by rumors and the associated fears.

William ward, who was a militia captain and an African American union veteran, organized his people in Colfax and took residence at the courthouse as a means of protecting his people from unnecessary attacks. On April 13, 1873, the defenders in the courthouse were attacked by the whites, which acted as a catalyst to the mayhem in which there was much confusion about who fired at whom. In this mayhem, 120 to 150 blacks were killed at 3 whites died, with 50 of the blacks dying in the evening where they were held as prisoners from the earlier attacks at the courthouse. Although the mayhem at Colfax was referred locally as the Colfax riots, contemporary historians refer it as the Colfax massacre due to the disproportionate number of people from different races that died. The Colfax massacre was the start of increased insurgency and attacks on both freedmen and republican officeholders in Louisiana and other states in the deep south (Hamilton 2018). For instance, in Louisiana, district attorney P. H. Harris and Judge T. S. Crawford of the 12th judicial district were attacked and shot off their horses, which resulted in their death on October 8, 1873, in an ambush as they went to court.

The political violence in Louisiana reached endemic levels, such that by 1874, the white militias had evolved into paramilitary organizations like the white league starting in the red river valley parishes. The newly formed organization held its operations openly and clearly stated its political objectives of violently overthrowing republican rule as well as suppressing

black voting. Across many rural parishes emerged white league chapters whose funding for advanced weaponry was received from wealthy men who wanted to ensure that white nationalism and supremacy was maintained at all costs. Due to the reinvigorated nature of the league and its chapters, violence became even more widespread, as is seen in the 1874 Coushatta massacre in which the white league killed 6 white republicans and between 5 and 20 black witnesses at Coushatta in red river parish. The white league also mounted an attempt at unseating the republican governor of Louisiana later in 1874, which was an attempt at restarting a dispute that had been settled since the 1872 election (Vandal 1995). The white league brought 5,000 troops to New Orleans with the objective of engaging and overwhelming metropolitan police and Tate militia so that William P. Kellogg would leave office and John McEnery would take his place. Although the white league managed to take over and hold the city hall and statehouse, it retreated before reinforcing federal troops arrived to support the 2,000 that were in the state.

Similar to the rise of the white league, the red shirts rose in the Carolinas and Mississippi in 1875, whereby it was a sizable group with 20,000 men from North Carolina, such that they were referred to as the military arm of the Democratic Party aimed at restoring white supremacy. While many northern republicans and the democrats agreed that slavery and confederate nationalism were dead and that the objectives of the war had been achieved, they also believed that military interference by the federal government was undemocratic and violated historic republican values. The democratic rifle clubs and the red shirts started operating in the open such that they either

threatened or shot enough republicans that the election was decided in favor of the democrats. The violence, which accompanied the campaigns in the 1875 Mississippi elections, resulted in the death of hundreds of black men, and Grant initially refused a request by Adelbert Ames for federal troops because the country was getting tired of southern troubles; this caused Ames to flee as Mississippi was taken over by democrats. The attacks and murders of republicans in Florida, the Carolinas and Louisiana persisted even in the 1876 campaigns and elections, whereby in South Carolina, the campaigns were characterized by outbreaks of fraud and murders against freedmen (Perman 2010). The red shirts always stood behind democratic candidates with arms and killed blacks in the Ellenton and Hamburg massacres, whereby it is estimated that, across South Carolina, at least 150 blacks were killed in the weeks leading to the elections. In South Carolina, the red shirts managed to prevent nearly all black people from voting in two counties in which the blacks were a majority, which is a success they wanted to replicate in North Carolina.

The Election of 1876

As indicated earlier, the objective of the reconstruction was to get the country to heal after the damage caused by the civil war while at the same time giving blacks the civil rights of full citizens. Based on these primary objectives, the reconstruction was seen as a threat to white nationalism, hence the measures taken to suppress black power as much as possible, as discussed above. Reconstruction persisted in Louisiana, South Carolina, and Florida until 1877 after which a compromise was reached, and the country shifted toward the Jim Crow era in which white nationalists had achieved

their objectives. Across the Deep South, there was heightened violence that accompanied the 1876 elections, whereby the white league was most active in Louisiana. The violence was, in turn, accompanied by incidences of black intimidation and ballot stuffing aimed at suppressing the black vote even in counties with a black majority. After Rutherford B. Hayes, a Republican won the highly disputed presidential election of 1876, there was the national compromise of 1877, which was viewed by many as a corrupt bargain (De Santis 1955). The main condition for the white democrats in the south to accept the victory of Hayes was if he withdrew all federal troops from the south. Hayes agreed because, at this time, the north had already grown weary of the insurgency, and, in any case, rural areas and small towns were controlled by armed militias and most southern legislatures were controlled by white democrats. Protectors of white nationalism and supremacy had won because even the blacks considered reconstruction to have been a failure because the withdrawal of the federal government meant it could not enforce rights as citizens.

End of Reconstruction by Hayes

Grant used the electoral commission act to set up a commission comprised of 7 democrats and 8 republicans on January 29, 1877, to settle the disputes of the 1876 presidential election. The commission awarded the electoral votes to Hayes such that congress confirmed that he had won the election with a single vote; although the democrats would have wanted Samuel J. Tilden as the president, they did not have any leverage. They, however, agreed to allow the inauguration of Hayes instead of delaying it indefinitely, as long as the federal government refrained from interfering in the politics of

the south even with far-reaching election-related violence against blacks. Although the south promised to protect blacks, these promises were not kept, as was the promise by Hayes to help the south build a railroad in Texas; however, Hayes kept the promise of naming a southerner to his cabinet (De Santis 1955). Once northern troops had been withdrawn from playing any political role in the south, there was no way for the president to enforce reconstruction, which means that this deal marked the end of the reconstruction era. In the south, white nationalists reestablished their position, as was seen in the events that followed the reconstruction era, like the passing of Jim Crow laws.

Conclusion

Instead of using force, white nationalists during the reconstruction era used political policies passed by the government to push their agenda of limiting black votes and black power as much as possible. The main acting force at this time was the Democratic Party that used groups like the red shirts and the white league to perform violent acts against blacks and their supporters that the political party itself could not perform. Through these activities, the Democratic Party managed to cause political instability in Louisiana, Mississippi, and the Carolinas to the extent that the federal government was left with no option than to bring the reconstruction era to an end.

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