

American reconstruction: a revolution or a failure?

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



Historians Eric Foner and C. Vann Woodward, provide a Tyson Vs Ali fight in the debate over whether the American Reconstruction period was in fact a revolution or a failure. Each provides an in-depth analysis supporting his argument. Foner takes the approach that the Reconstruction was a Revolution, explaining, that “ Reconstruction allowed scope for a remarkable political and social mobilization of black, community, opening doors of opportunity that could never again be completely closed. Woodward takes a much more pessimistic approach arguing, “ The other (failure) is the ruins of Reconstruction, the North’s failure to solve the problem of the black peoples place in American life. “ Foner’s argument is based on the immediate political and civil rights that the freedmen were given after the emancipation through the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, and how the mindset of the south was altered forever. New adjustments such as the Homestead Act of 1862 and many other social and political changes were grounds to label the Reconstruction Era a revolution.

Foner believed although nearly every authority and right that the freedmen were given were eventually taken back after the Reconstruction finally ended in 1867, the mindset and the drastic changes that took place would stay with America throughout its history, and therefore was revolutionary. Woodward’s pessimistic response to America’s optimistic take on the Reconstruction being revolutionary was based on the idea that in the long run what actually was accomplished was not very influential.

Except for the amendments that were established after the Civil War, the hope of the freedmen sharing equality with the whites was taken away after the Reconstruction, and therefore was a total failure. The South’s resistance

against the freedmen gaining any sort of political or social power was stronger than the will of the North to help bring equality to the South and according to Woodward, denies Reconstruction being a failure because they were too headstrong to admit defeat. When looking back at the Reconstruction and asking whether it was evolutionary, one must consider the affect it had on the country once the period ended. The answer is, the Reconstruction had had little to no influence on society once it had come to a halt after the election of President Hayes in 1867, and therefore cannot be considered a revolution. When talking about a revolution, what is being considered is a drastic change in culture, politics, and social structure, and the Reconstruction does not meet those requirements. Looking into what occurred during the Reconstruction, the only true accomplishments that won out were those that came from the resistance of the South.

When Foner makes his attempt to sway the reader's minds into following his argument that the Reconstruction was revolutionary, he fails to point out any substantial examples of the freedmen overcoming the resistance of the South without the help of the government. For example the Homestead Act of 1862 was enforced by the government to make available land to freedmen which belonged to former land owners, (many of which were former slave owners) however when the Homestead Act was put in place, only one-tenth of the land was distributed to new landowners.

Other examples such as sharecropping were also non-substantial as it triggered a new labor system which consisted of landowners advertising work to immigrants and hiring them to work for low wages and rations of bacon and cornmeal, which was a similar the experiments in the West Indies

with the “ coolies. “ How is forcing the freedmen and their families on the streets and living in poverty in anyway revolutionary? It was only until the government stepped in and put an end of what Foner called a “ New modification of the slave trade” that the freedmen even had an opportunity to work for wages on plantations.

One can argue that this was a change in how the labor system worked, but can something so minute be considered revolutionary? Once the government refuted one attempt at resistance from the South, another emerged. In 1865 the Black Codes were established in all different states throughout the South. These codes limited what the black man was able to do for a living and gave no opportunity to own land, making the situation for freedmen similar to what it was before the emancipation.

Other forms of resistance, such as the radical group Ku Klux Klan brought terror and destruction to the South. Radical Reconstruction groups did not match the will of the resistance and therefore Reconstruction did little good for the former slaves. Every attempt to make the former slaves equals to whites was not accomplished because the Resistance in the South would not allow it. Woodward says, “ The failure of Reconstruction is to be explained by the lack of revolutionary measures. If the attempt of Reconstruction was more radical, there could possibly be an argument that it was revolutionary, but the truth is the counter-revolution was stronger than the actual revolution. People were scared for their lives, terror and anger filled the streets, and the South was not a safe environment for the freedmen and their families. In conclusion, the only real gain that the freedmen received during

the Reconstruction were the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments that were added to the Constitution following the end of the Civil War.

All other gains were taken back with the election of President Hayes in 1867, after he made a deal to end Reconstruction in the South if elected president. Now compare what was accomplished to the other revolutions in History, the American Revolution, which separated the United States from British authorities and the French Revolution, where the people physically overthrew their government and established a democracy. Those were drastic shifts in society that defined what a revolution is.

The idea that Reconstruction was a revolution would be the side that says the government establishing three laws was a revolution. This is a very weak argument, especially when the amendments that were passed were not accepted by the majority of the South and therefore not practiced due to the radical's response of violence and terror. Revolutions are drastic changes that affect the country forever, and the Reconstruction simply did not meet the requirements to even be considered a revolution.

Bibliography :

1. Eric Foner, " The Politics of Freedom in Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and its Legacy" (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press)
2. C. Vann Woodward. " Reconstruction: A Counterfactual Playback" (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989)