

A review of Coulter's South during reconstruction



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To start, Coulter's *The South During Reconstruction* is an in depth analysis of the Southern United States (Confederate States of America, 1861-1865) following the end of the Civil War, the 8th installment of Coulter's series *A History of the South*. The author, E. Merton Coulter (1890-1981), is a Georgia native and a Professor and Historian of the south for University of Georgia. He's been described as a writer with "...purpose" and "...a teacher with purpose." (Bailey, 2015). His qualifications come from his time as a professor for the University of Georgia with a very extensive course on the history of the Southern United States pre 1900s. However, his credibility as an author took a minor blow in the mid 1960's with his book *Negro Legislators in Georgia During the Reconstruction Period* which casted the African-American legislators at the time as "unmitigated villains..." (Bailey, 2001). This, which shall be highlighted further in the review, is considered common in Coulter's writing as a Southern scholar.

Coulter's book contains a chapter by chapter analysis of different functions and effects of the economy post Civil War and during reconstruction. Chapters I-III titled "Cost of War," "The Way Back," and "Short Cut to Civilization," discuss the beginning costs of the war and employ the use of numbered statistics, showing the true cost and how much the south was affected while offering some side points from the side of civics and community. This group of chapters first discusses primarily the cost and levels of destruction, state by state, such as "Alabama claimed destruction amounting to \$300, 000, 000." (2, 4) and begins to discuss the destruction of the Southern railway system claiming, "Two third's of the South's railroads

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were utterly destroyed..." (3, 6). However, the book is sometimes written from personal views and beliefs. Chapter V can be regarded as one of the more interesting chapters, a chapter dedicated to "The Negro as Laborer and Landowner." (92). Here, Coulter can be seen as showing his "true colors," highlighting his opinions of "negro landowners" and "freedman" stating "Basically the freedman did not like to take orders that reminded him of slavery... The hardest work before the North now is to teach the Negro what constitutes his freedom." (93, 4).

Next, elaborating on the author's qualifications, the book actually does not contain an expected bibliography. Coulter chose not to create a list of source material, instead the bibliography is replaced with what the author notes a "Critical Essay on Authorities" He explains the meaning behind the change, stating "No attempt is made here to compile either an exhaustive or an ideal list of items, but rather to indicate with some evaluation what was examined in writing this volume." (392, 1). The essay offers an extensive outlook on the groups of materials used in the making of the book. These materials are arranged in collections pertaining to their function, such as Manuscripts and Government Documents, (392, 393). On the issue of credibility, many of the statistics found seem to have come from a personal recollection from manuscripts of soldiers, generals, and politicians as well as the census from 1860 to 1880. ^[1] However, using personal manuscripts without offering the author's credentials or credibility leaves room for doubt and skepticism on how accurate the account is. What should also be taken in account with this use of these materials is the time they came from, where race was regarded in a very different way, leading to a one sided account of

history in favor of the white and not the colored enslaved at the time or those affected by the Civil Rights movement a century later.

Next, to summarize the contents of this review in a few words, good intentions with poor execution. *South During Reconstruction* could be a very promising book with a magnificent story of the south to tell while analyzing the socioeconomic impact of the Confederate states. For a man who writes the "Southern Point of View" as "...a scholar." (Cotterill, n. d.), Coulter leaves me wanting for more. One of the more pinnacle and turbulent pieces of history the story of this land can offer goes semi untold in this book, leaving a taste of what the book could be, readers such as myself yearning for a better taste. Nowadays a history book made and published in 1958 would not exactly be as accurate as a modern day book.

Now, the unfortunate fact about Coulter is he is considered by some as a "Confederate Apologist," and has been revealed to be a racist. One man has described Coulter as a "conservative, racist, unreconstructed southerner..." who "defends Southern racist policies and practices" (Smith, n. d.) This brings in question the true accuracy of the information provided in the book. The reasoning is the majority of the book is written by the "War of Northern Aggression" standpoint which humanizes the Confederacy and dehumanizes the North. Even then, Coulter's history of Reconstruction was already obsolete by the time it was released. Coulter did not test his claims and research by diving into the research and material available. Instead, he told the old story of a liberated people worse off for being on their own and adamant, and of nefarious carpetbaggers and scalawags manipulating them to engender a "blackout of veracious regime." Dismissing Ku Klux Klan

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violence, Coulter claimed that nothing went right until the South's natural rulers were put back in charge. Coulter rather hoped that his contribution would come in shifting the subject to something less exhaustively covered, by inditing a gregarious history of the South, the magnification of cities, and the habits of white Southerners. In this he came up with plenty of information, but not by utilizing the materials — court records, probated wills, diaries and journals, manuscript census returns, a history relying largely on conservative bigoted accounts without dipping into a larger database of the south's history and culture. As a scholar and a professor, you would expect Coulter to teach an unbiased and neutral stanced view of history without being tied down to banal Southern policies and statutes. Instead the University of Georgia professor ties himself down to outdated bigoted Southern beliefs and traditions with chauvinism and pride to the land of Ol' Dixie.

To conclude, what makes the book worth a read is the dramatic contrast on how we write history today and how we wrote it yesterday. But on the contrary we can see that's where the book keeps some charm. Instead of being a source for analysis, the book can be used as a source for preservation. The preservation of old bigoted policies, the preservation of what was once the true face of the south, a dark and vicious spot in American history that is not to be forgotten, but heeded and preserved, to see how we've progressed and grown as a nation.

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[1] Covers the book's range of pre reconstruction (before 1865) and after reconstruction (1865-1877)