

Comparing the end of reconstruction in south carolina and louisiana



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The similarities between South Carolina and Louisiana at the end of Reconstruction outweighed the disparities. The end of Reconstruction with the Compromise of 1877 assured dominant white's political autonomy and non-intervention regarding race policy and it promised a share in the blessings of the new economic order.[1]In return, the South became a satellite of the dominant region.[2]The role of the Ku Klux Klan in both South Carolina and Louisiana in ending the United States of America's most progressive and reactionary era should not be underestimated. The violence of white supremacist activity in both states prevented blacks from voting, weakened the Republican parties and required federal intervention to the point that "Redemption" was the only viable option. Economically, Louisiana and South Carolina were both devastated by the Depression. This united agriculturalists to support Southern Democrats in the elections of 1874 and 1876. Politically, the two Southern states were aligned: they both had large black populations and were run by Republican governments throughout the Reconstruction period.

White supremacist activity was ubiquitous in both South Carolina and Louisiana at the end of Reconstruction. White supremacy differed depending on region but the foundations of the Ku Klux Klan almost everywhere built on traditions of enforcing domination and submission on grids of kinship and political patronage.[3]The terrorism deployed by white supremacists was the most significant reason for ending federal involvement in Reconstruction. Steven Hahn's supports this idea by suggesting that its depredation not only weakened the will of white republicans but it also intimidated blacks. The Colfax Massacre in Louisiana epitomized the widespread hatred and

contempt of whites towards the newly emancipated and politically active African Americans. The Massacre that took place Easter Sunday 1873 was arguably the most brutal act of terror by white Southerners during Reconstruction.[4]Its depiction by white conservative newspapers as a “riot” is a testament to the success of the reactionary white establishment in controlling the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction in Louisiana.[5]As Foner suggests, the bloodiest single instance of racial carnage in the Reconstruction era was long remembered as proof for blacks that they stood at a fatal disadvantage at any confrontation.[6]In the case of Colfax, the semantic victory reflected above all the determination of local whites, who began commemorating the event in public in the early twentieth century. [7]Similarly, in South Carolina, there were examples of white backlash. Francis Simkins made the most thorough study of the Ku Klux Klan in South Carolina during Reconstruction. Simkins sets out to prove how even unimportant the South Carolina Klan was.[8]Simkins’s claim that the Klan was largely a movement of the poorer classes seems redundant as the evidence clearly indicates that a major role in the leadership of the Klan was taken by men from respectable families.[9]For example, upper class complicity in the Klan’s activity was charged repeatedly during the Federal trials.[10]Another damning flaw with his argument is that there is strong evidence that suggests Southern Carolinian Klan activity was as pervasive as Louisiana’s. Like Louisiana, the Klan’s political attacks took a more violent turn from 1870. By the mid-1870s, it appeared that conservatives in South Carolina had many of the same opportunities as their counterparts in Mississippi, Louisiana and Florida.[11]For example, William Tolbert, a former Klan member and a witness in the case of the murder of black State Senator <https://assignbuster.com/comparing-the-end-of-reconstruction-in-south-carolina-and-louisiana/>

Randolph, told the Congressional committee that the KKK were more daring and better organized in Anderson than anywhere in the South.[12] Thus, the regional differences of the Ku Klux Klan should not be exaggerated and both Louisiana and South Carolina were breeding grounds for white supremacy.

Economic hardship characterized the end of Reconstruction for both South Carolina and Louisiana. The Depression of the 1870s dealt the South an even more severe blow than the rest of the nation.[13] Between 1872 and 1877, the price of cotton fell by nearly fifty percent and tobacco, rice and sugar also suffered precipitous declines.[14] The Depression dealt the final blow to the low country rice aristocracy of South Carolina, hastening the breakup of their plantations into tiny plots owned by black farmers. Similarly, many small planters in Louisiana lost their holdings to owners of large estates.

[15] The despair and dejection over the state of Southern agriculture meant that a handful of influential reforms gained prominence in the early 1870s. D Wyatt Aiken, the South Carolina Grange leader and one of the region's best known agricultural reformer, laid out the essential ingredients for attaining self-sufficiency.[16] Unfortunately, by the late 1870s, the reformer's agenda had been eclipsed and removed from consideration.[17] This coincided with the increased popularity of Democratic-Conservatives throughout the New South. With control over the political apparatus gone, the capability for disciplining the black labour force that was agitated due to Reconstruction. [18] This meant that, by 1877, after years of inconclusive struggle, external political and military controls were removed, and southern elites drove their former slaves from positions of political authority and into renewed social, political and economic subservience.[19]

The Depression was also a significant factor in rousing agricultural support for the Southern Democrat's. In South Carolina, the votes of white farmers in the backcountry counties had been responsible for eclipsing the Republicans' black electoral majorities.[20]The impact of the agricultural interest on the Democratic Party was evident from the measures that came before the State legislatures when the Democrats assumed control. For example, the creation of a government department responsible for encouraging agriculture was instituted in Georgia in 1874 and South Carolina and Louisiana made similar provisions in 1879.[21]The latter half of the1870smarked a reassertion of agriculturalist influence in both South Carolina and Louisiana. In both Louisiana and South Carolina, the Depression was a critical factor in ending Reconstruction.

The collapse of Reconstruction in South Carolina was in some ways distinctive to the rest of the New South. Zuczek makes a compelling argument that South Carolinian conservatives produced a different strategy towards the constitutional conventions mandated by the Reconstruction Acts than other Southern states with black majorities did.[22]For example, the general plan of conservatives in the rest of the South was to cooperate with the holding of these conventions and seek to elect conservative delegates to the conventions. South Carolina was unique in that conservatives tried to prevent the convention by voting against it in order to prevent a majority from approving the convention. This tactic - which proved unsuccessful—would have meant continued military rule. Zuczek highlights that conservatives preferred this strategy since military rule would be temporary. The alternative to opposition was a constitution granting political power to

blacks— thus creating a platform which the legislature, the governorship and the judiciary would slip away from the control of South Carolina's white conservatives. No convention was as revolutionary as South Carolina's— partly because no state had so reactionary a political state or so outdated a constitution. Christened the "Congo convention" by opponents, the black majority assembly abolished debtors' prison and property-owning qualifications for serving in the state legislature. By enfranchising black men, the new state constitutions laid the groundwork for Republicans to assume power throughout the south by the early 1870s. South Carolina was also the only state that had black majority in the legislature during Reconstruction. Heather Cox Richardson furthers this argument by suggesting that South Carolina was distinctive in that it became the stage on which Northerners examined an America controlled by workers. This meant that discussions of South Carolina contained an intersection of class and race that debates about most other Southern states did not. The propaganda endorsed by South Carolinian Democrats meant that Northerners came to accept the idea that black workers were plundering South Carolina landowners in a class struggle.[23] Finally, South Carolina was idiosyncratic to the rest of the South as it became the model State used by Democrats to convince the North that freedpeople running the Southern Republican Party were corrupt and incompetent.

Nevertheless, to a great extent, South Carolina and Louisiana shared many political similarities at the end of Reconstruction. Both Southern states were Republican governments throughout the Reconstruction period even in the disputed 1876 election. The South Carolinian and Louisianan Democrats both

relied upon violence and intimidation. More than any other Southern state, however, national attention focused on South Carolina.[24]Here, Democrats entered 1876 divided between Charleston- centered “ fusionists” who advocated conceding the gubernatorial race and concentrating on local and legislative contests.[25]A contest modelled on Mississippi’s, insisted upcountry planter-lawyer Martin Gary could redeem South Carolina. Gary’s “ Plan of the Campaign” illustrates the extreme lengths that Southern Carolinian Democrats went to in order to quell Republican majority in the 1876 election. Gary demanded that every Democrat was responsible for stopping blacks becoming Democrats by any means.[26]This source shows the level of intimidation they felt was required to stop Republicans from voting as Democrats were encouraged to intercept Republican meetings with guns. The stories of Francis Nicholls and Wade Hampton infer that South Carolinian and Louisianan Democrats made no effort to conceal their own dependence on superior force of arms. For example, in Louisiana, Democratic gubernatorial clamant Francis Nicholls demonstrated his understandings of political necessities.[27]He designated local White League units as the legal state militia and took control of the New Orleans Police. Similarly, in South Carolina, Wade Hampton’s allies succeeded in garrisoning the state capitol with as many as six thousand Red Shirts as white rifle clubs drove out Republican officeholders in upcountry counties.[28]This therefore demonstrates that South Carolina and Louisiana were both States that resorted to effective and extreme examples of violence in order to “ redeem the South”

To conclude, South Carolina and Louisiana were similar Southern States at the end of Reconstruction. The most telling indicator that they closely resembled one another was that they both resorted to violent white supremacist counterattacks in the face of black Republican rule. Violence had always been rampant in large parts of the South since 1865 but the advent of Radical reconstruction encouraged its further expansion. The Ku Klux Klan was also highly effective at constructing a discourse that was later embraced by apologists for slavery that not only justified vigilantism but also demonized Radical Reconstruction for its political illegitimacies.[29]The Depression in South Carolina and Louisiana was also another important factor in ending Reconstruction as it galvanized the weakened agriculturalists to enact reforms, encouraged them to become strident Democrats and it was the main reason Northerners allowed the Democrats to “ Redeem” the South with independent rule. Although South Carolina’s convention was novel in its approach, the political landscape of South Carolina and Louisiana was largely the same.

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[2]Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction*, 246

[3]Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South, from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 268

[4]Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*, New American Nation Series, (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 437

[5]LeAnna Keith, *The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror and the Death of Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), xiv

[6]Foner *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877*, 437

[7]Keith, *The Colfax Massacre*, xv

[8]Francis B. Simkins, "New Viewpoints of Southern Reconstruction", *Journal of Southern History*, V (February 1939), 50

[9]Herbert Shapiro. "The Ku Klux Klan During Reconstruction: The South Carolina Episode." *The Journal of Negro History* 49, no. 1 (1964), 49

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[11]Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 303

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[14]ibid, 535

[15]ibid, 537

[16]Michael Perman, *The Road to Redemption: Southern Politics, 1869-1879* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 240

[17]Perman, *The Road to Redemption* , 241

[18]ibid, 242

[19]Burton, “ Race and Reconstruction”, 32

[20]Perman, *The Road to Redemption* , 225

[21]ibid , 225

[22]Richard Zuczek, *State of Rebellion: Reconstruction in South Carolina*. Columbia University of South Carolina Press, 1996, 10

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[24]Foner, 570

[25]Foner, 570

[26]Martin W. Gary, " Plan of the Campaign of 1876," available in in Frances Butler Simkins and Robert H. Woody, *South Carolina During Reconstruction* , Appendix, p564

[27]Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 311

[28]Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 311

[29]Hahn, 265