

## A Letter to My Colleagues: How I Teach Reconstruction in a Fifty-Minute Session of the American History Survey Course

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### **Abstract**

A seasoned history professor explores the dynamics of teaching a session on Reconstruction during the last class meeting of the semester.

It is the final class, lecture 42 of 42. My people are weary and so I am. But during their last 50 minutes with me, I have to give them what I think are the essentials of Reconstruction history.

After my usual “Good Morning” and a quick sip of coffee, I start with the Big Picture, talking forcefully to give my weight: “The period of American history that followed the Civil War is known as Reconstruction. It lasted about twelve years from the end of the Civil War in 1865 to the end of Reconstruction with the Compromise of 1877.” I go on to say, “Historians divide Reconstruction into three phases: One, Johnsonian Reconstruction from early 1865 to early 1867; two, Congressional Reconstruction from early 1867 to about 1876, and three, the Compromise of 1877.”

(Here again the question arises: Coverage versus Concepts. Should I cover this background material? I’d argue yes. This late in the semester I suspect they haven’t read the required reading. Coverage is thus essential; otherwise, they’d get lost as we march into the “dark and bloody ground” of Reconstruction history.)

Next I give them the nub of my lecture: “Let me clearly state at the outset what I think is the most compelling reason to study Reconstruction history. It’s race relations!” I say it again: “The most compelling reason is race relations. And race relations, I think you would all agree, have been and still are the American Republic’s most troublesome problem.”

After that I shift to elementary historiography. “As we start to discuss the Reconstruction era, I would like to remind you again that most historians are fundamentally just like you and me. Why? Because just like us they don’t usually challenge the bedrock assumptions of their own era.” Now I get specific: “Therefore, given that, consider this: until the 1950s, most white Americans, and likewise most American historians (95 percent of whom were white), believed that African-Americans were inferior to whites and should remain segregated and disenfranchised. Consequently, for at least a few years, from the 1870s until the mid-1950s, most historians praised Andrew Johnson and his Reconstruction policies.”

In a louder voice, using repetition as a teaching tactic, I note, “Most historians praised Johnsonian Reconstruction because Johnsonian Reconstruction treated Southern whites leniently – and because Johnsonian Reconstruction allowed Southern whites to treat their former slaves harshly.”

When I think that’s clear, I say, “Okay, now let’s review another basic concept. You will recall that we’ve seen several times this semester that any major trend in American history needs intellectual justifications to sustain it. Well, here’s a graphic example of that concept. The books and articles written by historians praising Johnsonian Reconstruction provide one, but certainly not the only, intellectual justification for the widespread disfranchisement and segregation of black Americans during the period from the 1870s to the mid-1950s.”

Shifting to my Navy officer voice, I continue, “Listen up! Here’s what affects you. Beginning in the mid-1950s, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. and by the insightful scholarship of Kenneth Stampp, most historians changed their minds. Most historians began to damn Johnsonian Reconstruction and praise Congressional Reconstruction.”

Here's a teaching tactic I use to try to make that point especially clear: "In other words, when your grandparents American history in the 1940s, their textbooks would have saluted Johnsonian Reconstruction and condemned Congressional Reconstruction. But, when your parents took American history in the 1970s, it was just the opposite. The textbooks, much like your textbooks today, condemned Johnsonian Reconstruction and saluted Congressional Reconstruction."

(About 30 minutes left. Not enough time for a chronological narrative. I'll pick and choose only what I need to illustrate the difference between Johnsonian and Congressional Reconstruction.)

"Okay," I announce, "here's a brief overview of Johnsonian Reconstruction." Talking in short bursts I mention Johnson's pardons of many Confederate leaders, his support of the Black Codes, designed to control the former slaves veto of the Civil Rights Bill of 1866, and his unyielding hostility toward the Fourteenth Amendment that gave blacks United States citizenship.

Then, I go back to historiography: "All right. Knowing what we now know about Johnsonian Reconstruction, especially its hostility toward African-Americans, you can understand this sad slice of American life." In a slow voice, I say "If you were a typical white historian of the 1870s to mid-1950s era, you would probably support white supremacy, and you'd praise Johnson's leniency toward Southern whites and his support for their determination to control their former slaves. However, since the mid-1950s, most historians have supported racial equality and consequently thought it intellectually justifiable to damn Johnsonian Reconstruction."

Wistfully, almost apologetically, I say, "I hope that's clear. I hope that's enough to help you understand the different interpretations of Johnsonian Reconstruction, and how and why those interpretations have affected race relations."

I glance at the clock and speak, "Now let's push on to examine why we've also had two interpretations of Congressional Reconstruction."

Again picking and choosing, I say: "President Johnson made a jackass of himself with his undignified behavior during the 1866 mid-term Congressional elections. Johnson's enemies heckled him and he shouted back, lowering him to their level and tarnishing his presidential prestige. That's one reason the Republicans won more than two-thirds of the seats in the House and Senate in 1866."

I shift to a slower voice: "That meant that, during the 1867-1868 congressional session, the American Republic, for the only time in its history, had a veto-proof Congress – in other words, a Congress that could override any presidential and enact any law it wanted."

(Notice that I don't discuss – and never have, even when teaching history courses during Nixon's and Clinton's times of troubles – Johnson's impeachment, trial, and acquittal. However instructive and fun that might be, it's still less important than race relations.)

I jab at them playfully with my coffee cup while saying, "Take note now. We're at the beginning of Congressional Reconstruction.

"During the year 1867, the newly elected, veto-proof Congress wipes out Johnsonian Reconstruction, lock, stock and barrel. And then it begins Reconstruction all over again, dividing the South into five military districts and putting a Union general in charge of each." I stride over to the map, point out the five districts, and list the states in each.

(I'm where I want to be and don't want to be diverted by explaining why Tennessee was excluded.)

"The Union generals in each district – obeying laws passed by the Republican-controlled Congress – made sure the Southern states ratified the Fourteenth Amendment. That revolutionary amendment gave blacks United States citizenship. Two years later, the Union generals also made sure that the Southern states ratified the Fifteenth Amendment which gave blacks males the right to vote.

"Furthermore," I explain, "and in the short term even more important, the Union generals made sure that the Southern states disfranchised tens of thousands of white elites, pushing them *off* the political stage, while, at the same time, they oversaw the enfranchisement of tens of thousands of blacks, pulling them *onto* the political stage."

After slowly repeating what I just said, and checking their eyes to see if they understand, I step to the board and

in a neat column:

Carpetbaggers

Scalawags

Blacks

“Therefore,” I announce, pointing to the board, “during Congressional Reconstruction, these three groups made the political coalitions that governed, for various lengths of time, ten of the former Confederate states.

“For example, a coalition of these three groups governed Virginia for a few months. But similar coalitions governed North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Texas for several years, and governed South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana for ten years.”

(Regrettably I don't have time today for a question and answer session on the Carpetbaggers and Scalawags, so just spoon it out.)

“First, let's look at the Carpetbaggers. They were Northerners who came South after the war, and, with most Southern leaders disfranchised, some Carpetbaggers managed to get themselves elected to public office.

“As you can imagine,” I continue, “most white Southerners regarded the Carpetbaggers as sleazy Yankees who exploited the unique situation in the post war South for their personal gain.”

Pushing forward, I remark that Scalawags were Southern whites who cooperated with Congressional Reconstruction and who, from time to time, also got themselves elected to public office. “Understandably their fellow Southerners detest them, considering them traitors to their own people and region.

“And finally we have the tens of thousands of newly enfranchised blacks, who could now vote and get elected to office. As you can imagine, the specter of African-Americans, most of whom were former slaves, voting and holding office horrified most Southern whites.”

There are about five minutes left.

In the strongest voice I can still muster, I continue: “Now you can understand why, from the 1870s to the mid-1950s, most historians agreed with Southern whites that, during Congressional Reconstruction, these coalition governments, forcefully installed and supported by the Northern dominated, Republican-controlled, Congress, threaten to undermine white supremacy and the Southern way of life.”

Talking fast, probably too fast, I point out, “Most historians also agreed that these coalition governments were inefficient, and corrupt – that they were” (I slow to savor the best metaphors in Reconstruction history) “a ‘Carnival of Corruption,’ a ‘Blackout of Honest Government.’

“Therefore, these historians agree that Carpetbaggers and Scalawags ought to be damned and, infinitely more significant, that blacks ought to be segregated and barred from voting and holding office.”

As they begin to pack their gear, I ask for one more minute.

“However,” I exclaim, “most historians since the mid-1950s have argued that these coalition governments – because they were progressive and idealistic – proved that blacks should vote and hold office.

“Yes, these coalition governments raised taxes and spent millions of dollars, some of it wastefully. But that was understandable. They were in uncharted political territory. They were rebuilding the war-torn South, rebuilding the highways, hospitals, railroads, canals, levees, and establishing the South's first public school system. And, most important, these coalition governments ratified the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. What could be more enlightened than that?”

My people have to go. So I have to give them my shortest rendition of one of America's saddest episodes. I say, “

Compromise of 1877, which settled the disputed presidential election of 1876 – an election as close and controver as ours in 2000 – and, in turn, ended Congressional Reconstruction, marked a low point in American history. The Compromise, which sanctioned the withdrawal of the last federal troops from the South, indicated clearly that Northern whites had grown tired of spending time and money to defend the former slaves against the attacks of the unrepentant Southern whites.”

So, I tell my people, “Check out the Compromise of 1877 in your required readings! It’s political drama of the first magnitude. But this is its fundamental significance. In effect, in 1877, Northern whites said to Southern whites: ‘Your for slaves – I’m handing that problem back to you. Do with them as you like. We won’t interfere.’ And so African-Americans especially in the Southern states, remained a segregated and disfranchised underclass until only yesterday.

“Study hard for your final examination. I look forward to seeing you next semester. May Clio be with you.”

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