The untold story of Reconstruction

by Gene Dattel

Celebrations, exhibitions, and media coverage of the sesquicentennial of the ending of the Civil War have concluded. The historic moments—Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860, the beginning of the war at Fort Sumter, the victory at Gettysburg, the Gettysburg Address, the Confederate surrender at Appomattox (April 9, 1865), and the assassination of Lincoln have been duly re-memorialized.

Now America confronts a more complex chapter, the murky years—1865–1877—of Reconstruction. There will be few triumphal observances for there was no happy ending. Instead, America will be exposed to reams of material blaming the South for our racial conundrum and speculating on the lost opportunity for equality. Nevertheless, all of the issues of Reconstruction circle back inexorably to one fact—the attitude of the white North towards blacks.

The scene at Appomattox, Virginia, is quite instructive for the future. The meeting of the two opposing combatants—Confederate General Robert E. Lee and Union General Ulysses S. Grant—is particularly noteworthy because of the current demonization of Confederate symbols, including statues of Lee. Lee and Grant were antagonists in a war that felled hundreds of thousands of soldiers, but the scene at Appomattox was anything but vengeful. Importantly, Grant would become president of the United States for eight years of the Reconstruction period.

Lee was immediately paroled. Despite the fact that Grant viewed the Confederate cause as immoral, his respect for the Confederate general was genuine. Grant wrote that his "own feelings were sad and depressed":

> I felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and so valiantly. . . . [Lee and I] . . . soon fell into a pleasant conversation about old army times. . . . [O]ur conversation grew so pleasant that I almost forgot the object of our meeting.

On June 13, 1865, a mere two months after Lee surrendered, Grant submitted a pardon application for Lee with his personal "earnest recommendation." Within five years, the leader of the secessionist army would be hosted in the White House by President Grant.

What happened to the president of the Confederacy—Jefferson Davis, another target of today's wrath? Davis was imprisoned for two years. When President Andrew Johnson suggested a pardon, Davis refused to accept it. "To ask for a pardon," the secessionist president responded, "would be a confession of guilt." Davis was not afraid of pleading the justice of his cause in a courtroom with the nation as an audience. Davis was released on bail, part of which was paid by the abolitionist Gerrit Smith and the editor Horace Greeley.

Davis was subsequently freed without a trial on what was described as a technicality. The chief justice of the Supreme Court, the abolitionist Salmon P. Chase, announced that the man who led the insurrection against the United States could not be tried for treason.

The underlying premise of Reconstruction in terms of black America was flawed from the outset. For the most part, Americans have equated anti-slavery and abolitionist attitudes with assumptions of black equality. Most ask only what white Northerners thought about slavery, not their opinions about free blacks. In fact, there was pervasive anti-black animosity in the North and a ubiquitous fear of a free black invasion (i.e., migration) to the North. These widely held anti-black feelings existed when the black antebellum population was under 2 percent of the total population. Northern racial attitudes would be a near-perfect guide to the destiny of free blacks after emancipation.

White Northerners may have been opposed to race-based slavery, but held free blacks in disdain and wanted to exclude them from society. The preeminent historian C. Vann Woodward did not equivocate. "The views of the North on [black equality]," wrote Woodward, " were in no important respect different from those of the South—and never had been." There was an important difference. There were 250,000 blacks in the North and four million in the South. Nevertheless, this infinitesimally small group represented an alien intrusion.

Historians may cite a small number of Northern abolitionists with strongly held favorable notions of blacks, but many abolitionists "best love the colored man at a distance," noted the black abolitionist Samuel R. Ward in the 1840s. The Radical Republicans would grant a few free blacks in their own states something approximating civil rights, but they wanted the bulk of freed slaves to have rights only if they stayed in the South.

The antebellum background of blacks in the North did not bode well for the millions soon to be emancipated. The slaves would soon receive what might be called half-free status or probationary citizenship. Benjamin Franklin had outlined extensive regulation—including a special "branch of our national police" to supervise emancipated slaves. (A detailed description of white Northern attitudes is found in my *Cotton and Race in the Making of America*. The historians Eugene Berwanger and Jacques Voegli have also constructed an unassailable description of Northern hostility to blacks.)

As Northern states instituted gradual emancipation, harsh racial judgments became evident. Connecticut gradually eliminated slavery beginning in 1784; in 1800, a concerned Connecticut government issued a survey which asked whether blacks born free were more industrious or moral than those born enslaved. Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale, was responsible for New Haven's report. "[T]hese [free blacks] . . . are generally neither able, nor inclined to make their freedom a blessing," chronicled Dwight in 1811. "When they first become free, they are turned out into the world . . . fitted to make them only nuisances to society. . . . They have no economy and waste much of what they earn. . . . They are left, therefore, as miserable victims to sloth . . . poverty ignorance and vice."

Connecticut soon displayed anti-black sentiment openly. The state disenfranchised its small black population (2 percent) and started a colonization society to rid itself of free blacks. Connecticut went on to vote against the Fifteenth Amendment after the Civil War, when its black population was 1.9 percent. Today's Yale students and New Haven residents are demanding that Yale's residential John C. Calhoun College be renamed because of Calhoun's antebellum connection to slavery; the Yale community remains oblivious to the opinions of Timothy Dwight, after whom another residential college is named. Indeed, Yale played an active role in preventing the founding of an industrial school for blacks in New Haven in 1831. At the same time, citizens of Canterbury, Connecticut, literally ran a teacher, Prudence Crandall, out of town for establishing a school for young black girls.

William Henry Seward, President Abraham Lincoln's right hand, was a longstanding antislavery advocate. This most powerful New York State politician—governor, senator, and secretary of state under Lincoln—he had decidedly negative views about black people. "The great fact is now fully realized," spoke Seward in Detroit in 1860, "that the African race here is a foreign and feeble element . . . incapable of assimilation."

When Seward referred to equality, he spoke of the "equality of white men." Seward only supported black suffrage in New York State

because "their numbers were negligible"; he opposed black suffrage in Washington, D.C., because of the size of the black vote. (The number of blacks in a locale became a critical fact throughout the rest of the African American experience.)

Even though slavery was prohibited in the Old Northwest Territory (Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois), these states wanted to prohibit free blacks, as well. Strict laws were enacted to exclude them from the territory. In the Illinois territory, an 1813 law provided that a free black or mulatto was given two weeks to leave or else thirty-nine lashes would be applied. In 1807, Ohio made blacks post a prohibitive $500 bond before even entering the state. Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana would not allow the tiny black community to serve on juries, intermarry with whites, or serve in militias. The Ohio Republican Senator John Sherman, the brother of General William Tecumseh Sherman, stated that blacks "were spurned and hated all over the country in the North and South." Before the Civil War, ninety-four percent of all free blacks in the North were not allowed to vote.

The North's opposition to an expansion of slavery, as conventionally related, is a half-story which whitewashes American history. An obscure Pennsylvania congressman, David Wilmot, introduced his famous "Wilmot Proviso" as an amendment to an existing bill in 1846. Wilmot's proviso, his claim to history, provided that slavery could not be introduced in the acquired New Mexico territories. Wilmot actually referred to his bill not as the "Wilmot Proviso," but as the "White Man's Proviso." There was no ambiguity in Wilmot's racial attitude:

> I plead the cause of the rights of white freemen. I would preserve for free white labor a fair country, a rich inheritance, where the sons of toil, of my own color, can live without the disgrace which the association with negro slavery brings upon free labor. . . . It is not true that the defenders of the rights of free labor seek the elevation of the black race to an equality with the white.

He did not want any blacks—free or slave—in the annexed territory.

There was no conversion in the North during the Civil War to racial tolerance. The Ohio Republican Senator Salmon P. Chase—Lincoln cabinet member and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court—was a strong anti-slave advocate. But he wanted free blacks out of the North. In 1862, he encouraged General Benjamin Butler, commander of Union forces in the Gulf States, to emancipate the slaves in his territory. He thought emancipation would incentivize Northern blacks to move to the South.

Disdain of blacks was no isolated matter for the North. In 1862, Illinois soldiers voted three-to-one to maintain black exclusion and disenfranchisement. Blacks constituted 0.5 percent of the Illinois population. Both Illinois and Massachusetts rejected attempts to resettle contraband (slaves behind Union lines) in their states in 1862. There were race riots in Illinois when Secretary of War Edwin Stanton sent these refugees to Illinois towns. Governor John Andrew of abolitionist Massachusetts argued that the refugees would end up as "paupers." At the time, blacks accounted for 1.3 percent of the Massachusetts population. By 1930, the black Massachusetts population was still 1.3 percent.

The North's solution for freed slaves was confinement to the South. Separatism was intact. What is well known but less frequently acknowledged is that President Lincoln advocated and funded colonization attempts to rid America of the black population. Lincoln signed a bill appropriating funds for sending freed slaves to an island near Haiti on December 31, 1862, the day before he signed the Emancipation Act. It was impractical, however, to send blacks abroad.

As an alternative, one powerful Republican politician from Massachusetts, George Boutwell, proposed that Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina be designated exclusive black states. His proposed isolation of blacks, in 1866, was an accurate indication of Northern views. Boutwell advocated civil rights for blacks to keep them in the South:

> I bid the people, the working peoples of the North, the men who are struggling for subsis-

> tence, to beware of the day when the southern freedmen shall swarm over the borders in quest of those rights which should be secured to them in their own states. . . . An unjust policy on our part . . . forces him from home to those [Northern] states where his rights are protected, to the injury of the black man and the white man in the North. . . . Justice and expediency are united in indissoluble bonds.

"Expediency" is the operative word. It could be applied to much of the legislation purported to promote black equality. Expediency also included black suffrage in the South to establish a Republican political bloc. Conversely, the North had no problem admitting "swarms" of white immigrants after the Civil War, nor did they fear competition from the white newcomers. Since white Northerners generally viewed blacks as lazy and incompetent, in reality they found black presence, not black competition, objectionable.

Since colonization was not a feasible solution, another ill-fated scheme, "diffusion," was contemplated. This dilution plan would have forced each Northern state to accept a quota of blacks. In 1862, Abraham Lincoln supported "diffusion." Dispersing blacks, thought Lincoln, would reduce racial tension. In 1864, "diffusion" bills in Congress were defeated by Charles Sumner, Thaddeus Stevens, and abolitionists who did not want blacks to move north. (Similarly, in 2015, the European Union attempted to deal with the flood of unwanted migrants by instituting a quota system. Northern European nations quickly overruled this idea.)

During the Civil War, the *Chicago Tribune*—Republican, radical, adamantly anti-slavery, and pro-emancipation—wrote of the "white and superior race." It opposed miscegenation, supported separation, and favored colonization to Haiti. "The greatest ally of slaveholders," opined the Radical Republican *Tribune*, ". . . is the apprehension in the Northern mind that if the slaves were liberated, they would become roaming, vicious vagrants; that they would overrun the North." The free state of California, in 1857, sent black inmates to New Orleans to be sold into slavery.

A containment policy emerged whereby the North assigned free blacks to the South. The Northern black population stayed under 2 percent from 1865 to World War I, when millions of white Europeans immigrated to the North. Only a labor shortage induced by World War I changed the status quo. During this period, one attempt at mass migration north occurred, in 1878. Thousands of blacks, in the "Exoduster" movement, traveled to Kansas where they were met with anti-black resistance. A small number established permanent residence in Kansas.

The North didn't want free blacks; the South needed free blacks as cotton laborers. Such was the situation that America faced in April 1865. It is inconceivable to think that the white South would voluntarily acquiesce to equal rights for four million former slaves living in their midst. White Southerners quickly established "black codes" to restrict black rights; interestingly, these legal efforts somewhat resembled the discriminatory black laws of the Midwestern states. The laws were highly intrusive, as the number of blacks was enormous relative to the North. It is also equally implausible to assume that white Northerners would shed white Southern blood for black rights.

Furthermore, Southerners were well aware in the 1860s (and in the 1960s) of Northern racial hypocrisy. When Pennsylvania declined to enfranchise its black population in 1868, one Southern editor noted "that they refuse to grant in Pennsylvania the 'justice' they would impose on the South." Even by 1869, only seven northern states had voluntarily allowed their insignificant number of blacks to vote, including Iowa and Minnesota, which had infinitesimally small black populations.

An utterly defeated and disarmed South lay at the mercy of the victorious North. In theory, the North could have dictated any terms and conditions on a South which it occupied. The South had lost 25 percent of its white men to death and incapacity. In 1866, 20 percent of all state revenues were spent on artificial limbs of Confederate veterans.

Current interpretation regards Reconstruction as a "splendid failure," a phrase coined by

the black author and activist W. E. B. Du Bois. This treatment focuses on the positives—the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, the defeat of the Confederacy, the ending of race-based slavery, the enfranchisement of freed slaves in the South, the initiation of public schools in the South, the election of black public officials in the South, and the legal basis for negating overt legal segregation in the 1950s and 1960s. Arguably, by the mid-twentieth century, overt legal segregation would have been overturned by an appeal to abstract rights and through legislation, even if the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments did not exist.

What went wrong? First to be blamed was Andrew Johnson, the vice president who succeeded to the presidency after Lincoln's assassination. But President Johnson was impeached in February 1868, and the attempt to remove him from office failed by one vote. His power was severely curtailed.

Interestingly, had Johnson been removed from office, Benjamin Wade, the abolitionist Republican senator from Ohio, would have become interim president. Wade was an advocate for black rights (because there were so few in Ohio) and supported black suffrage, but personally loathed black people and also supported colonization. In 1851, he described Washington, D.C., "as a mean God forsaken Nigger ridden place," where the food was "all cooked by niggers until I can smell and taste the nigger." In 1873, he sought to hire a white servant because he was "sick and tired of niggers." He abused a black attorney by calling him "a damned Nigger lawyer." Wade preferred blacks "at a distance."

The throwaway line "lack of political will" is cited for the problems of Reconstruction. This unfortunately presupposes that there was a groundswell of support for black rights. Such was not the case. America's priorities before, during, and after the war were material and economic, and not the promotion of full citizenship for freedmen. Immediately after the war, the Northern cities rapidly developed railroad connection to the cotton trade of the South. The Union Army was reduced to a few thousand occupying forces in the South—hardly a strong message to protect freedmen. Union soldiers wanted to go home.

King Cotton was humbled by the immutable laws of supply and demand during the war, but still reigned supreme as America's leading export. Black America was cast in the role of laborer in the cotton fields. "White ingenuity and enterprise," declared *The New York Times* on February 26, 1865, "ought to direct black labor" to reestablish King Cotton's export role. Any rhetoric about land reform—i.e., a redistribution of plantations to freedmen—met the chronic need to reestablish cotton production and the attitude towards blacks.

Cotton production and cotton finance dictated the harsh terms of black livelihood. The maligned sharecropping system was a financial system that reflected the risky nature of cotton. The equity stake—the "share" of sharecropping—became arbitrary and the black laborer was prey to the whims of the white land owner. America soon resumed its dominance of the cotton export market.

Hordes of Union soldiers did venture south, as fortune hunters, not as civil rights infantrymen. A significant number of Union officers had generated a great deal of wealth by smuggling cotton out of the Confederacy. The wartime bonanza enticed many veterans to become cotton farmers. These newly minted cotton farmers, however, had no understanding of the risk factors, the labor issues, or the artificially war-induced high price of cotton. Most lost their investments and retreated north. During the war, Lincoln condoned the smuggling, as long as the illicit cotton was shipped to the North, rather than sent by the Confederacy to England as barter for munitions. Lincoln was "thankful that so much good can be got out of pecuniary greed."

Few remember that Harriet Beecher Stowe sent the heroes and heroines of her most famous novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, to Africa in a religious colonization scheme. "I have no wish to pass for an American," spoke Stowe's fictional black hero, the former slave George Harris, "or to identify myself with them. . . . I go to my country,—my chosen, my glorious Africa."

That high priestess of abolitionism Stowe was herself seduced by visions of post–Civil War cotton wealth. She funded her son's cotton venture in Florida and moved there to become rich. Instead, she was greeted by cotton-devouring insects, unpredictable weather, and the return of cotton prices to peacetime levels. Her $10,000 investment was quickly lost. Stowe noticed the "obedient" nature, the "animal content," and the "irrepressible nervous system" of the freedmen. Education for black children, wrote Stowe, should be largely restricted to practical skills: agriculture for the boys and sewing for the girls.

The South sponsored violent repression of blacks via the Ku Klux Klan and other organizations. The result was oppression, exploitation, and discrimination. Where were the Union soldiers? There were a million Union soldiers in uniform at the end of the war. There were 200,000 in July 1865 and the figure dwindled to a few thousand. Neither Union soldiers nor politicians had any appetite for protecting blacks. The race riots, particularly those of Memphis and New Orleans in 1866, prompted the establishment of military districts in the South, but these formal steps did not prevent a white Southern reassertion of power.

Rather than a "splendid failure," Reconstruction was merely a failure. Abstract concepts of freedom and citizenship were crushed when applied to the real world of nineteenth-century America. The former General Ulysses S. Grant obtained the presidential reins in the election of 1868. One would have assumed that the aggressive general would have little reluctance to use military force against recalcitrant Southerners. President Grant's refusal to send troops to Vicksburg, Mississippi, effectively ended Reconstruction in that state. Grant's defeat in the Battle of Vicksburg (1875) during Reconstruction was arguably as significant as his victory in the Battle of Vicksburg (1863) during the Civil War. When questioned by John R. Lynch, the black congressman from Mississippi, President Grant responded that if he had sent troops to Vicksburg, he would have lost elections in Ohio. The triumphant general had become a political hack.

Another excellent Union general, Adelbert Ames, was the military governor of Mississippi in 1875. Governor Ames had no long-term commitment to the Mississippi freedmen. During the violent struggle for black suffrage, according to one author, Ames was consumed with reading Anthony Trollope's novel *The Way We Live Now* and "with new ideas . . . about a double-hulled sailboat." He longed to return to Massachusetts.

The impending reconciliation was illustrated after the death of Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, an abolitionist. In 1874, the Massachusetts congressional delegation asked L. Q. C. Lamar, the Mississippi congressman, to deliver a memorial address in Congress for Sumner. Lamar had written the legislation for Mississippi's secession from the Union. Lamar had genuine respect for Sumner and used the opportunity to promote reconciliation: "Democrats and Republicans alike, melted in tears." Lamar's address, an astounding success, catapulted him to a cabinet position and the U.S. Supreme Court. The union of abolitionist Massachusetts and antebellum slaveholding Mississippi was complete. Lamar was one of the senators featured in *Profiles in Courage* (1956) by the young Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy, which won the Pulitzer Prize.

The Freedman's Bureau and the Freedman's Savings Bank and Trust Company, organizations formed by the federal government to assist freedmen, were hardly comprehensive and at times problematic in operation. The well-intentioned Freedman's Savings Bank had been established to foster thrift and savings habits among the freedmen. But the freedmen's first experience with government-sponsored financial guidance was an unmitigated disaster.

The founder, John W. Alvord, a Connecticut Congregationalist minister and abolitionist, had no banking experience. The institution was riddled with mismanagement and fraud. Frederick Douglass, the black author and activist, was appointed president as a cosmetic gesture in its dying days.

Douglass, who had no chance of rescuing the bank, enjoyed the prestige of being called the "President of the Freedman's Bank." A giant of American history, Douglass marveled at his rise from impoverished slave to "President of a bank counting its assets by millions." But he had not the slightest notion of the bank's business and condition, and, rather than trying to learn, he spent his time promoting civil rights legislation. The perils of having a political activist manage a business were on display.

Tragically, thousands of freedmen lost their savings when the bank met an ignominious death in bankruptcy. W. E. B. Du Bois in 1901 highlighted the significance of the Freedman's Bank failure:

> Not even ten additional years of slavery could have done as much to throttle the thrift of the freedmen as the mismanagement and bankruptcy of the savings bank chartered by the nation for their especial aid.

In an attempt to rationalize the demise of Reconstruction, present-day historians have resurrected the deceased Abraham Lincoln, the man who saved the Union and freed the slaves. This view holds that Reconstruction would have been different if Lincoln had lived. This speculative interpretation of Lincoln's impact may have a soothing effect on the conscience of later generations of Americans but has little basis in reality.

Reconstruction officially ended during the presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes. The former Union general and abolitionist Hayes had indicated the withdrawal of the remnant of Union forces from the South even before his election in 1876. The nation was free to pursue its commercial course without the slightest distraction of the dealing with fate of black America. It was time to "turn . . . attention from politics," recommended the Wisconsin Republican senator Matt Carpenter, "to trade and business." The freedmen had been placed in a separate American society in both the North and the South—outside of the economic mainstream.

Years later, a poignant anecdote of two conspicuous women serves as a powerful example of the nation's reunion. On June 23, 1893, a *New York Times* headline on page 1 read "Celebrated Women Meet." The article referred to the beginning of a warm friendship between Julia Dent Grant, the widow of Ulysses S. Grant, and Varina Howell Davis, the widow of Jefferson Davis. Both women were living in New York when Mrs. Grant called upon Mrs. Davis. Their subsequent carriage ride together in Central Park drew media attention. White America had reconciled.