



## INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF THE RECONSTRUCTION ERA

The Reconstruction Era was literally a period of rebuilding—it entailed the reshaping of the ideologies of the defeated Old South and the physical re-construction of the region so desolated by the ravages of war, and, as a nation, developing policies that thoroughly remade and modernized America and laid the foundation for the "Second Reconstruction"—the Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s and 60s. Thus the post-Civil War end of slavery not only brought freedom to African Americans but also inaugurated a comprehensive and protracted reshaping of fundamental American institutions and the very definition of American citizenship itself.

Still, sandwiched as it is between the dramas of the Civil War and the Jim Crow era, Reconstruction suffers as one of the most understudied and misunderstood periods in American history. Part of this misunderstanding is due to the history's complexity, and scholars' interpretations of the period have varied widely. The first generation of professional historians at the turn of the twentieth century generally followed the white supremacist arguments of the Dunning School in characterizing the postwar Reconstruction era as one where former slaves, abetted by white Northern "Carpetbaggers" and turncoat Southern "Scalawags," dragged the prostrate South through the darkest and most wretched period of shame and humiliation in its history. Only when Southern whites banded together to (in their misguided terms) "redeem" their region from such "evil" and "corruption" and restore "home rule" and white supremacy did the South's long "nightmare" end. Alternatively, others later interpreted Reconstruction as a bright age of hope that ultimately failed, but only insofar as it did not go far enough or achieve its lofty goals. More recently, scholars have agreed with W.E.B. Dubois' conclusion in his 1935 study *Black Reconstruction in America* that its overthrow was a tragedy, a "splendid failure," whose revolutionary agenda could not overcome the overwhelming forces set against it. Indeed, it is unlikely that any other period of American history has undergone so many and so sweeping reassessments than the post-Civil War years.

The public has largely ignored the history rather than grapple with interpretations, and the past four decades of Reconstruction scholarship have had little impact upon the ways most Americans understand the period. For generations of Americans, the history of Reconstruction was imprinted on the popular imagination through books and films like *The Clansman*, *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*. Epic films and best-selling literature had, for most of the twentieth century, the sanction of the nation's leading (white) intellectuals, and was, in many cases, based upon their scholarship. Their racist portrayal of Reconstruction was widely adopted and accepted, becoming the prevalent narrative in popular culture and laying the groundwork for segregation and disenfranchisement of African-American voters in the South that extended into the twentieth century and still resonates today. Outdated stereotypes endure because of the persistent appearance of outdated points of view in popular culture and contemporary political discourse as well as the challenges of teaching the period in schools. As we mark the sesquicentennial anniversary of the end of the Civil War and the beginning of Reconstruction, the era remains a challenge because there are few other periods in American history where such a wide gap exists between scholarly understanding and public consciousness.

Yet the story of Reconstruction is a tale of a pivotal period in the nation's history where a generation of African Americans were active agents in shaping the era's history rather than simply a "problem" confronting white society. The neglected history is one of a period of tremendous and revolutionary accomplishment for former slaves: dozens newly-freed men served in state legislatures and in the US Congress; men and women once considered property formalized longstanding marriages in church services; once illegal, schools for African Americans proliferated in the South; and, no less important or impressive, African Americans went where they pleased, were paid for their labor, and lived without the once-constant fear of arbitrary violence or being sold apart from loved ones.

Moreover, despite lasting but a handful of years and ultimately falling short of reformers' ambitious initial goals, Reconstruction remains one of the most relevant periods of study for contemporary Americans. A confluence of events including the June 2015 massacre of nine churchgoers at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston by a white supremacist who unabashedly touted the main tenets of the Lost Cause, the resulting removal of the Confederate battle flag from the SC Statehouse grounds, the spotlight social media has shone on continuing racial inequalities through the #blacklivesmatter movement, and the 150th anniversary of Reconstruction have initiated a new thirst for a thorough understanding of the postwar years where echoes of these issues were first debated. There are even suggestions by those both within and outside the academy that a "Third Reconstruction" may be eminent where the lessons of history to offer a vision for the future, one in which a diverse coalition of citizens fight together for racial, social, and economic justice for all Americans. Indeed, the most important issues at the front of American politics today—citizenship and voting rights, the relative power of state and federal governments, proper responses to terrorism—are all "Reconstruction questions." In the introduction to the most recent edition of his classic book *Reconstruction*, historian Eric Foner stresses that as long as these matters remain central to our society, so too must an accurate understanding of the Reconstruction era inform those inquiries. These are not simply esoteric pursuits for historians or political scientists, but moral questions at the heart of American society. "Whatever the ebb and flow of historical interpretations," Foner appeals to a new generation of readers, "I hope we never lose sight of the fact that something very important for the future of our society was taking place during Reconstruction."