

# **The American Civil War and Reconstruction: Another Look**

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In this paper I would like to comment on the American Civil War and the policy of Reconstruction in the hope that these insights will shed new light onto our understanding of why full black assimilation into mainstream American society continues to be so elusive. It's true that to a certain degree, Black Americans have assimilated into various areas of society, but are still far behind in social, political and economic status. Some of the reasons may go back to a few lesser-known issues in the conflict. I'll examine some of the prominent leaders and the policy of Reconstruction, an attempt made by the North to integrate the newly freed slaves into mainstream society in the South.

Most if not all of the literature used in textbooks designed for secondary education courses give a rather one sided, right and wrong view of the Civil War. As expected, the North was the protagonist and the South the rebellious antagonist. The antagonist line is made especially dark by the institution of slavery, the ultimate degradation of the human spirit and that which all "Free America" stood for. In my own classes I preached to my students that the North, especially President Lincoln, was fighting a war to preserve the Union and to free the slaves. This notion presented the conflict quite distinctively; the South who depended on the inhumane free labour of blacks was trying to break away from a country bent on keeping itself together and ridding the nation of slavery. The North was the champion of the constitution and the Declaration of Independence which states; ".....all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". However, as anyone who has read or taught about the war at length knows, there is a lot more to the conflict than this. I still believe that the main issues, but not the only ones, were to abolish slavery and preserve the Union. However, the perspectives behind these two issues especially from the leaders at the time say much about how the war was started, was conducted and the treatment of emancipated blacks after the fighting ended.

One of the more interesting differences between what is presented in textbooks and what historical evidence suggests is that the North wasn't fighting to free the slaves, but to abolish slavery, more specifically the institution of slavery. Slavery was an identifiable and tangible

difference that separated the North from the South and so the institution had to be abolished. The Northern commitment to this was declared with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. However, the reason why slavery was an issue was not a humanitarian one per se, but a legal one. The South was allowed to own slaves, the North wasn't. It was a matter of equality under the law for whites, not equality for "all men" as the Declaration of Independence states. This was often reiterated by Lincoln who was adamant toward the principle of the law. He never professed that equality among the races was possible or that it should be. In fact, in his debates with Stephen Douglas, he makes a number of contradictory statements, which illustrate this; "I am not nor have I ever been in favour of bringing about in any way the social or political equality of the black and white races. There must be a position of superior and inferior.... And I ... am in favor of a superior position assigned to the white race." (Current, Richard 1976). In another instance he makes the point clear again and refers directly to the Declaration of Independence by stating in a letter he wrote privately in 1858; "As a nation we began declaring that all men are created equal. We now practically read it as all men are created equal except blacks". (Current, Richard 1976). In the autumn of 1862, Lincoln possibly under pressure from Republicans and the lack of military success stated openly to party colleagues, "My paramount objective in this struggle is to save the Union....if I could save it without freeing any slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that". (Current, Richard 1976). Clearly freeing all, some or none of the slaves was a secondary matter. It appears then that equality of "all men" wasn't a driving force behind the prominent leaders of the North in the Civil War, only the equality of white men, one may say of "true Americans" in their view. Therefore, it was a fight between whites, not whites and blacks. The South won many battles at the onset of the war and one may argue that it influenced a change in the recruitment policy of the North which disallowed blacks from fighting until much later. Blacks were only allowed on the battlefield after 1863 when the conflict took on a more abolitionist temper and where it could be seen as saving white lives. (Carroll and Noble 1995). This strongly suggests that there is little difference between how the leaders in the South and the North viewed blacks, as machinery to do work and save white lives in times of war.

Why then is the notion of freeing the slaves such a predominant one in history textbooks? One of the more obvious answers may be that Americans, like many countries tend to want to glorify any war as a "just" war, a war of good over evil. In the Civil War it makes the catastrophic cost of 618,000 plus lives, the most of all American wars combined, more acceptable. In contrast, we can see the remnants of what many people see as an unjust and wasteful war, the Vietnam War. There is little comparison in the way academics, historians or lay people view these two conflicts and politicians and historians alike are still trying to

justify or at least to make sense of Vietnam. The popular notion of the Civil War is that Lincoln was a saviour of the black cause, when in fact he was a patriot of the Union cause, the "white" Union cause of which slavery was a barricade that had to be broken. Once broken and the South defeated, the Union would be saved and the principle of law and order preserved. One must also recognize that free blacks roaming the countryside would not benefit the North and may even cause more problems as jobs would be harder to come by with the added competition which would explain why there was little or no policy developed early by Lincoln or Congress about what would happen to free blacks after the war ended. One can only surmise that it was not of over riding concern to the leaders until much later.

The next point I would like to discuss is that a major motivation of the war which is mentioned very little in secondary educational literature was economics. There was a marked difference between the economies of the North, which was manufacturing and industry based and the South which was almost exclusively agricultural based and who depended on the North and especially England for its finished goods. Since the South had ideal conditions for agriculture and a cheap labour force to keep the price of their commodities low, it was more profitable for English merchants to trade with the Southern farmers than the more expensive Northern ones. Thus the North was losing a considerable amount of commerce to the South because it could not compete. An attempt was made to impose a tariff on the South but was vigorously opposed by Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina who argued successfully that internal tariffs were unconstitutional. The North knew that it could not easily curb the economic advantage that the South had a lock on.

In reality then the United States was running as two separate countries. The South could and was acting on its own. It had its own way of life and identity with the agricultural land of which it traded for the goods it needed with the North and England. It had its own history and government, although regional, was stable and had a proud tradition. The weakest link in the South was arguably their regionalism and want of distinctiveness amongst themselves. The states were developed individually with separate ideals and distrusted centralization of power of both southern leaders as well as national ones. Therefore, planning southern political strategies that had to do with taxation, political control or authority and especially war strategy proved very challenging and consensus was rarely reached, a factor, which proved beneficial to the North during the war. Despite this, the North felt that the South was slipping away and although slavery was an issue, one may argue that it wasn't slavery that annoyed the North, but the economy that the institution of slavery was providing the South. The cheap labor and the continuing generations of slaves which guaranteed an abundance of relatively cheap labor for as long as the institution lasted would put the North on the losing end in competition with England for the Southern market. The North by tradition and especially by law couldn't obtain the cheap labor force to keep its costs

down. Thus, by law, neither should the South.

If we can concede that the Civil War was to a large extent economic and not one exclusively to free black Americans, then it becomes clearer why Reconstruction and the Freeman's Bureau failed to lay a foundation for integration into mainstream society. In the short term, they did provide the opportunity for passing of the 14th and 15th Amendments which gave, at least on paper, political and civil rights. However, had the North been serious about reconstruction they would never have agreed to the Congressional compromise of 1876 which "peacefully" inaugurated a Republican Hays as President in exchange for, among other things, pulling out federal troops in the South which set the stage for a return of white supremacy there. The troops were never replaced by any kind of supervisory body to protect black rights as new citizens and so they were left to fend for themselves in a hostile, bitter postwar southern environment, an environment which blamed blacks themselves for the war and who were eager to return to the prewar status quo. The North had sympathizers for the black cause, but the South had few. The war, supposedly fought to abolish slavery, an institution that was a way of life for southerners, would find few allies once the last federal troops were finally gone in 1877. The North knew this but did little to guarantee their safety and rights as citizens after the compromise was completed. Subsequently, the oppressive Jim Crow Laws of 1881 became the norm and were validated by the Plessy vs. Ferguson Supreme Court decision legalizing separate but equal facilities for white and blacks. These two events sealed Black Americans fate until the civil rights movement in the 1950's and 60's when federal troops returned to quell new civil rights legislation protests. Thus it becomes clearer that the well being and integration of the newly freed slaves into mainstream society was not a major objective of the war or of much concern for the post war leaders of the time.

There are other issues to suggest that the war was fought for other reasons than legalities. The Freeman's Bureau which sought to establish an agrarian economy, land and crops for the newly emancipated slaves was also a failure mostly due to a lack of education and the fact that the North let the South supervise the venture after a certain agreed number of years. There was also the problem of the management of the farms to which the former slaves had insufficient knowledge and who were not trained to run. Here too the North could have provided more educational assistance and funding, but did little to remedy the situation and over time blacks were forced into servitude to repay debts, many to their former masters.

Given these insights into the leaders of the war, costly political compromises and the policies of Reconstruction, it is easier to understand why the integration of black Americans into society was such a failure for the first 100 years. Integration was not seen as an attainable or a realistic goal for if it was, the political leaders would have committed themselves

more to Reconstruction and the well being of the freed slaves and wouldn't have agreed to pull federal troops out of the South, knowing that political leaders there would go back to their old ways given the opportunity. This would have guaranteed equal representation in Congress and in state legislatures which did happen in the south when federal troops were supervising elections. However, after the compromise and the troop pull out, virtually no black members of any state legislature could be found until the troops returned in the 1950's and 1960's under massive social and federal pressure. Consequently, with no political support and no economic base, blacks were doomed to repeat another 100 years of repression. The conditions of these people changed very little from the pre war era, only now they were in "invisible" chains, free to be in permanent servitude to whites that controlled every facet of their public life. For their continued plight, both the North and the South share the blame as both failed miserably to establish a foundation for long-term political, social and economic livelihood for the people they claim to be liberating. Now America must deal with that failure and lack of commitment, which pushed black American integration into mainstream American society back a century or more.

#### References

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