RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY:
NATION BUILDING FROM AMERICA TO IRAQ

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# Table of Contents

Lessons from Reconstruction for Nation Building Today ........................................ 1

The Southern and Iraqi Reconstructions: Comparable Cases of Nation Building .. 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nation Building Basics</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nation Building and Identity Construction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Reconstruction as Nation Building</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Southern Experience: From Reconstruction to Redemption ......................... 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How Identity Was Constructed</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Violence</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications Of and For Democracy</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Economic Divisions</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Iraqi Experience: From Reconstruction to Deadlock .................................. 24

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How Identity Was Constructed</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Violence</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications Of and For Democracy</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Economic Divisions</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lessons for Policy ........................................................................ 31

Bibliography ..................................................................................... 36
Lessons from Reconstruction for Nation Building Today

President Barack Obama declared an end to the American combat mission in Iraq on August 31st, 2010. Seven years after the U.S. invasion, however, Baghdad remains without a permanent government as Iraqi leaders struggle to resolve a political deadlock and ordinary Iraqis grow increasingly frustrated with their dysfunctional government and the lack of basic necessities. As the United States draws down its presence in Iraq, troop levels are being increased in Afghanistan as part of an American strategy to wear down a Taliban insurgency and make way for a political settlement. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has expended over one trillion dollars in the last decade.\(^1\) American objectives in both wars changed from military regime change to the promotion of stable democratic governments, sustainable economic growth, and sectarian and ethnic reconciliation. The prospects for success in each case are dim.

Debates on how to achieve nation building objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan often focus on whether or not Western, liberal democracy is exportable to other regions of the world.\(^2\) Difficulties in negotiating who will rule and who will benefit, however, confront the architects of every society, including that of the United States. The American ideal of equal economic opportunity and political influence for all citizens regardless of group identity has been threatened by violence, unjust laws, and historical prejudices even within U.S. borders. The struggle between the forces of white

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supremacy and black equality during the Reconstruction Era in the American South presents a historical case study of an unsuccessful attempt at nation building. Following the defeat of the Confederacy, as after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, attempts to reshape the power structure produced chaos and turmoil. In both cases, identity construction played a major role in the stratification of society. What lessons can the Reconstruction of the South teach about the obstacles that identity politics poses for U.S. nation building strategies today?

The paper is organized into four sections. First, a brief overview of the major theoretical concepts is presented in order to justify a comparison between Reconstruction in Iraq (beginning in 2003) and Reconstruction in the American South (between 1865 and 1877). These include a summary of the basics of nation building, an introduction to the role of identity construction in nation building, and an explanation of why Southern Reconstruction is a case of nation building. The paper then describes in depth the experiences of the U.S. South and of Iraq during their respective Reconstructions. Finally, the conclusions drawn from this comparison are used to make policy recommendations for future nation building projects.

The Southern and Iraqi Reconstructions: Comparable Cases of Nation Building

Nation Building Basics

Nation building in post conflict societies is a recurring American foreign policy goal. From disasters in Somalia and Haiti, to mixed successes in Bosnia and Kosovo, to
ongoing projects in Iraq and Afghanistan, each successive effort has become wider in scope and more ambitious in intent. Mounting American expenditures, in terms of both dollars and lives, have been accompanied by heated policy debates. Alongside this expanded activity emerged a body of scholarship on nation building theories and best practices.

Nation building, also called state building, is understood most broadly as actions taken by national and/or international actors to establish, reform and strengthen state institutions. The goals of state building include the provision of security, the establishment of the rule of law, the effective delivery of basic goods and services, and the generation of political legitimacy. A stricter definition employed by a 2003 Carnegie Report narrows the focus to outside military interventions by naming three criteria for American nation building: the American overthrow of a regime or rescue of a regime that would otherwise collapse; the commitment of large numbers of U.S. ground troops; and the use of American military and civilian personnel in the political administration of target countries. Histories of nation building agree that after two success stories in post-World War II Germany and Japan, successive U.S. attempts have yielded mixed results or failure. Common themes in academic analyses include the complexity and time-consuming nature of sustainable institutional change; the primarily

political, rather than technocratic, character of state building projects; and the
importance of reforms driven from within.\textsuperscript{6}

Nation building interventions are rooted in assumptions that developed countries
make about the functions of the state. The accepted key themes of state function
include security and the rule of law; transparent and efficient bureaucratic institutions;
the provision of essential services to the population; the operation of democratic
processes and norms; and the fostering of the conditions for market-led development.
This framework mirrors what interventions seek to achieve in practice. Michael Wesley
identifies the emergence of a three-phase approach in contemporary state building
interventions in Kosovo, East Timor, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan,
Liberia, and the Solomon Islands. The first phase prioritizes security, order, and the
provision of humanitarian assistance. The second phase seeks to create effective,
efficient, and transparent systems of public administration. The third phase promotes
the rule of law, democratic processes and norms, and free-market-driven growth.\textsuperscript{7}

\textit{Nation Building and Identity Construction}

The present study contributes to the existing literature by examining more
closely the causal mechanisms linking context, strategy, and result during nation
building. Specifically, it explores the role of identity construction. In a wartime or

\textsuperscript{6} Fritz and Menocal, “Understanding State-Building,” 44; Nicole Ball, “Democratic governance and the
security sector in conflict-affected countries,” in \textit{Governance in Post-Conflict Societies: Rebuilding
\textsuperscript{7} Michael Wesley, “The State of the Art on the Art of State Building,” \textit{Global Governance: A Review of
Multilateralism and International Organizations}, Volume 14, Issue 3 (July-September 2008), 369-385.
post-conflict context, identity politics exacerbates violence and presents a major obstacle to political reconciliation. The role of subnational identities is an ongoing theme in analyses of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The processes that connect identity construction to identity-based violence and the challenges of nation building, however, are poorly understood.

Primordialists assert that conflict between ethnic or religious groups is inevitable because of unchanging, essential characteristics of the members of each category. Constructivists, in contrast, reject the notion of unchanging, essential characteristics, as well as the permanence of any category; identities are socially constructed. This paper takes the latter view. Violence has the effect of constructing group identities in more antagonistic and rigid ways, favoring the continuation or escalation of conflict. A dominant theme in the existing literature is that elites provoke identity-based conflict to gain, maintain, or increase their hold on political power. Publics follow along the path of elite power interests often to their own detriment.

Race relations during the Reconstruction Era in the southern United States reveal identity construction to be simultaneously an organic and elite-driven process. A complex interaction of political, economic, and psychological factors between 1867 and 1877 resulted in the white supremacist victory. Unique but equally complex dynamics blocked progress in Iraq. This study identifies the lessons for current and future U.S.
nation building initiatives that are offered by the role sub-national identities played in the failure of past nation building projects.

**Southern Reconstruction as Nation Building**

The American South during Reconstruction is a reference point for testing generalizations about nation building. The Marshall Plan for Germany is the dominant analogy used by policymakers announcing nation building strategies. Expert analyses, however, stress that the political and economic liberalization of West Germany occurred under circumstances unlikely to be repeated; in contrast to more recent nation building projects, Germany prior to World War II had been an industrialized nation with strong state institutions and an established sense of national identity.10 Southern Reconstruction provides an alternative case of regime change. During a period of military rule, the North struggled in vain to set up a viable political leadership in the South, and to craft a modern, industrialized economy where it had never existed. The survival of the Republican governments installed by Radical Reconstruction ultimately depended on federal support. Large parts of the population saw the U.S. as an occupier, and sub-national identities provided rallying calls for violent terror.

Reconstruction fits the Carnegie definition of nation building, representing America’s first attempt to transform a defeated society through military occupation.

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“We are making a nation,” Thaddeus Stevens told the House in 1866. Competing academic literatures have made Reconstruction one of the most controversial chapters in U.S. history. The scholarly study of Reconstruction began in the early twentieth century with the Dunning School, which portrayed the period from 1867-77 as an era of corruption ruled by ignorant freedmen, greedy Northern ‘carpetbaggers’, and unprincipled Southern ‘scalawags’. In the 1950s and 1960s, revisionists produced a drastically altered account of Reconstruction, casting the Radical Republicans and Southern freedmen as the heroes and the white supremacist Redeemers the villains. Despite this history of academic controversy, diverse accounts agree that white Southern resistance developed into an effective insurgency that succeeded in driving Reconstruction from the South after twelve years. “These constitutions and governments,” a Democratic newspaper wrote of the 1868 Republican electoral victories, “will last just as long as the bayonets which ushered them into being, shall keep them in existence, and not one day longer.” This quote applies also to current American concerns regarding the persistence of the new governments installed in Iraq and Afghanistan, after the withdrawal of U.S. troops.

Comparisons of Southern Reconstruction to the U.S. occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq are not perfect, of course. While some commentators have used this

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12 Foner, Reconstruction, xx.
13 Charleston Mercury, 5 February 1868, in Foner, Reconstruction, 333.
comparison to justify dire predictions for Iraq,\textsuperscript{14} others concluded that the situation in Iraq is more hopeful because the United States is now using its military in a far greater role and is empowering a majority rather than a minority.\textsuperscript{15} This paper acknowledges important contextual differences between these situations, but maintains that the Reconstruction Era can nonetheless offer important insights and lessons on identity construction and nation building.

The following accounts of the Southern and Iraqi experiences with state building seek to identify valid generalizations about the role and development of sub-national identities. Special attention is paid to how identity was actively constructed, the primary agents of identity construction, the role of violence, the implications of sub-national identity conflict for democracy, and the alignment of identities with economic divisions.

\textbf{The Southern Experience: From Reconstruction to Redemption}

\textit{How Identity Was Constructed}

Identity conflict in the American South has obvious roots in the legacy of slavery. President Abraham Lincoln understood that the Civil War had created a fluid


\textsuperscript{15} Christopher F. Leavey, Major, USAF, “Reconstructing Iraq: Lessons from the American Reconstruction Era,” unpublished paper for Air Command and Staff College, (Montgomery: Air University, April 2006).
situation that made far-reaching change inevitable. More than two years before Appomattox, the Emancipation Proclamation transformed a war of armies into a conflict of societies, ensuring that Union victory would produce a social revolution within the South.\textsuperscript{16} How Southerners and Northerners reacted to the war and its consequences reflected prior divisions of class, race, and politics, even as these were themselves reshaped by the conflict.\textsuperscript{17}

The abolition of slavery notwithstanding, the polarization of black and white actually increased during Reconstruction. In the words of historian Eric Foner, “if racism contributed to the undoing of Reconstruction, by the same token Reconstruction’s demise and the emergence of blacks as a disenfranchised class of dependent laborers greatly facilitated racism’s further spread, until by the early twentieth century it had become more deeply embedded in the nation’s culture and politics than at any time since the beginning of the antislavery crusade and perhaps in our entire history.”\textsuperscript{18} The mind of the white South became frozen in opposition to outside pressures for social change.

The absence of a general agreement on a system of social relations was reflected in the politicization of everyday life as both blacks and whites sought security. Anxiety about the transformation in social relations was underscored by insurrection panics among white Southerners. Touring the South in 1865, Carl Schurz predicted that if

\textsuperscript{16} Foner, \textit{Reconstruction}, 7.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 604.
freedmen chose to behave “as free laborers in the North act every day without causing the least surprise,” Southern whites would be seized by “a paroxysm of fright.”19

As racial anxieties increased, so did polarization and segregation. Before the war, blacks and whites had lived scattered throughout Southern cities. Reconstruction witnessed the rise of a new, segregated, urban geography.20 The mass withdrawal of blacks from biracial churches was the result of both the black quest for self-determination and the refusal of whites to offer blacks an equal place.21

In the North, too, the political conflict between free and slave societies deepened racial anxieties. In July 1863, the New York City draft riot degenerated into a racial pogrom, in which uncounted blacks were murdered on the streets by the city’s vast, poor, and white immigrant working class. The draft riot exposed the class and racial tensions exacerbated by the war experience, and raised serious questions about what it meant to remake the South in the Northern image.22

The primary agents of identity construction were political parties, most notably the majority white Democratic party that employed propaganda and violence to solidify its hold on the Southern power structure. The Democratic party built upon the appeal of individual liberty and limited government, but the final ideological glue was the potent cry of white supremacy. For Democrats, the issue of race relations offered the best means of embarrassing their opponents and disrupting the Republican coalition. They

20 Foner, Reconstruction, 82.
21 Ibid., 89.
22 Ibid., 26, 32-33.
trivialized other issues in a forthright appeal to race: “Shall this country be ruled by the
white or the niggers?”23 When the Emancipation Proclamation provoked predictions of
a black inundation of the Midwest, a group of Democratic women in Indiana paraded
before an election with banners reading, “Fathers, save us from nigger husbands.”24 As
efforts to redeem Southern states began in earnest in the mid-1870s, Democrats
embraced “white-line” politics in earnest, judging that the appeal of white supremacy
offered the best prospects for mobilizing the Democratic electorate.25 According to an
Alabama Democratic party strategist in 1874, the surest means of overcoming regional
and class divisions among white Alabamans was to appeal “to the interests, the pride
and prejudices of the white race,” and make “nigger or no nigger” the chief issue of the
campaign.26 The Redemption of Alabama was thus assisted by the persuasion of many
scalawags “to withdraw their support from the republican party by the appeal made to
them to support their color against the negro.”27

A white identity was actively promoted during Reconstruction. From the
erliest days of settlement, there had never been a monolithic white South. The
plantation belt contained the majority of slaves and the planters who dominated
Southern society, politics and wealth. The upcountry contained a larger number of

23 William M. Browne to Samuel L. M. Barlow, 22 April 1868, Samuel L. M. Barlow Papers, Huntington
26 H.C. Jones to Robert McKee, May 23, 1874, W. Brewer to McKee, 10 May 1874, Robert McKee
Papers, Alabama State Department of Archives and History, in Foner, *Reconstruction*, 552.
white Southerners and was an area of self-sufficient farm families known as yeomen. A latent conflict between these two regions with their sharply different political economies preexisted the Civil War, and many mountain counties rejected secession believing that yeomen should not fight for a planter-dominated Confederacy. According to one citizen of Winston County in Alabama, “All tha want is to git you … to fight for their infurnal negroes and after you do their fightin’ you may kiss their hine parts for o tha care.” Similar class disputes were evident in plantation states, as well; delegates at a wartime constitutional convention in New Orleans condemned the planters and hailed emancipation as “the true liberation and emancipation of the poor white laboring classes of the South.”

President Andrew Johnson, who saw himself as the spokesman for the South’s yeomen, believed that slaves had even joined forces with their owners to oppress non-slaveholding whites. Johnson opposed black enfranchisement because he believed blacks identified with their former masters and would likely form an alliance that would exclude the yeomanry from political power. He told a black delegation in 1866 that “the colored man and his master combined kept [the poor white] in slavery.” The longstanding conflict between planters and yeomen demonstrates that the strength of the white supremacy movement was far from inevitable. The deliberate efforts of ‘identity

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entrepreneurs’ within the Democratic Party was necessary to harness the political power of white supremacy.

Black identity was far from a mere byproduct of white exclusivity. The end of slavery prompted a new unity among black populations previously divided into slaves and free blacks. The unjust laws of Presidential Reconstruction applied indiscriminately to free and freed blacks, thus eliminating the middle ground between black and white that some free mulattoes had hoped to preserve and propelling them into a political alliance with the freedmen.\(^\text{32}\) An independent black church and a host of fraternal, benevolent, and mutual-aid societies emerged, linking blacks across lines of occupation, income, and prewar status.\(^\text{33}\) New schools also symbolized the emergence of a community that united the free and the freed, and Northern and Southern blacks.\(^\text{34}\) By severing ties that had bound black and white families and churches to one another under slavery, sparking an explosion of black institution building, and fusing the fates of former free blacks and former slaves, Reconstruction significantly shaped the development of the modern black community.\(^\text{35}\)

Like their Northern counterparts during the Civil War, Southern blacks proclaimed their identification with the nation’s history, destiny, and political system. A meeting of Norfolk blacks declared: “We are Americans. We know no other country, we love the land of our birth.”\(^\text{36}\) Former slaves identified themselves with the heritage

\(^{33}\) *Ibid.*, 95.
\(^{34}\) *Ibid.*, 100.
of the Declaration of Independence and throughout Reconstruction, blacks took pride in
parading on the Fourth of July.\textsuperscript{37} They viewed the national government as the custodian
of freedom.\textsuperscript{38} The Republican party became an institution as central to the black
community as the church and school. The few black Democrats were considered
“enemies to our people”\textsuperscript{39} and found themselves ostracized as “deserters of their race.”
One woman in South Carolina accused a black man of being a “damned democratic son
of a bitch” who “was voting to put her and her children back into slavery.”\textsuperscript{40}

\textit{The Role of Violence}

Violence was an intrinsic part of the process of social and political change. In
1868, Georgia and Louisiana Republicans abandoned the Presidential campaign, unable
to hold meetings for fear of massacres. In the village of Camilla in southwest Georgia,
400 armed whites, led by the local sheriff, opened fire on an 1868 black election parade.
White gangs roamed New Orleans, intimidating blacks and breaking up Republican
meetings. In St. Landry Parish, a mob destroyed a local Republican newspaper, drove
the editor from the area, and then killed as many as 200 blacks.\textsuperscript{41}

White-line politics were accompanied by political violence, especially in the
Deep South, where Democratic victory was impossible without the neutralization of

\textsuperscript{37} Foner, \textit{Reconstruction}, 288-289.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 291.
\textsuperscript{40} 44\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Session, Senate Miscellaneous Document 48 (1876), 939, in Foner, \textit{Reconstruction},
574.
\textsuperscript{41} Foner, \textit{Reconstruction}, 342.
part of the black electorate.\textsuperscript{42} In Red River Parish in Louisiana, the White League—openly dedicated to the violent restoration of white supremacy—transformed the 1874 campaign into a violent reign of terror. On September 14, 3,500 league members defeated an equal number of police and black militiamen, and occupied the city hall, statehouse, and arsenal. The uprising shocked President Grant, who ordered federal troops to the scene, where they succeeded in forcing the White League to withdraw.\textsuperscript{43}

The most obvious incarnation of violence as a political and social tool was the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan. Although the Klan did not possess a well-organized structure or a clearly defined regional leadership, and acts of violence were typically committed by local groups of their own initiative, the unity of purpose and common tactics make it possible to generalize. As described by Foner, “the Klan was a military force serving the interests of the Democratic party, the planter class, and all those who desired the restoration of white supremacy.”\textsuperscript{44} Its objectives included the destruction of the Republican party’s infrastructure, the destabilization of the Reconstruction state, the reestablishment of control over the black labor force, and the restoration of racial subordination in every aspect of Southern life.\textsuperscript{45} Violence was typically directed at local black leaders. At least one tenth of the black members of the 1867-1868 constitutional conventions became victims of violence during Reconstruction.\textsuperscript{46}

Institutions such as churches and schools frequently became targets as symbols of black

\textsuperscript{42} Foner, \textit{Reconstruction}, 548.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 551.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 425.
\textsuperscript{46} Foner, \textit{Reconstruction}, 426.
autonomy. White participation in Klan activities crossed class lines, from ordinary farmers and laborers to middle-aged planters and lawyers.47

The Klan promoted an obsessive sense of white solidarity, paralyzing the law and making it impossible to indict a Klansmen; witnesses were reluctant to testify and members perjured themselves to provide each other with alibis. Community support extended to the many Southern women who sewed disguises for night riders, and to manufacturers who sought to increase sales by incorporating “Ku-Klux” into the names of their products. By constantly vilifying blacks, carpetbaggers, scalawags, and Reconstruction, even Democratic leaders who did not participate directly in Klan activities helped foster a climate that condoned violence as a legitimate political tool. Even whites wholly unconnected to the Klan tended to view violence against blacks as something less than a crime.48

**Implications Of and For Democracy**

The extreme polarization of sub-national identity had far-reaching implications for American democracy. Foner notes that democracy “functions best when politics does not directly mirror deep social divisions, and each side can accept the victory of the other because both share many values and defeat does not imply a fatal surrender of vital interests.”49 While Republicans typically sought stability through conciliation, opponents of Reconstruction used violence to raise the stakes, add potency to the appeal

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of white supremacy, and intensify questions on the legitimacy of the Reconstruction state.

Reconstruction was an unprecedented experiment in interracial democracy. In America, Foner argues, the ballot did more than identify who could vote—it defined a collective national identity. Senator Thomas Hendricks of Illinois demonstrated the thinking that black suffrage sought to defeat when he declared, “Without reference to the question of equality, I say we are not of the same race; we are so different that we ought not to compose one political community.” This thinking ultimately prevailed and fatally wounded the democratic experiment.

Whites constituted the large majority of Southern Democrats, and blacks a large majority of Southern Republicans. Whereas Democrats solved the problem of majority black counties by preventing blacks from voting through violence and threats, Republicans in majority white counties attempted to build coalitions to win elections. In the words of one Northern observer in 1865, “a party sustained only by black votes will not grow old.” Because only three of the eleven states of the old Confederacy contained a black majority (South Carolina, Mississippi, and Louisiana), Southern Republicanism had to attract white support. The two main sources of this support, carpetbaggers and scalawags, fought a losing battle against the local forces of racial hatred. Northerners constituted in no state even two percent of the total population; far

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more numerous were Southern-born white Republicans. Scalawags were cast by Democrats as “white negroes” who had betrayed their region in a quest for office.\(^5\)

To their moral credit but political detriment, Republicans both black and white took democratic processes more seriously than their opponents. Despite the scale of violence leveraged against blacks and white Republicans by the Klan, extralegal reprisal was rare. The lack of retaliation has been partially attributed to the legacy of slavery, which gave rise to numerous forms of black resistance but did not produce a broad tradition of violent retribution.\(^5\) Another explanation, however, is the remarkably strong commitment that blacks demonstrated to legal processes. “We could burn their churches and schoolhouses,” one black Georgian wrote, “but we don’t want to break the law or harm anybody. All we want is to live under the law.”\(^5\) In any case, the plausibility of armed black self-defense was illustrated in Grant Parish, Louisiana, where in 1873 freedmen cordoned off the county seat of Colfax and held the town for three weeks before being overpowered by whites. It was Easter Sunday, and the white force engaged in an indiscriminate slaughter, including the massacre of some fifty blacks who surrendered and lay down their arms. John G. Lewis, a black Louisianan teacher and legislator, noted that “they attempted [armed self-defense] in Colfax. The result was that on Easter Sunday of 1873, when the sun went down that night, it went down on the corpses of two hundred and eighty negroes.”\(^5\) Thus, blacks and supporters


\(^{54}\) Ibid., 436.


of black rights were committed to democratic principles, but the identity-based tactics of white supremacists precluded the institution of a strong democracy.

The pervasiveness of violent terror proved the incapacity of the state to protect the victims. Pleas for protection flooded the South’s Republican governors. Local officials declared themselves unable to enforce the law and called for the rapid organization of state militias or the dispatch of federal troops. Republican leaders enacted decisive new laws in response to Klan violence, but failed to enforce them. Governors feared that arming black militias would inaugurate an all-out race war, and were reluctant to take actions that would discourage white support.57 In Arkansas and Texas, where governors were able to draw upon large populations of white Republicans, the declaration of martial law did lead to drastic curtailment of Klan activities.58 In 1871 and 1872, the Grant Administration finally brought its legal and coercive authority to bear against the violence, culminating in the use of federal troops to eradicate the South Carolina Klan.

The success of the federal government in restoring order and enabling blacks to exercise their rights as citizens had the side effect of further reinforcing Southern Republicans’ tendency to look to Washington for protection.59 Black political mobilization was most extensive where the army and Freedmen’s Bureau stood ready to offer protection.60 Despite the demonstrated ability of federal troops to restore order when deployed in sufficient numbers, northern electoral politics rendered a strong,

57 Foner, Reconstruction, 438.
58 Ibid., 440.
59 Ibid., 458-459.
60 Ibid., 111.
continued presence in the South impossible. The Panic of 1873, which led to the longest period of uninterrupted economic contraction in American history, crucially weakened Northern resolve in support of Reconstruction.\textsuperscript{61}

Democracy thus had a hand in crippling the Reconstruction project, first by providing incentives for political groups to exploit sub-national identities and violence to gain power, and second by sapping the commitment of the Republicans, who prioritized the plights of Northern voters. The serious limitations of Reconstruction, in turn, weakened democratic principles by justifying the use of any means to ensure white power, including corruption, election fraud, political violence, and terror campaigns.

\textit{The Role of Economic Divisions}

The alignment of economic and ethnic groups after the Civil War was clear and undisputable. The forging of a new class structure to replace the world of slavery was also an economic transformation that would culminate, long after the end of Reconstruction, in the consolidation of a rural proletariat composed of the descendants of former slaves and white yeomen, and a new owning class of planters and merchants, itself subordinate to Northern financiers and industrialists.\textsuperscript{62} The vast majority of blacks emerged from slavery without the ability to purchase land and entered the world of free labor as wage or share workers on land owed by whites.\textsuperscript{63} “Free labor” was interpreted differently by Northern investors, who understood the term to mean working

\textsuperscript{61} Foner, \textit{Reconstruction}, 512-513.
\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Ibid.}, 170.
\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Ibid.}, 106.
for wages on plantations, and by blacks, who took it to mean farming their own land independent of the marketplace.\textsuperscript{64}

The persistence of black poverty was an obstacle that Reconstruction failed to overcome. Accustomed to viewing Southerners, black and white, as devoid of economic initiative and self-discipline, Northern carpetbaggers saw themselves as agents of sectional reconciliation and the South’s “economic regeneration.” They believed that only “Northern capital and energy” could bring “the blessings of a free labor system” to the region.\textsuperscript{65} Northern reformers believed that the irrational legacy of slavery would disappear as soon as planters and freedmen absorbed free labor principles. However, the South’s “labor problem” actually arose not from misunderstanding, but from the irreconcilable interests of former masters and former slaves. Foner postulates that the greatest failing of the Freedmen’s Bureau was that it “never quite comprehended the depths of racial antagonism and class conflict in the postwar South.”\textsuperscript{66}

Between the planters’ need for a disciplined labor force and the freedmen’s quest for autonomy, conflict was inevitable.\textsuperscript{67} Slavery was gone, but in the absence of large-scale land redistribution, the plantation system endured.\textsuperscript{68} By the 1870s, sharecropping had become the dominant form of black labor.\textsuperscript{69} The goal of resurrecting as nearly as possible the old order with regard to black labor contradicted the aim of the

\textsuperscript{64} Foner, \textit{Reconstruction}, 54.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 137.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 170.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 134-145.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 399.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 404.
governments of Presidential Reconstruction to reshape the economy so as to create a modernized New South. The leaders of Presidential Reconstruction wanted the trappings of economic development without accepting its full implications—an agrarian revolution and a free labor market.

The pervasive dichotomy of poor black and rich white, however, is distorting in that it disguises the fate of poor whites, which in fact constituted a majority of the white population in the South. The campaign for white supremacy paralleled a struggle to maintain the planter’s economic domination. When Democrats recaptured control over ‘Redeemed’ states, their reductions in taxes and expenditures did not benefit all Southerners equally, as those with the least property bore the heaviest proportional burden. While the region’s new upper class of planters, merchants, and industrialists prospered, the majority of Southerners of both races sank deeper and deeper into poverty. Blacks paid the highest price for the end of Reconstruction. For white yeomen, however, the restoration of white supremacy brought few economic rewards; the economic decline and rapidly expanding, low-wage cotton textile industry engulfed many upcountry families in a cycle of poverty. Foner suggests that the new mill villages “solved” the problem that would bedevil the rulers of other racially segregated societies, such as twentieth-century South Africa: “how to establish low wages for whites as well as blacks.”

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70 Foner, Reconstruction, 210.
71 Ibid., 213.
72 Ibid., 563, 589, 598, 596.
Reconstruction laws regarding labor, property rights, taxation, the administration of justice, and education together formed a broad effort to employ the state’s power to shape the new social relations arising from slavery. Generally, however, reforms in the political sphere were not matched by far-reaching progress in the economic or social spheres. Congressional Radicals viewed economic issues as secondary. Southern society was marked by vast economic disparities and a growing racial separation in social and religious life. Politics thus became the only arena where blacks and whites encountered each other on a basis of equality. Beyond equality lay questions of class relations crucial to the freedmen and glimpsed in debates over land confiscation, but lying beyond the purview of Radical Republicanism. The Northern labor movement called upon the Republican party to move beyond its commitment to equality before the law to consider the realities of unequal economic power, but failed to inspire agreement on the responsibility of the state in combating economic inequality and in fact contributed to the splintering of the Republican party. In the South, Republicans had undertaken “to promote political equality in a society characterized by equality in nothing else.”

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73 Foner, Reconstruction, 198.
74 Ibid., 233.
75 Ibid., 290.
76 Ibid., 17.
The Iraqi Experience: From Reconstruction to Deadlock

How Identity Was Constructed

In the power vacuum that replaced Baathist rule in Iraq following the 2003 American overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime, underlying historical tensions surfaced as sharp internal divisions and led to communal massacres. The antagonism between Muslim Sunnis and Shi’as dates back to the death of Mohammed, but the sectarian tensions in Iraq have been exacerbated by a unique history of power relations. Iraq is a majority Shi’a country in a majority Sunni world, and was ruled for nearly a century by an elite Sunni minority, until the American invasion led to the creation of a Shi’a dominated government in 2005.\textsuperscript{78} By 2006, the country had dissolved into civil war; a sustainable power-sharing arrangement remains elusive today.

Sectarianism, or conflict between Iraq’s three major ethno-religious groups, Sunni Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Shi’a Arabs, has been labeled the main barrier to progress in Iraq.\textsuperscript{79} In the wake of the swift overthrow of Saddam’s regime, the United States disbanded the Iraqi army and purged the government of Baath party members. These decisions had grave implications. The disbanding of the army produced high unemployment rates among young Iraqis who flocked to sectarian and criminal


organizations."\(^{80}\) Iraq’s Sunni population equated de-Baathification with a de-Sunnification of government.\(^{81}\) In April 2004, Sunni insurgents attacked Coalition forces in Fallujah, Baghdad, Ramadi, Samarra, and Tikrit, while the Shi’a Mahdi Army occupied Najaf in the south and Sadr City in Baghdad.\(^{82}\) The response of the ill-prepared Iraqi security forces was disastrous, as large percentages joined the insurgents or mutinied when attacked, leading to the deaths of thousands of civilians.\(^{83}\) Coalition forces abandoned plans for a quick transfer of control to Iraqi security forces and became embroiled in Iraqi civil conflict.

In the lead-up to the January 2005 elections, sectarian violence steadily increased, with Shi’a and Sunni groups striking mosques and individuals as their leaders pursued disparate political agendas.\(^{84}\) Following Coalition attacks on Fallujah, Iraq’s most prominent Sunni party announced in November 2004 its withdrawal from the interim government and decision not to participate in the upcoming elections. The Sunni 2005 election boycott left the Interim Iraqi Government dominated by Shi’a and Kurdish factions, and the increasing polarization fueled an escalation in sectarian violence that threatened reconstruction and national reconciliation.\(^{85}\)

\(^{82}\) SIGIR, “Hard Lessons,” 161-162.
\(^{83}\) Ibid., 164.
\(^{84}\) Ibid., 371.
\(^{85}\) Ibid., 439.
The chaotic struggle for power precipitated by Iraq’s new electoral system moved control of Iraq’s central government ministries from technocrats controlled by the Baath party to competing political parties built around sectarian identities. Who received what services and who did not was increasingly decided on the basis of political allegiance, which mirrored sectarian identity. As the public institutions managing reconstruction were overwhelmed by sectarian conflict, mistrust among Shi’a, Sunni, and Kurdish communities deepened.86

In February 2006, Sunni terrorists destroyed the al-Askariyah mosque, a Shi’a holy site in Samarra, and prompted an acceleration of sectarian killing. At least 1,300 Iraqis, mostly Sunni, were murdered in the next four days, many by the Moqtada al-Sadr’s Shi’a militia.87 As the country descended into civil war, the mass violence between Iraq’s sects compromised the government’s ability to protect refugees. The population was further radicalized as Sunni and Shi’a neighborhoods cordoned themselves off and threatened minority groups. In effect, ethnic cleansing made refugees fully dependent on sectarian militias for their safety.88

At its height in 2006, the civil war resulted in the deaths of 1,000 Iraqis per day. Violence was modestly reduced in 2007 due to the success of the U.S. troop surge and the organization of local Sunni security forces, known as the Sunni Awakening. Calmer conditions, however, did not translate into political reconciliation as hoped.89 An Iraqi in Basrah described the politicization of everyday Iraqi life in 2008 by comparing it to

87 Ibid., 501.
88 Ibid., 502.
89 Ibid., 553.
Saddam’s rule, when many Iraqis could remain largely ignorant of politics: “Now it’s a truth for all life.”90

Major factors in identity construction in Iraq included history, U.S. policy, and the deliberate tactics of sectarian militias. If the legacy of slavery poisoned relations between blacks and whites in America, contemporary sectarian politics in Iraq are likewise historically contingent. Extensive cross-ethnic cooperation between Sunni and Shi’a Arabs and Kurds characterized the Iraqi nationalist movement from 1908 through 1963, but the British legacy of an elite Sunni minority controlling Iraq’s government and economic resources persisted. Saddam Hussein seized power in 1979 and proved himself a consummate manipulator of identity politics. He initially pursued an overarching national mythology that transcended ethnic and sectarian cleavages. During the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam emphasized Arab primacy by referring to the war as “Saddam’s Qadisiya,” in reference to the Arab Muslim defeat of Sassanid Persia in 636. In the 1990s, he suppressed Shi’a uprisings even as he embraced sectarian ideas such as reverence for ayatollahs in order to co-opt Shiites into a larger concept of Iraqi nationalism. He co-opted tribal identities in a similar manner, swearing to defend tribal traditions in exchange for public declarations of allegiance to Iraq. Saddam’s survival thus depended on the deft manipulation of differing and sometimes contradictory myths of solidarity.91

While the United States did not create Iraq’s sectarian identities, a series of egregious errors following the March 2003 invasion helped promote them. The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) dramatically increased the recruitment pool for insurgent organizations and sectarian militias by disbanding the 385,000 man conscript army, laying off 500,000 workers in public sector factories, and terminating agricultural subsidies. The formation of the Iraqi Governing Council in July 2003 according to ethnic quotas sent a message to sectarian based political parties, such as the Da’wa Party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), that confessional rather than nationalist politics were required.\textsuperscript{92}

Sectarian identities were exploited by ‘sectarian entrepreneurs’—from the Mahdi Army to neo-Salafi extremists—to mobilize and enforce discipline on their members as a means to achieve political and criminal ends.\textsuperscript{93} Populist Shiite militia leaders, notably Moqtada al Sadr, capitalized on the narrative of Shi’a relative economic deprivation. The motif of suffering and deprivation that runs through Shiite identity and religious practice was supported by a degree of correlation between sectarian and socio-economic position; Shi’a in Iraq were generally more economically disadvantaged than their Sunni counterparts, representing a disproportionate number of the poor. Rich and powerful Shi’as, however, did exist and were certainly outnumbered by poor Sunnis.

The narrative of the Shi’a underdog was thus never perfect, and relied on conscious promotion.⁹⁴ For their part, Sunni insurgents embraced the tactics of propaganda. Armed insurgents used the internet, T.V. and cell phones to encourage a siege mentality and promote their own role as protector of an oppressed population. The popular T.V. station Zawra regularly showed footage of attacks against U.S. troops and encouraged Iraqis to engage in such attacks. U.S. military officials believed that insurgents attacked occupation forces in some cases just to get footage.⁹⁵

**The Role of Violence**

Violence played a visible role in aggravating identity conflict. Iraq’s sectarian divide increased dramatically following the 2006 bombing of the al-Askariyah Mosque. While violence against coalition forces and Iraqis was on the rise prior to the bombing, this event exacerbated sectarian tensions and led to increased violence in Iraq’s ethnically-mixed areas, especially Baghdad. Sectarian attacks occurred on a daily basis, creating instability and weakening the Iraqi government, which in turn lent greater legitimacy to sectarian groups.⁹⁶ Violence thus solidified sub-national identities. Both Sunni and Shi’a militias initially aimed to grab political power and satisfy personal greed. By the end of 2006, however, reconciliation had become more challenging than

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⁹⁶ Cordesman, “Iraq’s Insurgency,” 34.
simply addressing the grievances and political goals of different groups; sectarian violence was increasingly propelled by revenge for past killings and fear of future ones.  

**Implications Of and For Democracy**

The implications of sub-national identity conflict for Iraq’s nascent democracy were disastrous, and vice versa. Because the 2005 Constitution could not assure Sunni groups that their interests would be protected, they sought to sabotage the process, first by boycotting elections, then by sheltering Salafi jihadists such as al Qaeda in Iraq, and finally by supporting a full-blown insurgency against the central government. Shi’a militias were able to take advantage of Sunni non-participation and of their larger numbers in early elections based on sectarian identity to dominate the Iraqi government. The militias gained strength by providing protection, as well as basic services such as food, medicine, money, employment, gasoline, and even electricity to Iraqis who could not count on the central government. In return, they received political support. The militia takeover of Iraq’s ministries ensured that they would not provide basic goods and services, lest they undermine popular support for the militias. When Sunni insurgents clashed with Shi’a militias in the streets of Iraq, the cycle of violence became self-perpetuating.  

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The Role of Economic Divisions

Economic factors are as relevant in understanding Iraq as the American South. Under Saddam and United Nations sanctions, Iraq plunged from a gradually advancing, middle income country to a poor and underdeveloped one.99 After the U.S. invasion, the core grievances underlying sectarian strife intertwined political and economic issues, including the sharing of oil revenues, federal-regional relations, and minority rights.100 Post invasion economic policies facilitated the rise in sectarian tensions, which in many ways evolved into a war for economic space.101 Bassam Yousif explains that the sectarian polarization and economic impasse that emerged in Iraq “are not simply the result of stubborn historic enmities, but are the product of the interaction of specific economic policies with existing social and structural conditions.” The United States’ desire to radically restructure Iraq’s economy using market shock therapy reinforced and inflamed sectarian divisions, which damaged the prospects for security and rebuilding.102

Lessons for Policy

The previous discussion draws out multiple parallels between the Reconstructions of the American South and of Iraq. Both situations witnessed the

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101 Cordesman, “Iraq’s Insurgency,” 422.
increased polarization of different identity groups. In both cases, this was associated
with urban segregation; Southern cities saw the separation of whites and blacks, and
Iraqi cities the separation of Sunnis and Shi’as. The South and Iraq were characterized
by a palpable politicization of everyday life, in which consciousness of one’s own group
identity dramatically affected the day to day interactions between groups. Identity
entrepreneurs—white supremacist Democrats, and Sunni and Shi’a militia leaders—
encouraged the crystallization of sub-national groups in order to gain popular support.
Their success came at the expense of the poorer, majority population segments, both
black and white, as well as Sunni and Shi’a.

In both cases, the trappings of democracy, including elections, provided
incentives for political groups to exploit sub-national identities and violence to gain
power. This in turn weakened democratic principles by justifying the use of any means
to ensure the security of identity groups, including corruption, election fraud, political
violence, and terror campaigns.

The civil strife of both conflicts was complicated by the presence of an outside
actor, the North or Federal Government in the case of the South, and the United States
in the case of Iraq. The outside actor, after playing a major role in overturning the old
power arrangements, assumed that changing the laws would have a deep impact on the
reconstructed society’s social and economic structure. Whether or not the old order
deserved overturning is not the main issue; the point is that this assumption of the
sufficiency of political reform was disproved in both cases. In both the South and Iraq,
victims of violence came to look to the outside actor for protection that failed to
materialize. The recessions of 1873 and 2007 led to a loss of interest in reconstructing the South and Iraq, respectively. Finally, the withdrawal of the outside actor from each situation resulted in a marked decay of the order imposed by its security forces, and ultimately in resurged turmoil.

Identity politics play a visible role in post-war societies, yet are frequently misconstrued as the cause, rather than the result, of civil conflict. Identity is simultaneously malleable and a key element in determining group interests. The same forces of identity construction were at work in the American South during Reconstruction and in Iraq following the 2003 American invasion, and the exploitation of sub-national identities significantly hindered the accomplishment of nation building objectives in both.

The critical role of sub-national identities implies that these should receive much more attention during the planning and implementation phases of nation building projects. Subgroups that feel disenfranchised are liable to resort to extreme measures, including violence, to gain popular support for an overthrow of the new status quo. For these groups, identity politics is a very attractive tool.

America continues to pursue nation building strategies that place little priority on existing social stratifications, assuming that the correct institutional structures will encourage democratic and economic growth. The United States Army Field Manual No. 3-07 summarizes the primary objectives and tactics of “stability operations” in Iraq and Afghanistan, without explicitly referring to them as nation building. The goals outlined in the Field Manual reflect the same priorities summarized above as
conventional nation building basics: first establish security; then establish and support
the institutions of public administration; and finally promote democracy and economic
development.103

The basic flaw of this approach is the conception of the state as separate from
the political, economic, and social spheres. The main lesson of Southern
Reconstruction, reconfirmed in Iraq, is that in post-conflict environments, a top priority
must be given to understanding how the identities and interests unique to a particular
situation co-evolve. Following the overthrow of a society’s established power structure
and commonly understood rules of interaction, the day-to-day encounters between
different groups are infused with an inevitable tension until a new social order is
confirmed. In such fluid circumstances, the existing fault lines of identity may widen
through mutual fear, distrust, and the deliberate efforts of entrenched economic
subgroups seeking to maintain an elite position.

Michael Wesley explains that “from Iraq and Afghanistan to Kosovo and
Bosnia, intervention forces are trapped by the realization that if they withdraw, un-
reconciled hatreds in the political sphere, unresolved resentments in the economic
sphere, and unreformed traditions in the social sphere will tear apart the imposed order
and state frameworks.”104 A legitimate state will only be stable when it is the product
of the dominant understandings and categories of the political, economic and social
spheres of human activity. The U.S. approach in the South and in Iraq put the cart

103 FM 3-07, “Stability Operations,” (U.S. Department of the Army, 6 October 2008), 4-10, accessed 18
before the horse and overestimated the influence that state institutions could have on these spheres.

A deeper appreciation of the obstacles posed by identity construction in post-conflict societies could lead policymakers to conclude that nation building is not a feasible enterprise. This conclusion should weigh heavily on their decision to allow or actively work for the overthrow of an existing government. If an intervention does take place, a coherent strategy is needed to avoid the long term destabilizing consequences of letting the chips fall where they may. The American South endured another century of stagnation, injustice, and violence before the United States addressed again the implications of emancipation. Racism imperils American democracy and the ideal of equal opportunity to this day.

Domestic as well as international policymakers should be prepared when even the most cleverly designed electoral system with the most brilliant power-sharing clauses fails to remove the incentive that certain groups have to exploit identity politics. From the outset of any nation building endeavor, officials must accept the inevitable necessity of obtaining the buy-in of all stakeholders, including potential spoilers. More importantly, decision makers must avoid assuming that redefining the political structure will automatically reshape the social and economic structure of a society. Unless all spheres of power relations are addressed, attempts to build viable societies—whether led from without or from within—will fail.


