What Kind of Example?

*Elite and Activist Perceptions of the U.S. Reconstruction Period in Subsequent Reform Movements*

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Societies in fact reconstruct their pasts rather than faithfully record them.

—Michael Kammen
*Mystic Chords of Memory*

*I authorize the public release of this thesis.*
Introduction

“Never have American public men in responsible positions...been so brutal, hypocritical, and corrupt.”¹ So wrote Democratic politician Claude Bowers, capturing the consensus of the white governing elite, in his widely read 1929 history of the Reconstruction era. Just a few years earlier, conversely, *The Crisis* – one of the leading black periodicals in the country – described Reconstruction as “the single finest instance of the effort of a nation to set immediately right an ancient wrong.”² The disparity of opinion suggested by these two contemporaneous works naturally raises the question of how the controversial Reconstruction period was seen by activists and political elites in later eras, and what factors might have affected those attitudes. This thesis will explore perceptions of Reconstruction among two constituencies for which considerable sympathy with the period might be expected: white liberal and African American elite activists during the Progressive Era and the New Deal.

Reconstruction refers to the period after the Civil War in which the defeated Southern states were occupied by the federal government, which devoted considerable effort for about a decade to altering their political, economic, and social structures. The era and its historiography are intensely studied subjects in American history, and scholarly opinion of the period has changed dramatically over time. The common perception among scholars until roughly the 1950s, referred to as the Dunning School after its chief proponent William Archibald Dunning, depicted Reconstruction as a tyrannical Northern dictatorship handing the South over to incompetent and corrupt blacks. Since then, a far more positive view, which emphasizes the intense efforts of African Americans – assisted by the federal government – to bring about a more just and humane society, has emerged. In spite of this interest in Reconstruction’s

historiography, however, remarkably little attention has been paid to the attitudes of activists and political elites – as distinct from scholars – in the twentieth century towards the period. This is even the case for activists and elites among both the white Northern liberal and African American communities during the two great social and political reform movements of the early twentieth century: the Progressive Era and the New Deal. These are two constituencies whose aims and sympathies would seem to have considerable natural congruence with Reconstruction, given their emphasis on reform, a more equitable society, and expanded federal power, but which lived in an era in which the period was vilified. This potential disparity between natural sympathies and scholarly perceptions creates the interesting question of the popular attitudes of these groups towards Reconstruction.

An examination of these activist attitudes reveals considerable variation based on both race and time period that demonstrates the influence of both the dominant trends in historical scholarship and of changing contemporary political, social, and economic circumstances. The examination also reveals important conceptions of and shifts in attitude towards the federal government, as whites were consistently skeptical of the legitimacy of federal intervention to promote social equality even as the federal government expanded its overall reach in these periods, while blacks used their positive memories of Reconstruction to advocate for a more assertive federal role. This examination reinforces theories about the social and political construction of collective memory by contemporary factors.

These groups left considerable evidence of their views towards Reconstruction in the form of newspaper articles, book reviews, and other types of documentary evidence. The consensus opinion of white liberal elites was disdainful of Reconstruction during the Progressive Era, and this contempt became only somewhat milder during the New Deal. In the Progressive
Era, the common perception was the traditionally negative one of the Dunning School. In the New Deal, some sources – especially politicians – repeated these criticisms, but some in the media also adopted a marginally more positive outlook. However, during the New Deal Progressive historians and others also emerged to offer a more class-based perspective, which criticized Reconstruction as an attempt by Northern capitalists to squash the industrial power of the South. The opinions of this constituency are found in a great many sources, principally periodicals – in this case prominent liberal magazines like *The New Republic* and *The Nation* – as well as other writings by relevant white progressive politicians.

Conversely, throughout these two periods the general attitude of the African American elite – shaped by historian-activists like W.E.B. Du Bois – remained a remarkably positive one: praise and fondness for Reconstruction, in spite of its poor reputation, and even while acknowledging its limitations. Although expressing some cynicism about the ultimate outcome and sometimes about Northern motives, periodical articles and other works consistently maintained a fairly positive view in which the achievements of Reconstruction for African Americans – straightforward observations now, but quite unusual ones given the prevailing trends in scholarship – were celebrated. However, particularly in the New Deal and under the clear influence of Du Bois, there was also an increasing amount of economic or class-based criticism similar in many cases to contemporary white thinking along the same lines. As with the white community, the principal sources here are the great many African American newspapers and periodicals, most prominently *The Crisis* and the *Chicago Defender*, as well as historical works by activists like Du Bois and other representative primary sources.

In addition to reflecting shifts in academic attitudes from the Dunning School to a more diverse scholarship, these changes mirror some of the larger shifts in political, social, and
economic circumstances and the changing concerns of elites during the two reform movements. The Progressive Era was very much concerned with corruption, honest government, and political reform – though with economic issues as well – and thus a contemptuousness towards the perceived corruption and messiness of the Reconstruction period was natural. In addition, the Progressive Era followed a serious retrenchment for civil rights in the 1890s, and Progressive elites often tolerated or even embraced a form of pseudoscientific racism; both of these factors meshed well with a dismissive attitude towards African American self-government. Conversely, during the Great Depression and the New Deal attention towards economic issues – including the power of big business, class conflict, and Marxist-inspired thinking after the 1917 Russian Revolution – was understandably greater, which motivated many of the economic critiques of the Reconstruction era. At the same time, the New Deal was not linked to racism and racial retrenchment in the same way the Progressive Era was, allowing for a more receptive attitude in the white liberal elite towards black civil rights that was reflected in thought towards Reconstruction.

This thesis begins by presenting an overview of the Reconstruction era, the historiography of Reconstruction, a review of relevant secondary literature, and a discussion of the constituencies and periods that will be examined. The next two chapters, covering the Progressive Era and the New Deal respectively, form the bulk of the work; each begins with a basic overview of the period and its race relations, and then describes perceptions of Reconstruction by white liberals and African American elites based on primary source documents. The Conclusion discusses more closely some of the factors which may have contributed to the attitudes and changes in attitudes discussed in the prior chapters, looking particularly at changing contemporary circumstances and the work of historians in each era. The
attitudes towards Reconstruction examined by this thesis underscore how powerful contemporary events are in shaping conceptions of the past, as reflected in the remarkable amount of variation in thought towards Reconstruction that existed in such a short period of time.
CHAPTER ONE
A “Dark and Bloody Ground”
Remembering Reconstruction

Any attempt to trace perceptions and attitudes towards Reconstruction must begin with an understanding of the Reconstruction era itself. An overview of the passion, trauma, and conflict of the period helps to make clear how Reconstruction could inspire such intense disagreement and rhetoric decades into the future. An understanding of historical attitudes towards Reconstruction likewise requires an examination of the scholarly literature that has considered the period, and the different paths it has taken – from profoundly negative to largely positive – in the hundred and fifty years since the era itself. The first part of this chapter will survey both the Reconstruction era itself as well as the historiography of the period from the 1870s to the present. As the rest of this thesis will explore, popular attitudes towards Reconstruction frequently paralleled these scholarly assessments, but also differed from them in important ways, and both were shaped by contemporary events.

In contrast to historical work on Reconstruction, historical literature on perceptions of Reconstruction is fairly sparse, which creates the opportunity for this thesis. The two constituencies considered by this thesis – white Northern liberal elites and African American elites – both lived in eras in which Reconstruction was decisively maligned by historical scholarship, but both might be thought ordinarily sympathetic to the aims of the period. The final part of this chapter will examine existing work on popular perceptions of Reconstruction, and discuss in more detail the two constituencies as well as the two eras – the Progressive Era and the New Deal – the thesis will examine.

The Reconstruction Era
The Reconstruction era refers to the period immediately after the Civil War – generally dated from 1863 to roughly 1877 – in which the Southern states defeated in the conflict were
occupied by the federal government, which then devoted considerable effort to reintegrating the states back into the Union and remaking their political, economic, and social structures broadly in the direction of greater rights and opportunities for African Americans.\(^3\) The rapid transformation of Southern life brought about by the region’s defeat in the Civil War and the enormous economic and social impact of the abolition of slavery stirred substantial passions and resistance among Southerners, while the North likewise witnessed significant political and ideological conflict over the issue. Southern resistance and shifts in Northern opinion ultimately led to a withdrawal of Northern troops and an increasing Northern weariness and disinterest that enabled the restoration of Southern state governments that undid much of the progress of the era.

Plans for Reconstruction, and controversy surrounding them, predated the end of the Civil War. In December of 1863, President Lincoln proclaimed a “10 Percent Plan” whereby new state governments could be formed in the South whenever voters equal to ten percent of the votes cast in 1860 took an oath of future loyalty to the Union; the new state governments were required to confirm abolition, but otherwise little more was mandated of them.\(^4\) By the end of the war, such an approach was being put into practice in Louisiana, Tennessee, and Arkansas, states in which large swaths of territory had been occupied by the Union for some time.\(^5\) This approach, however, produced substantial criticism from the so-called “Radical Republicans” in Lincoln’s own party, especially after it became clear that state governments restored under the president’s plan were hardly eager to expand civil rights to freed slaves. The Radical Republicans embraced a far broader conception of federal authority, and increasingly viewed

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\(^3\) 1877 is the date traditionally given to the end of Reconstruction. Other historians, however, have postulated somewhat later dates, on the basis of the gradual nature of the decline of federal interest and the installation of the Redeemer regimes in the South, as well as the continuing participation in political life of some black politicians. See, e.g., Orville Vernon Burton, *The Age of Lincoln* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 311-22.


Reconstruction as an opportunity for far-reaching social and economic transformations in the oligarchic South. In 1864, Congress passed the Radical Wade-Davis bill, which substituted for the 10 Percent Plan a proposal that state governments only reconvene after a majority of white males pledged loyalty to the Union, and required voters to take the so-called “Ironclad Oath” that they had never supported the Confederacy. Presaging future conflict, Lincoln pocket vetoed the bill.

The end of the Civil War brought the problems of Southern reintegration and the effects of abolition – confirmed by the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 – into sharp relief. Millions of slaves (representing a vast part of the Southern economy) were now free; one-fifth of Southern white males had perished in the conflict; agriculture and commerce were destroyed. The freed slaves immediately set about asserting their new freedom, building black community institutions, and working towards economic independence, typically under the ideology of free labor, which envisioned individual economic independence flowing from land ownership. Freed blacks typically met resistance from whites resentful of the ongoing social and economic dislocation, convinced that freed slaves would not work, and determined to maintain, to some extent, the old order; blacks faced substantial violence in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. In March of 1865, Congress created the Freedmen’s Bureau, which – despite substantial weaknesses – promoted black education, labor, health, and welfare, intervened in judicial and labor disputes, and made some effort to distribute land to freed slaves.
The man overseeing Reconstruction was not Lincoln, who had been fatally shot by John Wilkes Booth in April of 1865, but his Vice President, Andrew Johnson. Johnson, from Tennessee, remained loyal to the Union even as the state that had elected him to the Senate seceded, and as Tennessee’s military governor he had initially taken a hard line against Confederates. As president, however, Johnson – who viewed himself as the champion of poor Southern whites – was considerably more conciliatory to the defeated South, and displayed little interest in the rights of freed slaves. In a series of proclamations and appointments in 1865, Johnson largely extended Lincoln’s lenient reconstruction policy to the whole of the South, but with even less emphasis on black civil rights; his military governors focused much of their energies on gaining the support of white Southerners. The state governments restored under Johnson’s plan enacted, most notably, the repressive Black Codes, which under the guise of addressing the labor problems created by emancipation essentially sought to replicate the conditions of slavery, preventing blacks from gaining any measure of economic independence. Such measures quickly garnered criticism from the Radicals in Johnson’s own party.

The increasingly powerful Radical Republicans – led by Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania in the House and Charles Sumner of Massachusetts in the Senate – embraced not merely resistance to Johnson’s lenient policies but a strikingly different vision of black civic equality, national power, and free labor over Southern landed oligarchy. Conflict between Congress and the president escalated. In early 1866, Johnson shocked Congressional Republicans by vetoing two bills to extend and expand the Freedmen’s Bureau and guarantee civil rights to blacks; as Johnson’s rhetoric became increasingly hostile to meaningful

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12 Ibid., 176-81; Heather Cox Richardson, West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 48-53.
14 Ibid., 199-205.
15 Ibid., 228-39.
reconstruction in any form, Congress overrode Johnson’s veto of the civil rights bill. The same Congress also adopted the Fourteenth Amendment, guaranteeing the equal protection of the laws to all citizens regardless of color, and enshrining birthright citizenship in the Constitution.

After the 1866 midterm elections, in which Radical Republicans gained decisive majorities of both houses of Congress, Johnson’s political power waned and Reconstruction entered its more radical “congressional” period. In the Reconstruction Acts of 1867, enacted over Johnson’s vetoes, Congress reversed Johnson’s policies, divided the Southern states into military districts, and premised readmission into the Union and self-government on the drafting of state constitutions that ratified the Fourteenth Amendment and guaranteed universal manhood suffrage regardless of race. In two further laws, Congress moved to limit Johnson’s authority: the first routed all military orders through the Army chief of staff, General Grant, who was thought more politically reliable; the second, the Tenure of Office Act, required Senate approval for dismissals of Cabinet officials during the term of the president who had appointed them. The latter law would shortly become the basis for impeachment proceedings against Johnson, after the president dismissed the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, without securing Senate approval. The House impeached Johnson in early 1868, but the case floundered on political pressure and legal uncertainties, and the Senate fell one vote short of the two-thirds needed to remove Johnson from office.

1868 saw the election of Northern war hero Ulysses Grant to the presidency on the Republican ticket; he would be reelected to a second term in 1872. From the beginning, federal efforts to assert its authority in the South had been hamstrung by limitations to state capacity and

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16 Ibid., 243-51.
17 Ibid., 276-7; Richardson, 58-63.
18 Foner, Reconstruction, 333-6.
Nevertheless, the Grant Administration attempted an increasingly vigorous federal effort to protect black civil rights in the South. Across the South, white violence against blacks and sympathetic whites had exploded, most notably by the Ku Klux Klan, and aimed principally at black exercise of political power. In Colfax, Louisiana, in 1873, an electoral dispute escalated into the slaughter of fifty blacks by white Democrats; this type of intimidation contributed to the election of a number of Democratic state governments. In response, Congress passed a series of civil rights and Enforcement Acts – premised, as was the whole of congressional Reconstruction, on a broad conception of national power – which criminalized efforts to deny blacks the vote or to exercise other civil rights and prohibited other types of racial discrimination. Congress also approved the Fifteenth Amendment, which formally guaranteed universal male suffrage. From 1871 on, federal efforts to blunt the KKK and other violence were moderately effective. However, by this point the Northern public had begun to develop considerable uncertainty about proceeding with aggressive Reconstruction and defense of black civil rights; this uncertainty stretched back to Johnson’s failed impeachment and Democratic gains in the Northern states, and would shortly escalate dramatically.

The most important Reconstruction developments throughout this period were the remarkable efforts taking place on the state level. In a series of state constitutional conventions held pursuant to the Reconstruction Acts from 1867 – 1869, a Republican coalition of freed slaves newly granted the right to vote, “scalawag” Southern Republicans, and “carpetbagger” Northern transplants drafted constitutions that aimed to protect black civil rights and promote

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20 Foner, Reconstruction, 425-8.
21 Ibid., 437; 441.
22 Ibid., 454-5.
23 Ibid., 457-9.
24 Ibid., 450-2; 332-6; Richardson, 100-2.
economic modernization and public education, while also confronting difficult questions of
defter relief and white disenfranchisement. The state governments constituted by these
constitutions provided the first (and generally, until the Civil Rights Movement, only) instances
of large-scale black participation in self-government, although white Republicans still
disproportionately held state offices. These governments embraced a reformist, activist state
unprecedented in Southern political history. Legislatures attempted to create systems of public
education, eliminate racial discrimination, humanize penal and labor practices, make the tax
system more fair, and stimulate private investment, most notably in the form of railroads. At
the same time, these governments were encumbered with financial difficulties, beset with
factionalism, and suffered from allegations of corruption, some valid. It is from these state
governments that many African Americans drew their positive memories of Reconstruction, and
it is in these state governments that a number of politicians whose memoirs will be examined
later in the thesis, both black and white, participated.

By the early 1870s, however, support both within the Republican Party and among the
broader public for federally-supported Reconstruction was fast fading. As freed slaves in the
South became increasingly entrapped in a credit-based system of sharecropping and tenant
farming, industrialization likewise altered the North, undermining the free labor ideology that
was the foundation of abolitionism. Politics shifted from the highly charged sectional issues of
the Civil War to the economic and patronage ones of the Gilded Age. The Republican Party
increasingly was split between supporters of Grant and Reconstruction and the upper-class,

26 Ibid., 352-7.
27 Ibid., 364-5; 379-81.
28 Ibid., 348-9; 360; 383-6; 387-90.
29 Ibid., 460.
30 Ibid., 484-8.
reformist Liberal Republicans, who disparaged Reconstruction for its supposed corruption (and out of a not inconsiderable amount of racism); the Liberal Republicans bolted in the 1872 election to nominate Horace Greeley in opposition.\textsuperscript{31} The traumatic Crash of 1873 dramatically altered the political atmosphere, furthering elite and public mistrust of an activist national government and reorienting politics towards questions of class conflict and wage labor.\textsuperscript{32} This mistrust in an activist government led to disinterest in Reconstruction, supported by a conservative judiciary that repeatedly struck down federal efforts at protection of civil rights.\textsuperscript{33}

Taking advantage of Northern disinterest, the Democratic Party reclaimed state governments across the South on “Redeemer tickets,” frequently relying on substantial violence to prevent black voting.\textsuperscript{34} The disputed 1876 presidential election was awarded by special commission to the Republican, Rutherford B. Hayes, who quickly ordered the withdrawal of the remaining Northern troops from Southern political life, allegedly on the basis of a secret bargain (the “Compromise of 1877”) that had secured him the presidency.\textsuperscript{35} With this event Reconstruction, which had spurred so much promise and passion in the years after the Civil War, was brought to an ignominious end. Many of its gains had already been reversed, and over the next few decades, the South would chip away at its remaining achievements by formalizing segregation and disenfranchisement and further excluding African Americans from political life. Among African Americans, the collapse of Reconstruction caused a profound sea change in thought, suppressing the assertiveness of the post-Civil War period and encouraging the rise of conservatives with a constrained vision of black advancement.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 488-511; Richardson, 121-2.
\textsuperscript{32} Foner, Reconstruction, 512; Richardson, 164-75; 186.
\textsuperscript{33} Foner, Reconstruction, 517-9; 530.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 550-3; 558-63.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 577-83.
Historiography of Reconstruction

If Reconstruction spurred enormous passions and changes, so to has the historiography of Reconstruction, which began even during the era itself. As early as 1959 historian Bernard Weisberger referred to Reconstruction historiography as a “dark and bloody ground,” while historian John Hope Franklin in 1980 described a century of Reconstruction history as a “mirror for Americans,” writing that “it may be said that every generation since 1870 has written the history of the Reconstruction era.”

The frequently heated or politicized rhetoric of Reconstruction historiography, and the significant alterations in the accepted historiography over time, are not surprising given the intense passions stirred by the Civil War and by issues related to the Civil War, like race relations and the proper role of the federal government, with which the United States continues to struggle even today.

The Dunning School

The sharply critical attitude towards Reconstruction that prevailed until midway through the twentieth century emerged from works published during the era itself. An early attempt to examine Reconstruction history, James Pike’s *The Prostrate State: South Carolina Under Negro Government*, was published while the effort was still underway, and so more properly ought to be considered journalism rather than true history. Nevertheless, Pike’s work is important because it marks the beginning of the profoundly negative – and deeply racist – perspective of Reconstruction that would quickly become a scholarly consensus. Pike was a veteran journalist and antislavery advocate who had served as an ambassador to the Netherlands during the Lincoln Administration, giving his words some credibility in the eyes of contemporary observers.

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38 Ibid., 3.
39 Foner, *Reconstruction*, 525
the title of the book indicates, Pike painted the Reconstruction state government of South Carolina in lurid and critical detail, depicting it as overrun with corruption and filled with African Americans who – because of both their ignorance and their innate inferiority – had little capacity for self-government. Pike describes this government thusly:

In the place of [old South Carolinian society] stands the rude form of the most ignorant democracy mankind ever saw…the dregs of the population habilitated in the robes of their intelligent predecessors, and asserting over them the rule of ignorance and corruption, through the inexorable machinery of a majority of numbers. It is barbarism overwhelming civilization by physical force.\(^{40}\)

Much of the remainder of the book is devoted to describing the fraud of the state government, which was “complete and universal” and marked by a “recklessness and audacity without parallel” in which the culprits “embraced all grades of people” and did not “attempt even to conceal their plunder.”\(^{41}\) Pike, for his part, made no attempt to conceal his racism and rejection of the basic idea that African Americans were capable of government. Blacks – at times referred to as “Sambo” or prefaced with the adjective “dusky” – “[could] copy like a parrot or a monkey.”\(^{42}\) Black legislators are quoted speaking in the state legislature in an “incoherent harangue,” and the “endless chatter” of the body could hardly “be dignified” with the term “debate.”\(^{43}\) “The ignorance manifested is black with its denseness.”\(^{44}\) As later historians and some contemporary observers have pointed out, Pike had an agenda: he had a history of racism, and was a supporter of the Liberal Republican Greeley campaign in 1872, which made him inclined to look for criticisms of the Grant Administration.\(^{45}\) Pike relied for his sources on

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 206; 25.
\(^{42}\) Ibid., 10; 17-8.
\(^{43}\) Ibid., 17-8.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., 48.
\(^{45}\) Franklin, 3; Foner, *Reconstruction*, 525-6.
Democratic leaders, and only spoke with one black South Carolinian. Nevertheless, Pike’s work is significant because it is one of the clearest examples of public figures within the North, including formerly sympathetic Republicans, beginning to turn against Reconstruction.

Pike’s arguments would become the basis of the scholarly approach towards Reconstruction, typically turned the Dunning School, which developed a generation later. The Dunning School was most prominent in the first two decades of the twentieth century, where it interacted smoothly, as will be discussed in Chapter Two, with the pseudoscientific racism and emphasis on honest government of the Progressive Era. The Dunning viewpoint accepted the incapacity of blacks for self-government; dismissed the Reconstruction state governments as dens of corruption and ignorance; depicted the North and the federal government as tyrannical masters cruelly foisting black rule upon white society; and lionized the white Redeemer governments that had so violently seized back power in the 1870s.

The Dunning School took its name from its progenitor, William Archibald Dunning, a professor at Columbia University originally from New Jersey. In the preface to his chief work on the era, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic*, Dunning describes Reconstruction as “the struggle through which the southern whites, subjugated by adversaries of their own race, thwarted the scheme which threatened permanent subjection to another race.” Freed blacks “wasted away in idleness, disease, and want” and “wandered aimless but happy” throughout the South; “[i]ntelligence and political capacity were…almost exclusively in the [white] race.”

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46 Ibid., 525.
47 Ibid., 526.
49 Franklin, 3-4; Eric Foner, “Reconstruction Revisited,” *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (December 1982), 82.
51 Ibid., 11; 213.
The Black Codes were “in the main a conscientious and straightforward attempt to bring some sort of order out of the...chaos” of the postwar period, and the violence of the Ku Klux Klan is minimized.\textsuperscript{52} Thaddeus Stevens was “truculent, vindictive, and cynical;” Charles Sumner “the perfect type of that narrow fanaticism which erudition and egotism combine to produce;” and their Reconstruction Acts “not restricted by a careful regard for facts...[nor] by any careful regard for constitutional law.”\textsuperscript{53} The Reconstruction state governments enabled by the Radical Republicans were marked by “inefficiency, extravagance, and corruption...a mere travesty of civilized government.”\textsuperscript{54} Finally, the Dunning lauds the Redeemer governments and defends the violence they used to gain power was.\textsuperscript{55} The viewpoint of Dunning was not simply one side of a scholarly debate; it was the overwhelming consensus within white academia, was replicated with fervor by Dunning’s disciples, and quickly molded, as will be discussed in the rest of this thesis, the popular conception towards Reconstruction as well, at least among whites.\textsuperscript{56} The 1911 Encyclopedia Britannica informed its readers: “All the misfortunes of [the Civil War] itself are insignificant compared with the sufferings of the people during Reconstruction.”\textsuperscript{57}

The most notable work of the Dunning School, besides Dunning’s own \textit{Reconstruction}, is Claude Bowers’ \textit{The Tragic Era}, published in 1929. Bowers was a Democratic politician, born in Indiana, and as a result \textit{The Tragic Era} will also be examined in Chapter Three. The work is discussed here, however, for the extent to which it crystallized the Dunning School academic narrative. Bowers’ book describes Reconstruction on its first page as an

“appalling...tragedy...[in which] never have American public men...been so brutal, hypocritical,

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{52} \textit{Ibid.}, 58; 187.
\item \textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ibid.}, 86-7; 94.
\item \textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.}, 204.
\item \textsuperscript{55} \textit{Ibid.}, 268; 280.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Franklin, 3-4.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Francis B. Simkins, “New Viewpoints of Southern Reconstruction,” \textit{The Journal of Southern History} 5, no. 1 (February 1939), 50.
\end{footnotes}
Andrew Johnson was an honest, responsible man; Stevens was bitter. After the war, “the Southern people were fighting for the preservation of their civilization. The negroes would not work” and were under the sway of “demagogues,” “fanatics,” “and the white scum of the North.” The Reconstruction Acts imposed “military despotism” and “rule…by the sword,” while the impeachment of Johnson was a “farce.” The constitutional conventions and legislatures of the Reconstruction state governments were “monstrosities,” “illiterate and corrupt;” the book purposefully recounts their debates in extravagant Gullah-style prose. Finally, the Ku Klux Klan are depicted as a harmless band of “regulators” whose efficacy largely stemmed from the stupidity of the blacks, who believed the sheeted riders were ghosts. It is important to linger on the prose of these works in order to understand the depth of feeling against Reconstruction, as well as its academia-approved racism, both of which would be extremely influential in molding popular attitudes. Foner describes The Tragic Era as a “work of fiction masquerading as history” and Weisberger characterizes it as a “zestful work of imagination.” At the time, however, it was largely accepted by the public.

COMPETING VIEWPOINTS

Even around the time of the publication of The Tragic Era, however, changes and moderations in perception were beginning inside academia. Historian Francis Simkins in 1938 called upon his colleagues to offer “moderate, saner” interpretations of the period. These new perspectives came from a variety of factors, most notably changes in politics – a lessening of

59 Ibid., 24-44; 65-71.
60 Ibid., 60-1; 198-99.
61 Ibid., 150-3; 171.
62 Ibid., 216-7; 348-9.
63 Ibid., 306-9.
64 Foner, “Reconstruction Revisited,” 2; Weisberger, 428.
65 Foner, “Reconstruction Revisited,” 82.
66 Simkins, 51.
Civil War animosities and an increasing interest in civil rights – as well as a newfound willingness to pay greater attention to African American sources and authors. Paul H. Buck’s notable *The Road to Reunion*, published in 1937 and covering the period from 1865 to 1900, emphasized reconciliation rather than the anti-Northern bitterness that had marked so much of the Dunning School. Although it still described Reconstruction laws as unfortunate excesses borne of sectional bitterness, it was (unlike the Dunning School) likewise critical of Southern attitudes, avoided the outright racism of Bowers and Dunning, and attempted to paint much of the ill-feeling – in keeping with its reconciling agenda – as an outgrowth of partisanship.

An entirely distinct approach towards Reconstruction emerged during this time, based on the “Progressive” school, which emphasized economic factors in its approach towards historical analysis. The Progressive school was most famously developed by the historian Charles Beard, whose 1913 work, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, famously argued that the Framers were motivated primarily by economic self-interest in their drafting of the document. Progressives argued, in this mindset, that Reconstruction should be interpreted chiefly as an attempt by northeastern industrial business interests to cement their own national power, and their control over the national government, by destroying the economic and political power of the Southern agrarian class.

The chief representative of this viewpoint was the historian Howard K. Beale, who published *The Critical Year: A Study of Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction*, in 1930. In *The Critical Year*, Beale wondered why the North adopted for its Reconstruction policy an approach

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68 Franklin, 6.


70 Williams, 470.
its “grandchildren generally condemn as harsh and vindictive.”\textsuperscript{71} The answer lies in the fact that Reconstruction was not merely a political conflict, but one “between two social and economic orders…an industrialized Northeast…faced an agrarian South and West.”\textsuperscript{72} “Under cover of [Reconstruction], a minority group fastened upon the whole country an economic system that had failed for thirty years to make headway against a combined West and South…[b]y the time Radical domination of the South had spent itself in failure, the new economic order was firmly established in the country beyond danger from attack.”\textsuperscript{73} Beale did not repudiate the bulk of the Dunning consensus critical of Reconstruction; indeed, in a separate piece, he praised Dunning and his confederates for their “careful researches” freed from the sectional and partisan biases of the immediate postwar period.\textsuperscript{74} Nevertheless, Beale’s analysis had the effect of turning attention away from race and partisanship into economic thinking – as Beale wrote in \textit{The Critical Year}, historians like Dunning “have failed to see the larger economic and social aspects in the struggle over reconstruction” – and in doing so contributed to undermining the hegemony of previous interpretations and reaffirming the interactions between race and class.\textsuperscript{75} Marxian historians – particularly James S. Allen, who went further even than Beale with an economic emphasis and presented Reconstruction as an egalitarian attempt to replace the feudal system of the South – also emerged during this time, though they generally were not widely accepted by the rest of academia.\textsuperscript{76}

At the same time, an incredibly important but largely distinct trend was the emergence of a competing school of historiography by African American scholars, which stressed the positive

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Ibid.}, 1.
\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Ibid.}, 2.
\textsuperscript{74} Foner, “Reconstruction Revisited,” 82-3; Beale, “On Rewriting Reconstruction History,” 808.
\textsuperscript{75} Beale, \textit{The Critical Year}, 4; Foner, “Reconstruction Revisited,” 82-3.
aspects of Reconstruction. The leader of this school was W.E.B. Du Bois, who – because of his status as one of the foremost black activists of the period – will be discussed in significant detail in Chapters Two and Three. Nevertheless, the overall school deserves examination here. It began in a pair of essays published by Du Bois in the first decade of the twentieth century: one, in his *The Souls of Black Folk*, on the Freedman’s Bureau, and the second, six years later in 1909, entitled “Reconstruction and Its Benefits.” From there, the approach was expanded upon by other black historians, most notably John Lynch (a politician, discussed in Chapter Two) and A.A. Taylor, who published detailed studies on Reconstruction and African Americans in South Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee. The general thrust of these works, in obvious contrast to the Dunning School, was that freed slaves after the Civil War were hardly as ignorant and corrupt as they had been made out to be, and that Reconstruction produced substantial benefits and accomplishments, like enfranchisement and free public schools.

The school was encapsulated in Du Bois’ titanic *Black Reconstruction in America*, published in 1935 and discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three. In the work, Du Bois refers to Reconstruction as “a clear and definite program for the freedom and uplift of the Negro, and for the extension of the realization of democracy…the finest effort to achieve democracy for the working millions which this world has ever seen.” An entire chapter of Du Bois’ work is devoted to refuting the specific allegations of the Dunning School. This school also adopted, to a significant degree, economic and Marxian interpretations of Reconstruction. Du Bois’ sprinkled his work with references to the “black proletariat;” it describes the Radical Republican

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78 Franklin, 5.
agenda as a reaction to the “danger of slavery both to capital and labor,” and the victories of the Redeemer governments as “a determined effort to reduce black labor as clearly as possible to a condition of unlimited exploitation and build a new class of capitalists.” However, at the time this new black scholarship received fairly minimal consideration by white academia. Beale, in 1940, criticized Du Bois’ Marxian approach and described his work as “far too wordy,” but acknowledged that he had brought to the fore new materials and issues that historians had to address.

**REVISIONISM AND POST-REVISIONISM**

These diverse schools of thought in the 1930s and 1940s undermined the former hegemony of the Dunning School and gave way, by the 1960s, to revisionism. This revisionism replaced virtually every truth taken for granted by the old Dunning School with an entirely new conception. As Eric Foner puts it:

> By the end of the 1960s, the old interpretation had been completely reversed. Southern freedman were the heroes, Redeemers the villains, and if the era was “tragic,” it was because change did not go far enough. Reconstruction appeared as both a time of real progress, and a golden opportunity lost for the South and the nation.

In particular, revisionists criticized Andrew Johnson and the Redeemer state governments of the 1870s, which had formerly been highly praised, and spent considerable time on the accomplishments of freed slaves and the Reconstruction state governments, which had formerly been much maligned. Important scholars here include Joel Williamson, Eric McKitrick, Kenneth Stampp, LaWonda and John Cox, and more, all of whom particularly emphasized black

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82 Ibid., 313; 354; 151; 549.
85 Foner, “Reconstruction Revisited,” 83.
86 Ibid., 83.
accomplishments.\textsuperscript{87} The primary driver of this shift in scholarly attitudes was not new sources but rather contemporary political and social change: the Civil Rights Movement, which made old Dunning School notions seem antiquated – and conceptions of African American ignorance and inferiority straightforwardly racist – and which induced historians to pay greater attention to black experiences and existing black sources.\textsuperscript{88} Indeed, as early as 1959 the historian Bernard Weisberger acknowledged that the \textit{Brown v. Board} school desegregation decision five years earlier moved some of these new considerations into “unescapable prominence.”\textsuperscript{89} In keeping with the political currents, this decisively positive view of Reconstruction has remained the dominant narrative in elite circles.

However, even as the revisionist perspective gained ground in the 1960s, a number of historians were already developing a “postrevisionist” school that questioned many of the conclusions of the revisionists.\textsuperscript{90} Whereas before Reconstruction had been seen as a radical experiment, postrevisionists like C. Van Woodward and August Meier depicted the period as a conservative one, and stressed the continuity and reluctance to change even among Radical Republicans.\textsuperscript{91} Michael Les Benedict, Michael Perman, and William Gillette described federal policy as largely conservative and concerned with Southern white cooperation, while Harold Hyman, Morton Keller, and James Mohr argued that there was little evidence of Radical Republicanism in Northern policymaking, reducing Congressional Reconstruction to a largely partisan exercise.\textsuperscript{92} Similarly, William McFeely, Louis Gerteis, and others cast doubt on the idea that there was much change for freed slaves even during the Reconstruction state governments,

\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Ibid.}, 96.
\textsuperscript{88} \textit{Ibid.}, 83.
\textsuperscript{89} Weisberger, 429.
\textsuperscript{90} Foner, “Reconstruction Revisited,” 83-4.
\textsuperscript{91} \textit{Ibid.}, 83-4.
\textsuperscript{92} \textit{Ibid.}, 84-5.
painting the federal army, the Freedmen’s Bureau, and even the new public school systems as generally indifferent to black suffering and acting as agents of social control and inculcation.\footnote{Ibid., 85-6.}

Eric Foner’s 1988 magnum opus \textit{Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution}, attempted to preserve revisionism’s main points while acknowledging the work of the postrevisionists. In addition, Foner worked to address other concerns he had with Reconstruction scholarship, many of which he identified in an essay six years earlier, such as a lack of focus on economic factors and the complexity of black politics, as well as a return to assumptions of black passivity.\footnote{Ibid., 87-95.} Foner’s work has since become the standard treatment of Reconstruction, and informs the sketch of the period in the first section of this chapter. In his preface, Foner writes that he seeks a “coherent, comprehensive modern account of Reconstruction” which affirms the centrality of the black experience while also keeping in mind broader changes in the South as well as the impact of Northern political, economic, and social changes on Reconstruction.\footnote{Fonder, \textit{Reconstruction}, xxii-xxiv.} As a result, Foner devotes considerable attention not merely to the standard chronology of political developments but also to the response of the black community to freedom, the new status of African Americans as free laborers, and the economic changes in the industrializing North, particularly the idea that the Northern transformation from free to wage labor undermined support for supporting the quest of slaves to become self-sufficient free laborers.\footnote{Ibid., 518-25.} Foner takes care, however, to stress the truly transformational attitudes and potential of Reconstruction and its sincere participants. Foner depicts freed slaves as motivated by a desire for independence and autonomy, and Radical Republicanism as rooted in genuine support

\footnote{Ibid., 85-6.}  
\footnote{Ibid., 87-95.}  
\footnote{Fonder, \textit{Reconstruction}, xxii-xxiv.}  
\footnote{Ibid., 518-25.}
for black equal rights. The Reconstruction state governments “[embraced] a new definition of public responsibility...[and] affected every facet of Southern life.” “Reconstruction can only be judged a failure...for blacks its failure was a disaster whose magnitude cannot be obscured by the genuine accomplishments that did endure.”

However:

[T]he institutions created or consolidated after the Civil War—the black family, school, and church—provided the basis from which the modern civil rights revolution sprang. And for its legal strategy, the movement returned to the laws and amendments of Reconstruction.

Foner’s work remains the dominant vision of Reconstruction – to the extent that it has somewhat monopolized interpretive space – and has shaped the present generation of scholars of the era. Scholarship from 1988 to the present has tended to focus on narrow slices of the period, including local histories and analyses of specific themes like black agency and issues of class, land, and economic relationships. A recent major work largely echoed Foner in emphasizing the democratic nature of the period, the violence of Southern whites, and the political involvement of freed slaves. Nevertheless, there cannot be any doubt that the current scholarly view towards Reconstruction is dramatically different than the views that prevailed for most of the first century after the Civil War, including during the periods surveyed by this thesis. These views have, in large part, been the product of contemporary politics and social thought. The importance of historiography and scholarly consensus in shaping popular thought, and the ways that thought interacts with contemporary currents, is made clear in the rest of the thesis.

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97 Ibid., 77-8; 228-33.
98 Ibid., 364.
99 Ibid., 603-4.
100 Ibid., 612.
102 Ibid; Baker and Kelly.
Literature on Perceptions of Reconstruction

In contrast to the voluminous work examining the historiography of Reconstruction, the literature examining popular attitudes towards the period – the focus of this thesis – is surprisingly sparse. In part, this may simply be due to the overwhelming amount of attention devoted to the examination of scholarly attitudes, and a sense that the histories of Reconstruction produced over the years so effectively reflect the attitudes of their contemporaries that no more explicit examination of attitudes is needed. Nevertheless, such an attention to historians’ attitudes has the potential to ignore differences of interpretation among other sectors of the population, particularly those who, for cultural, political, or other reasons, are less able to influence or be taken seriously by the academic mainstream.

As historians have become more willing to consider African American rather than simply white perspectives and contributions, there has been more consideration of African American viewpoints on contested historical events from the Civil War onwards. Foner, in his 1988 book *Reconstruction*, briefly discusses the attitudes of African Americans who had lived through Reconstruction, basing his writing on more complete published accounts of the lives and histories of slaves and their descendants, which were often themselves based on oral histories collected by the Works Progress Administration during the New Deal. Foner concludes, quoting a number of those interviewed, that “Reconstruction [was] remembered for its disappointments and betrayals, but also as a time of hope, possibility, and accomplishment.”

Similar sentiments are evident in the attitudes of the African Americans who will be examined in the next two chapters of this thesis. However, Foner’s brief examination focuses almost exclusively on freed slaves and others who had memories of the Civil War and Reconstruction, and never attempts to consider the attitudes of African American elites or opinion leaders who

105 Ibid., 610.
had come of age since those periods. For the most part, little effort has been made to consider these attitudes, with the exception of W.E.B. Du Bois, whose scholarly attention to Reconstruction is often considered in examinations of historiography.\(^{106}\) As will be discussed below, the attitudes of these elites and leaders is one of the central concerns of this thesis.

Literature on white perceptions is similarly scare, and two recently published works do not address the issues of concern to this thesis. Foner discusses the historiography of Reconstruction and makes brief references to the ubiquity of white disdain for the period, but largely sticks to an examination of scholarly attitudes.\(^{107}\) Both David Blight’s *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* and Caroline Janney’s *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* thoroughly examine attitudes towards the Civil War, and to a lesser extent Reconstruction, after the conflict. Both works offer a fascinating examination of many of the impulses towards reconciliation, as well as the related loss of interest in the fortunes of African Americans, which motivated the negative scholarly treatment of Reconstruction during the period with which they are concerned. Nevertheless, they do not consider in detail the questions of public opinion towards Reconstruction this thesis is intended to answer.

Blight explicitly focuses on the fifty years after the Civil War, ending in 1915.\(^{108}\) As a result, he does not consider attitudes during the New Deal, one of the main focuses of this thesis, and only considers the initial part of the Progressive Era, the other focus – and, even then, as his choice of dates implies, he is not interested in capturing the attitudes of Progressivism as a reform movement. Indeed, much of the book is concerned with contemporary accounts of

\(^{106}\) E.g., Franklin, 5-6; Williams, 471-2; Weisberger, 428.


Reconstruction as a vehicle for considering attitudes about the Civil War itself.\textsuperscript{109} When Blight does move into the twentieth century, he focuses on how both Northern and Southern whites worked together to foster a spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness and shaped their memory of the Civil War in such a fashion, an issue that – while certainly relevant to this thesis – is distinct to the question presented here of perceptions towards Reconstruction itself, especially because it considers Southern viewpoints, which this thesis does not.\textsuperscript{110} Additionally, for the most part Blight is concerned, as the title indicates, with examining attitudes towards and interpretations of the Civil War, rather than explicitly looking at perceptions of Reconstruction in the manner of this thesis. His discussion of African American attitudes focuses on the historical memory of slavery and debates within the black community on the most appropriate response to white reconciliation, but not – with the brief exception of Booker T. Washington – on perceptions of Reconstruction.\textsuperscript{111}

For her part, Janney also focuses most of her work on the period prior to the twentieth century. She goes further forward in time than Blight, but when she does so, it is principally to examine the specific constituencies of women’s and veteran’s groups, generally Southern, and their attitudes towards reconciliation or the Lost Cause movement.\textsuperscript{112} In two specific sections, she surveys opinion towards Reconstruction, and briefly mentions figures like Dunning and Bowers. However, in both sections, she focuses on Confederate women’s groups and other Southern politicians and their interactions with proposals for celebrations and monuments commemorating the Civil War.\textsuperscript{113} Thus, Jenney does not consider the constituencies that are the

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 31-2; 98-101.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 354-66; 395-7.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 300-37.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 272-81; 294-301.
focus of this thesis, and like Blight, she is much more concerned with examining attitudes towards the Civil War, not Reconstruction. While both *Race and Reunion* and *Remembering the Civil War* are interesting and relevant, then, in terms of constituencies and timeframe examined and in their thematic focuses they are distinct from the questions that this thesis considers.

The dearth of investigation into popular attitudes towards Reconstruction creates a considerable natural space to be examined by this thesis. The prodigious historiography of Reconstruction makes clear the sharply changing attitudes towards the period and the ways in which those attitudes reflected contemporary political events, but does not address the question of whether popular interpretations and memories of Reconstruction matched scholarly ones. In addition, the hegemony of negative perceptions of Reconstruction in academia raises the possibility of differences of popular opinion among different segments of the population. This thesis attempts to address this void in historiography by examining the popular perceptions of Reconstruction to see the ways in which they approach and interpret the period, if they align with the scholarly consensus, if they are different based on the communities examined, and what the causes of various differences might be.

**Constituencies and Periods to be Examined**

Especially given the substantial amount of time that has passed since the period, to examine the “popular perceptions” of anything as complex as Reconstruction in a nation as vast and diverse as the United States is an impractical proposition. As a result, this thesis has narrowed down its examination by both constituency and time period. The groups and periods selected are those in which the historical circumstances seem to offer the most potential for disagreement with the scholarly consensus that demonized Reconstruction. This accords with
the idea that collective memory – the memory of societies and groups – is frequently the result of changing contemporary needs and beliefs.\textsuperscript{114}

This thesis will focus on the viewpoints of two distinct constituencies: Northern white politicians and liberal elites, and African American elites and activists. These two groups have been chosen because they would seem, on their face, to be the most motivated to disagree with the Dunning School’s negative interpretation of Reconstruction. African Americans naturally took issue with disdain both for efforts to protect black rights and for black capacity for self-government, while Northern liberals were generally more in favor of an activist government intervening for social or economic ends. As a result, the attitudes of these two groups most directly address the question of the extent to which ubiquitous criticism of Reconstruction impacted attitudes towards Reconstruction even among potentially sympathetic groups.

The time period to be examined has likewise been compacted to focus on the two great reform periods in the first half of the twentieth century: the Progressive Era and the New Deal. In both of these eras, the federal government decisively intervened, albeit in different ways, in the social and economic fabric of the nation, asserting its power in a scale unprecedented since Reconstruction itself. In both cases, this intervention was aimed at limiting the power of established interests and promoting the welfare and opportunities of those without political or economic power. The specifics of this intervention, and the forms that these reform periods took, will be discussed in the first part of each of the next two chapters. In both cases, Northern liberals were some of the principal supporters of these reform movements.\textsuperscript{115} African American elites also hoped that these reform impulses would translate into greater interest from the


national government in their own rights, though in this they were frequently disappointed. Because of this willingness for federal intervention in favor of reform, these two reform movements bear the most similarity to Reconstruction, and therefore most directly pose the question of whether popular distrust of Reconstruction was sustained in light of changing contemporary circumstances. Although this thesis will thus focus on material from the two periods, it will occasionally also consider material from the 1920s, in between the Progressive Era and the New Deal, if it bears sufficient relevance or is still sufficiently indicative of the viewpoints being considered. Finally, this thesis does not progress beyond the New Deal because reform movements after the Second World War, such as the Great Society, overlap with theCivil Rights Movement and revisionist historiography towards Reconstruction, and thus the question of disconnect between scholarly and popular attitudes largely ceases to be relevant.

When it considers white Northern politicians and liberal elites, this thesis means to cast a broad net that encompasses the politicians and reformist intellectuals who shaped both the Progressive Era and the New Deal. Thus, “liberal” is a loose term intended to capture the backers of both of these movements. This most obviously means Northern politicians, to the extent that they expressed opinions on Reconstruction. However, it also includes scientific, religious, and other intellectual leaders who, particularly with the Progressive Era, were decisive in bringing both reform movements into being and shaping the contours of their thought. It also includes major media publications sympathetic to both movements, who often offer some of the most interesting examples of attitudes towards Reconstruction given that they were frequently more likely than politicians or other figures to publish articles explicitly discussing the period. Since both the Progressive Era and the New Deal embraced an activist, interventionist

conception of the federal government, and since white Northern liberals were some of the chief proponents of both of these movements, these figures offer the potential for sympathy with Reconstruction, a movement similarly concerned with using active federal power to reshape the social and economic landscape in the direction of greater equality.

The discussion of politicians and liberal elites has been deliberately restricted to Northerners, and excludes Southern white politicians. This is the case even though Southern politicians were vital voices in both the Progressive Era and during the New Deal. In the Progressive Era, Southern politicians adopted many of the tenets of reform, and often embraced an agrarian populism that railed against big business and pushed for greater regulation and assistance for the common man.\footnote{Southern, 88-94.} In the New Deal, Southern Democrats were key members of Roosevelt’s governing coalition, and played important roles in crafting some of its most important, and genuinely progressive, policy achievements.\footnote{Ira Katznelson, \textit{Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time} (New York: Liverlight, 2013), 15-6; 21-3; 144-61.} Nevertheless, in spite of this economic progressivism, Southern politicians were uniformly in favor of maintaining the South’s segregated social and political system, opposed any attempts at federal intervention, and to a large extent were simply racist. During both the Progressive Era and the New Deal, Southerners consistently gave priority to preserving their discriminatory racial system over both any other policy objective and over loyalty to the Democratic Party.\footnote{Southern, 88; Katznelson, 23.} Such an attitude, of course, means that – unlike Northern liberals – Southern liberals had little sympathy with either the ends or the means of Reconstruction. No question of distinction from scholarly attitudes is therefore raised. Southern attitudes were simply too predictable and straightforward towards Reconstruction during this period to hold the same interest as the attitudes of the constituencies this thesis will
examine. However, this thesis will also occasionally examine the attitudes of major liberal politicians, like Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who were substantially (albeit not exclusively) influenced by the South, but who were such towering figures in their respective movements as to make their examinations worthwhile.

Finally, by African American activists and elites this thesis similarly will consider a broad swath of major black opinion leaders, political activists, and other major figures. Unlike with whites, no sectional distinction is imposed, since Southern blacks were largely as likely as their Northern counterparts to take issue with the South’s debilitating racism. As with white liberals, this constituency includes major political figures, activists for civil rights and economic improvement, authors and other influential social voices, and the major media outlets of the thriving black press that supported them and transmitted and reflected their opinions. Since Reconstruction was the most recent attempt by the federal government to enforce the civil rights of African Americans and improve their social and economic wellbeing, the sympathy African American activists might have with the period is obvious.

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Reconstruction was a wrenching and traumatic period for the nation, and the oft-changing and frequently polemic scholarly approach towards Reconstruction reflects this trauma. The relative lack of attention to popular attitudes towards Reconstruction in spite of this vast historiography raises certain important questions about the extent to which popular opinions mirrored scholarly attitudes, the extent to which there were differences within popular opinion, and the degree to which those opinions were changed by changing circumstances. The next two chapters consider these questions in detail for the constituencies and timeframes for which divergence from the
scholarship appears most likely, beginning with the first major reform movement of the twentieth century, the Progressive Era.
CHAPTER TWO
“Grave Injustice Will Be Done the Negro”
Public Perceptions During the Progressive Era

The Progressive Era marked perhaps the first sustained and successful reform movement since Reconstruction itself, but produced very little in the way of gains for African Americans. Indeed, in a great many ways the Progressive Era confirmed the profound disinterest of the national body politic towards addressing, or even acknowledging, the challenges and discrimination faced by African Americans. The perceptions of white Northern liberals towards Reconstruction reflect this dismissive and contemptuous attitude on race. Even as they advocated for an expanded federal role in ameliorating the economic and resulting social problems that motivated Progressivism, members of this constituency held a profoundly negative view of Reconstruction, largely adopting the perceptions of black inferiority and corruption advanced by the Dunning School.

At the same time, the Progressive Era saw the development of a dynamic group of African American activists such as W.E.B. Du Bois, largely Northern, who pushed – generally unsuccessfully – to expand the reform efforts of the period to embrace African Americans. The disparity between the attitudes of this group and the attitudes of whites towards Reconstruction is striking: in general, although not uniformly or unreservedly, this African American elite viewed the era with fondness and approval. In their attitudes, both whites and African Americans reflect the obvious influence of both scholarship and contemporary historical events, and demonstrate sharply different conceptions of the federal government and its legitimate activities.

Background: The Progressive Era

In general, the Progressive Era refers to the political, social, and economic reform movement that swept American national politics and discourse from roughly 1900 to 1917, when
the country entered the First World War. The Progressive Era was a response to the rapid and disconcerting industrialization of the United States in the period after the Civil War, which implicated a whole host of associated problems: trusts, monopolies, and other attempts to stifle competition by ever-expanding corporate behemoths; large-scale urbanization and immigration; massive disparities between the rich and the poor; substantial labor unrest and violence, including multiple strikes of major national import; and constant insecurity for farmers struggling to interact with corporations to market their commodities on the world stage. These economic inequalities created, and were then reinforced by, governments widely perceived as under the thrall of corporate interests and a prevailing ideology that emphasized social Darwinism and unfettered capitalism without state intervention. Successive crises in the 1890s—a terrifying depression, significant steel and railroad strikes, populist agrarian unrest, and a divisive presidential election—set the stage for the rise of Progressivism on the national level in 1901, when President William McKinley was assassinated and Theodore Roosevelt assumed the office.

In general, Progressivism was a middle class movement that advocated for expanded government intervention to counter the social and economic excesses of the Gilded Age, but that did not seriously contemplate a radical transformation of the economic system. Foremost in its ranks were urban professionals, journalists, intellectuals, and other reformers who brought a distinct focus on good government, efficiency, and moral reform, for instance temperance or

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122 Nugent, 12-5.
Jane Addams’ famous Hull House; these reformers were frequently Northern. At the same
time, there was also a pronounced strain of agrarian populism in both the South and the West,
descended from the Grange and Populist movements of the 1880s and 1890s. There were also
those who were more radical, such as the socialists who governed a number of Midwestern
municipalities after the turn of the century. Nevertheless, as a whole the Progressive
movement maintained a decidedly “respectable” character, with government intervention
typically responding to the needs of the middle class, not the working class.

This perspective notwithstanding, the litany of achievements of the Progressive Era is
impressive. The Roosevelt Administration (1901 – 1909) began a vigorous application of the
Sherman Antitrust Act against corporate monopolies (a practice that would be continued by his
successor, William Howard Taft), secured the passage of legislation regulating meatpacking,
food, and drugs, fought passionately for conservation, and famously mediated the 1902
anthracite coal strike in one of the first instances of the federal government not reflexively
intervening on behalf of capital. In the second phase of federal Progressivism, under
Democrat Woodrow Wilson (1913 – 1921), changes were equally significant: a federal income
tax, the Federal Reserve, the Federal Trade Commission, stronger antitrust laws, prohibitions on
child labor, an eight-hour day for railway workers, and more. The 1912 election was notable
for the presence of Theodore Roosevelt’s stridently progressive Bull Moose ticket, as well as the
strong performance of Socialist candidate Eugene V. Debs. Progressives successfully pushed
for the passage of four sequential constitutional amendments, authorizing the income tax,

125 Ibid., 44-5.
127 McGerr, xv; Diner, 68.
128 Ibid., 36-46.
129 Ibid., 99-106.
130 Ibid., 91-6.
directly electing senators, beginning Prohibition, and granting women the right to vote.\textsuperscript{131}

Especially in the West, the progressive spirit gave rise to even more aggressive measures at the state and local level, including the regulation (or ownership) of public utilities and railroads, electoral reforms like primaries and powers of initiative and referendum, and more.\textsuperscript{132} The era’s broader reform movement stretched beyond politics, leading to settlement houses, advances in the social sciences, and the Social Gospel.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsc{Race Relations During the Progressive Era}

As sweeping as this record appears, one area is conspicuously absent: civil rights. The attitude of Progressivism towards African Americans was at best unconcerned and at worst decidedly hostile. Indeed, the Progressive Era overlapped with what historians have come to consider as the “nadir” of post-Civil War American race relations that began with the retrenchments of the 1890s.\textsuperscript{134} Disenchanted with Reconstruction, many political and social reformers avoided the issue of race, viewing it as a distraction from their desired reforms. Reform organizations, such as the suffragists and even the progressive churches, were hostile.\textsuperscript{135} Muckrakers rarely focused their attention on race, preferring to stay on the more comfortable terrain of political or economic reform.\textsuperscript{136} Popular culture perpetuated racism and other stereotypes of African Americans, for instance in D.W. Griffith’s wildly popular 1915 film \textit{The Birth of a Nation}, which adopted and popularized many of the Dunning School’s arguments.\textsuperscript{137} Progressivism’s intellectual orientation proved extraordinarily compatible with a “scientific racism” – obsessed with issues like intermarriage and eugenics – which applied Darwinism,

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{131} Southern, 45.
\textsuperscript{132} Nugent, 63-72.
\textsuperscript{133} \textit{Ibid.}, 56-63.
\textsuperscript{134} Southern, 3.
\textsuperscript{135} \textit{Ibid.}, 63-7.
\textsuperscript{136} \textit{Ibid.}, 58-62.
\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Ibid.}, 67-71.
\end{footnotesize}
anthropology, and other emerging sciences to justify assumptions of African American inferiority, and couched age-old prejudice in a modern, seemingly forward-looking patina.\footnote{138} As a result, white Progressive reformers accepted and even encouraged the system of social and economic segregation, enforced both by the state and by public opinion, which existed in both the North and the South.\footnote{139}

It is impossible to understand this situation without first discussing race relations in the preceding several decades, which ultimately culminated in the creation of the Jim Crow South and the consolidation of white supremacy in the 1890s. As the federal government abandoned Reconstruction in the 1870s, the Democratic white supremacist Redeemer governments presided over de facto social segregation, tolerated African American participation in politics only when it could be controlled and manipulated, and countenanced violence against black populations.\footnote{140} In the 1890s, under the influence of a new generation of vitriolic racist demagogues, the Southern states began to formalize the de facto situation: African Americans (and many poor whites) were formally disenfranchised with a variety of new devices like grandfather clauses, literacy tests, and poll taxes, while Jim Crow laws mandated segregation of railroads, theaters, and other public accommodations and facilities.\footnote{141} At the same time, the conservative Supreme Court provided cover for the emerging regime, first stripping the federal government of its power to enforce the civil rights laws and then sanctioning segregation and disenfranchisement by the states.\footnote{142} A major cause of the increased Southern zeal was the development of populist fusion tickets in the first part of the 1890s that sought to unite blacks and poor whites behind common agrarian and

\footnote{138}Ibid., 47-53.\footnote{139} McGerr, 188-193.\footnote{140} Southern, 21-4.\footnote{141} Ibid., 25-8.\footnote{142} Ibid., 17; 28-9.
White Democratic governments used race to break up these coalitions, and then deprived both African Americans and poor whites of political power for good measure. The worsening of race relations was accompanied by a rising tide of state-sanctioned violence against African Americans, with thousands of lynchings. In 1898 a group of Democratic leaders overthrew the biracial fusion government of Wilmington, North Carolina – the state’s largest city – and ransacked black neighborhoods in a prelude to a Democratic takeover of the state government, and the installation of Jim Crow, in the elections that year. The event, which was referred to as a “race riot” until quite recently, remains the only instance of a coup d’état in American history.

This period was paralleled by a broader disentanglement with race issues on the national political scene. As late as the 1890s, the Republican Party had worked to end disenfranchisement, attempting to move legislation through Congress that would have imposed federal oversight on elections. Thereafter, however, the party rapidly lost interest. Northern public opinion – in a region whose de facto social segregation approached that of the South – had little interest in civil rights, and there was therefore little electoral benefit in continuing to push for them. The Democrats, who made no pretense of an interest in civil rights, gained in elections in the 1890s, and the Republicans retreated on civil rights in order to appeal to white voters. This shift in attitudes was aided by a new focus on reconciliation between North and South after the Civil War. The North now desired to put aside past differences, and was more than willing to abandon civil rights on the federal level to do so, as the 1876 presidential election and ensuing

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143 Ibid., 26-7; Diner, 133-6.
144 Ibid., 127-8; Southern, 30-2; 107.
145 Ibid., 32-3.
146 Ibid., 34.
147 Ibid., 34-5.
negotiations made clear. 148 As early as the 1870s, Northern politicians and newspapers began dismissing Reconstruction and black capacity for self-government. 149 For its part, the South witnessed a resurgence of Southern pride and nationalism referred to as the “Lost Cause” movement, which was typically accompanied with a full-throated defense of the Southern position during the Civil War. 150 This movement, combined with the pseudoscientific racism of Progressivism, substantially contributed to the Dunning School described in the first chapter.

These trends led naturally to the Progressive inaction of the 1900 – 1917 period. In spite of some initial positive signs, such as a meeting with Booker T. Washington, and some greater willingness to appoint African Americans to federal offices, Roosevelt showed little desire to broach the race question and was quiet on the subject of lynching. 151 The famously literate president embraced the pseudoscientific Darwinian view of the races, and ranked blacks at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. 152 His summary dismissal of hundreds of decorated black soldiers alleged to have shot up the town of Brownsville, Texas – despite the utter lack of evidence implicating them – was particularly galling to black activists. 153 Taft, his successor – nominated at a convention in which Republicans consciously tried to appeal to Southern whites – was even worse, and effectively excluded black officeholders from the South. 154 Finally, Woodrow Wilson, despite some positive campaign comments, adopted the worst policies of any of the Progressive presidents. Wilson had been born and raised in the South, and had clearly internalized the Southern worldview. Under his direction, the federal government was segregated, and black appointments were dramatically reduced. Famosly, after Wilson
screened *The Birth of a Nation* in the White House – the first movie screening in the building – he declared, “my only regret is that it is all so terribly true.”\(^{155}\)

African Americans responded to this new discrimination in a number of ways. An elaborate network of black educational, religious, and social institutions enabled improvement and mutual aid.\(^ {156}\) Ultimately, beginning at the start of the First World War African Americans voted with their feet and left the South for the North in large numbers.\(^ {157}\) The most famous dispute over the correct response to civil rights regression occurred between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Washington, born a slave, advocated for educational and economic self-improvement for African Americans, and counseled them to avoid political agitation. His well-known 1895 speech in Atlanta declared: “[t]he wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly…[i]t is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercises of these privileges.”\(^ {158}\) Conversely, the Northern-born Du Bois advocated a strategy of protest. Increasingly estranged from Washington, he convened a meeting of black civil rights advocates in 1905 and thereafter founded the NAACP and its magazine, *The Crisis*; quickly, the NAACP began a coordinated political and legal strategy for civil rights.\(^ {159}\) The differences between Washington and Du Bois are reflected in their differing perceptions of Reconstruction, which are described later in the chapter.

In sum, the Progressive Era, despite its general attitude of progress and reform, resulted in almost nothing of value to African Americans. Indeed, it followed a period of dramatic retrenchment for black civil rights, and many of its adherents accepted or even encouraged these

\(^{155}\) Southern, 125-9.
\(^{156}\) Diner, 138-44.
\(^{159}\) Diner, 146-7.
trends. Such a situation prompted the rise of a passionate African American protest and advocacy movement. These competing forces are made clear in the strikingly competing perceptions of Reconstruction discussed in the remainder of this chapter.

**Perceptions of Reconstruction: White Northern Liberals**

Adopting the perceptions of the Dunning School and the cultural and pseudoscientific racism of their time, white Northern liberals had, for the most part, a profoundly and thoroughly negative view of Reconstruction. In line with the contemporary scholarly consensus, they dismissed it as a tragic and misguided period in which tyrannical and vindictive Northern politicians had oppressed the Southern states, improperly elevating corrupt and incompetent African Americans to government. This view is most prevalent in the writings both of periodicals that catered to elites and of some of the era’s most notable politicians, and is especially striking in individuals who previously had a reputation as progressives on the issues of race and civil rights. As Progressives, they were increasingly accepting of federal intervention in economic issues, but still retained a traditional skepticism of federal intervention in social issues that was both motivated by, and contributed to, their disdain towards Reconstruction.

By “white Northern liberals,” this section will examine the broad swath of politicians and reformist intellectuals who shaped the Progressive Era. As a thoroughly middle class and anxiously rational and scientific movement, Progressivism frequently looked to its intellectual and reformist figures for legitimacy and affirmation.\(^{160}\) As a result, important in the Progressive Era are not only politicians, but also scientific, religious, and other intellectual figures, all of which fall under the umbrella category that this section will consider. Although there certainly were Southern participants in the Progressive Era, as is generally the case the Southern outlook

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\(^{160}\) McGerr, xiv-xv; Southern, 44-5.
during this period towards Reconstruction was so uniformly hostile that it makes little sense to examine Southern progressives in any detail.

**THE LIBERAL PRESS ECHOES THE DUNNING SCHOOL**

Some of the most stridently negative and dismissive portrayals of Reconstruction came from the periodicals of the Progressive movement. Both the Progressive Era and the New Deal benefited from a variety of magazines and other periodicals that catered quite deliberately to the white liberal constituency whose opinions are under consideration here. As a result, the opinions published in these magazines, and the general viewpoints embraced, make for a reasonable barometer of consensus opinion. The publications considered here are two of the Progressive Era’s most important, *Harper’s Weekly* and *McClure’s*.

*Harper’s Weekly* was published in New York from 1857 until 1916, near the end of the Progressive Era. It was gained enormous influence following the appointment of George W. Curtis as political editor in 1862 and the hiring of cartoonist Thomas Nast the same year. Though the two men had very different personalities, they both supported the Republican cause, and both quickly became widely read among the political elite.161 Already popular during the Civil War, *Harper’s* supported Lincoln and increasingly moved in favor of emancipation and civil rights for blacks.162 After the conflict, the magazine became a well-known and influential supporter of Reconstruction and the Republican Party and an important participant in American politics, advancing civil service reform and bringing down the Tweed ring. Ulysses S. Grant attributed his election to Thomas Nast, and Lyman Abbott remarked that Curtis managed “the most influential editorial page in the world.”163 After Nast left in 1886 and Curtis died in 1892,

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the magazine declined somewhat in influence, but still remained an important and well-respected bastion of the white liberal press, helping to elect Woodrow Wilson in 1912 before it was folded into *The Independent*, another news magazine, in 1916.164

*Harper's Weekly* published a number of articles during the Progressive Era on Reconstruction, many – by coincidence – from 1903 and all profoundly negative towards the period. Richard H. Edmonds, a Baltimore industrialist and a fervent supporter of Southern industrialization, referred to Reconstruction as a “curse” that had stunted the industrial and manufacturing power of the region for decades.165 An article at around the same time, in which the newspaper’s editors attempted to justify a brutal lynching of a black man accused of raping and murdering a white woman, declared the man’s alleged crime “directly traceable to the notions of equality implanted in ignorant and brutal negroes by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments of the Federal Constitution, and by the practical applications thereof in the carpet-bag governments of the Reconstruction period, and in the deference paid in many Northern States to the negro vote,” offering as evidence the absence of such crimes after disenfranchisement in Mississippi.166

A third article, which responded to the apparently strong response occasioned by the second, laid out in exacting detail the argument that Reconstruction, by favoring the “amalgamation” of the races, contributed to the purportedly unprecedented wave of assaults upon the nation’s young white women.167 “There is, in a word, no doubt that the idea of absolute social equality between the black and the white races, to which amalgamation was the logical and inevitable corollary, pervaded the atmosphere of Washington during the reconstruction

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164 Ibid., 16.
period,” concluded the magazine, adding for good measure that Reconstruction was shaped by Thaddeus Stevens, “who carried out his principles in private life” – a less-than-subtle reference to Stevens’ lifelong relationship with Lydia Hamilton Smith, who was black.\textsuperscript{168} A 1911 article largely maintained this point of view, describing in glowing terms a visit by a group of Confederate veterans from Atlanta to Philadelphia, part of the general mood during the time of national reconciliation. The article favorably compared the attitudes of the veterans to the “unjust and sectional legislation during the Reconstruction period,” which was produced by a mindset thankfully passed.\textsuperscript{169}

Still, it is another article from 1903, entitled “Recent Views of the Fifteenth Amendment,” that perfectly encapsulated the magazine’s embrace of the Dunning School during the period. The purpose of the article was to praise the recent Supreme Court decision in \textit{Giles v. Harris}, in which the Court had refused to invalidate Alabama’s disenfranchisement laws on the basis of the Fifteenth Amendment.\textsuperscript{170} Describing the decision as “one of those unusual rulings in which the nation's chief tribunal sometimes asserts its character as a fountain of equity,” the article explained that the ruling was evidence of a growing consensus, North and South, that the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments “may have been measures of uncertain wisdom, added to the Constitution without due deliberation upon their consequences.”\textsuperscript{171} The magazine, surveying the response to the ruling in the Northern press, proceeded to describe Reconstruction thusly:

\begin{quote}
the sudden and wholesale extension of the suffrage, less than four years after the end of the civil war, to millions of people whose capacity for the responsibilities of the ballot was then untried, was exceedingly problematical in view of race characteristics, and has since…been absolutely proved not to have existed…the destinies of men, women, and children of the white race had for years been placed at the mercy of ignorance and irresponsibility [of the black governments]…The
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{168} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{169} “Atlanta’s Tribute to National Peace,” \textit{Harper’s Weekly}, August 26, 1911.
\textsuperscript{170} “Recent Views of the Fifteenth Amendment,” \textit{Harper’s Weekly}, May 5, 1911.
\textsuperscript{171} \textit{Ibid.}
authors of the Fifteenth Amendment assumed that altering the colored man’s political status would alter the colored man’s intellectual and moral nature.\textsuperscript{172}

A more succinct expression of the Dunning School, mixed with the biological racism of the Progressive Era, could scarcely be imagined. Indeed, the article goes on to explicitly reference the work of James S. Pike, whose 1874 work \textit{The Prostrate State} inaugurated the Dunning School mindset.\textsuperscript{173} All of these \textit{Harper’s} pieces straightforwardly criticized federal efforts and social intervention during Reconstruction as the primary cause of the South’s resulting problems. The criticism by \textit{Harper’s} is all the more notable given its forthright support for Reconstruction and civil rights during the first years of that period, reflecting the major shift in attitudes generally in Northern opinion. In addition, all of these articles, when they criticize the work of the federal government – its laws and constitutional amendments and the governments and politicians it appointed or supported – reflect a continuing association of federal intervention in social and race issues with corruption, disorder, and illegitimacy.

\textit{McClure’s} largely followed the same tone. \textit{McClure’s}, founded by two classmates at Knox College in Illinois and published from 1893 to 1929, is perhaps the magazine most representative of the Progressive Era.\textsuperscript{174} Founded to appeal to the well-to-do middle class that made up the bulk of Progressivism, \textit{McClure’s} was phenomenally successful and published famous articles by noted muckrakers, like Ida Tarbell’s \textit{History of the Standard Oil Company}, on the massive Standard Oil trust (Tarbell herself was an editor and stakeholder at the magazine), and Lincoln Steffens’ “Shame of the Cities,” about municipal corruption.\textsuperscript{175} American historian Richard Hofstadter, in his famous work \textit{The Age of Reform}, referred to \textit{McClure’s} as

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{172}\textit{Ibid.}.
\textsuperscript{173}\textit{Ibid.}; Franklin, 3.
\textsuperscript{175}\textit{Ibid.}, ch. 2.
\end{flushright}
“completely representative…of the thought and sensibility of the muckraking movement” to a degree unmatched by any other publication.\textsuperscript{176}

The four articles published in *McClure’s* about Reconstruction during the Progressive Era – a magazine representative, according to Hofstadter, of the quintessential Progressive viewpoint – are decidedly negative, along the lines of the Dunning School, although perhaps to a less vituperative degree. A 1908 article written by Thomas Nelson Page, a Progressive Era Virginian political figure, criticized Reconstruction leaders, the Freedmen’s Bureau, and enfranchisement, concluding that “the eight years of reconstruction possibly cost the South more than the four years of war had cost her.”\textsuperscript{177} This article was written by a Southerner – though a progressive reformer – and thus it cannot itself be taken as representative of “white Northern liberal” opinion, but its inclusion in *McClure’s* provides a fairly good idea of the sympathies of the editors and its readers. A later article from 1922, this time written by a Pennsylvanian, similarly painted Reconstruction as a failure that had hurt the South, enriched corrupt carpetbaggers, and placed “negroes, very few of whom could read or write,” in positions of power; the article justified the Ku Klux Klan – composed of “many worthy men” as an inevitable and understandable response to the situation.\textsuperscript{178} These articles adopt the same attitude as the ones in *Harper’s* as to the negative consequences of federal involvement.

The remaining two articles were both written by Carl Schurz, a German-American and leading independent politician during the Gilded Age who was instrumental in forming the Liberal Republican Party – which was opposed to aggressive federal action to enforce civil rights – to challenge Grant’s Reconstruction policies in 1872. The first, from 1904, is moderate: it praised some actions of the Freedmen’s Bureau and is critical of the postwar Black Codes.

\textsuperscript{178}Arthur Briggs Farquhar, “The Heart of America,” *McClure’s*, May 1922.
Nevertheless, it is still critical of Reconstruction, in particular the Radical Republicans, and is decidedly paternalistic towards African Americans, presuming them incapable of exercising the franchise.\textsuperscript{179} The second, from 1908 (apparently published posthumously, as Schurz died in 1906), criticized President Johnson, but has the same tone of dismissiveness towards Reconstruction – which it accused the Radical Republicans of “[fatally] bungling” – and African Americans.\textsuperscript{180} As with \textit{Harper’s}, Schurz’s attitudes are notable because Schurz had been a supporter of abolition during the Civil War, again showing the major changes in reformers’ opinions. Thus, while the tone of \textit{McClure’s} was less strident than that of \textit{Harper’s Weekly}, in the essentials of Dunning School-style criticism of Reconstruction, it was largely identical: contemptuous of Reconstruction, its authors, and their ideals, and critical of any notion that African Americans were competent to exercise the franchise.

\textbf{LIBERAL PUBLIC FIGURES ECHO THE DUNNING SCHOOL}

Some of the most notable public figures – both intellectuals and politicians – of the Progressive movement adopted the same attitude as that of \textit{Harper’s Weekly} and \textit{McClure}. The two most notable presidents of the Progressive Era, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, both spoke about Reconstruction, and both regarded it quite negatively. In his biography of Roosevelt, published the year of Roosevelt’s death, his friend of forty years William Roscoe Thayer speaks at length about Roosevelt’s thoughts on race.\textsuperscript{181} Roosevelt, says Thayer, “agreed fully as to the folly of the Congressional scheme of reconstruction based on universal negro suffrage.”\textsuperscript{182} Such a view would have been entirely natural given the sensibilities of the period. The same section largely repeats a number of other typical Dunning School criticisms of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{179} Carl Schurz, “Can the South Solve the Negro Problem?,” \textit{McClure’s}, January 1904.
\item \textsuperscript{180} Carl Schurz, “The Repudiation of Johnson’s Policy,” \textit{McClure’s}, July 1908.
\item \textsuperscript{181} William Roscoe Thayer, \textit{Theodore Roosevelt: An Intimate Biography} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1919), vii.
\item \textsuperscript{182} \textit{Ibid.}, 285.
\end{itemize}
Reconstruction clearly taken as fact, such as the idea that the Reconstruction state governments were placed under the control of “wholly incompetent blacks.”  

Woodrow Wilson’s racism has already been described, and so his attitudes towards Reconstruction should not be surprising. Wilson was born in Virginia and started his professional life in Georgia, and though he spent much of his public life in the North – first as president of Princeton, then as governor of New Jersey – both places had substantial Southern sympathies. Even so, given his pivotal importance in Progressivism, his views are still worth briefly examining. In his article “The Reconstruction of the Southern States,” published in The Atlantic Monthly in 1901, just before Wilson’s appointment as Princeton president, Wilson essentially repeats the common Dunning School viewpoint. He justifies the Black Codes by describing the newly freed slaves as “unpracticed in liberty; unschooled in self-control…bewildered and without leaders; and yet insolent and aggressive…a host of dusky children.” The actions of the Reconstruction state governments, given the presence of uneducated blacks and corrupt carpetbaggers, “was in almost every instance much worse than what had had to be endured under military rule;” the whole era was a “dark period in our history.” Much of the essay is an examination of some of the constitutional and theoretical implications of Reconstruction, but Wilson’s attitude towards the period is clear enough, and resoundingly negative.

Finally, the memoirs of Lyman Abbott, a prominent Congregationalist intellectual and Progressive Era figure, are perhaps the most interesting, because they make clear the tremendous change it attitudes that occurred on issues of race between the Reconstruction period itself and

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183 Ibid., 281.
186 Ibid., 11.
the Progressive Era. Abbott, a generally progressive figure, supported Darwinian evolution and social reform; he was an ally of Theodore Roosevelt and, as editor of *The Outlook Magazine*, reached an audience of some 100,000 subscribers.\footnote{Southern, 56.} During the Civil War, the idealistic Abbott had worked for abolition, black suffrage, and integrated schools.\footnote{Ibid., 36; 56.} This was a sincere belief on his part; as early as 1860, as a pastor at a Congregationalist church in Indiana, he had earned criticism for preaching against slavery: “I preferred a divided country, one half of it free, to a united country, all of it slave.”\footnote{Ibid., 423.}

Over the decades, however, Abbott’s views towards Reconstruction changed sharply. In his 1915 *Reminiscences*, Abbott explained and defended his shift. While in favor of abolition and federal support for African American education, “[t]he results of universal suffrage without universal education” have been negative.\footnote{Ibid., 423.} In fact, this poor Reconstruction policy caused him to leave the Republican Party after the Civil War.\footnote{Ibid., 422.} His view towards African Americans was now that they had not advanced as a race and thus did not deserve self-government: “[m]anhood suffrage means manhood first and suffrage afterwards.”\footnote{Ibid., 424.} He defended the recently imposed Southern disenfranchisement methods as promoting “intelligence, thrift, [and] loyalty” among voters, and described interracial marriage as “injurious to both races and fatal to the community.”\footnote{Ibid., 425.} He recast his earlier work in paternalistic terms: “by so much as the white man is the superior of the black man, by so much is it the duty of the white man to minister to the welfare of the black man.”\footnote{Ibid., 425.} Abbott, once an opponent of slavery and a progressive proponent...
of Reconstruction, now agreed – as a leading intellectual and theological light of Progressivism – with the critiques and attitudes of the Dunning School.

During the Progressive Era, several Republican Northerners who had held public office in the South after the Civil War – that is, “carpetbaggers” – published their memoirs of the period, most notably Henry Warren’s *Reminiscences of a Mississippi Carpet-Bagger* and Powell Clayton’s *The Aftermath of the Civil War, in Arkansas*.\(^{195}\) Though principally intended to justify the authors’ own legacies – and largely self-serving throughout – these memoirs have some interesting mentions of larger Reconstruction policy, generally in a more positive light. However, there is no evidence that these works participated in or influenced the larger conversation about Reconstruction in the Progressive Era, and their authors, mostly of advanced age, were far removed from the Progressive movement and the politics of the day. As such, they have little relevance for an analysis of white Northern liberal attitudes of Reconstruction during the Progressive Era.

Among both the press and leading public figures, the white Northern liberals during the Progressive Era all generally adopted the same tone. In their contempt for both the goals and mechanisms of Reconstruction, their absolute lack of faith in African American intelligence or capacity for self-government, in their focus on the corruption of the era, and in their frequent references to interracial relationships, the progressives surveyed here all reflect the characteristics of the era: an obsession with rationality and science that manifested itself in pseudoscientific racism, an interest in honest government and political reform, disdain towards federal involvement in social or racial issues, and a deference to scholarly elites, in this case the Dunning School.

The perception of Reconstruction among African American elites and activists was strikingly different than that of the white Northern liberal community. In contrast to the profoundly negative view that prevailed among the latter community, African Americans viewed Reconstruction in a generally positive light, which frequently referenced the achievements of the period and its unique instance of African American self-government and agency. Unlike whites, who dismissed federal efforts at intervention in social or racial issues, African Americans embraced such a proposition; it had guaranteed them rights and opportunity during Reconstruction and would be essential in doing the same in the present. This largely positive perspective was offset by some ambivalence and cynicism reflected in the evidentiary record, especially about the true commitment of whites towards black equality. Nevertheless, while African American elites recognized the limits of Reconstruction, they still viewed it fondly. The exception here, unsurprisingly, was the attitude taken by Booker T. Washington, who had a remarkably negative – almost Dunning School – attitude towards Reconstruction. However, this point of view does not seem to have been widely shared in the African American press.

**DU BOIS SETS THE STAGE**

As was also the case with the New Deal, much of the black thought towards Reconstruction during the Progressive Era was influenced and encapsulated by W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois was a prolific historian, from his 1896 doctoral thesis – *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade* – to major portions of *The Souls of Black Folk* to his 1909 biography of John Brown. Nevertheless, he was also an activist: founder of the NAACP, editor of *The Crisis*, later a committed communist, and, in the words of his biographer David Levering Lewis, “[t]he premier architect of the civil rights movement in the United States.”\(^{196}\) Therefore, while this

thesis is explicitly not concerned with examining historical scholarship, a focus on Du Bois is appropriate because he represented not only scholarship but the elite, activist community that worked for civil rights and racial equality during the Progressive Era. Du Bois has already been briefly mentioned in the vein of Reconstruction in the section on Reconstruction historiography in Chapter One.

Du Bois’ magnum opus on Reconstruction, *Black Reconstruction in America*, will be discussed in great detail in the next chapter; published in 1935, it was still decades away during the Progressive Era. Nevertheless, in his writings in the first few decades of the twentieth century Du Bois laid down the battle lines on Reconstruction and made his thoughts on the period known. In his 1903 seminal essay collection, *The Souls of Black Folk*, which is primarily a sociological work, Du Bois included a chapter on the Freedman’s Bureau, entitled “Of the Dawn of Freedom.” This essay was itself an adaptation of a piece Du Bois had wrote two years earlier, “The Freedman’s Bureau,” in the *Atlantic Monthly*.197 “[D]ecades ahead of its time,” in the words of Lewis, Du Bois’ 1901 and 1903 essays painted a profoundly positive picture of the Freedman’s Bureau as an agency that had substantially improved the lives of African Americans in the South.198 Du Bois acknowledges the limitations of the Bureau – among them an insufficient budget and continual criticism from Democrats in the South and in Washington – but concludes that:

[The Bureau] set going a system of free labor; it established the black peasant proprietor; it secured the recognition of black freemen before courts of law; it founded the free public school in the South... The passing of a great human institution before its work is done, like the untimely passing of a single soul, but leaves a legacy of striving for other men.199

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Such an attitude was, to say the least, very much at odds with the prevailing historical scholarship of the time, which was firmly rooted in the Dunning School. Notably, Du Bois’ fulsome praise of direct federal intervention and its benefits directly contrasts with the disdain of the white Progressives for such efforts.

Du Bois next took up Reconstruction in a paper he delivered at the 1909 conference of the American Historical Association entitled “Reconstruction and Its Benefits,” which was equally opposed to the Dunning School and which would form the basis for Black Reconstruction in America two decades later. In the paper, Du Bois began crafting the revisionist interpretation of Reconstruction that was not yet palatable to white audiences but that, as will be seen shortly, reflected what was already a largely positive attitude towards the period in the black press. “There is danger today that between the intense feeling of the South and the conciliatory spirit of the North,” Du Bois begins – a clear reference to both the “Lost Cause” Southern attitude and the lack of concern among even Northern liberals with civil rights issues – “grave injustice will be done the negro American in the history of Reconstruction.” The piece goes on to criticize the actions, such as the Black Codes, of the post-Civil War Southern governments, praise the Freedman’s Bureau and the federal reconstruction scheme, and mount a strident defense of the African American-dominated state governments of the period, traditionally the target of much of the Dunning School’s criticism. While conceding that “the negroes were to some extent venal but to a much larger extent ignorant and deceived,” Du Bois argues that black corruption has been exaggerated and points to the significant successes of these governments, most notably enfranchisement, the establishment of systems of free public schools,

202 Ibid., 784-8.
and other progressive social legislation. Du Bois concludes by saying, “[p]ractically the whole new growth of the South has been accomplished under laws which black men helped to frame thirty years ago. I know of no greater compliment to negro suffrage.”

Delivered at a conference only a few feet away from Dunning himself, the paper – which Du Bois considered a “racial challenge” – had virtually no impact on mainstream scholarship, and the editor of the American Historical Review even refused to capitalize the word “Negro” where it appeared in the manuscript. Nevertheless, aside from helping to crystallize his own views and to inspire the beginnings of serious revisionist history by academics in the 1920s – particularly the black Alrutheus Taylor, whose minutely detailed tomes on Reconstruction in South Carolina and Virginia would in turn contribute to Du Bois’ Black Reconstruction – Du Bois’ essay is indicative of the high esteem in which African American elites and activists held the Reconstruction period, in contrast to white activists, during the Progressive Era. With its references to the black “proletariat,” the work also presages the Marxist approach that would increasingly animate Du Bois’ analysis and the more general focus on class that historians of Reconstruction more broadly would adopt during the New Deal.

Disagreement with Washington

This black positive view towards Reconstruction, however, was not universally shared. Most notably, Booker T. Washington took a strikingly different approach when he discussed the period. Not a historian, Washington did not analyze Reconstruction in the same way Du Bois did, but he nevertheless spent some time on it in his 1901 autobiography, Up from Slavery.

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203 Ibid., 789-92.
204 Ibid., 799.
“Though I was but little more than a youth during the period of Reconstruction, I had the feeling that mistakes were being made,” writes Washington. He continues:

I felt that the Reconstruction policy, so far as it related to my race, was in a large measure on a false foundation, was artificial and forced. In many cases it seemed to me that the ignorance of my race was being used as a tool with which to help white men into office, and that there was an element in the North which wanted to punish the Southern white men by forcing the Negro into positions over the heads of the Southern whites. I felt that the Negro would be the one to suffer for this in the end.208

Washington goes on to cite some of his typical themes in his discussion of Reconstruction, criticizing the constant desire among African Americans to run for political office, as well as their lack of education and preparation for self-government; he argues that they would have been much better served with securing an economic livelihood and industrial education.209 “[I]t was cruelly wrong in the central government…to fail to make some provision for the general education of our people,” he says. “[I]t would have been wiser if some plan could have been put in operation which would have made the possession of a certain amount of education or property, or both, a test for the exercise of the franchise.”210 In this, Washington was distinct from many contemporary white critics of Reconstruction, who would have viewed such federal efforts as folly.

To be sure, Washington does not wholly adopt a Dunning School-style argument; he labels a number of black Southern politicians and carpetbaggers “strong, uptight, useful men,” and is careful to stress that any property or literacy test for voting must “apply honestly and squarely to both the white and black races.”211 Nevertheless, the congruence between Washington’s attitudes and many of those of the Dunning School is striking, most notably a

209 Ibid., 80-5.
210 Ibid., 83-4.
211 Ibid., 84-6.
condemnation of the idea of black self-government on the basis that freed slaves were simply not ready to assume such a responsibility, as well as the sentiment that Reconstruction was primarily aimed at punishing Southern whites and providing political benefit for Northern Republicans. Washington’s viewpoint, aside from contrasting predictably with that of Du Bois, shows that thinking about Reconstruction among African American elites was not monolithic. However, Washington seems to have been decidedly in the minority with his perceptions, which were generally not echoed – in contrast to Du Bois’ – in the black press.

**THE BLACK PRESS BACKS DU BOIS**

The black press – which was vibrant during this period – adopted a view similar to that of Du Bois: largely positive, but accented with an acknowledgement of limitations and ultimate failures, and tinged with some cynicism or ambivalence. Nowhere was this congruence more the case, appropriately, than in *The Crisis*, which was edited by Du Bois as the official magazine of the newly founded NAACP starting in 1909. The NAACP was an elite-driven, not a mass organization, and *The Crisis* itself divided the organization’s leadership, but the magazine “struck a chord in African Americans,” claiming a circulation of 100,000 a month (80% of which was African American) by 1919.\(^{212}\) As such, *The Crisis* can be taken as a perspective quite indicative of the elite, activist (and largely Northern) communities in which Du Bois travelled.

Between 1912 and 1924 (slightly after the end of the Progressive Era, but still containing sentiment worth including), *The Crisis* published a number of articles focused on or referencing Reconstruction that will be examined here.\(^{213}\) The first, in September 1912, favorably described the “reform governments” of South Carolina and Mississippi, whose accomplishments it argues led to the overthrow of Republican governments in the South on the grounds that “the one thing

\(^{212}\) Southern, 167-70.  
\(^{213}\) Archival digitization of *The Crisis* is not complete, and so some more may exist, but the ones examined here, which span a wide timeframe, seem more than adequate to draw conclusions.
the white South seems to have feared more than bad Negro rule was good Negro rule.”214 Such a theme was repeated in an article from June of 1917 – “it was not bad Negro voters they feared, but good, intelligent ones.”215 More positive articles follow. In March 1913, the paper remembered the Reconstruction era for its enfranchisement of African Americans, a situation mourned as having passed.216 In June 1915, The Crisis strongly condemned D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation in an article that included a number of quotes from similar publications along the same lines. Given the subject matter, the article featured a full-throated defense of Reconstruction: Griffith’s portrayal was “unfair and vicious,” its depiction of rape and plunder by black troops was entirely false, and the misfortunes of the period for whites “they brought upon themselves” by attempting to nullify the abolition of slavery via the Black Codes after the end of the conflict.217 The February 1917 edition praised the “wonderful sense of dignity” produced by the education and social welfare legislation enacted by the Reconstruction state governments, while simultaneously lamenting the “rank injustice” to which African Americans have been subjected since the end of the period.218 An article from January 1922, which attempted to draw a comparison with post-World War One reconstruction, effusively praised American Reconstruction as “the single finest instance of the effort of a nation to immediately set right an ancient wrong” while still allowing for “many an attendant injustice.”219 Finally, a letter to the editor in the December 1924 edition dismissed a biography of a judge during Reconstruction as “reiterating all the outworn blah” criticizing the period.220

220 Paul Munter, letter to the editor of The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races, December 1924, 82.
Articles published in other African American newspapers – not under the control of Du Bois – were generally in the same vein of tempered praise. Such an attitude generally seems to have existed regardless of geography, including in the South. In 1911, the Savannah Tribune carried favorable reports of a speech by Du Bois at a black convention in London, noting approvingly of Reconstruction that “whatever the faults” of African American state governments, they “gave the south the beginning of a public school system, admitted thousands of poor whites to the suffrage…and abolished many barbarous forms of punishment.”\(^{221}\) An article in the Broad Axe, a Chicago newspaper, the next year similarly fondly recalled the gains of Reconstruction – the Fifteenth Amendment, state governments committed to “political equality,” and the establishment of public schools for blacks – while lamenting the effective nullification of those amendments at the hands of Redeemer governments and the indifference of the contemporary Republican party.\(^{222}\) A 1913 article in the Washington Bee lambasted plans to include Confederate veterans in the fiftieth anniversary ceremonies for the Battle of Gettysburg – emblematic of the conciliatory Northern mood – given the Lost Cause attitude of the South and its “nefarious contention that emancipation, reconstruction, and enfranchisement are dismal failures.”\(^{223}\) African American politician John Lynch, discussed below, was moved by the release of The Birth of a Nation to pen a piece in the Cleveland Gazette in 1915 that “while some mistakes were made during the progress of reconstruction…I do not hesitate to assert that the reconstructed state governments were the best governments those states ever had.”\(^{224}\) This was one of a number of similar condemnations of The Birth of a Nation carried in African American newspapers.

\(^{221}\) “The American Race Problem,” Savannah Tribune, September 23, 1911.
\(^{222}\) “Afro-Americans and the Ballot,” Broad Axe (Chicago, IL), October 12, 1912.
newspapers. For example, in 1916 the Savannah Tribune again joined in, publishing approvingly a statement by black ministers that the film “by no means [represents] the truth of affairs” as to the Reconstruction period. On the whole, then, the elite and activist opinion contained in The Crisis and in other black newspapers reflects a decidedly positive view of Reconstruction, in which acknowledgements of the progress that had been lost since that time or occasional mistakes did not diminish the overall fondness for the period. All of these articles also unreservedly praise federal efforts and intervention, in contrast with their white counterparts.

BLACK RECONSTRUCTION MEMOIR

The one notable instance of a memoir of Reconstruction by a black politician generally supports Du Bois’ position as well. This work is the memoir of John Lynch, published in 1914 and appropriately titled The Facts of Reconstruction. Unlike the white carpetbagger memoirs mentioned above, Lynch’s work was widely cited in the black press and by black scholars, and Lynch himself remained a noted part of the African American community and a participant in the discourse of the period, as the newspaper articles involving him in both the Progressive Era and later in the New Deal make clear. As such, it is appropriate to consider and analyze Lynch’s work. The Louisiana-born Lynch, an African American, was elected Speaker of the Mississippi House of Representatives and then a member of Congress during Reconstruction. His memoirs naturally are considerably concerned with political minutiae in Mississippi or commentary on later Gilded Age politics – one chapter is simply a verbatim transcript of a conversation between Lynch and President Grant on the subject of a postmaster appointment –

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227 Lewis, introduction, xxv.
and are clearly self-serving.\textsuperscript{228} In this, Lynch’s work is similar to many of the political memoirs published during the period.

Nevertheless, a considerable portion of the book is devoted to a cogent defense of Reconstruction and African American self-government in the South, and reflects the considerable fondness and pride with which many in the elite community – a community that still included a number of direct participants – viewed the era. “Very much, of course, has been written and published about reconstruction, but most of it is superficial and unreliable,” he begins. “The author of this work has endeavored to present facts as they were and are…entirely free from race prejudice, sectional animosity, or partisan bias….The main purpose of this work is to present the other side [of the Reconstruction debate].”\textsuperscript{229} Lynch stresses the justness of aiding the freed people who had helped the North to such a degree during the Civil War, and the widespread support Congressional Reconstruction had among the Northern electorate.\textsuperscript{230} Arguing that nearly all agreed the Mississippi Reconstruction constitution was an “admirable document,” he devotes considerable time to describing the important social welfare measures passed by the Republican government, as well as the improved financial condition in which it left the state.\textsuperscript{231}

As Lewis writes, Lynch’s work was “taken seriously by no more than a handful of scholars.”\textsuperscript{232} Nevertheless, it clearly had some impact in the African American community. The book won positive – and largely identical, suggesting an organized campaign – reviews (“an admirable book” – “a most interesting and valuable book”) clearly sympathetic towards

\textsuperscript{229} \textit{Ibid.}, 9-10. Emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{230} \textit{Ibid.}, 14-8.
\textsuperscript{231} \textit{Ibid.}, 25; 48-53; 86-91.
\textsuperscript{232} Lewis, introduction, xxv.
Reconstruction in several African American newspapers. Furthermore, advertisements for the book – typically accompanied by some positive mention both of the book and towards Reconstruction more generally – were present in a number of editions of The Crisis published in the years after its release.

SOME SIGNS OF CYNICISM

There were some scattered instances of cynicism in the black press, thought far outweighed by positive interpretations. The only notable instance of genuine cynicism in The Crisis appeared in the January 1913 edition celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. This mention of the period occurs as part of a larger article noting the enormous regression that has occurred for African Americans over most of the past five decades.

There are also some dissenting voices in the other black periodicals. The Washington Bee gave a decidedly cynical take on Reconstruction – which presaged later, class-based arguments – in an article that described it as a period in which “the negro was put in power” by a Republican Party controlled by “the white man” who “controlled the money.” That same year, the Broad Axe ran a series of historical articles on the Reconstruction era in which the author took a view decidedly sympathetic to the South, in many cases echoing Washington: Andrew Johnson was seen as an honorable man with a moderate plan for Reconstruction, the Freedman’s Bureau was criticized, and Black Codes, while called harsh, were even defended for encouraging freed slaves to work. “It is not making any new or startling assertion to say that Negro suffrage

234 E.g., The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races, February 1914, 162; June 1915, 104; February 1917, 202; June 1917, 104.
was a failure,” the article concluded: “[t]o import the ex-slave into politics was to make a
parasite of a plant that needed to strike its roots deep into the earth.” Nevertheless, these
sentiments were decidedly in the minority, in both *The Crisis* and the other black newspapers.

On the whole, then, the attitude among African American elites and activists towards
Reconstruction, as represented in writings of major figures as well as in periodicals, is a
profoundly positive one, though with the limitations already described. Du Bois helped to
crystallize this consensus, but clearly did not manufacture it; his sentiments were broadly similar
– though perhaps with a greater Marxist tinge, as will be discussed in the chapter on the New
Deal – to those of John Lynch, a dozen different newspapers and magazines, and more.
Washington’s negative attitude, in contrast, does not appear to have been widely shared. It is
also worth noting that this positive perception was very much at odds with the contemptuous
Dunning School scholarship of the time, a situation quite unlike white perceptions, which
broadly tracked the mainstream historical consensus.

* * *

In spite of the tremendous interest – and genuine progress – during the Progressive Era
towards social and political reform, the white liberals of the period had little interest in the plight
of African Americans, and this attitude was reflected in their perceptions of Reconstruction.
African American elites, conversely, refused to accept the dominant scholarly narrative and
crafted their own, which reflected their continuing pride and fondness at Reconstruction’s
achievements.

Progressivism faded as the United States entered the First World War and as a string of
conservative postwar presidents embraced a limited federal government that had little interest in

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237 Hilary A. Herbert, “The Conditions of the Reconstruction Problem, VIII,” *Broad Axe* (Chicago, IL), June 8, 1901.
issues of race or civil rights. The spirit of reform would again rear its head, however, during the
Great Depression and the New Deal. The class-based critiques of Reconstruction that
occasionally appeared during the Progressive Era would become much more common, including
among African Americans, even as white elite attitudes softened marginally.
The New Deal was the second great reform movement of the twentieth century, and its contours, effects, and constituencies were frequently different than those of the Progressive Era. A specific response to the circumstances of the Great Depression, rather than a reaction to general concerns about reform, the New Deal also overlapped with both the emergence of a new historiographical approach, the Progressive school, that emphasized class and economic motivations, and with continuing fallout from the Russian Revolution and the Marxist thinking it inspired. Popular attitudes of Reconstruction changed to reflect this concern with economic issues and new interpretations of history as shaped by class conflict. This was the case for both white liberal attitudes and for African American attitudes. African Americans, in particular, simultaneously continued their traditional praise for Reconstruction and interpreted it through an economic lens, under the influence of W.E.B. Du Bois, who combined both approaches. Economic interpretations and praise for Reconstruction were not mutually exclusive, but economic thinking sometimes introduced more cynicism, and a tendency among both African Americans and whites to associate the federal government with the capitalist industrial class.

Unlike the Progressive Era, which was often accompanied by a distinct prejudice on issues of race, the New Deal – while still crafted partially by Southerners, and in no way a civil rights movement – provided tangible benefits African Americans, and in turn counted them among its supporters. Under the New Deal, the perceived legitimate sphere of federal activity expanded, though it did not yet encompass issues of direct race relations. Amidst these factors, there was a perceptible softening of white attitudes towards Reconstruction, especially in the liberal press, though liberal politicians displayed minimal change in thought. As in the
Progressive Era, these changing perceptions confirm the close relationship between popular attitudes, scholarly interpretations, and contemporary events.

**Background: The New Deal**

The New Deal was a far shorter period of reform than the Progressive Era, and its proximate cause was far more obvious. It began as a response to the trauma of the Great Depression, and lasted roughly from the inauguration of President Franklin Roosevelt, in January of 1933, to the end of the decade. It was also, to a much greater extent than the Progressive Era, the work of a single man – Roosevelt – and his Democratic Party. The New Deal was backed by the party’s famous New Deal coalition, which added African American support to the party’s traditional Southern base and its strengths among immigrants, city dwellers, labor unions, and other ethnic and religious minorities, all in an improbable alliance oriented towards economic reform that lasted until the 1960s. Major elements of both the party’s base and its liberal intelligentsia came from the North.

The New Deal was famously vague in terms of its overall philosophical basis; Roosevelt himself scorned such questions and more than one declared it his desire to try every remedy to meet the Great Depression regardless of ideological source. Roosevelt maintained a “Brains Trust” of academic advisors like Raymond Moley and Rexford Tugwell who gravitated towards sympathy both towards the large industrial enterprises of the modern age and the strong state that was needed to regulate them, but their ultimate influence on New Deal policy is debatable. In spite of this muddle the New Deal ultimately created a set of enduring institutions and attitudes centered on security for the marginalized and unfortunate in society and security for capitalism.

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239 Rauchway, 112.
as a whole by minimizing its volatility and subjecting it to public regulation.\textsuperscript{242} Its whole approach was consistently buoyed by Roosevelt’s typical optimism and charisma, particularly with the famous “fireside chats” he used to spur public support for his policies.\textsuperscript{243}

The stock market crash of October 1929 set in motion the chain of events that would lead to the New Deal. The panic in the stock market, whose value was cut by one-third by mid-November, transformed into a broad-based and long-lasting economic depression of unprecedented trauma. Economic and industrial output plummeted, nearly one quarter of the labor force was unemployed, and human need far outstripped the ability of relief networks to respond.\textsuperscript{244} In particular, thousands of banks failed, and by the time of Roosevelt’s inauguration the banking system was on the brink of complete collapse.\textsuperscript{245} President Herbert Hoover worked to respond to the calamity to the extent his politics and those of his party would allow – with new federal vehicles like the Reconstruction Finance Corporation as well as state, local, and private charity – but in the end he was capable of mustering neither the political will nor the government efforts needed to truly address the crisis.\textsuperscript{246} The severity of the crisis and Hoover’s deep unpopularity propelled Roosevelt – the reform governor of New York, from aristocratic old money but brought low by polio, which led him to spend substantial time in the hot springs of the South in search of a cure – into the White House alongside a Democratic majority in Congress, winning all but six states.\textsuperscript{247}

Immediately upon inauguration, Roosevelt took measures to stem the overwhelming banking crisis.\textsuperscript{248} In the ensuing famous “hundred days” period and beyond over the next two

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{242} \textit{Ibid.}, 365-80.
\item \textsuperscript{243} \textit{Ibid.}, 114-7.
\item \textsuperscript{244} Rauchway, 38-55.
\item \textsuperscript{245} Kennedy, 131-3.
\item \textsuperscript{246} \textit{Ibid.}, 79-85; 88-92.
\item \textsuperscript{247} \textit{Ibid.}, 102-3.
\item \textsuperscript{248} \textit{Ibid.}, 135-7.
\end{itemize}
years, Congress enacted a flurry of unprecedented legislative proposals that dramatically increased government relief efforts to contain the Great Depression: the Emergency Banking Act, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the corporatist National Recovery Administration, the Works Progress Administration, and more “alphabet soup” agencies.\textsuperscript{249} Perhaps even more significant, and certainly more long-lasting, were the reform laws, many of which were enacted in the “Second New Deal” period of 1935: the Social Security Act, which established the Social Security and welfare state system that exists today; the Agricultural Adjustment Act, which laid the foundation for the modern farm subsidy system; the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Rural Electrification Administration; banking regulation that created the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation; and the National Labor Relations Act, which guaranteed the right to collective bargaining.\textsuperscript{250}

Although there is considerable controversy about the overall effect of the New Deal on economic recovery, the fact remains that in the face of assertive government action beginning in 1933, public confidence increased and economic indicators like output and unemployment began to show improvement.\textsuperscript{251} At the same time, Roosevelt had to contend with populist critics – like the flamboyant Senator Huey Long of Louisiana and his “Share Our Wealth” campaign, Dr. Francis Townsend, who pushed for what would become Social Security, and the charismatic (and anti-Semitic) priest Father Coughlin – as well as with growing labor unrest.\textsuperscript{252} In spite of these obstacles, the voters continued to endorse the New Deal, expanding Democratic majorities

\textsuperscript{249} Rauchway, 59-69.
\textsuperscript{250} Ibid., 77-81; 93-102; Kennedy, 257-73.
\textsuperscript{251} Ibid., 288-9.
\textsuperscript{252} Ibid., 224-42; 289.
in Congress to unprecedented levels in the 1934 midterm elections and then reelecting Roosevelt in 1936 by historic margins, handing him every state but Maine and Vermont.\textsuperscript{253}

Roosevelt’s reelection, however, turned out to be one of the final unmitigated triumphs of the New Deal. Invigorated by his victory, Roosevelt sought the power to reshape the membership of the Supreme Court, whose hostile conservative majority had struck down a number of the New Deal’s most significant early achievements. Congress, however, fearful of even further increases in executive power, rejected his proposal.\textsuperscript{254} At the same time, he pursued a widely-publicized and ultimately fruitless offensive against the conservative Southern Democrats who had blocked his court proposal and others.\textsuperscript{255} Finally, tightening fiscal policy resulted in a debilitating second recession from 1937 to 1938 that thoroughly sapped any remaining public support for further New Deal reform.\textsuperscript{256} The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which created the minimum wage and prohibited child labor, was the last major New Deal achievement.\textsuperscript{257} Roosevelt was reelected to an unprecedented third term in 1940, albeit by a reduced margin, but by that point the nation was thoroughly immersed in the conflicts in Europe and Asia that would eventually result in American entry into the Second World War.

In their scope, the ways they altered the relationship between the federal government and the people, and the speed of their enactment, the achievements of the New Deal outstrip those of the Progressive Era and are rivaled in the twentieth century perhaps only by Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs thirty years later. Progressive Era reforms, while vast and diverse, principally contemplated regulation, rather than direct assistance, and at assuaging the concerns of its middle class constituencies. Conversely, the New Deal’s programs directly provided

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{253} Ibid., 216; Rauchway, 112.
  \item \textsuperscript{254} Kennedy, 31-8.
  \item \textsuperscript{255} Ibid., 338-50.
  \item \textsuperscript{256} Ibid., 350.
  \item \textsuperscript{257} Rauchway, 142.
\end{itemize}
federal aid to millions of Americans – assistance that, in the case of Social Security and other programs, continues to this day.²⁵⁸ Whereas the Progressive Era’s reforms were implemented over two decades by politicians from both parties, but those of the New Deal were enacted over just five years (from 1933 to 1938) and almost entirely by the Democratic Party. The two eras also differed substantially in their interaction with African Americans and their treatment of issues of race relations generally.

RACE RELATIONS DURING THE NEW DEAL

The relationship between the New Deal and African Americans was intensely complicated but on the whole considerably more positive than that of the Progressive Era. Unlike the pseudoscientific racism of the Progressive Era, no part of the New Deal’s ideology dovetailed with racism. Nevertheless, the Roosevelt Administration, supported as it was by Southern Democrats in Congress, was loath to address racial issues. It established the famous “Black Cabinet” of African American advisors during the New Deal, and Eleanor Roosevelt was particularly noticeable for her outreach towards the black community, but on more substantive issues it showed little interest in involvement.²⁵⁹ Southern Democrats, for their part, thoroughly controlled Congress, and did not hesitate to assert themselves on issues of race, typically putting sectional loyalty before partisan loyalty.²⁶⁰ The Southern bloc insisted on the exemption of domestic and agricultural workers – resulting in the exclusion of most African Americans – from the benefits of the Social Security system, and refused to include provisions against racial discrimination in labor unions in the National Labor Relations Act; the Administration acquiesced on both counts.²⁶¹ The Administration likewise did nothing to support the enactment

²⁵⁸ Nugent, 122-6.
²⁵⁹ Weiss, 136.
²⁶⁰ Katzenelson, 15-6; 21-3; 144-61.
²⁶¹ Weiss, 162-8.
of passage of antilynching legislation by Congress, which was defeated by Southern opposition in both 1935 and 1937.\textsuperscript{262} The defeat of the antilynching bills and Democratic acceptance of Southern demands on other policy issues indicates that the New Deal, in spite of its massive expansion of federal policy, did not herald a general acceptance of federal involvement in racial and social issues zealously guarded as the prerogative of the states by white supremacists.

In terms of the New Deal itself, while official policy prohibited racial discrimination in federal relief programs, the reality varied widely on the basis of individual administrators, region, and the degree to which a program was centrally controlled from Washington or decentralized.\textsuperscript{263} In the South, where administration of New Deal programs was typically in the hands of the Democratic machine, racism was much more common, while the National Recovery Administration frequently promulgated industry codes harmful to black workers.\textsuperscript{264} Indisputably African Americans did not receive the aid that a fair administration would have provided them, and there is evidence that the New Deal actually reinforced certain negative trends, like the residential segregation of African Americans in urban areas.\textsuperscript{265} Nevertheless, in terms of sheer scale the New Deal provided government assistance to African Americans at a level utterly unprecedented since the Reconstruction period itself. In 1937 alone the Works Progress Administration employed 370,000 blacks – 20\% of its total workforce – and cared for 10,000 black children in nursery schools. The same year the National Youth Administration funded attendance by 35,000 black students in high schools and colleges, and African Americans made up 10\% of the Civilian Conservation Corps workforce. From 1933 to 1937, the Public Works Administration invested $7 million building black public schools in the South, and fully a third

\textsuperscript{262} Katznelson, 166-8; 179-82.
\textsuperscript{263} Weiss, 50.
\textsuperscript{264} Ibid., 51-9.
\textsuperscript{265} Ibid., 178-9; 296-7.
of the housing units it constructed, typically in part using well-paid black labor, were for black families.\textsuperscript{266} The Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration conducted ambitious plantation resettlement programs, with enormous benefits for African Americans, in a number of locations in the South.\textsuperscript{267} In the North, WPA-funded cultural activities, like the Federal Theatre and the Federal Writers’ Project, included plays and research activities by African Americans.\textsuperscript{268}

Perhaps the clearest confirmation of the benefits provided by the New Deal to African Americans is the distinct change in voting patterns by African Americans, where they could vote, from support of the Republican Party to support of the Democratic Party. African Americans had long been loyal supporters of the Republican Party, in spite of the minimal concern in that party towards blacks at least in the twentieth century, because of the party’s legacy in ending slavery and because of the Democratic Party’s base in the white supremacist South.\textsuperscript{269} In the face of Hoover’s unwillingness to deal with the conditions of the Great Depression, which affected African Americans and other marginalized communities particularly harshly, there were some black defections from the Republican Party in 1932, though the GOP still captured the lion’s share of the black vote.\textsuperscript{270} This dominance changed dramatically, however, as the tangible benefits of the New Deal became more and more clear. In the 1936 election, in which both parties appealed directly for African American support in unprecedented ways, Africans Americans swung decisively towards Roosevelt, with the president winning as much as 80% of the black vote in some Northern cities.\textsuperscript{271} This behavior was repeated in the 1940 elections, and

\textsuperscript{266} Ibid., 236.
\textsuperscript{267} Ibid., 237-9.
\textsuperscript{268} Ibid., 239-40.
\textsuperscript{269} Ibid., 3; 11.
\textsuperscript{270} Kennedy, 164; Weiss, 29-33.
\textsuperscript{271} Ibid., 180-203.
since the New Deal African Americans have been – and continue to be – a key part of the Democratic base. Historian Nancy Weiss portrays this dramatic shift as a practical decision on the part of the African American electorate to reward the party that was providing at least some benefits to blacks, even while the electorate acknowledged the limitations of the New Deal.

The change in voting behavior was not the only manifestation of increasing black political involvement during the New Deal. The NAACP and the Urban League engaged in unprecedented activism and lobbying efforts to monitor discrimination in federal relief programs and press for favorable legislation in Congress. Their efforts were reflected in the 1935 and 1937 debates over antilynching legislation, some of the first serious considerations of civil rights bills since the federal elections bills of the 1890s. Similarly, black Democratic politicians, such as Chicago congressman Arthur Mitchell, gained prominence. The case of the Scottsboro boys – in which nine black teenagers were convicted of raping a white girl in an Alabama trial that denied them nearly every element of due process, resulting in years of legal battles on the state and federal level – further energized the black community. The Scottsboro trial additionally demonstrated division in the black community between moderates, for instance in the NAACP, and the American Communist Party, which made a determined effort to win black minds both through its aggressive support of the defense in the trial and through its promotion of revolution and “self-determination” for blacks in the South.

\[\text{\cite{272}}\ \text{Ibid., 286-9.}\]
\[\text{\cite{273}}\ \text{Ibid., 296-8.}\]
\[\text{\cite{274}}\ \text{Ibid., 62-77.}\]
\[\text{\cite{275}}\ \text{Ibid., 78-95.}\]
\[\text{\cite{276}}\ \text{Kennedy, 222-3.}\]
\[\text{\cite{277}}\ \text{Lewis, W.E.B. Du Bois, 512-9.}\]
At the same time as African Americans were increasing in importance in the Democratic coalition, the party’s traditional base in the South remained as influential as ever. As the previous chapter mentioned, the decades prior to the 1930s had seen the rise and entry in the mainstream of the “Lost Cause” strain of thought that glorified Southern history and the Confederacy and rejected slavery as the cause of the Civil War.\(^\text{278}\) This Lost Cause mentality was alive and well during this period, for instance with the publication of *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and its film version (1939) or the placement of Confederate monuments at Gettysburg (North Carolina, 1929; Alabama, 1933). In fact, strong Southern memories of Reconstruction, nurtured by the Lost Cause, were one of the main reasons for Congress’ rejection of antilynching legislation and for conservative Southern Democrats’ larger criticisms of the New Deal as an unacceptable expansion of federal power from 1937 on.\(^\text{279}\)

**PROGRESSIVE HISTORIANS**

Even before the New Deal changed the nation, a new historiographical approach, the Progressive school, was altering academia. The Progressive school emphasized economic forces in its analysis, and was connected to a rise in professionalism within the scholarly discipline of history and to the reform currents of the Progressive Era itself.\(^\text{280}\) Indeed, the Progressive historians began cementing their ideas during the Progressive Era, and were linked to it – hence the name – but only after World War One did those ideas translate into thinking about Reconstruction.\(^\text{281}\) Richard Hofstadter identified the three principal figures of the school as Frederick Jackson Turner, Charles Beard, and Vernon L. Parrington, and Beard’s 1913 work (written with his wife, Mary), *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United*

\(^\text{278}\) Blight, 258-62; Southern, 31-2.
\(^\text{279}\) Kennedy, 342.
States – which analyzed the Constitution from the economic interests of the Framers and their supposed opposition to majoritarian democracy – is probably the best known of the whole movement.\textsuperscript{282} In general, the Progressive viewpoint, in spite of its link to the Progressive Era, was inevitably skeptical of grand elite efforts at social reform, viewing them as necessarily shaped by the economic interests of their proponents.\textsuperscript{283} The direct impact of the Progressive school on Reconstruction historiography, principally reflected in the work of Howard K. Beale, was discussed in the first chapter, but this key intellectual current was also influential in shaping popular perceptions of history – especially history as controversial as Reconstruction – during the New Deal period.

To be sure, class had hardly been absent from the discourse, nor from previous reform movements. The Progressive Era was known for its middle class credentials, and this middle class marker was in large part derived from cultural values and social perception.\textsuperscript{284} However, the Progressive school was distinct in its conception of economic factors, rather than ideological ones, as the main motivating forces in history. The Progressive historians repudiated a number of aspects of Marxist historical materialism, but even so leftist thought more broadly during the New Deal increasingly adopted a Marxian gloss towards history, involving competition between classes as conceived purely by economic interest rather than cultural factors.\textsuperscript{285} When publications approached Reconstruction from this economic or class-based perspective, they typically – along the lines of Beale – saw Reconstruction as an effort by Northern industrialists to extinguish the South as an economic competitor, and associated the federal government with

\textsuperscript{282} Hofstadter, xi-xiii; 182-3.
\textsuperscript{283} Cheng, 105-6.
\textsuperscript{284} McGerr, xiv-xv; Southern, 44-5.
\textsuperscript{285} Cheng, 86-7; 117-8.
this industrialist class rather than as a force interested in the rights of the freed slaves for their own sake.

During the 1930s, a strong reform movement – one more willing than Progressivism to include African Americans in its benefits – backed by an assertive federal government once more offered parallels to Reconstruction, but Southern hostility on issues of race remained as alive as ever, and the Progressive school did not typically view endeavors like Reconstruction with much sympathy. All of these complementary or competing currents are evident in perceptions towards Reconstruction by both white Northern liberals and African American elites.

**Perceptions of Reconstruction: White Northern Liberals**

There was a noticeable and positive shift in perceptions by white Northern liberals towards Reconstruction during the New Deal. Liberals less readily discounted accomplishments of the era, and there was some sense past criticisms may have been too far-reaching. This changing thought was in line with a civil rights movement increasingly supported by liberals, an evolving scholarship that – between Paul H. Buck, the Progressive historians, and others – was less dominated by the Dunning School, and a reform movement that no longer overlapped so easily with pseudoscientific racism, did not follow a period of racial retrenchment, and (as with Reconstruction) considerably expanded the boundaries of legitimate federal intervention. However, there was still a considerable element of Dunning School thought, especially among politicians as opposed to journalists. In addition, paralleling both the period’s economic concerns and the work of some African American thinkers and Progressive historians, there was also a substantial rise in criticism of Reconstruction from an economic, class-based perspective. This economic perspective counteracted much of the increasingly positive conception of the federal government in its tendency to associate the federal government with the bourgeois, industrialist class.
DUNNING SCHOOL REDUX

In spite of the changes contributing to a more positive approach towards Reconstruction during the New Deal, the Dunning School remained a major factor. This was the case both for a significant portion of the articles that appeared in periodicals, but perhaps more prominently in the work and statements towards the period by politicians. The most notable entrant in the Dunning School during this period, and one of the most important Dunning School works in general, is The Tragic Era, by Claude Bowers. This work, a history of Reconstruction, was previously discussed in Chapter One because it was intended as a scholarly work and was indeed received as such by contemporaries. However, it is also worth discussing here because Bowers was not a traditional scholar; rather, he was a political actor and a figure whose influence in the Democratic Party is probably underappreciated. Born in a small Indiana town, Bowers rose to become a prominent journalist who, in the 1920s, wrote a pair of books on Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson that were enormously popular and influential in defending Jefferson’s democratic legacy and his role in founding the Democratic Party. Bowers was not simply a partisan hack: he served as a well-regarded ambassador to Spain (during the Civil War there) and Chile, where he defended democracy in both against fascism, and his biography of Albert Beveridge was well-received. Nevertheless, Bowers moved decidedly in a political, rather than a scholarly, sphere, and his penchant for dramatization and tendency to fit the facts around his partisan worldview are evident in The Tragic Era.

Published in 1929, The Tragic Era presents itself as a straightforward history of Reconstruction, and adopts essentially in full the arguments of the Dunning School. Bowers describes the era as an “appalling…tragedy…[in which] never have American public men…been

287 Ibid., xvii; 125.
so brutal, hypocritical, and corrupt.” Accordingly, Andrew Johnson was an honest, responsible man; Stevens was bitter. Aside from Johnson and his supporters, Bowers vilifies the federal government: the Reconstruction Acts imposed “military despotism” and “rule...by the sword,” while the impeachment of Johnson was a “farce.” The constitutional conventions and legislatures of the Reconstruction state governments, made possible by federal action, were “monstrosities,” “illiterate and corrupt.” Similarly, the book idolizes Southerners – after the war, “the Southern people were fighting for the preservation of their civilization,” against freed slaves under the sway of “demagogues,” “fanatics,” “and the white scum of the North.” The Ku Klux Klan was depicted as a harmless band of “regulators” whose efficacy largely stemmed from the stupidity of the blacks, who believed the sheeted riders were ghosts. Bowers’ focus on drama and narrative is evident throughout the book, from its opening line (“[a] dismal drizzle of rain was falling as the dawn came to Washington after a night of terror”) to some of its chapter headings (“The Great American Farce” – “A Season of Scandal”). Evident as well are his inordinate focus on the social scene in Washington – to which he devotes whole passages – and his interest in defending the Democratic Party itself.

Bowers fully expected to win the Pulitzer Prize for *The Tragic Era*; in this he was disappointed. The book’s partisan slant was too much to allow for that honor. Nevertheless, the historians on the Pulitzer jury chose the work by a wide margin, only to be overruled by the prize’s organizing committee at Republican-leaning Columbia University; contemporary reviews of *The Tragic Era*, both in academia and the popular press, were quite favorable; and the book

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288 Bowers, v.
sold more copies than any other work at that point on Reconstruction. Subsequent historians, of course, have been decidedly less favorable – Foner describes *The Tragic Era* as a “work of fiction masquerading as history” and Weisberger characterizes it as a “zestful work of imagination.” But the book’s influence on attitudes and discourse at the time, particularly among the Democratic politicians and elites for whom Bowers had some influence, should not be underestimated. *The Tragic Era* both repeated the claims of the Dunning School, with little alteration but much dramatization, and reinforced them for a wide variety of readers.

One of the white liberal politicians who largely mirrored Bowers’ attitudes was the most prominent of the New Deal: President Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt, in 1925, had reviewed Bowers’ book on Jefferson and found it “thrilling;” while it is unknown if he read *The Tragic Era*, what public comments he made on Reconstruction suggest he would have agreed with the book. In a 1937 speech commemorating the Battle of Antietam, Roosevelt referred critically to the “so-called era of reconstruction” and its “evil ways.” “They encouraged sectionalism, they led to misunderstanding and they greatly retarded the unity of the nation.” In a press conference from December of 1943, he repeated the same sentiments: Reconstruction was “a policy of repression and punishment of the whole of the South” that the country ultimately “threw out.” Thus, Roosevelt expressed the traditional Dunning School viewpoint that saw Reconstruction as the work of a tyrannical federal government bent on sectional revenge.

Roosevelt was hardly free of Southern influence: after being diagnosed with polio, he spent

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297 Foner, “Reconstruction Revisited,” 2; Weisberger, 428.
298 Sehlinger and Hamilton, ix.
300 *ibid.*, 358.
considerable time in Warm Springs, Georgia, trying to recuperate and hoping vainly for a cure. He established a foundation there for polio sufferers, returned there frequently throughout his life, and would ultimately die there in 1945.\textsuperscript{302} Still, Roosevelt was born and raised in the New York aristocracy, served as governor of that state prior to his election as president, and led perhaps the most radical and progressive transformation of government since the Reconstruction era itself. He more than meets the criteria for a Northern liberal politician, making his disdainful attitude towards Reconstruction that much more notable.

While these sentiments are perhaps unsurprising given Roosevelt’s Southern connections, they are more unexpected coming from another celebrated white Northern liberal of the age – Franklin Roosevelt’s wife, Eleanor Roosevelt. Generally considered more progressive than her husband, Eleanor “personally sought more equality and economic redistribution than the New Deal embraced;” she was the Administration’s emissary to African Americans, and after the war was a key player in the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations.\textsuperscript{303} Nevertheless, her attitudes towards Reconstruction were similar to her husband’s and reflected the Dunning School milieu in which she was educated. These attitudes are apparent from “My Day,” her widely read and long-running syndicated column.\textsuperscript{304} In a 1936 column, she expressed interest in \textit{Gone With the Wind} not only for its portrayal of the Civil War, but of Reconstruction. In it, she referred to the Northern occupying forces as “invaders” towards whom the “bitterness” of Southerners was “only natural.”\textsuperscript{305} The remaining two columns are from some decades later, after the New Deal, but still serve to show the thoughts of a notable New Deal figure. In 1960, she referred to Reconstruction as marred by “many excesses” that

\textsuperscript{303} Maurine H. Beasley, \textit{Eleanor Roosevelt: Transformative First Lady} (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 127-44; 214.
\textsuperscript{304} \textit{Ibid.}, 111-5.
\textsuperscript{305} Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day,” August 22, 1936.
prolonged both the “enslavement” of African Americans and the “bitterness” between North and South, while in 1962, she again referred to the “abuses that were prevalent [in the South] in the Reconstruction period.”

That such critical attitudes survived in someone like Eleanor Roosevelt – even into the 1960s, when scholarship surrounding Reconstruction was changing for good – is evidence of the wide influence of the Dunning School and its attitudes towards Reconstruction even in the New Deal.

The traditionally critical Dunning School attitudes were prominent not only in white Northern liberal politicians like Bowers and the Roosevelts, but also in a considerable part of the writing of the notable white liberal publications of the day, such as The Nation and The Century Magazine. The Nation, founded in 1865, broke with traditional Republicans to focus on more Liberal Republican concerns like civil service reform and a sound currency. In the first part of the twentieth century, however – under the editorship of Oswald Garrison Villard, named for William Lloyd Garrison – it moved decisively leftwards, and continues to be one of the flagship publications of the American left.

Nevertheless, this leftist stance did not prevent it from providing a platform for Claude Bowers to sketch out largely the same Dunning School arguments he made in The Tragic Era. In one article, reviewing a biography of Andrew Johnson, Bowers describes the “utter madness” of Reconstruction, and praised the fact that Johnson was now being “vindicated” as a defender of “constitutional liberty” and democracy.

In a second article, reviewing a biography of Jefferson Davis’ wife Varina Howell, Bowers adopted a similar tone, celebrating that the North can now read with “sympathy and appreciation” of a “chivalric figure” like Jefferson Davis, as opposed to in past decades like

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Reconstruction. The articles are written in 1928 and 1929, slightly prior to the New Deal but still well within its period of thinking, especially for someone like Bowers. Bowers’ thoughts towards Reconstruction were not new, but what is significant is the willingness of a publication like *The Nation* – by that point, decidedly liberal – to give them credence and circulation.

These views are also reflected in *The Century Magazine*. *Century*, first published in 1881, was hardly leftist like *The Nation*; indeed, it was often conservative and pro-Southern in its initial years, though it supported progressive causes like civil service reform and conservation during the Progressive Era. By the late 1920s, it was somewhat more liberal, and was also in decline; it would merge with another magazine in 1930. Still, its views on Reconstruction during this period help to show the wide influence of Dunning School thought during this period even among well-regarded moderate or liberal publications. In 1927, as part of a series on the life of Lincoln, an article depicted him in traditional Dunning terms as heroically trying to resist the “vindictive policy” of Reconstruction, whose Radical backers were described in typical language: Stevens, for instance, an “avowed enemy of Lincoln,” had the “plague of disease upon him.”

An article from the same year, part of a similar series on Andrew Johnson, likewise adopted the Dunning viewpoint: the Reconstruction laws were “infamous,” motivated by “rising madness of hatred” and “lust of revenge,” and subjected the South “by army despotism to the rule of ignorat ex-slaves and thieving white carpetbaggers.” Clearly, this kind of language demonstrates that traditionally negative perceptions of Reconstruction were alive and well even among liberals during the New Deal and its surrounding years. The language also, in spite of the faith New Dealers had in the energies of the federal government, consistently vilified an

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energetic federal government during Reconstruction, attributing to it excesses, abuses, and
tyranny in the South. These phrases indicate that, although there were many areas in which
federal intervention was newly seen as legitimate, civil rights and race relations were not yet one
of them. However, as the next section documents, even in some of these same periodicals
distinct shifts towards a more positive conception were emerging.

CHANGING WHITE ATTITUDES

The changes in scholarly and contemporary circumstances mentioned above, though
largely absent from the rhetoric of major politicians, were reflected in a number of pieces
published in solidly liberal Northern magazines, even ones that simultaneously published articles
still holding to the traditional Dunning interpretation. The Nation, for instance, has already been
highlighted for the platform it gave Claude Bowers, but in the 1930s, a few years later than
Bowers’ articles, it published several pieces much more favorable towards Reconstruction. A
1934 book review, for example, while focusing on an economic study of the South, dismissively
noted the “invective” and “apologies for slavery” that had dominated much of the study of the
Civil War and Reconstruction since the conflict. A 1938 review of the Gone With the Wind
knockoff novel And Tell of Time likewise was contemptuous of the traditional approach towards
Reconstruction, mocking its portrayal of “the corruption and brutality of the Northern military,
the wild abandon of the free Negroes (revealing, apparently, how stupid emancipation was), and
the varieties of pride, anger, and gallantry with which the planter aristocracy handled all
three.”

These changing attitudes are likewise apparent in The New Republic, which unlike The Nation published no traditional Dunning pieces alongside its more positive ones. The New

Republic, founded in 1914, was during the New Deal one of the principal voices of American liberalism, and to some extent still is. The articles about Reconstruction published in the magazine during the New Deal are either positive or, as discussed below, critical from an economic perspective. A 1936 article mocked Gone With the Wind for the “legend” it perpetrated about the Civil War and “the black days of Reconstruction, the callousness of the Carpetbaggers, the scalawaggishness of the Scalawags, and the knightliness of the Ku Klux Klansmen.” A 1938 review of a positive biography of Thaddeus Stevens praised it for refuting the “propaganda of Neo-Confederate novelists and historians” who had “[rewritten] American history from a pro-slavery point of view;” it referred to Reconstruction as working against a system that “would mean the renewed hegemony of slave-owners in the federal state and a permanent status of inferiority for both Negroes and ‘poor whites’ in the South.” Finally, a 1939 article by celebrated historian C. Vann Woodward criticized a largely positive book about the Ku Klux Klan as simple and unfair, calling out the Dunning School by name and advising all readers to react with “indignation” at the author’s history. Woodward himself was hardly a full-throated defender of Reconstruction, and an economic perspective is also apparent in the article, but the piece’s rejection of the old attitudes is clear.

**RECONSTRUCTION AS CLASS WARFARE**

If the New Deal contributed to a softening of white liberal attitudes about Reconstruction, it also changed them in other ways. The naturally enhanced focus on economic issues during the Great Depression led to an enhanced focus on economic issues in many disciplines, including

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319 Foner, “Reconstruction Revisited,” 83.
history. This focus was buttressed by the rise of the Progressive historians, already described, who approached Reconstruction and other parts of American history from a class-based perspective. The Russian Revolution of 1917, which came too late to substantially affect Progressive Era thought, and the twists and turns in US-Soviet relations in the 1920s and 1930s also contributed to this new interest in economic factors. This new focus—which typically led to criticism of Reconstruction for economic reasons—is apparent in a number of places.

Two of the foremost voices for white liberalism, *The Nation* and *The New Republic*, printed articles with this attitude even alongside more traditionally critical ones from the Dunning School or more positive ones. A 1935 article in *The Nation*, while harshly critical of the South during Reconstruction, argued that Reconstruction failed when its objectives no longer “fell in with the interests of Northern industrial capitalism” and the “Northern bourgeoisie.” A 1937 review of Buck’s *Road to Reunion* in *The New Republic* focused on the “[e]conomic power” of the “industrialists,” who manipulated national policy to produce the “high tariff and bloody shirt” for their own gain. This article, in contrast to the one in *The Nation*, is more critical of Reconstruction not just for economic reasons but for more traditional ones, for instance pointing out the “stench of Reconstruction governments.” Finally, in another 1937 article *The New Republic* offered a generally positive review of James S. Allen’s explicitly Marxist treatment of Reconstruction, which criticized the Dunning School interpretation and praises many of the achievements of the Reconstruction state governments while considering the period in strongly economic terms. Writes the author:

> From 1870 on, it may be said that Reconstruction had as its purpose not the betterment of the Negro but the subjection of the South until the class representatives of industrial capitalism had completely established their control.

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322 Ibid., 258.
over the national state…At this point [when control had been established] the Reconstruction era was formally ended. Industrial capitalism itself took up where its political representatives left off.\footnote{Louis M. Hacker, “Why Reconstruction Failed,” \textit{The New Republic}, October 27, 1937, 347.}

All of these pieces, it is important to note, explicitly or implicitly associate the federal government with the interests of the wealthy, typically contrasted with the interest of the working class. Such an attitude naturally contributed to the certain amount of cynicism or dismissal of federal efforts in the articles.

Perhaps the most obvious conclusion about white Northern liberal thought during the New Deal is that, in parallel to much of white scholarly thought towards Reconstruction, it was diverse and in considerable flux, buffeted by a number of intellectual currents. Among some sectors – in particular, among politicians themselves, such as Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt and the politician-writer Bowers – old Dunning School attitudes remained strong. In others, especially in many of the liberal periodicals, there was an increasing appreciation of the accomplishments of Reconstruction and skepticism towards its most virulent detractors, motivated partially by the black scholarship of Du Bois and others and presaging the revisionist interpretation. Finally, the economic criticisms of Reconstruction were increasingly influential, again largely in the liberal periodicals. This criticism could either refute the Dunning School, or it could sympathize with it, but it nevertheless represented a largely new theoretical framework.

\textbf{Perceptions of Reconstruction: African American Elites}

In spite of the more positive approaches towards Reconstruction in some quarters of the white liberal elite, the contrast between white thought and the positivity of African American elite perceptions towards the period remains striking. Whereas there was a distinct break for white intellectuals between the thinking underlying the Progressive Era and the thinking underlying the New Deal, there were less differences between the two eras among African
Americans, and many of the decidedly fond memories towards Reconstruction and its accomplishments still predominated. The one major shift, motivated both by Progressive historians and by W.E.B. Du Bois’ titanic *Black Reconstruction in America*, was the increased prominence given to class-based, Marxian analysis of Reconstruction. Such an approach certainly adopted a different analytical framework than other perspectives, and was much more apt to criticize Northern motivations as largely influenced by economic motive, but – as Du Bois makes clear – did not imply a rejection of the positive gains of Reconstruction for African Americans during the period itself. In contrast with the largely positive perceptions during the Progressive Era, attitudes towards the federal government became more complicated, for many of the same class-based reasons as with white commentators.

*BLACK RECONSTRUCTION IN AMERICA*

*Black Reconstruction in America*, published in 1935, is undoubtedly one of the most important works on Reconstruction, and had wide influence on contemporary black thought. It is a historical, scholarly work, hence its appearance in the section on historiography in Chapter One, but given Du Bois’ sterling activist credentials it is also important as an indicator of black elite thought. As Chapter Two discussed, it was also a culmination of Du Bois’ years of serious work on Reconstruction, particularly his 1909 paper “Reconstruction and Its Benefits.” In the meantime, there had been considerable scholarly work by African Americans such as A.A. Taylor on Reconstruction, and at the same time Bowers’ *The Tragic Era* had outraged many in the black elite, who resolved that a complete rebuttal ought to be published.\(^{324}\) Between the Progressive Era and the New Deal, Du Bois for his part remained one of the foremost figures in the NAACP. Nevertheless, steep fissures emerged between him and more moderate black figures, as well as the NAACP’s white liberal donors, when Du Bois began expounding, in 1933,

\(^{324}\) Lewis, introduction to *Black Reconstruction in America*, xxvii-xxviii; xxxiii.
a “New Racial Philosophy” that gravitated towards black separatism and socialism.\textsuperscript{325} The fallout forced Du Bois’ resignation as editor of \textit{The Crisis}, but also allowed him to redouble his efforts to complete \textit{Black Reconstruction}, which was published in 1935, a few years after Du Bois had started it.\textsuperscript{326} There was a generally positive critical reception outside of the South, but its immediate influence was limited and many historians, including some African Americans, criticized it both for its passionate prose and its Marxian analysis.\textsuperscript{327} Nevertheless, its impact both on black thought and on scholarship some decades later was enormous.\textsuperscript{328}

\textit{Black Reconstruction in America} combines, in a sweeping narrative, an overview of Reconstruction that gave agency to the freed slaves and glorified their accomplishments with a class-based, Marxian analysis both of the Civil War and its aftermath. Du Bois refers to Reconstruction as “a clear and definite program for the freedom and uplift of the Negro, and for the extension of the realization of democracy…the finest effort to achieve democracy for the working millions which this world has ever seen.”\textsuperscript{329} Sumner and Stevens are praised, and emphasis is placed upon education, the political and social endeavors of the freed slaves, and the black vote.\textsuperscript{330} At the same time, the Marxian interpretation dominates the work. Its core thesis is that the end of Reconstruction “was a determined effort to reduce black labor…to a condition of unlimited exploitation and build a new class of capitalists on this foundation,” made possible through the shift after the Civil War to a “war between laborers, white and black men for the same jobs,” which eventually led to the white laborers joining white capitalists against black

\textsuperscript{326} Ibid., 575-83.
\textsuperscript{327} Lewis, introduction to \textit{Black Reconstruction in America}, xxx-xxxii; xl. For instance, when Du Bois describes emancipation: “All that was Beauty, all that was Love, all that was Truth, stood on top of these mad mornings and sang with the stars” (Du Bois, \textit{Black Reconstruction in America}, 100).
\textsuperscript{328} Ibid., xli.
\textsuperscript{329} Du Bois, \textit{Black Reconstruction in America}, 155; 595.
\textsuperscript{330} Ibid., 156-70.
laborers.\textsuperscript{331} The desertion of slaves to the invading Union armies is described as a “general strike.”\textsuperscript{332} Chapters are each devoted to the “black proletariat” in South Carolina, Mississippi and Louisiana, and to the “white proletariat” in Alabama, Florida, and Georgia.\textsuperscript{333} This interpretation, though, does not change the fact that the book was a vastly more positive portrayal of Reconstruction than in mainstream scholarship, and contemporary white historians were just as perturbed by its praise of Stevens as its economic interpretation.

Du Bois’ influence is apparent contemporary black thought both in praise of Reconstruction and in hints of cynicism and in the Marxist, Progressive, or class-based criticism that also surfaces. It is important to remember that, while \textit{Black Reconstruction} was published in 1935, its ideas – as well as similar ones by the Progressive historians and others – percolated long before, and found their way into the discourse even before they were encapsulated by the work.

\textbf{THE BLACK PRESS PRAISES RECONSTRUCTION}

Under Du Bois’ clear influence, the black press – at \textit{The Crisis} and elsewhere – continued to praise Reconstruction, and also retained a considerable amount of the more traditionally positive conceptions towards Reconstruction and its accomplishments of the type common during the Progressive Era. The importance of \textit{The Crisis}, the magazine of the NAACP, has already been stressed in the previous chapter. Editorial disputes between its editor Du Bois and the largely middle class outlook of the organization – not to mention its white philanthropists – were serious as early as 1915 and 1916.\textsuperscript{334} As described above, these disagreements reached a climax in the 1930s, when Du Bois penned an editorial in the January 1934 endorsing black

\begin{footnotes}
\item[331] \textit{Ibid.}, 549.
\item[332] \textit{Ibid.}, 44-5.
\item[333] \textit{Ibid.}, 313; 354; 400.
\end{footnotes}
separatism. The outrage from both moderates in the NAACP and the organization’s white supporters, from Eleanor Roosevelt on down, was intense and immediate, and by May Du Bois had been forced to stepped down, replaced by Roy Wilkins. Nevertheless, during this period *The Crisis* remained one of the foremost magazines of the black establishment and the civil rights movement, and published a number of articles on Reconstruction that allow the viewpoints of its editors and contributors to be assessed with some certainty.

In general, these articles demonstrate a positive, albeit not unreserved, conception similar to that which appeared in the publication during the Progressive Era. An article in 1930 defended Charles Sumner and criticized the Dunning School’s dismissal of Congressional Reconstruction. In 1933, the newspaper declared that the South “should pray earnestly for a little old Reconstruction,” and devoted much of an article on the history of African American voting to a praise of the period.

Because the Reconstruction laws allowed black voting and black self-government, the article explains, the South was able to establish “democratic government…a free public school system…[and] new legislation for social betterment and wider distribution of land and wealth.”

The article then concluded with a long quote from Du Bois’ essay “Reconstruction and Its Benefits,” discussed in Chapter Two, which heaps praise upon Reconstruction. Articles in 1935 and 1936 made passing mentions of Reconstruction, praising it and criticizing its Southern opponents, as part of coverage of contemporary issues like antilynching legislation.

A review of *And Tell of Time*, the Civil War novel in the style of *Gone With the Wind*, criticized it as “subtle propaganda…about the virtues of the South and the

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335 Ibid., 569-75.
336 Bliss Perry, “Moorfield Storey As a Man,” *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, May 1930, 156.
338 Ibid., 128.
339 Ibid., 128.
treason of the North during those weary years of Reconstruction.” Finally, a review of Du Bois’ *Black Reconstruction* in November of 1935, as well as a precursor to that review in July, praised the work for disturbing the traditional “distorted question of reconstruction” and demonstrating the benefits of Congressional Reconstruction and the virtues of Sumner and Stevens as well as the black politicians in the South.

A great many other African American newspapers, aside from *The Crisis*, participated in the debate over Reconstruction and responded to Du Bois’ thoughts, and generally adopted a similar line. Another important indicator of African American thought during this period was the *Chicago Defender*, a black newspaper begun in 1905 that is still published today. Called “the country’s foremost shaper of black thought,” the *Defender* featured works by Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and others; during the Progressive Era, at the height of its influence, it had a circulation of some 120,000 and is thought responsible for much of the Great Migration out of the South. There is only one minor mention, discussed in the previous chapter, of Reconstruction from that period, but during the New Deal the *Defender* retained considerable influence, and published a number of pieces on the period.

These pieces typically adopted a positive tone towards Reconstruction. An article in 1929 criticized Herbert Hoover’s efforts to reform the Republican Party so that it could appeal to Southern voters, contrasting this with the party’s efforts to protect African Americans during Reconstruction. A piece in 1932 solicited reader comments on whether blacks had made “any noticeable advancement in politics” since Reconstruction. In general, the responding readers

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fondly remembered Reconstruction, particularly the black politicians who had served in Congress during that time. A 1937 extract from a speech by a black female political activist referred to the “promising days of Reconstruction,” when blacks were elected to Congress and the state legislatures and made laws that brought “economic and political benefits.” Finally, two articles covered Reconstruction through their subject, John Lynch, the politician whose book on the period was discussed in Chapter Two. Lynch died in November of 1939, and his obituary referred to Reconstruction as a “monumental era” that resulted in worthwhile laws by biracial governments, a “democratic handiwork” now sadly “buried.”

Articles in other black newspapers generally remained conventionally positive. A 1933 article on the Scottsboro boys trial contrasted contemporary Alabama justice with the fairer system that prevailed during Reconstruction, while a 1937 piece on the Supreme Court described the Reconstruction laws as “intended to give full rights to Negroes throughout the length and breadth of the United States.” A 1934 article on the African American church called Reconstruction a “bloody debacle” for its ultimate failure, but praises the gains for African Americans while it was in effect. A positive 1935 review of Du Bois’ Black Reconstruction praised the book for demonstrating the “solid contributions of colored people” to the United States after the Civil War, and for repudiating the thoughts of “prejudiced white historians” about the era. Finally, a 1938 article is actually just an approving quote from The Crisis editor Roy Wilkins on a new book about Reconstruction; Wilkins described Reconstruction as “the

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347 “John R. Lynch and The Reconstruction,” Chicago Defender, November 18, 1939.
348 John L. Spivak, “Scottsboro Trial Starts New Era in Dixie for Negro Race; Condemned Boys are Heroes,” Plain Dealer (Kansas City, KS), December 15, 1933; Sidney Jones, “What the Supreme Court Has Done On Negro Cases,” Plain Dealer (Kansas City, KS), March 12, 1937.
349 C.E. Chapman, “Bishop R.A. Carter Delivers Scholarly Address on ‘Contribution of the Negro Church to Race Progress,’” Plain Dealer (Kansas City, KS), September 7, 1934.
most important period of American history,“ in which the writers of “school textbooks have chosen to repeat the lies and slanders about our people…rather than…the vitally important role played by us in effecting progressive reforms in the South.”

**DISSENT IN THE BLACK PRESS**

Both *The Crisis* and the *Chicago Defender* also published some pieces indicative of increasing cynicism and class-based thought towards Reconstruction, motivated in part by Du Bois’ work. Issues of *The Crisis* in 1933 prominently advertise the “New Racial Philosophy” Marxist and separatist articles that would force Du Bois to step down. Nevertheless, only in May of 1935, after his departure, did *The Crisis* run a piece that took the Marxist viewpoint to its logical extent with respect to Reconstruction. In “The Communist Way Out,” the white Communist historian and activist James S. Allen advocated for the American Communist Party’s preferred solution to race relations in America: “self-determination,” the establishment of an independent and socialist “Negro Republic” in the Southern United States. In making this argument, Allen characterized Reconstruction in entirely economic terms – as a movement which, under the deliberate influence of “northern demagogy,” “did not fulfill the tasks” – principally economic redistribution – “demanded by history.” The positive review of *Black Reconstruction*, naturally given the tenor of Du Bois’ book, also presents Reconstruction from an economic perspective (“[t]he final result was that the North under money pressure ultimately conspired with the South in an attempt to prove government by blacks ineffective”), but in general treats the period itself much more positively than does Allen.

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355 Hopson, 345-6.
Similar concerns are evident in the *Defender*. For instance, in the article soliciting reader feedback on Reconstruction, reader Israel J. Trammel opined that during the period, “[t]he northern white man was eager to get even with the South for rebelling, and he knew that by using the black man in public office he would smart the feelings of the southern whites.”

In the second piece covering John Lynch, from April of 1939 (billed as an interview with the “Only Living Reconstruction Congressman – Now Over 90 Years Old”), the article praised Reconstruction, but also takes a much more class-based approach to the subject, quite unlike Lynch’s 1915 book. As the article describes, “Major Lynch declared that there is really no race issue in the south. What friction existed prior to 1874 was more of an economic nature.”

These articles remain generally positive towards Reconstruction, but with somewhat greater nuance – both cynicism and class-based thought – reflective of the changing attitudes of Du Bois and others in the era. Whereas praise of Reconstruction in the black press largely continued the same positive perceptions of the federal government common in the Progressive Era, the more critical articles are similar to their white counterparts in associating the federal government with the industrial, bourgeois class.

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The tumult and competing ideologies of the New Deal contributed to a softening and diversification of white attitudes towards Reconstruction; and likewise among African Americans that positive narrative, while still dominant, increasingly competed with a more skeptical economic one. The rapid changes that attitudes towards Reconstruction underwent between the Progressive Era and the New Deal – separated by just a decade – is a testimony to the susceptibility of popular narratives of past historical events to changes both in scholarship

356 Ibid.
358 Ibid.
and contemporary social, political, and economic circumstances. Developing this tendency more fully is the subject of the Conclusion.
CONCLUSION
“Thorough Analysis and Extended Reflection”
The Forces Behind Changing Public Conceptions

“[F]ew episodes of recorded history more urgently invite thorough analysis and extended reflection than” Reconstruction, writes William Archibald Dunning in the preface to his consensus-shaping overview of the period.\textsuperscript{359} Modern historians would undoubtedly agree with Dunning, but this line is possibly the only part of his work with which they would agree, as the quote in whole reveals: “few episodes of recorded history more urgently invite thorough analysis and extended reflection than the struggle through which the southern whites, subjugated by adversaries of their own race, thwarted the scheme which threatened permanent subjection to another race.”\textsuperscript{360} Without question, historians have come a significant distance since Dunning published \textit{Reconstruction, Political and Economic} more than a century ago.

The substantial changes in Reconstruction historiography over that period are well-known and well-documented. As Chapter One discussed, historian Bernard Weisberger referred to Reconstruction historiography as a “dark and bloody ground,” while historian John Hope Franklin in 1980 wrote that “it may be said that every generation since 1870 has written the history of the Reconstruction era.”\textsuperscript{361} Perhaps surprisingly, however, in spite of the enormous attention towards scholarly attitudes regarding Reconstruction there has been remarkably little examination of public opinion: whether the debates and shifts in academia translated into changing conceptions among public intellectuals, reformers, and politicians.

Such an examination of public opinion has been the objective of this thesis. Given the massive documentary record and substantial timespan between Reconstruction and the present day, this thesis has focused on two periods – the Progressive Era and the New Deal – in which

\textsuperscript{359} Dunning, xv.  
\textsuperscript{360} Ibid., xv.  
\textsuperscript{361} Weisberger, 427; John Hope Franklin, 3.
the expanded power and intervention of the federal government harken back to that
government’s actions after the Civil War. Similarly, it has confined itself to the constituencies
thought likely to produce the most disagreement with the Dunning School’s traditional dismissal
of Reconstruction during those periods: the white liberal reformers in the North at the forefront
of both the Progressive Era and the New Deal, and the African American elites and activists
hardly comfortable with the stereotypes and inferior position to which the Dunning School
consigned them.

The results of this examination have confirmed a broadly negative white attitude even
among reformers and a broadly positive black attitude, but with considerable nuance. In the
Progressive Era, white liberals, politicians, and other leading figures adopted the negative
attitude of the Dunning School practically without reservation. In this, they were
overwhelmingly backed by the white press, as represented by some of the leading periodicals of
the Progressive movement. At the same time, however, African Americans and the black press
nearly uniformly rejected the white interpretation, formulating a far more positive view of
Reconstruction based on their own memories and the vibrant black scholarship occurring at the
time. While there were some voices of cynicism and dissatisfaction, most notably from Booker
T. Washington, the majority of African American elites and activists decisively embraced the
more positive portrayal.

During New Deal, some of the old trends remained, but the consensus among both
constituencies began to break down. Among white liberals, some sources – especially politicians
like Claude Bowers and Franklin Roosevelt – continued to adopt the old language of the
Dunning School. Among others, however, particularly in the liberal press, attitudes began to
change, resulting both in more positive conceptions that recognized the accomplishments of
Reconstruction and negative portrayals in the distinct vein of class-based economic relations rather than old Dunning viewpoints. For their part, more disagreement emerged among African American elites. Most voices in the media and elsewhere continued to emphatically praise Reconstruction, but others found more to criticize along the same economic lines referenced by many whites. The work of the towering figure of W.E.B. Du Bois, which both praised Reconstruction and adopted a class-based perspective, were used to support either conclusion.

It is widely accepted that changing scholarly attitudes towards Reconstruction were primarily the result of changing contemporary political and social circumstances. The obvious corollary to this point is that changing public opinion towards Reconstruction was driven by the same contemporary changes. The remainder of this Conclusion will seek to consolidate and explore some of the primary factors, suggested in the previous chapters, that might have caused shifts in public attitudes.

History as a Study of the Present

The changes in public opinion towards Reconstruction surveyed in this thesis were the result of two distinct but related factors. The first factor was change in scholarly opinion, which filtered down to public opinion through media, popular historians and public intellectuals, and other channels. The second factor was change in contemporary circumstances: shifts in the political, social, economic, or ideological situation of the present that caused a reexamination of events in the past. Naturally, contemporary changes impacted scholarly attitudes as well, and in doing so impacted public attitudes. However, they also changed public opinion in and of themselves, especially as scholarly opinion often took substantially longer to shift. A subset of changing contemporary circumstances relates to the changing attitudes among the constituencies examined in this thesis towards the federal government in the midst of ongoing reform that substantially expanded the sphere of federal involvement. These attitudes about the legitimacy
of federal action frequently affected in substantial ways conceptions of the extraordinary exertion of federal power that was Reconstruction.

It is not the intent of this thesis to penetrate deeply into the contentious and complicated scholarship surrounding collective memory; that is, societal memories, knowledge, and beliefs about the past. Nevertheless, this idea that contemporary events were one of the primary engines of change about attitudes towards Reconstruction accords well with the basic notion that collective memory is socially and politically constructed in a constant contemporary struggle involving the changing attitudes and beliefs of the present. More broadly, this perpetual reconstitution of memory is often done in the service of present-day needs; as Michael Kammen wrote in *Mystic Chords of Memory*, his survey of American collective memory: “societies in fact reconstruct their pasts rather than faithfully record them, and…do so with the needs of contemporary culture clearly in mind – manipulating the past in order to mold the present.” Collective memory involves a complex dialectic between the memories of popular culture and the interpretations towards the past taken by historians.

These developments and changes in academia and contemporary circumstances and concerns that affected public opinion about Reconstruction in the Progressive Era and the New Deal are reflected in the documentary record that has been the subject of Chapters Two and Three, and which this section seeks to summarize. It is important to note, however, that assigning direct connections is an inherently less precise venture than simply determining opinion, and so the motivating factors suggested by this Conclusion are necessarily more speculative than the rest of the thesis.

363 Savage; Schwartz.
The most obvious driving scholarly force shaping public opinion during the Progressive Era was the Dunning School, whose influence was pervasive throughout white attitudes towards Reconstruction during the period. Its chief attitudes – the corruption of the Reconstruction state governments, the tyranny and duplicity of the Northerners and the carpetbaggers, and the incompetence of the blacks in the South – were manifest in a number of the works surveyed throughout the period. These include the rhetoric of Woodrow Wilson and Lyman Abbott and the pieces on Reconstruction printed in Harper’s Weekly and McClure’s. However, Dunning rhetoric also appears in the work of Booker T. Washington, with his references to the “ignorance” of African Americans and the simple desire of the Northern whites to “punish” the South.

A distinct scholarly influence, however, was already present in the attitudes of the elites and the media in the African American community, deriving principally from the scholarly work – for instance, “The Freedmen’s Bureau” and “Reconstruction and Its Benefits” – being carried out by Du Bois. Du Bois’ chief themes with these works included a discussion of the benefits of institutions like the Freedmen’s Bureau and of the laws enacted by Reconstruction state governments relating to education, suffrage, and similar causes. This emphasis was then repeated in the black press, most obviously in The Crisis, which Du Bois edited at the time, but also in other black newspapers, which commented favorably on Reconstruction achievements in a similar way.

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364 E.g., Wilson, 6; Abbott, 423-4; “The New Negro Crime again Considered;” “Recent Views of the Fifteenth Amendment;” Schurz, “Can the South Solve the Negro Problem?”
365 Washington, 84.
Just as important were the circumstances of the Progressive Era and the period immediately preceding it. The Progressive Era, born as it was in part as a reaction against the extensive corruption perceived in both corporations and the government during the Gilded Age, was very much concerned with political reform – an agenda that produced accomplishments like the direct election of senators on the federal level or electoral reforms like primaries on the state and local level. More broadly, Progressives valued scientific, rational government, in keeping with the overall tenor of the movement. As a result, Progressivism naturally recoiled against any suggestion of large-scale corruption or incompetence. Since both were such common (and sometimes accurate) charges levied against the Reconstruction state governments, this emphasis on political reform contributed to a more easy dismissal of the Reconstruction governments and their achievements. Thus, in white attitudes during the period one finds many references to the corruption or incompetence of the Reconstruction state governments – whether under carpetbagger or African American control – as a basis for disdain for the Reconstruction effort more broadly, and an equivalent tendency to look askance upon any of the accomplishments of those governments.

Criticism of corruption mixed easily with – and in many cases was substantially fueled by – the racism of the period, and changes in race relations were perhaps the more salient factor in contributing to Progressive dismissal of Reconstruction. The 1890s had been a period of intense racial retrenchment, culminating in the formal establishment of disenfranchisement and segregation across the South coupled with Northern politicians largely abandoning efforts at reversing those trends. These events were buttressed by the rise of the “Lost Cause” movement in the South glorifying the Confederacy and parallel efforts at sectional reconciliation.

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368 Diner, 3-13; Nugent, 6-15; 63-72.
369 E.g., Wilson, 11; “Recent Views of the Fifteenth Amendment;” Farquhar.
370 Southern, 25-35.
in the North.\textsuperscript{371} At the same time, the Progressive emphasis on science and intellectualism led to the increased prominence of pseudoscientific racism, which applied new concepts like Darwinism and anthropology to justify the assumption that African Americans were mentally inferior and not capable of self-government.\textsuperscript{372} All of these trends, aside from bolstering the emerging Dunning School in the scholarly world, contributed to increasingly negative popular and elite conception of Reconstruction as a movement doomed and misguided from the start due to the incapacity of African Americans, as evidenced by the final reversals against black equality that the nation had just witnessed. The overwhelming contempt for black capacity to self-government – often expressed in biologic or scientific terms – pervaded literature by politicians and in the press during this period.\textsuperscript{373}

Without question, these changing Progressive Era circumstances profoundly affected the discourse on Reconstruction, and on issues of race more generally, among whites during the period. However, they may have also contributed to positive attitudes among African Americans. In particular, the rollback of civil rights laws and other positive achievements of the Civil War and Reconstruction may have caused African Americans to remember those periods more fondly, a common sentiment throughout much black treatment of Reconstruction during the Progressive Era, and to work to defend their historical legacy.\textsuperscript{374}

Finally, the evidence on Reconstruction shows a distinct divide on perceptions of the federal government generally, which contributed to attitudes towards that period. African Americans, including Du Bois and the popular press, were likely to view the federal government

\textsuperscript{371} Ibid., 31-2; Blight, 131; 258-62.
\textsuperscript{372} Southern, 47-53.
\textsuperscript{373} E.g., Warren, 88; Wilson, 6; Abbott, 424; “The Wilmington Lynching;” “The New Negro Crime again Considered;” “Recent Views of the Fifteenth Amendment;” Farquhar.
as a profoundly positive force for social good – a natural position given the federal government’s actions during Reconstruction. This led them both to remember Reconstruction – as an example of federal power – more fondly, and to press for greater federal involvement as a means of restoring black civil rights during the Progressive Era. Conversely, whites brought up in the Dunning School looked askance at federal intervention, one of the reasons they were disdainful both of Reconstruction and of contemporary civil rights efforts generally. One of the key tenets of the Progressive Era was that, in contrast to the Gilded Age, it actively supported federal intervention for the public welfare. However, both the overview of – largely economic or regulatory – Progressive Era achievements and the attitudes of contemporaries suggest that even among Northern liberals his federal intervention was thought legitimate only if it constrained itself to economic, rather than social, issues.

THE NEW DEAL

A number of distinct trends in academia contributed to changing scholarly attitudes that in turn helped to alter popular attitudes around the time of the New Deal. First, among white historians, newer viewpoints – such as Paul Buck’s more balanced The Road to Reunion – entered into the picture and eroded the hegemony of the Dunning School. These developments are reflected in a certain amount of exasperation in the Northern liberal press for the more strident criticisms of Reconstruction, and even a tepid appreciation for some of the achievements of the period. Among African Americans, there was by the time of the New Deal a vibrant alternative scholarship that contested entirely the narrative of the Dunning School,

377 Nugent, 36-46; 99-106; Southern, 35.
378 Simkins, 51; Williams, 469-72; Foner, “Reconstruction Revisited,” 82-3; Beale, “On Rewriting Reconstruction History,” 807-11.
379 E.g., Mitchell, 81-2; Rugoff, 276-7; Cowley, 161-2; Woodward, 341-2.
led by Du Bois, A.A. Taylor, and other black historians.\textsuperscript{380} The positive mentions of
Reconstruction in the black press, of a similar tenor to positive mentions during the Progressive Era, make clear that African Americans continued to form their own thoughts on the period rather than simply accept the white narrative.

The most influential scholarly development, for both whites and African Americans, was the far greater prominence of economic and class-based arguments. These arguments descended from multiple, though overlapping, scholarly trends: for whites, primarily the Progressive historians school of Turner, Beard, and others; for blacks, primarily Du Bois, whose Marxist sympathies became more explicit as his career progressed.\textsuperscript{381} Occasional during the Progressive Era, by the New Deal economic arguments relating to Reconstruction were pervasive in both constituencies, most prominently in both white periodicals and black newspapers.\textsuperscript{382}

The increased focus on economic issues was not prompted solely by changes in academia, of course; it also flowed naturally from the circumstances of the Great Depression and the New Deal. The Progressive Era had been partially motivated by economic concerns, particularly the tumultuous economic conditions of the 1890s, but it was in large part a political reform movement; conversely, the New Deal was an explicit state response to the Great Depression, its accomplishments reshaped the American economy to a far greater extent than those of Progressivism, and the ravages of the Depression encouraged a substantial discourse on national political economy.\textsuperscript{383} At the same time, the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the subsequent creation of the Soviet Union, starkly presented a whole new economic model that a

\textsuperscript{380} Franklin, 5.
\textsuperscript{381} Hofstadter, 42-3; Williams, 470; Lewis, \textit{W.E.B. Du Bois}, 310-24; 575-83.
\textsuperscript{382} E.g., Herberg, 574-5; Milton, 258; Hacker, 347; Allen, “The Communist Way Out,” 135-49; “Major John R. Lynch.”
\textsuperscript{383} Rauchway, 38-55; 77-81; 93-102; Kennedy, 224-42; 257-73.
number of Americans, particularly on the left, regarded with some seriousness.\textsuperscript{384} Indeed, during the “Popular Front” phase of Communism, from 1935 to 1939, many American Communists were quite close to the New Deal. All of these factors combined, along with scholarly work, to a much greater appreciation of and focus on economic forces during Reconstruction among the liberals who are the subject of this thesis. This was most obvious in the work of the white Communist historian James Allen, whose Marxist treatment of Reconstruction was favorably received in both \textit{The New Republic} and \textit{The Crisis}.\textsuperscript{385}

The softening white attitudes towards Reconstruction also were the result of other differences between the Progressive Era and the New Deal concerning race. The New Deal, while hardly aimed at African Americans or free of racial bias, nevertheless did help African Americans in many ways, and was favorably received by them.\textsuperscript{386} More to the point, it was not in any ideological way connected to racism in the way Progressivism naturally mixed with pseudoscientific bigotry. It also did not follow a period, like the 1890s, marked by such profound racial retrenchment. These factors all prevented the same embrace of Dunning School attitudes during the New Deal by white reformists, in contrast with the Progressive Era.

Attitudes towards the federal government remained the same in some ways during the New Deal, but also showed evidence of change for both constituencies. Among African Americans, one of the reasons that positive attitudes towards Reconstruction remained strong likely was the continuing positive attitude towards federal intervention generally, especially as the New Deal – that is, federal intervention – operated in many places to improve their own lives. Likewise, the continuing rejection of Reconstruction achievements by many whites reflects a continuing feeling that, even as the New Deal enlarged the regulatory and social

\textsuperscript{384} Ronald Allen Goldberg, \textit{America in the Twenties} (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 9-14.  
\textsuperscript{385} Hacker, 347; Allen, “The Communist Way Out,” 135-49.  
\textsuperscript{386} Weiss, 50; 180-203; 236-40.
welfare state, the federal government could still not be trusted to intervene in social concerns like race relations.\textsuperscript{387} On the other hand, as the reach of the federal government continued to enlarge throughout the New Deal, the softening attitudes of many liberals may have been due to a new conception of the appropriate tasks of Washington, which led them to evaluate the federal government’s legacy during Reconstruction. At the same time, the economic and Marxian analysis of the period, both white and black, increasingly gravitated towards identifying the federal government with the bourgeois and the wealthy – an association that generally led the authors to more cynicism and distrust of federal power, either in Reconstruction or in contemporary issues, because intervention was presumed to favor the wealthy against the working class.\textsuperscript{388}

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This thesis has examined in considerable detail the attitudes of white Northern liberals and African American elites and activists towards Reconstruction during the two most notable subsequent reform movements. From this examination, certain conclusions can be drawn about the ways in which popular attitudes towards Reconstruction were shaped by both scholarly attitudes and changing contemporary circumstances, as well as what those changing circumstances might have been. It is hoped that this analysis can contribute to the understanding of what remains one of the most crucial, controversial, and scrutinized periods in American history.

However, the key message of this thesis – that popular conceptions of past events are primarily the result of present interpretations and circumstances – is hardly restricted to Reconstruction. Rather, it can be applied to analyze popular memory towards any number of

\textsuperscript{387} Bowers, v; 150-3; Roosevelt, Press Conference, 543; Dodd, 47; Katznelson, 133-55.

\textsuperscript{388} E.g., Hacker, 347; Allen, “The Communist Way Out,” 146; Hopson, 345-6.
events or periods. The conclusions of this thesis serve as a reminder that “history,” far from being a simple and unerring collection of facts, is infinitely malleable, and inevitably as much the product of present conditions as of past events.
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