

Chapter 4

Congressional Reconstruction in South Carolina: A Study in Black Power

The central controversy between Andrew Johnson and Congress had been over their plans for reconstructing the South. Once armed with a two-thirds majority to override a presidential veto, Congress was able to institute its own plans. These called for the South to ratify the 14th Amendment to the Constitution before returning to the Union. The amendment would have given the former slaves the same political rights enjoyed by their former masters and would have banned most Confederate leaders from holding political office. With Johnson's encouragement, all of the Southern states except for one refused to ratify the amendment.

Congress's next step was to divide the Southern states into five military districts. Each district was placed under the control of a major general. His duty was to supervise an election of delegates to a Constitutional Convention in that state. These elections were open to the freedmen as well as to white Southern men, and many African-Americans were elected in each state to serve in these conventions. Once these conventions drew up a Constitution, ratified the 14th Amendment, and started their own state governments (with participation by both blacks and whites), US troops would be withdrawn, and the state would be considered reconstructed.

Most white Southerners hated the governments installed under Congressional Reconstruction in part because they were forced on them and in part because they granted rights to their former slaves. Southerners called them "carpetbag governments" referring to the suitcases that were made out of materials used for rugs and frequently carried by northern politicians who came to the South to run for office. These politicians were called *carpetbaggers*, and the Southerners who worked with them were considered traitors to the South and called *scalawags*.

The carpetbag governments were accused of stealing and of general mismanagement. Many people believed that the very presence of blacks in State governments demoralized and corrupted whites. Stories of the dishonesty and the stupidity of black legislators and their carpetbag allies were spread throughout the states. Many people living in the North believed that these stories and were joined later by the historians who wrote the history of Congressional Reconstruction. But, there is another side to the history of Reconstruction, which has generally been ignored.

Under carpetbag rule, many Southern states wrote constructive constitutions, which were great improvements over the old ones. Furthermore, these constitutions established free public schools for the first time in the history of these states and made many other important social reforms. And, if there were, occasionally, corrupt politicians in these governments, they certainly were not as dishonest as the white politicians, both North and South who stole far more public money during this and other periods in American history.

This chapter does not take a position on the issue of Congressional Reconstruction. Instead, it presents several documents and asks readers to decide what carpetbag governments were really like? Were they a 'blackout of honest government' as Southerners charged? Or was it on the whole 'a beneficial and constructive attempt' to deal with the legacy of slavery and the Civil War, as others have argued?

Professional Legislative Robbers

A Northern abolitionist by the name of James Pike visited the South in the 1870's. After returning, he wrote a book about Congressional Reconstruction in South Carolina called *The Prostrate State*. It made a big impression in the North because the author, an abolitionist, expected to be favorably impressed by what he saw. As you read excerpts from Pike's book, try to determine whether Pike really was an objective observer.

*One of the first things that strikes a casual observer in this Negro assembly is the endless chatter that goes on there all the time. The leading topics of discussion are all well understood by the members. When the bill comes up to raise money to catch and punish the Ku-Klux, they know exactly what it means. They feel it in their bones. So, too, with educational bills. The free school comes right home to them; then the business about arming and drilling the black militia. They are eager on this point. Sambo can talk on these topics and those of a similar character, day in and day out. There is no end to his gush and babble. The intelligence level of this talk is about as high as the thinking at black holy rollers meeting. This kind of mindless chatter can go on forever. It is so simple that even they can understand it. Here the Negro copies the white like a parrot or a monkey, and he is always ready to try his skill. The rule of South Carolina by these clowns should not be given the name of government. It is a huge system of stealing and looting. The men who run it are the picked robbers of the community. They are professional legislative robbers. They are men who have studied and practiced the art of legal stealing. They are in no sense different from, or better than, the men who fill the prisons of the world. They are in fact, of the same class, only more daring and cunning. They pick your pocket by law. They rob the poor and rich alike, by law. They do all to make themselves personally rich.*⁹

We Had Reconstructed the State

An African-American who sat in the same legislature so roundly criticized by James Pike had quite a different tale to tell. Read his evaluation of the South Carolina legislature under Congressional Reconstruction and decide whether this story is more believable than Pike's?

*We had built school houses, established charitable institutions, built and maintained the penitentiary system, provided for the education of the deaf and dumb, rebuilt the jails and court houses, rebuilt the bridges and re-established the ferries. In short, we had reconstructed the State and placed it upon the road to prosperity and, at the same time, by our acts of financial reform transmitted to the Hampton Government an indebtedness not greater by more than \$2,500,000 than was the bonded debt of the State in 1868, before the Republican Negroes and their white allies came into power.*¹⁰

Drinking in the Legislature

After the so-called carpetbaggers, scalawags, and their African-American allies were kicked out of office, an investigation was made into their alleged misuse of state moneys. The documentary evidence placed on the public record by the restored democrats in South Carolina included the following. The first is the testimony from Lewis Grant, a Negro porter:

⁹James Pike, *The Prostrate States South Carolina Under Negro Government*, (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1874), pp. 17-18, & 58.

¹⁰Quoted by William E. B. DuBois "Reconstruction and Its Benefits," *Historical Review* XV (July, 1910) p. 790

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A part of my duty was to attend to the refreshment room adjoining the room occupied by the clerk of the Senate. I generally opened the room at 8 o'clock in the morning and kept it open from 2 to 4 next morning. During that time some one was constantly in the room, eating and drinking or smoking. Senators, members of the House and State officers and Judges and editors of influential newspapers were constant visitors; not an hour in the day, and but few at night, but what some one of them were there drinking and smoking. Many of the senators and members would come to the room before breakfast, hunting a drink or "eye-opener." I cannot estimate the amount drank on an average every day, but several gallons, with a considerable amount of wine, port, ale, included. We kept the best articles at the time; the Senators and members would complain if any but the best of cigars and wines and liquors were furnished them. ... The Senate refreshment room was where the members met to talk over the various jobs that were under consideration and make arrangements as to how they would vote on them. When some of them would leave they would put a bottle of champagne in their pockets. ¹¹

The following purchases were reported to stock the refreshment room:

Feb. 1: 6 boxes cigars, \$10 - \$60; cheese, \$1.25	crackers, \$1.25	\$62.50
Feb. 1: 1 dozen ale, \$3.50; 1 dozen porter, \$3.50; 1 jar ginger, \$3		\$10.00
Feb. 1: 1/2-gallon c. whisky, \$1.50; 1 bottle wine, \$2,		\$ 3.50
Feb. 1: 3 bottles wine, \$6; 1 box cigars, \$9;(Robertson)		\$15.00
Feb. 4: 4 dozen ale, \$3.50 - \$14; 1 gallon whisky, \$3	\$17.50	
Feb. 4: Matches, 40c; (5) 1 gallon c. whisky, \$3		\$ 3.50
Feb. 5: 1 pineapple cheese, \$2.50; 5 pounds crackers, \$1.25	\$3.75	
Feb. 5: 3 boxes cigars, \$10 - \$30; (6) 1 gallon whisky, \$7		\$37.00
Feb. 5; 1 pineapple cheese, \$2.50; 6 boxes sardines, \$1.80		\$4.304. ¹²

This was a Day of a Great Deal of White Corruption

An African-American historian, W. E. B. Du Bois, was one of the first writers to point out that corruption was not an exclusive characteristic of black Americans. Dishonesty of the Carpetbag governments, Du Bois argued, if indeed there was a great deal, must be measured in relationship to the behavior of white lawmakers in other governments. Read the following and evaluate the force of Du Bois' argument.

Dishonesty in public life has no monopoly of time or place in America. To take one state: in 1839 it was reported in Mississippi that ninety per cent of the fines collected by sheriffs and clerks were unaccounted for. In 1841, the state treasurer acknowledges himself "at a loss to determine the precise liabilities of the state and her means of paying the same." And in 1839 the auditor's books had not been posted for eighteen months, no entries made for a year, and no vouchers examined for three years. Congress gave Jefferson College, Natchez, more than 46,000 acres of land; before the war this whole property has "disappeared" and the college was closed. From 1830 to 1860 Southern men in federal offices alone embezzled more than a million dollars — a far larger sum than now. There might have been less stealing in the South during Reconstruction without Negroes voting. But it is certainly highly instructive to remember that this was a day of a great deal of white corruption in government. A national secretary of war was caught stealing, a vice-

¹¹Walter L. Fleming, *Documentary History of Reconstruction*, Vol. II, (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company 1907), p. 59

¹² Fleming, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

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president presumably took bribes, a private secretary of the president, a chief clerk of the Treasury, and eighty-six government officials stole millions in the whiskey frauds.¹³

Suggested student exercises:

1. Why were Southerners likely to despise the governments established under congressional rule?

Review each of the four documents in this chapter examine them for:

- **Loaded language** (are there words that show obvious prejudice?)
- **Objectivity of observer** (does the source have a reason to lie?)
- **Believability** (are exaggerations so great they are beyond belief?)
- **Relevance** (does the information (if true) have any relevance to the question under consideration (in this case, the accomplishments of African-Americans in government during Reconstruction)?)

2. What conclusions do you come to regarding the success of Congressional Reconstruction and the role of African-Americans in these newly formed governments?

3. Read the story of Robert Smalls (see Epilogue below) and explain how this story informs your view of Black Reconstruction.

Epilogue: The Case of Robert Smalls (written by two, white, liberal historians)



Robert Smalls

Off the coast of South Carolina in the picturesque Sea Islands, Robert Smalls grew up a slave, the favorite of his owner Henry McKee. During the Civil War, Smalls was hired out by his owner to pilot the coastal steamer, *The Planter*, which was engaged in strengthening the Confederate's defenses around Charleston. Smalls was determined to escape to the Sea Islands, now in Yankee hands. One night when the white crew and officers were at a party on shore, Smalls quietly took the ship out into the harbor and went to another dock to pick up his wife and two children. Wearing the broad brim hat of the *Planter's* white captain, Smalls gave the correct signals to Confederate soldiers in Fort Sumter and cleared the port. When Smalls and his crew came in sight of the Union gunboats off the islands, they raised a white bed sheet on the mast as a sign of truce and gave three cheers for the Union. Robert Smalls was now a free man and somewhat of a hero. During the rest of the war, he made daring raids into coastal rivers to pick up other escaping slaves, and built a successful business ferrying Northerners around the Sea Islands. With the money he earned operating the *Planter*, Smalls bought his former master's house at Beaufort. When Congressional Reconstruction started two years later, Smalls was appointed registrar of voters in his home county. The next year he was elected to represent this heavily black county at the Constitutional Convention.

Robert Smalls and other delegates were greeted with great hostility in Charleston where they came to write the new state constitution. A majority of the delegates were African-Americans and South

¹³ W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1935),

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Carolina's white population could not have been more upset. Some of the delegates were field hands who could neither read nor write. Others, like Smalls, had learned to write since the war and were successful businessmen. Others had been free Negroes who had been literate for years. More than one-half of the white delegates were native South Carolinians – some from the up-country – and had never before been able to challenge the political power of the aristocratic planters.

When the convention came to order, the delegates were intensely serious about the business at hand. They paid careful attention to the fine points of parliamentary procedure. They voted not to hire a chaplain in order to save the state money, and also saved by not hiring extra clerks, messengers, and doorkeepers. As one delegate put it, "Most of us have been used to waiting on ourselves and I think we can do it yet."

The Negro convention elected a white man as president, and recognized the value of advice of those who had experience in government. As one delegate put it, "We must unite with our white fellow citizens. Can we afford to lose from the councils of state our first men? No, fellow citizen, no? We only want the best and ablest men. And then with a strong pull, and a long pull, and a pull together, up goes South Carolina."

The Convention finished its new Constitution in March 1868. The only major change made in it for the next forty years was to abolish the equality of races for which the Constitution provided. The Constitution also ended the Black Codes, the property requirement for voting, imprisonment for debt, and many restrictions on the rights of women. It was the most democratic constitution South Carolina ever had. Robert Smalls' contribution to the Constitution was its provision for a system of free public schools. His resolution had been submitted early during the convention:

Whereas the maintenance of an intelligent government, faithful to the interest and liberties of the people, must in great measure depend upon the intelligence of the people themselves and, whereas, the experience of those states which have opened to the poor and rich alike the opportunities of instruction has demonstrated the use of common schools in elevating the intellectual character of their population, therefore, resolved, that the Committee on the Constitution be directed to report an article providing for a system of common schools, of different grades, to be open without charge to all classes of persons.

Smalls' resolution passed. South Carolina established its first public school systems. During the Radical Reconstruction, African-Americans attended the University of South Carolina, which had been one of the South's best schools.

The constitution was ratified and Robert Smalls spent the next seven years representing his district in the State legislature. He gave strong support to the schools he had done so much to help establish. He also became a general in the state militia, vice-chairman of the Republican party, and a delegate to the Republican's national convention. In 1875 he became one of 22 African-Americans to serve in Congress during Reconstruction.

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Smalls served in Congress for eleven years. When he finally lost his seat in 1886, methods were used similar to those described in the next chapter. A Congressional committee was appointed to investigate. During the debate over the issue, a young Northern Congressman, Robert La Follette, told his fellow senators:

*You say in justification that the Negro is ignorant, inferior, incapable of growth. Secretly, do you not fear the opposite? Is it against the dull and submissive that you direct your hardest blows? Or are they aimed at those who, like Robert Smalls, have shown intellect, courage and determination to lift their people to a higher level and maintain their rights as free men?*¹⁴

Student Exercises:

1. What does the Robert Smalls story tell you about Black Reconstruction? Explain.

¹⁴Case of Robert Smalls is adopted from, Ladenburg and McFeely, 'The Black Man in the Land of Equality., (New York: Hayden Book Co., 1970), pp. 65-67.