Reconstruction Failure: Analytical Essay on Historical Issue

Section 2: white supremacist violence

The second most significant reason for the failure of Reconstruction in 1877 was the prevalence of white supremacist violence that was allowed to reign unchecked. The Civil War had led to deep-rooted prejudice from Southerners directed towards former slaves14. Many white Southerners found themselves very suddenly at the bottom of the social hierarchy, with many Southern cities being destroyed, sparking significant anger. This was then directed towards the freed slaves, particularly because many of them fought as soldiers on the Union side. They felt that their freedom was an injustice since it undermined their long-established feelings of superiority; there was intense resistance to Reconstruction from white supremacists15. Even white Southerners who were not actively involved in racially motivated violence were complicit – standing by and agreeing with what was happening16. Their core beliefs about themselves and African Americans meant that it was impossible for them to adapt to this new system right away, even if they had wanted to. This prejudice was ultimately supported by violence; there were almost 2000 lynchings in the Reconstruction era, and there was a failure from Federal forced to suppress this Southern violence, which often stemmed from Confederates seeking the reversal of black gains. To Southerners, black gains represented their own losses, building up resentment towards freedmen.

White supremacist groups began to spring up, and – aside from ineffective KKK hearings – went largely unopposed. The Freedman's Bureau offered some sort of protection but had too little federal support and ended too soon to offer any real protection. Although troops sent by Grant were unable to eradicate the Klan, Major Lewis Merril and his men were able to undermine the myth of the KKK as a chivalric organisation17. Some of these were secret (such as the KKK or the Knights of the White Camelia), and some public (such as the Red Shirts or the White League18) The White League was a group aiming for the 'maintenance of our hereditary civilization and Christianity menaced by a stupid Africanization'19. They committed many acts of violence against African Americans, including a massacre at Coushatta20. Federal forces failed to suppress the resulting violence in the South, from white people seeking the reversal of Black gains. This violence continued to go unchecked, especially after the Compromise of 1877 - this exacerbated the violence, since it saw the total removal of federal troops from the South21. Even before that, however, there were multiple massacres22 (including, significantly, the Colfax massacre23) against black people – the perpetrators for which were seldom held accountable. This was a result of intense resistance to Reconstruction from white supremacists, and Sothern discrimination was heavily supported by white violence. This continued, unchecked violence made it difficult for African American people to hold positions of power, since it was extremely difficult to vote and hold office, meaning that lasting change was difficult to make implement.

In his article 'The 1873 Colfax Massacre Crippled the Reconstruction Era', Danny Lewis examined the effects of white supremacist violence, in particular the Colfax massacre. The Reconstruction era was one of the most violent periods in US history, with thousands of African Americans killed by domestic terrorists. This is due to the factions that developed after the Civil

War – this is especially evident in Louisiana. Grant sent troops to support the Republican candidate, while the White League was formed by white Southerners. The Colfax massacre happened after a black militia took control of the courthouse out of fear, and a mob of 150 ex-confederates, KK, and White League surrounded it. A gun battle was sparked on the 13th of April 1973, and after surrendering 60-150 African Americans were massacred. Foner described this as ‘the bloodiest single instance of racial carnage in the Reconstruction era’, and it evidences an important lesson of the Reconstruction era: in large confrontation, white Southerners would go to extreme lengths to protect the authority they felt they deserved. Only 9 members of the mob were found in violation of the Klu Klux Klan Acts, demonstrating how the law was rarely on the side of African American victims of the Reconstruction era. In this article, Lewis explores the Colfax massacre. He looks into the circumstances of the massacre and goes on to describe exactly how and what happened. Importantly, he explores the consequences of this event; both immediate, and long-term (including the plaque to the white men that died). Although he acknowledges the many overarching causes for the failure of Reconstruction, he presents the ways in which the massacre – a stand out in a period of virtually unchecked violence – was an important reason for its failure, even outside of the perpetuating culture of white violence.

The effects of this are felt to this day – convict leasing was a practice established soon after the abolishment of slavery. It was easy for white people to penalise former slaves for minor misdemeanors (or for nothing at all) so many faced unjust long-term imprisonment, at which point they could be rented for sometimes as little as $9 to work in terrible conditions. This was slavery reinvented as a result of a clause in the 13th Amendment allowing slavery in cases of criminals – a loophole that is exploited to this day24. Many racial stereotypes against Africa Americans were born in the Reconstruction era: racist visual imagery such as the white supremacist construction of the African American as a ’Sambo’ began at this time25, and these stereotypes are still felt26.

The continued oppression of black people was highly beneficial to those in charge – the wealth of many countries was won on the backs of slaves, including the UK and the US. Though not every President was a white supremacist – Grant, for example, was pro-equality – it was in the country leaders' best interest to keep black people down. With a pervasive culture of slavery and white violence in the South, this was not a difficult task – all Democrats had to do was allow it to happen27.

In his article ‘How Reconstruction still shapes American racism’, Henry Louis Gates Jr explores the ways in which the history of black people in the US has been erased, starting with the Reconstruction era. He suggests that although Reconstruction was a period of hope, it was far too short for a full transition from enslavement to free labour; Reconstruction began and ended with occupation of the South. Eric Foner said that an understanding of Reconstruction is significant to today because ‘achievements thought permanent can be overturned and rights can never be taken for granted’. Gates Jr suggests that by 1877 there came a point that the federal government was no longer willing to pay the cost of protecting freedmen. The reversal of Reconstruction lasted longer than Reconstruction itself: Gates gives the example of South Carolina’s integrated state university, which was shut down and reopened for whites only three years later. Furthermore, in 1898 there were 130,000 black men registered to vote, but by 1904 this number was just 1342. This demonstrates the ineffectiveness of Reconstruction gains. Rayford Logan also described this as the nadir of American race relations, due to the introduction of segregation, violence, and disenfranchisement. It was also a result of the failed

Reconstruction period that led to widespread racist imagery such as minstrel shows. Frederick Douglass described this failure of freedom best, questioning why the black man, ‘after having been freed from the slaveholder’s lash, he is subject to the slaveholder’s shotgun?’ in 1876 to the Republican National Convention. Written in response to the Charleston massacre of 2015, Gates’s opinion article examines the roots of racist ideas in American society. Though much of it is rooted in slave ownership, and the dehumanisation necessary to justify it, Gates explores how it was the failed integration of former slaves into American society that solidified racist concepts – especially in art, literature, and other media.

Though white supremacy and white supremacist groups were not the most important reason for the failure of Reconstruction, they still had significant impact on the failure of Reconstruction. Deep-rooted prejudice was difficult to erase with a law, and there was widespread violence during this period across the South. The white supremacist groups that sprang up were integral in keeping the black vote suppressed and silencing black officials in order to prevent real systemic change in the US. Convict leasing and stereotypes were all born out of the white supremacy enforced by these hate groups. However, these groups are not the most responsible for the failure of Reconstruction. They were allowed to reign unchecked as a result of a laissez-faire government that made little effort to prevent and punish white supremacist violence.

Section 3: The South and the economy

Perceived injustices to Southern whites led to inevitable pushback to the Reconstruction Amendments.

The severe losses for white Southerners meant that they had little to hold on to, except the Confederacy, meaning that they clung to it and its ideals. Throughout US history, attempts to create systems to control black people as replacements to slavery continued to develop: Jim Crow laws, mass incarceration, excessive policing and so on. The Black Codes were developed immediately after the Civil War, and Southern discrimination was supported by both violence and those in power.

Progress in the South also regressed very quickly, because it was difficult for Black people to be in the position to make change (voting or holding political office). Failure to incorporate Southerners fully into the Union was also a significant reason for the divide between Black and white people in the South. Integrating the 4 million freed slaves into society also proved to be difficult, especially since this mostly occurred in the South since this was where plantations had been; to Southerners, this felt as though the North was meddling in things that did not affect them.

Therefore, especially after the war, there was a strong North versus South divide (only exacerbated by the issue of Reconstruction) – creating the strong Southern belief that the North was the Enemy.

The final reason for the failure of Reconstruction was the economy and land redistribution. Failure to redistribute land meant that Black people were unable to form their own base of economic power – Black land ownership should have been a large part of eradicating slavery. For example, the empty promise that characterises the Reconstruction era was that each former slave would receive ‘40 acres and a mule'. This land disparity had long-lasting effects.

Sharecropping was another practice in the South that was arguably an extension of slavery. Though this began in the 1870s, after the Reconstruction era, it was further proof that Reconstruction had failed to eradicate the racial divide. Though sharecropping meant that many freedman families were able to reclaim autonomy, it also meant that many were trapped in inescapable debt to their landowners (find the word for this).

https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/sharecropping#:~:text=By%20the%20early%201870s%2C%20the,the%20end%20of%20the%20year.

Andrew Jonson, instead of equally distributing land, returned it to former slave-owners (he had been a slaveowner himself).

Furthermore, source of labour became a significant issue. Black women and children were often no longer willing to work in fields. As well as this, Black men were no longer a source of free labour, since freedmen wanted to create power for themselves, rather than returning to work under whites. Economic and labour shortage issues resulted from Freedmen wanting self-supporting communities: work such as farming was not considered as such since it did not contribute to the American economy. This significantly impacted the economy in a country whose wealth was founded upon slavery – important, since it is often the economy that sways public opinion the most.

The West also posed an issue, since most troops were focused Westwards. Economic depression further divided Grant’s focus away from Reconstruction.

The final factor of the South and the economy is important in the failure of Reconstruction, but not as important as the other factors. This is because it is not economic failure that characterises Reconstruction, it is a failure to resolve racial tensions at a critical point in US history. There was a significant divide between the North and South after the war, and any progress made in the South quickly regressed. Southerners clung to their ideals after their resounding loss of the Civil War, making this divide deep-rooted. This meant that economic concerns like land distribution of source of labour were exacerbated. Again, it was the federal government’s responsibility to take care of these issues, and they failed. Instead, they focused Westwards, allowing white violence to spread through the South. Under different governments, the make-up of the South may not have resulted in such failure.

Conclusion:

On balance, though the factors behind the failure of Reconstruction 1877 were all of significant importance, the role of the government in its collapse was the most overarching and intrinsic of these factors. As time went on, with the other factors such as white violence or financial issues worsening, the government failed to address and keep up with what needed to happen for Reconstruction to be a success. Each factor reacted together to cause the failure of Reconstruction, and without some of these factors it is possible that Reconstruction would have seen far more success than it did. However, it was the government's responsibility to rebuild the country in a way that was beneficial for all, and they failed to do so – and made it worse in many cases (particularly during Johnson’s presidency). The effects of this are felt today in the USA, with those descended from slaves finding it far more difficult to build wealth and progress in American society as a result of the centuries of inequality, could have been significantly reduced

with a dedicated and successful Reconstruction period. Looking at who should have held responsibility in the issue of Reconstruction is the most appropriate argument in judging the main cause of its failure; many parts of the government failed to utilise its role of influence to Reconstruct the country after the war, in ignoring it, not prioritising it, and not protecting former slaves. The most significant part of this is Andrew Johnson's government, in which there was significant divide between his goals and the goals of Congress, and he actively worked to veto pro-Reconstruction Acts and Amendments. However, the role of Grant's government should not be ignored; government failure on many fronts allowed Reconstruction to fall to the wayside without ever truly being revisited. Furthermore, the government on a local level should also be considered – Black people were often unable to progress into positions of power, even after the success of freedmen such as Menard or Rainey. The role of white supremacist violence is an important part of this and highlights the way that the government failed to implement Reconstruction right down to the local level. Furthermore, the unfulfilled promises of the government were an important legacy of the Reconstruction era – the promise of 'forty acres and a mule' are extremely reminiscent of the failure to redistribute, and the long-term effects of this can be seen today. Despite the later accomplishments of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, many African Americans remain disenfranchised, and the impact of redistribution and Reconstruction failure after the Civil War cannot be ignored in this. Though violence is considered characteristic of the Reconstruction period, this factor is not the most significant cause of the failure of Reconstruction. The violence, mainly from white supremacist groups such as the knights of the white camellia or the redcoats, is rather a reaction to Confederate loss and failure to integrate the 4 million freedmen in the US – issues whose responsibility should have fallen to and been taken care of by the federal government (despite the laissez-faire attitudes of many American governments, leaving these issues to state governments was clearly an ineffective measure). 21st century views of Reconstruction demonstrate that it was a period of unfulfilled radical change – a period to reorganise American society while it was still in its early days of creation. Once the North lost interest in the oversight of the South, Reconstruction was over.

Therefore, to conclude, it was the government's responsibility to ensure the success of Reconstruction - no matter what issues made this more difficult – and they failed to do so.