James McPherson, "Reconstruction Reconsidered" (book review) ***The Atlantic*** Vol. 261 (No. 4), April, 1988, pp75-77.

Reviews of:

THOSE TERRIBLE CARPETBAGGERS by Richard Current. Oxford University Press, $24.95.

RECONSTRUCTION: America's Unfinished Revolution by Eric Foner. Harper & Row, $29.95.

ONCE UPON A TIME the story of Reconstruction after the American Civil War took the form of melodrama. The villains were vindictive radical Republicans. Seeking to aggrandize their power and to humiliate proud but defeated Confederates, they enfranchised freed slaves and loosed a carnival of misrule on the South. Their chief agents in this orgy of corruption were carpetbaggers, those impecunious but shrewd Yankees who traveled southward, carrying their worldly possessions in carpetbags, to squeeze ill-gotten gains from a defeated people. Their allies in pillage were scalawags, poor whites who, hyena-like, joined the Republican Party to pick a few remaining shreds of flesh from the southern carcass. Freed slaves, drunk with rights and privileges they neither understood nor deserved, functioned as the dupes of cynical carpetbaggers who manipulated their votes to ravish the prostrate South.

After a decade of intolerable exploitation, southerners (defined as white Democrats) rose in righteous wrath to throw off the rule of their oppressors. Recognizing the mistake of having tried to elevate black semi-savages over the flower of white civilization, the North acquiesced in this denouement, in 1877, by withdrawing federal troops from the last southern state capitals, where they had been the only force propping up the remaining "Negro-Carpetbag" governments. The prophet of this redemption (as whites called it) was Andrew Johnson, who as President from 1865 to 1869 had tried in vain to resist the radical juggernaut, suffering impeachment and near conviction for his pains. The heroes were former Confederates like Wade Hampton, of South Carolina, and L.Q.C. Lamar, of Mississippi, who led the South out of the wilderness of Reconstruction, aided by the saintly warriors of the Ku Klux Klan.

.This was the version of Reconstruction popularized by D. W. Griffith's classic 1915 movie Birth of a Nation and by Claude Bowers's best-selling 1929 book The Tragic Era. It persisted in books with such titles as The Dreadful Decade and The Age of Hate. Dissenters occasionally spoke up--chiefly black people and white liberals who thought their ancestors had fought a war for national survival and freedom and had carried out a reconstruction to preserve the fruits of that war. In the 1930s a few revisionist historians began to challenge the traditional version of Reconstruction with a more balanced and less racist interpretation. But the old orthodoxy prevailed until at least the 1950s. It received the imprimatur of the authoritative History of the South series, whose 1947 volume The South During Reconstruction declared that "no amount of revision can write away the grievous mistakes made in this abnormal period of American history," which witnessed "the blackout of honest government." In the 1950s the leading college textbook on Reconstruction described the era as "a time of party abuse, of corruption, of vindictive bigotry." The foremost general textbook on American history, widely used in both college and high school, deplored the "gun-supported reconstruction of the South, begun so brutally in 1867," which produced southern state governments that "resembled the comic opera."

Such views were not confined to the classroom. The New York Times pundit James Reston characterized the Reconstruction policy of Negro suffrage as "vicious," and Drew Pearson lamented the "excesses" of "Negro extremists" during Reconstruction which had alienated their southern white friends and "set back Negro progress by half a century." And in his best-selling Profiles in Courage, Senator John F. Kennedy condemned Republican "extremists" who made the period "a black nightmare the South could never forget," bringing on "years of Southern bondage and exploitation" before "the South could regain her dignity and her rightful place in the nation." A few years after the publication of Profiles in Courage, southern politicians and editors used similar language to denounce Kennedy's dispatch of federal marshals and troops to the South on precisely the same mission those Republican "extremists" had tried to accomplish a century earlier: the enforcement of national supremacy and constitutional rights.

THE CIVIL-RIGHTS movement not only transformed America in the 1960s; it also helped transform attitudes toward Reconstruction. Historians do not merely recount the "facts" of the past. Rather, they try to interpret the meaning of those facts. And that endeavor is inevitably conditioned by the perspective of the historian's present. Anyone who sympathized with the quest of blacks for equal rights in the 1960s--as most historians did--was likely to view black people rather than southern whites as having been the victims of "bondage and exploitation" a century earlier, and to regard Reconstruction not as a denial to the white South of "her dignity and her rightful place in the nation" but as an attempt to help blacks obtain theirs. The idealism and achievements of the "second Reconstruction" in the 1960s prompted intensive re-examination of the first, whose civil-rights laws and voting-rights acts anticipated those of 1964 and 1965 by a century, and whose enactment of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments provided the constitutional basis for whatever progress this country has been able to make toward a color-blind polity..

The earlier ripple of revisionism thus became a tidal wave that capsized the traditional view of Reconstruction. Instead of vindictive villains, radical Republicans became champions of racial justice. Instead of contemptible traitors, scalawags became courageous dissenters from southern white-supremacy orthodoxy. Instead of bayonet-wielding oppressors of southern whites, federal troops and marshals became protectors of blacks. Instead of ignorant pawns of northern exploiters, black voters became a liberated people struggling upward toward freedom and a decent life. Instead of an honored prophet, President Andrew Johnson became a despised racist.

Even the carpetbaggers underwent a remarkable metamorphosis. Though some of the northerners who moved south after the Civil War and eventually went into politics as Republicans may have merited the typical southern description of them as "depraved, dissolute, dishonest... itinerant adventurers," most did not. No historian has done more to rehabilitate their reputation than Richard Current, whose first book, ironically, was a biography of the radical leader Thaddeus Stevens which fit the traditionalist mold. But that was nearly half a century ago. The latest of Current's eighteen books, Those Terrible Carpetbaggers, culminates years of research on the carpetbaggers which has been intended to illuminate the "human beings hidden behind the stereotype." It succeeds brilliantly through biographies of ten of the most prominent (and in southern eyes notorious) Yankees who settled in the South after the war, interweaving the stories of their careers in a narrative of Reconstruction in the seven states where they lived.

Six of these men were state governors, four were United States senators (two of these served also as governors), one was a state judge, and one a county sheriff. Were they mostly "ignorant and illiterate," as a North Carolina college student wrote a few years ago? Seven of the ten had a college education (at a time when less than two percent of Americans had attended college); the other three were two lawyers and a newspaper editor. Four of the ten wrote books; another held a Phi Beta Kappa key and degrees from both Harvard and Yale. Nor was this untypical of carpetbaggers: in general, they may have been the best-educated group in American politics. Were they soldiers of fortune, penniless itinerants on the make who came south because they were too "degraded to get the lowest of places in the states they had just left," as a southerner has described them? They were soldiers, to be sure: nine of the ten had served as Union army officers. But they were hardly obscure or incompetent. All had fine war records, four were promoted to the rank of general, four had been wounded, and one had won the Congressional Medal of Honor. Nor was this untypical: fifty-two of sixty carpetbaggers who served in Congress were Union army veterans. Nearly two thirds of this larger sample had practiced a profession--law, medicine, engineering, or teaching--and many of them had also become involved in business or farming in the South. They brought not skimpy carpetbags but, rather, considerable capital to invest in what they hoped would become a new and better South. Indeed, it is likely that the carpetbaggers brought more money into the South than they took out. As a group, they were no more venal than was average for Americans in politics during that era. Their unsavory reputation, Current writes, was largely a product of "the Democrats' propaganda technique of the Big Lie."

But did not the carpetbaggers come "out of the North to use the negroes as tools for their own selfish ends," as Woodrow Wilson charged? It is quite true that they supported equal civil and political rights for the freedmen. However, most came south with little or no intention of seeking political office. They were officers in the Union occupation forces who stayed on after their discharge, or agents of the Freedmen's Bureau (a government agency to help ex-slaves make the transition to freedom), or teachers in black schools established by northern missionary societies, or investors in plantations growing cotton with free labor. Many settled in the postwar South for the same reason that others went west: they were seeking a new frontier in which to invest their capital and energy. It was an opportunity to rebuild a shattered economy and construct a new society based on freedom--and of course to get ahead themselves. They went into politics only when it became clear that these goals could not be achieved without the vigorous leadership of Republican state governments to preserve the principles of nationalism and freedom that they had fought for as soldiers.

In effect, Reconstruction became a continuation of the Civil War, with carpetbaggers being officers in government as they had once been officers in the army. "The war still exists in a very important phase here," Adelbert Ames, a Maine native and Medal of Honor winner, wrote in 1869 from Mississippi, where he became a senator and then governor. Nor was their new role as politicians notably more peaceful than their old one as soldiers. Confederate veterans organized the Ku Klux Klan and other paramilitary groups to fight Republican governments sustained by Yankees as they had fought the Yankee army a few years earlier. This time they won, killing hundreds of blacks and scores of carpetbaggers and scalawags in the process. Southern whites overthrew Reconstruction and restored "home rule" (government by white Democrats) with the most relentless and large-scale terrorism in American history. They succeeded because whereas the North had been willing to pour two million soldiers into the South to preserve the Union, it was unwilling to pour in the resources necessary to preserve radical Reconstruction.

And reconstruction was radical, according to Reconstruction.' America's Unfinished Revolution, Eric Foner's volume in the New American Nation Series. Indeed it was a revolution, though the success of the southern counterrevolution made it an unfinished one.

The revolutionary nature of the Civil War and Reconstruction would seem self-evident: they not only emancipated four million slaves (at a cost of at least 620,000 lives) but also granted those slaves civil and political equality with their former masters and elevated a number of them to political office within three years of their emancipation. Contemporary observers certainly perceived this as a revolution. British and French journalists reporting from the United States during the 1860s described Emancipation and Reconstruction as a "mighty revolution" and "one of the most radical revolutions known in history." Thaddeus Stevens, they told European readers, was the "Robespierre" of "the second American Revolution." None other than Karl Marx wrote extensively about the "world transforming... revolutionary movement" going on in the United States. A northern journalist, visiting the South a decade after the war, wrote, "I do not believe that the ruin of the French nobility at the first Revolution was more complete than . . . that of the proud, rich, and cultivated aristocracy of the low country of South Carolina," where former slaves now owned considerable land and held most of the government offices. Speaking in behalf of the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which granted ex-slaves equal citizenship and empowered federal courts to enforce civil rights, a senator from Maine conceded that "this species of legislation is absolutely revolutionary." He went on, "But are we not in the midst of a revolution?"

Revisionist historians in the 1960s accepted the notion of Reconstruction as revolution, and praised its achievements. Some of them believed that it was not revolutionary enough; in particular they regretted that Thaddeus Stevens's proposal to confiscate the land of wealthy "traitors" (Confederates) and grant it in forty-acre plots to the freed slaves was never adopted. Without the basis of economic independence that this might have provided them, the largely landless ex-slaves were vulnerable to the white counterrevolution that swept away many of their civil and political rights. Without land reform, one revisionist scholar wrote in 1969, "Reconstruction was a revolution manque."

It was but a step from this assertion to a belief that Reconstruction was no revolution at all. By the 1970s a number of "post-revisionist" historians had taken precisely this position. Post-revisionism grew up in the climate of disillusionment with American institutions produced by the Vietnam War and the aftermath of the civil-rights movement. If capitalist democracy produces imperialism and napalm bombing in Southeast Asia, if civil-fights and voting-rights acts leave the masses of black Americans impoverished in urban ghettos, what good are they? Such was the question asked by a growing number of white radicals and black militants. Several historians who asked these questions about contemporary America began taking a hard look at Reconstruction. Not surprisingly, they found that whereas northern Republicans had enacted civil-rights laws in the 1860s and 1870s, these lawmakers represented racist constituencies who cared little about black equality per se and watched with indifference, or satisfaction, when the rights were taken away; that although ex-slaves did vote in large numbers for a few years, they remained impoverished sharecroppers on land owned by their former masters, whose economic dominance was never interrupted and whose political dominance quickly recovered. In this post-revisionist view the Freed-men's Bureau became not the coddler of lazy blacks portrayed by traditionalists or the protector of exploited freedmen pictured by revisionists but an agency to get ex-slaves back to work on terms favorable to landlords. Even one of Reconstruction's proudest achievements--the creation from scratch of public-school systems for blacks (and indeed in some localities for whites as well), capped by teacher-training academies and colleges supported by northern philanthropy --became in post-revisionist eyes merely an instrument for the social control of black workers by the inculcation of docility and decorum. Thus, as one post-revisionist phrased it, the Civil War and Reconstruction produced no "fundamental changes" in the "antebellum forms of economic and social organization in the South." No real revolution took place because the abolition of slavery caused no "specific changes either in the status of the former slaves or in the conditions under which they labored."

As a school of Reconstruction historiography, post-revisionism has lasted a shorter time than did Reconstruction itself. The thesis that the Civil War, this country's largest and most violent upheaval, caused no significant change lacks credibility. Eric Foner's rich, complex, exhaustive study gives post-revisionism the coup degrace. Reconstruction constituted"dialectic of continuity and change," he maintains, and we must not lose sight of the importance of the change. Foner's thesis is all the more persuasive because he came to intellectual maturity during the Vietnam era and shares many cultural values and theoretical viewpoints with the post-revi-sionists. But his disappointment with the documented shortcomings of Re-constructruction is tempered by an appreciation of the difficulties it faced and the successes it achieved.

Foner agrees with post-revisionists that the problem of labor relations between former planters and former slaves was the central issue of Reconstruction. But rather than seeing continuity from slavery to sharecropping, he subtly analyzes the dialectic between landowners who wanted to restore gang labor under white supervision, and freedmen who wanted autonomy as independent farmers. The result was tenantry and share-cropping, which allowed freedmen some autonomy and a higher standard of living than they had known as slaves. Drawing on a rich body of recent scholarship on post-Civil War southern agriculture, Foner shows how an oppressive credit system and the restoration of political control by landlords in the 1870s turned sharecropping into a powerful engine of poverty and stagnation. But this is precisely the point that illustrates the radicalism of the brief Reconstruction interlude. As long as Republicans with a largely black constituency controlled southern state and local governments, they could largely protect the legal rights and economic welfare of those constituents.

No other society that abolished Afro-American slavery granted freedmen equal political rights. The uniqueness of Reconstruction in the United States stemmed from the Republicans' free-labor ideology --a belief in equal opportunity for all men to move up as fast and far as they were capable of in a free-enterprise economy. But this ideology carried the seeds of its own failure. In the world of giant corporations, permanent wage-earners, and growing agricultural tenantry. which emerged after the war--the America of the Gilded Age--the notion of equal economic opportunity for the poor became an ideology of conservatism rather than the radicalism that it had represented in the antebellum era. It ultimately weakened the northern commitment to federal intervention to uphold "Negro-Carpetbag" state governments in the face of counterrevolutionary terror.

The success of this counterrevolution, however, confirms the revolutionary dimension of Reconstruction. "It is a measure of how far change had progressed," Foner writes, "that the reaction against Reconstruction proved so extreme." And though largely a failure in the end, Reconstruction left some positive legacies in the form of black educational and social institutions, a tradition of black activism, and constitutional amendments that helped ensure that U.S. race relations would not go in the direction South Africa's have taken and that provided the legal framework for the second Reconstruction of the 1960s.