Remembering Reconstruction at Carolina
“To Make the World Anew”: The Black Role in Reconstruction by Thomas C. Holt

Introduction

My thanks to Harry Watson and other members of the committee that organized this conference and invited me to speak, as well as to Chancellor Moeser and all the others, but especially Barb Call and the staff at the Center for the Study of the American South, who made it possible for me to be here tonight. I commend the University of North Carolina community for having the courage to put on this event, to probe its own history with an eye to changing the present and future. Such a response to controversy does not go without saying. Others might do well to emulate your example.

I must say, as well, that I find the title chosen for this conference, “Remembering Reconstruction,” to be provocative in a number of ways. First, it is an invitation for me to reengage a topic that was the basis of some of my earliest research and writing as a professional historian many years ago—more years now than I like to admit to in fact. Secondly, it reminds me once more of the larger stakes involved in the work of a professional scholar. Not only does our scholarship often have consequences for debates on the great political questions of the day, but it can sometimes even have consequences for how we think about our everyday lives, our physical environment, our unstated assumptions. As a consequence, I am reminded that we historians bear a special public responsibility.

It is provocative on other levels as well, however. Being here tonight and addressing this topic, reminds me of growing up, just up the road a piece, on the rural outskirts of Danville, Virginia, where as a child I recall listening to my grandmother speak vaguely of the great “silver” war (as my young ears misconstrued civil war). She told me stories she had heard in her time of how deep trenches had been dug along the main roads into the city and how the local white residents were all in a panic as the war raged up to Danville’s very gates. I could see that she relished the image of the local white folks in a panic, as did I. I can’t recall that she related much more than these vignettes of the local scene. There was nothing about the larger canvass of historical events of which these scenes were but a part. The events in Danville occurred just a few years before she herself was born, and she lived and died within a space that could have been marked off by the sound of Union canon.

I grew up in the 1950s, knowing not a whole lot more than grandma about the local history of either that war or its aftermath. Both the school textbooks provided by Pittsylvania County and the markers on the local environment provided a very selective story of those years. We were all told to be proud that Danville was the last capital of the confederacy, for example; it was emblazoned on publicity lauding the city’s history. It was only when I became a historian myself that I learned that it was also the site, some 18 years later in 1883, of a murderous riot intended to suppress a biracial political coalition during Virginia’s belated reconstruction in the early 1880s. I have often mused on the fact that none of this history was readily available to the members of my
generation some one hundred years later, in 1963, when like our forefathers we once again assaulted the barricades of racial privilege seeking a more just community—
including the right to move freely in the public sphere, the right to a viable livelihood, the right to participate in the governance of our communities.
In both of these instances I am reminded, then, that “remembering” is not a passive verb, but an activity that has real-life consequences. What is silenced and what is remembered can have political efficacy. Memory has a politics, and politics is often shaped by what is remembered.

The Politics of Memory

One of the more striking and unexpected examples of what we might call the politics of memory was told to me many years ago by my doctoral adviser, C. Vann Woodward. Having recently written a book debunking the bogus memories that claimed segregation to be a venerable tradition, an indelible aspect of the southern social order (rather than a relatively recent, invented tradition), Prof. Woodward was more keenly sensitive than most observers to the political vagaries and consequences of remembering. It was in this context that he told the story of a young senator leaping to his feet in defense of a civil rights bill that was being debated in the US Senate chambers in the summer of 1957. The senator’s defense, however, was somewhat curious and unexpected. Apparently, the proposed enforcement provisions of the new law included some language referring to its legal precedents from Reconstruction era civil rights laws. The young senator wanted to make it clear to his colleagues—especially the southerners—that the proposed law had no connection to those earlier precedents.

“Mr. President,” he declared, addressing the president pro temp of the Senate, “I personally hope that any indirect reference in the bill to that dismal period in American history, the so-called Reconstruction period, will come out of the measure. I do not like to have the American people reminded in however well meaning a way, of the dark and sad days of reconstruction. It is a bad chapter.” [from Congressional Record, Senate, 85th Congress, 1st Session, vol. 103, part 9, p. 14979, July 17, 1957.]

When I later went to the Congressional Record to look up that passage I was bemused to find that this was not the only occasion in which ostentatious efforts were made to distinguish the current civil right initiatives from the “dark and sad days of reconstruction.” Indeed, at almost every turn civil rights proponents sought to dissociate themselves from that earlier moment.

Perhaps I should not have been surprised that the young senator seemed to have known even less about Reconstruction than did I, a product of Pittsylvania County’s segregated school system, but I was—especially when his identity was revealed. Because this harsh portrait of Reconstruction did not come from one of the numerous spokesmen for southern massive resistance in the Senate chamber that day. Rather it was the freshman senator from Minnesota who spoke; a man who had before entering the Senate made his reputation as the radical democratic mayor of Minneapolis. And southerners knew him well as the young firebrand whose speech in defense of a civil rights plank at the 1948 Democratic Convention had helped spark a southern walkout and the formation of the
Dixecrat party that year. In later years this “happy warrior,” as he was called, would remain one of the last pillars of and an unapologetic defenders of American liberalism (including civil rights). In 1957, however, in the mind of US Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, the Reconstruction era was still “a bad chapter” in American history.

It is arguable, I think, that remembering Reconstruction in this way had substantive as well as rhetorical effects. For, as most historians would now recognize, the civil rights initiatives of the 1950s were fatally flawed by their weak provisions for enforcement. Perhaps Senator Humphrey’s extraordinary effort to distinguish the legislative agenda of the mid-20th century from that of the mid-19th is an indication that there was simply no stomach in the US Senate at that time for strong enforcement. Perhaps the seven more years of civil turmoil, the untold pain and suffering that black and white civil rights workers endured, the scores of martyred, often mutilated victims washing up onto the banks of southern rivers were actually necessary before Congress would recognize in 1964, the need to emulate rather than distance itself from the relevant precedents of that earlier era. Perhaps. It is undeniable, nonetheless, that Humphrey and his colleagues shied away from effective enforcement provisions because of the pervasive image of an injustice having been done to southern whites during Reconstruction, because of the amazing, enduring myth of Reconstruction as a “tragic era.”

The Struggle over the Memory of Civil War and Reconstruction

What we might take away from these stories—about myself as well as Senator Humphrey—is how even those most committed to social justice and actively searching for guidance in achieving that justice can find themselves deprived of history’s aid, condemned to reinvent, rediscover well-worn paths to their goals. This “disremembering,” as the Alabama sharecropper Ned Cobb so poetically expressed it, is, however, often but the individual trace of a larger struggle. That I and Hubert Humphrey would be so ignorant of Reconstruction’s positive legacy was but the culmination of a long period of ideological trench warfare in American history. A struggle to shape the received history of the nation, to legitimize, even naturalize some memories while silencing others.

This struggle began in the dying embers of the Civil War. It engaged ordinary people as well as major historical figures, writers and creative artists of all kinds. What is striking about that struggle is that it suggests the means by which our “common sense” understandings of the world around us can be forged, as well as the tenacious strength of that “common sense.” By the early 20th century, the image of Reconstruction that spilled so freely from Senator Humphrey’s mouth had become embedded in American folklore, in film, and in the built environment, as well as in mainstream history. By the turn of the century, one encountered that image in novels like Thomas Dixon’s The Clansman, which by the First World War had become a play and then the movie classic, Birth of a Nation. Subsequent generations would encounter these images again in Gone with the Wind, Margaret Mitchell’s soft porn remake of the basic storyline of Griffith’s film. And like many of you no doubt, I grew up watching legions of western movies and TV programs that invariably celebrated the ex-Confederate soldier as a tragic hero, a figure
emblematic of the dispossessed white South. (And, of course, references to “the South” always meant the “white” South, its black inhabitants being silently elided.) But the institutionalization of the tragic “Lost Cause” and the elision of black southerners was not simply a function of popular culture, fiction, and film. It became embedded into the very built environment of the South, in public monuments to Confederate heroes (some literally carved into mountain sides), in the names engraved into public spaces, streets, buildings, and parks. What one read, what one heard, what one saw; what one walked through or stood in or sat on told a narrative that distorted and defied what has been called one of the last great chance for the realization of American democracy. Now, it was not that there was not a competing, dissenting tradition. Indeed, an alternative tradition also emerged from the dying embers of civil war. Grateful black communities freed from the threat of slavery by northern liberators, institutionalized public ceremonies of remembrance in which they decorated the graves of their fallen liberators. Those ceremonies (called “Decoration Day,” the precursor of “Memorial Day”) were soon overtaken, however, and expanded to include those who fell defending the southern racial order. Eventually even northern memorial ceremonies embraced a tragic narrative in which the Confederate dead shared the space of honor with Union martyrs—in the name of national unity. Figures like Frederick Douglass and John R. Lynch protested this, but to no avail. Later historians, like Carter G. Woodson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and John Hope Franklin, tried to resuscitate a more balanced picture of the war's sacred cause and its aftermath. But these were black men, who were presumed (unlike the sons and daughters of slaveholders) to be self-serving, “interested” parties, and thus not deserving of a respectful hearing. They also wrote in a period when much of the black world—indeed most of the world’s people of color—lived under the yoke of European colonialism. By that time, images of blacks participating as equals and making positive contributions to a political community seemed far-fetched. The flip-side of remembering, then, was silencing--both active verbs. If remembering is an active, transitive verb, rather than a passive state of revelry, then silencing is also active not passive; it transmits an action, it has an outcome.

Other Memories: A New Birth of Freedom

Suggesting that the memory of Reconstruction was distorted and its positive legacy obscured, however, still leaves us with the question of what that more positive legacy was. What was that alternative memory, so effectively silenced that neither Hubert Humphrey nor I was even aware of it almost a hundred years later. Now, there is a downside to asking a question like that of a historian, because before I answer it, I feel compelled to at least briefly sketch the historical context out which it developed. First, you need to understand that there were actually two different reconstructions, or at least two temporal and political phases of the process we have come to call Reconstruction. The first began even before the war was over and lasted until about two years after Lee surrendered. Textbooks refer to this as the presidential reconstruction because its initiation came from the White House, beginning with Lincoln and continuing with Andrew Johnson. Now, although there were important differences between Johnson’s policies and Lincoln’s, they both shared the same fundamental and fatal premise: the idea that somehow this devastating rupture in the national fabric could
be treated as little more than a family quarrel, which meant postwar adjustments were simply a matter of sectional reconciliation. What this amounted to was a proposal to return to the status quo ante of 1860, with the admittedly large exception that slavery would no longer be legal. As C. Vann Woodward pointed out many years ago, what was proposed (and partially implemented) was the most extraordinary outcome of a civil war in human history. Instead of finding their heads decorating pikes at the entrance to the nation’s capital, as had often been the case after such conflicts in the long history of western civilizations, the leaders of the most devastating rebellion the world had yet seen would simply retire to their estates after symbolically surrendering their sidearms. Meanwhile, white politicians—northern and southern—split hairs over constitutional interpretation. One incredible sequence of disputation turned on the question of whether a state could legally secede from the Union. With the scent of gunpowder still wafting from their cloaks white southerners, aided by their northern allies, went so far as to argue that since secession was illegal and null and void, the southern states never left the Union and so there was no need for a federally supervised reconstruction process to get them back in. One suspects that to black folk, they all looked like medieval clerics arguing over how many angels could dance on the head of a pin.

Radical Reconstruction

This Reconstruction was quite different, then, from that portrayed by southern sympathizers in later years. The image of a northern heel on southern necks does not quite fit here. Southern planters lost their slaves without compensation, of course, which was relatively rare in the western hemisphere, but then so too was waging civil war in defense of slavery. As for the former slaves themselves, there was a studied ambiguity about—or should we say benign neglect of—their status. But one thing was certain, there would be no black civil or political equality, no participation in the political process. I will not try to elaborate here the complex history behind this turn of events, except to suggest that one could have seen it coming from the first moments of the conflict, perhaps even earlier in the presidential campaign leading up to the war. The Union leadership (especially Lincoln) had always feared that too radical a prosecution of the war might unleash a backlash that would tear the Union yet further asunder. And one has to concede that there was ample reason for Lincoln’s lack of confidence in the northern public’s support for forthright anti-slavery war aims rather than one simply to preserve the Union. It took two years of bitter conflict before what Lincoln called “the incidents and vicissitudes of war” transformed public opinion. It would take a lot more disruption and death (as in the 1960s) before they embraced the idea of changing—that is, reconstructing—the entire southern social and political order.

White southerners did their part to nudge northern public sentiment in a more radical direction. At the first opportunity, they elected Confederate leaders to represent them in Congress. At every opportunity they brutalized blacks and Yankee civilians. To address the changed social and labor situation they passed new laws that smacked of slavery by another name. Some states even passed laws barring blacks from owning land, or working outside agriculture, or moving about freely on the public roads.
While some southern planters—being unable to imagine working with black free laborers—may have been hankering to reestablish slave-like controls, others may have been simply responding to the mounting pressures of their postwar situation, especially given the national government’s seeming indifference. They had lost their slaves without compensation, which was bad enough, but with the loss of those slaves the value of their landholdings plunged as well—because without labor the land was useless. It went unremarked at the time that this development was indirect evidence of the value-added that slaves had brought to their plantations, suggesting that some recompense was due them for what slavery had stolen from them. But no one—other than a few black leaders—thought the matter worth bringing up. (We’ll return to that in a minute.) It was not unreasonable, then, that many northerners began to wonder just who had won the war. Whatever they might have thought they were doing, however, southern whites’ intransigence amounted to a colossal miscalculation. They had overreached. And it was in this climate that Congress took charge of the reconstruction process and started again from scratch. Reestablishing military control and supervising the political process by which state governments were reorganized, including authorizing black voting and officeholding, they launched a social as well as political revolution in several southern states.

Black Officerholders

Much of the horror this turn of events excited among southern whites, however, was focused on the spectacle of blacks voting and taking seats in their state legislatures and on the magistrates’ bench. With a concerted “disinformation” campaign conservatives etched an image of black politicians as illiterate and poor, and thus disqualified and corrupt. The image was incorrect, since historians’ studies of these men show that most were literate, many owned real property and/or were employed in professions and artisanal employment. But such facts hardly mattered, since the real basis for the charge of disqualification and corruption was that these men were black and many were former slaves. The word “corruption” signified a world turned upside down. Indeed, today what many historians find credible about these blacks legislators was the extent to which they did indeed try to turn their world upside down. The world they targeted, of course, was the old regime of slavery and oligarchic power. In short, a world that grounded the social order in blatant inequalities. This was a world, they reasoned, that needed to be turned upside down.

As Steve Hahn puts it so cogently in his recent book: “they quite simply envisioned a nation that did not exist,” one that accorded equal citizenship rights to all born within its borders and/or ready to swear fealty to its founding ideals, ready to risk their lives and fortunes to defend its continued survival. On all these points, black folk qualified, and just as surely many white southerners would have failed on at least two of the three. Who then should constitute the body politic of the reconstructed South, they asked, other than the loyal defenders of the nation? Who was better qualified to build a new social order than those committed to the fundamental principles of the nation’s founding documents? Two consistent themes throughout the reconstructed South, therefore, were the fostering of a more democratic governance than the South had hitherto known and establishing a
system of public education open to all races and classes and extending up to the state universities that would form the foundation of that democracy. It is not surprising that these measures were also some of the first casualties of the so-called Redeemer regimes in the 1880s and 1890s. The historical result of the South’s so-called redemption is beyond dispute: a region in which most people (including most white people) didn’t vote; a region where most people—white and black—were desperately poor; a region with the worst education system in the nation. In the 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt called this redeemed South the nation’s number one problem.

The Aspirations of Ordinary Folks

But a principal theme to emerge from the scholarship of the past two decades is that Reconstruction was not just something that happened in politics, whether in Washington or in state capitols. As important as those “big-P” political activities were, they stood on the shoulders of hundreds of thousands of men and women in small communities throughout the South who dared to think the world anew. These were the “little people” engaged in “small-p” politics, in their wards or precincts, in camp meetings and churches, in schools and homes. Certainly it is safe to say that there would have been no “radical” Reconstruction—in the sense of black officeholding and the political reforms they produced—without ordinary, ex-slaves risking their lives and their livelihoods oftentimes to register and to vote.

But these local, everyday people were more than just the foot-soldiers of the Republican party. They were also what might be called “organic intellectuals” in a world turned upside down. Despite limited education, sometimes illiterate, even unable to write their own names, they understood their situation perfectly and could discern the codes of contemporary political discourse with which they could effectively articulate their needs and aspirations. Contrary to the propaganda that they simply wanted to wander off and live in idleness, they insisted loudly that they did want to work—just not for old massa, and not under the conditions they had labored as slaves. They knew very well, though, that the only way to avoid working for old master was to gain access to land. Listen to this black church elder in South Carolina: “Tell Lincoln we want land. This very land that is rich with the sweat of we face and the blood of we back. We born here, we parents’ graves [are] here; this here our home.” At the moment when their former owners were being sharply brought to recognize the economic equation of land and labor values, therefore, the former slaves were also cognizant that their own future depended on rejoining their labor with the land—but on their own terms—as independent farmers. By their moral economic reckoning, moreover, they had already earned the right to that land. The connection between the slavery they had endured for generations and the requirements of a just postwar settlement were clear. As Bayley Wyatt of Virginia declared: “Our wives, our children, our husbands, has been sold over and over again to purchase the lands we now locate on.”

For me, one of the most striking examples of this sophisticated analysis and laser-like focus on the issues confronting the freedpeople and the nation was a petition that freedpeople in Edisto, South Carolina submitted to General Oliver Otis Howard, head of
the Freedmen’s Bureau, in the Fall of 1865, just six months after Lee’s surrender. The Edisto Islanders were responding to General Howard’s efforts—at the instigation of President Andrew Johnson—to get them to surrender peacefully the 40-acre plots allotted to them just a few months earlier, after being taken from their former masters who had abandoned them. Now, as part of the reconciliation policies of presidential reconstruction, the land was to be given back to ex-rebel landlords. Listen to the freedpeople’s response:

“General It Is with painful Hearts that we the Committe address you, we Have thurougholy considerd the order which you wished us to Sighn, we wish we could do so but cannot feel our rights Safe If we do so,

General we want Homesteads; we were promised Homesteads by the government; If It does not carry out the promises Its agents made to us, If the government Haveing concluded to befriend Its late enemies [they saw clearly the political strategy behind Johnson’s policies] and to neglect to observe the principles of common faith between Its self and us Its allies In the war you said was over, now takes away from them all right to the soil they stand upon save such as they can get by again working for your late and thier alltime enemies.[unlike northern whites their conflict with these folk didn’t just start in 1861 and didn’t end in 1865] --If the government does so we are left In a more unpleasant condition than our former

we are at the mercy of those who are combined to prevent us from getting land enough to lay our Fathers bones upon. We Have property In Horses, cattle, carriages, & articles of furniture, but we are landless and Homeless, from the Homes we have lived In In the past we can only do one of three things Step Into the public road or the sea or remain on them working as In former time and subject to their will as then. [the essence of slavery is that one’s work, one’s very existence depends on the will of another] We can not resist It In any way without being driven out Homeless upon the road.

You will see this Is not the condition of really freemen

You ask us to forgive the land owners of our Island, You only lost your right arm. In war and might forgive them. The man who tied me to a tree & gave me 39 lashes & who stripped and flogged my mother & sister & who will not let me stay In His empty Hut except I will do His planting & be Satisfied with His price & who combines with others to keep away land from me well knowing I would not Have any thing to do with Him If I Had land of my own. -- that man, I cannot well forgive. Does It look as if He Has forgiven me, seeing How He tries to keep me In a Condition of Helplessness

General, we cannot remain Here In such condition and If the government permits them to come back we ask It to Help us to reach land where we shall not be slaves nor compelled to work for those who would treat us as such
we Have not been treacherous, we Have not for selfish motives allied to us those who suffered like us from a common enemy & then Haveing gained our purpose left our allies In their Hands There is no rights secured to us there Is no law likely to be made which our Hands can reach. The state will make laws that we shall not be able to Hold land even If we pay for It Landless, Homeless, Voteless, we can only pray to god & Hope for His Help, your Influence & assistance With consideration of esteem Your Obt Servts

This document was signed “In behalf of the people,” by a three-man committee, consisting of Henry Bram, Ishmael Moultrie, and Yates Sampson.

One gets perhaps some inkling of how heart-rending the meeting from which this letter was produced must have been, as songs and exclamations of bewilderment flowed through the crowd. But it’s important to also note that what these largely unlettered men and women were saying before federal officials were astute lessons in political economy. When the Edisto Islanders said, “we want Homesteads,” they were talking about much more than land as an economic good. To be “landless” was to be “Homeless,” to not--s they put it so poignantly-- even to have “land enough to lay our Fathers bones upon.” And thus to be deprived of the material, sensate ties to ancestors, is to lose that which grounds both an individual’s identity and a community’s. It was through land and the independence it brought, therefore, that they could build not only a livelihood but families and communities. And with land and homes they coupled the vote, which would enable them a measure of self-protection, for otherwise “there is no law likely to be made which our Hands can reach.” Without political rights, the state would make laws that devalued both their property and their hopes.

Our freedom must be made whole, they were saying. It was not rooted in individual autonomy and the formal equality of being able to make a contract. It must be embodied in ones capacity to form, support and protect a family. It must be realized through the integrity of communities and buttressed by their institutions, schools, churches, and mutual aid societies. It must balance work with the leisure in which those social relations can be nurtured and enjoyed; it must insure not only material progress but social wholeness. Thus spoke a people who would later be ridiculed as “ignorant fieldhands,” “political simpletons” easily mislead by corrupt carpetbaggers. These are the people, as conservative propaganda insisted, who must be excised from the body politic, even if they had to be killed.

It is not my purpose here to suggest that no mistakes were made during this era, that the new leaders were without blemishes, or that their measures and methods were without flaws. Those familiar with my work on South Carolina will know that that is far from my position. I would insist, however, that despite their mistakes, blemishes, and flaws they laid the foundations for a more democratic governance, some tentative efforts at least to foster the general social welfare, and some bolder steps toward a more just racial order. All in all, as Du Bois correctly noted, their efforts represented one of those rare historic opportunities to realize America’s democratic promise. We let such moments pass at our
peril. We “disremember” the true history of this era, only to face the task at some other historical turn.

Conclusion

One would have hoped that the problem of democracy raised in the Reconstruction era was solved by the sacrifice and struggles of the second Reconstruction—the civil rights movement of the 1960s. That is, until we witnessed thousands of black Floridians being deprived of their right to vote in the last presidential election and apparently continuing to be deprived as we approach the next one. One might have thought that the problem of economic justice that Edisto freedpeople so eloquently petitioned for in the immediate aftermath of civil war would have finally been granted. But the stubborn and even growing divide between haves and have-nots found in the last national census suggests otherwise. One would have thought that by now the blatant deployment of racial prejudice for political advantage would have passed away. But our current political climate suggests otherwise.

At the dawn of the last century, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote an essay on the Freedmen’s Bureau for The Atlantic Monthly. After carefully and objectively detailing its efforts to ease the nation’s transition from a slave to a free society, toting up its successes and failures, he concluded with a plaintive lament of the work left undone and what might have been. “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,” he wrote. He then went on to launch a challenge that could apply to the Reconstruction era as a whole and surely resonates with our own historical moment more than a century later. “To-day, when new and vaster problems are destined to strain every fibre of the national mind and soul, would it not be well to count this legacy honestly and carefully?” It would be well, indeed. It would be well, indeed.

Perhaps, just perhaps, our efforts to assess “honestly and carefully” one of America’s most fateful efforts to build a truly democratic nation might open the possibility to reenvision our present. Remembering a past, reenvisioning the present in order to build a different future.

Thomas C. Holt
University of Chicago