White Supremacy, Terrorism, and the Failure of Reconstruction in the United States

Daniel Byman

Wade Hampton's imposing statue, 15 feet tall and 17 feet long, greets visitors to the South Carolina state house. Hampton, a Confederate general in the Civil War, "the Savior of South Carolina," was one of the largest slaveholders in South Carolina and a member of its legislature when it became the first state to secede from the Union. After the Civil War ended, Hampton allied with the Red Shirts, a white supremacist paramilitary group that supported the Democratic Party by suppressing Black voters and intimidating white Southerners whom they feared might support the Radical Republican agenda of Black equality.[1] In essence, the Red Shirts were a South Carolinian version of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), which operated in several other states.[2] During the 1876 presidential election, the Red Shirts drove the formerly enslaved from their homes, barred them from voting, and murdered at least 150 of them. One historian called the Red Shirts, the KKK, and similar groups "a terrorist arm of the Democratic Party."[3] In that election, Hampton became South Carolina's first Democratic governor,

Daniel Byman is a professor in the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

1. This article capitalizes the word "Black" to reflect a shared cultural identity among an American community of African origin. The word "white" is not capitalized, however, as the cultural identity is less shared. For more on this usage, see Nancy Coleman, "Why We're Capitalizing Black," *New York Times*, July 5, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html.
2. Charles J. Holden, "'Is Our Love for Wade Hampton Foolishness?': South Carolina and the Lost Cause," in Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, eds., *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 60–88.
3. Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. xlvii. Another historian described such groups as a "military arm of the Democratic Party." George C. Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), p. 132. For other important historical works stressing the role of violence, see Richard Zuczek, *State of Rebellion: Reconstruction in South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996); and James K. Hogue, *Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

after ten years of Radical Republican dominance, and later represented the Palmetto State in the U.S. Senate.

The story of Hampton's victory is the story, in miniature, of how white supremacists overturned the verdict of the United States' bloodiest conflict. Violence during Reconstruction (1867–77) claimed the lives of many Republicans and prevented many others from voting, enabling the Democrats to seize control of the South. The number of people white supremacists killed during Reconstruction is unknown, but it is probably in the high thousands or even tens of thousands.[4] Thousands more were displaced, leaving their homes in the countryside for safer cities or fleeing their states altogether.[5] After Reconstruction, Democrats used their control of state governments to enact a mix of poll taxes, grandfather clauses, literacy requirements, and character tests, while white vigilante groups continued their lynchings and beatings. The process did not occur instantaneously or uniformly across the South, but its effects were nonetheless devastating over time. In South Carolina, there were more than 90,000 Black voters in 1876; by the end of the century, this number had fallen to fewer than 3,000.[6]

White supremacist violence destroyed the remarkable political progress that had been made by the formerly enslaved. During Reconstruction, 17 Black Americans served in the U.S. Congress, more than 600 in state legislatures, and hundreds more in local offices throughout the South. Voters in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina all elected Black leaders to national office. By the end of the century, this number had declined to a few scattered local officeholders. Not until 1967, almost 100 years after Reconstruction ended, did Black Americans return to the Senate, when Edward Brooke of Massachusetts won his seat. The former Confederate states became the "Solid South," voting consistently for Democratic candidates as a bloc well into the 1970s.

Why did Reconstruction fail? Why was the U.S. government unable and, at

---

4. Robert Smalls, a leading Black politician of the time, estimated almost 50,000 dead during this period, a figure that one leading contemporary historian of the era finds plausible. Douglas Egerton, "Terrorized African-Americans Found Their Champion in Civil War Hero Robert Smalls," *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2018, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/terrorized-african-americans-champion-civil-war-hero-robert-smalls-180970031/.
5. Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992); and Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post–Civil War North, 1865–1901* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 156–182.
6. John Lewis and Archie E. Allen, "Black Voter Registration Efforts in the South," *Notre Dame Law Review*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (October 1972), pp. 107–108, https://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndlr/vol48/iss1/6.

times, unwilling to quell white supremacist political violence? How did white Southerners emerge triumphant? What lessons can scholars and policymakers learn from the political violence that emerged from this period? These are the questions this article seeks to answer.

Historians have long repudiated the once-taught story of the end of Reconstruction as a rejection of corrupt scalawags and carpetbaggers (pejorative terms, respectively, for Southern white Republicans and Northern white migrants who supported Reconstruction) and the racist view that the formerly enslaved were unfit for politics. Scholars have recognized the tremendous political achievements that Black Americans attained in a short period of time and the often-virtuous intentions of white Northerners and Southerners in supporting greater equality.[7] In recent years, political scientists have drawn on this research and begun to examine Reconstruction in the context of bureaucratic capacity, taxation, education, and public finance—all important issues, but none of which fully explains how white supremacists overturned democracy in the South and disenfranchised and subjugated Black Americans.[8]

Political scientists, however, rarely consider Reconstruction part of the study of political violence in comparative perspective.[9] This is a mistake. In different guises, the dynamics of Reconstruction appear around the world when, after a

---

7. For works representing the old school of thought on Reconstruction that portrayed the violence as limited, and some Klan activity as justified, see William A. Dunning, "Military Government in the South during Reconstruction," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (September 1897), pp. 381–406, doi.org/10.2307/2139663; and E. Merton Coulter, *A History of the South*, Vol. 8: *The South during Reconstruction, 1865–1877* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1947). For a discussion of the historiography, see John David Smith and J. Vincent Lowery, eds., *The Dunning School: Historians, Race, and the Meaning of Reconstruction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013).

8. Pavithra Suryanarayan and Steven White, "Slavery, Reconstruction, and Bureaucratic Capacity in the South," January 14, 2019, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2951964; Mario Chacón and Jeffrey L. Jensen, "Democratization, De Facto Power, and Taxation: Evidence from Military Occupation during Reconstruction," *World Politics*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (January 2020), pp. 1–46, doi.org/10.1017/S0043887119000157; Megan Stewart and Karin E. Kitchens, "Social Transformation and Violence: Evidence from U.S. Reconstruction," October 23, 2020, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3223825; and Trevor D. Logan, "Do Black Politicians Matter?" Working Paper, No. 24190 (Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, January 2018), doi.org/10.3386/w24190.

9. An exception on the terrorism side is David C. Rapoport, "Before the Bombs There Were the Mobs: American Experiences with Terror," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (April 2008), pp. 167–194, doi.org/10.1080/09546550701856045. Stephen John Stedman also offers an excellent chapter on Reconstruction in the context of postwar stabilization. See Stedman, "The End of the American Civil War," in Roy Licklider, ed., *Stopping the Killing: How Civil Wars End* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), pp. 164–188. For a notable work on insurgency by a historian, see Mark Grimsley, "Wars for the American South: The First and Second Reconstructions Considered as Insurgencies," *Civil War History*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (March 2012), pp. 6–36, doi.org/10.1353/cwh.2012.0026.

civil war, the victor seeks to change the political system and society of the war's loser. This article demonstrates that white supremacist violence during Reconstruction can be understood through the lens of insurgency and terrorism against Black civilians and their white supporters and that other political science literatures, such as those on post-conflict societies and on peacekeeping, are also relevant. It identifies the central role of this violence in ways that scholars of national security, post-conflict societies, and political violence would recognize: a contested occupation in a divided society after a bitter civil war, successful countermobilization of traditional forces fearful of losing their dominance, the formation of an insurgency, and uses of terrorism to intimidate. In various forms, these problems show up in U.S. occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq and in postwar situations in countries as diverse as Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Northern Ireland.

Although the Reconstruction era is notable for several important successes, I argue that Reconstruction failed because white supremacists reversed Black political gains after the Civil War through violence and that the federal government was unable, and at times unwilling, to stop them. The subsequent order did not provide the formerly enslaved with security, political rights, social equality, or economic freedom and eventually ensured their inequality under the law. A successful Reconstruction would have been difficult, but its failure was not foreordained, as the federal government enjoyed several important advantages in fighting white supremacist violence. Nor do common explanations for the failure of Reconstruction, including economic weaknesses and class divisions, white Southerners' willingness to prioritize other issues at the expense of Black citizens, the Republicans' difficulties mobilizing the formerly enslaved to vote, and the presidential shift after Abraham Lincoln's assassination to Andrew Johnson, fully explain this outcome. Rather, the white supremacist campaign of violence proved decisive.[10]

Drawing on the comparative literature on civil wars, counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and postwar stabilization, this article identifies a range of structural and policy decisions that shaped the failure of Reconstruction. The article contends that the structural conditions of the post–Civil War South resembled those of a failed state and posed difficulties for Reconstruction's proponents. Yet, these structural conditions were not insurmountable, and some

---

10. For a summary of various factors and an argument on the importance of violence, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), p. 603. For an important work on class and economic issues and their impact on Reconstruction, see Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction*.

conditions, such as the decisive nature of the Union's triumph in the war, even favored the federal government. Policy choices proved path dependent, however, and, in several instances during the Reconstruction era, the federal government's unwillingness to suppress violence made future success far less likely. Indeed, Reconstruction itself was a critical juncture in U.S. history, a period when initial progress toward achieving racial equity and redressing the failures of U.S. democracy took a tragic turn away from freedom and justice.

The failure to stop violence and protect the political gains of Reconstruction was a policy failure: the U.S. government failed to coordinate and plan to suppress a nascent insurgency; failed to deploy enough troops or use the troops with consistency; failed to consider other options to secure the rights of Black Americans; and otherwise failed in its counterinsurgency and counterterrorism policies. Given their political difficulty, alternative paths that might have made success more likely—arming the Black community, reshaping economic power in the South, exploiting white divisions more effectively, planning for a backlash among the defeated white population, and extending the occupation for decades more—either were not pursued or would not have solved the problem of violence in the long term. In contrast, white Southerners opposed to Reconstruction effectively mobilized their community, using terrorism as an intimidation tactic to undermine Black political power and force uncommitted white Southerners to their side.

Reconstruction's many problems and ultimate failure both illustrate and support existing theoretical arguments on counterinsurgency, post-conflict societies, and peacekeeping. The influence of structural factors such as economic problems and collapsed governance on Reconstruction's failure was pronounced, but, on balance, structural factors were indeterminate. Leaders, including President Johnson and President Ulysses S. Grant, played important roles, but their actions cannot fully explain the federal government's failure. Rather, flawed policies related to counterinsurgency, state building, and peacekeeping contributed most to this outcome. Reconstruction's architects failed to sustain local Republican collaborators, manage commitment problems related to peacekeeping forces, and overcome the problem of illegitimacy common to outside forces seen as occupiers. Perhaps most important, they could not sustain the will, and marshal associated troops and other resources, to suppress spoilers.

Reconstruction is poorly taught in most U.S. history classes, even though its lessons and impact reverberate throughout U.S. society today. Reconstruction's failure illustrates four important policy implications for ongoing conflicts. First, it suggests the dangers of half measures. The United States sought to

dramatically reshape the American South on the cheap, in terms of both troop levels and time. Second, when the U.S. government seeks to promote democracy in post-conflict societies, it must ensure the democratic rule of law, without which elections can become instruments of tyranny. Third, failed efforts to install democracy and rebuild governments can leave those who do the most to make things better the most vulnerable. White, and especially Black, Republican leaders in the South paid a heavy price for the failure of Reconstruction. These findings illustrate a fourth, even more important implication: Reconstruction demonstrates that a common policy recommendation—compromise with the losers after a civil war—is often fraught. Negotiations and compromise can foster peace, but they may do so at the price of social justice.

For U.S. scholars, using broader literatures to understand Reconstruction integrates this era as a potential case for the study of divided societies, occupation, and other challenges thought only to happen abroad. As such, this article seeks to be part of a wider scholarly effort to add events in the United States such as the slaughter of Native Americans and race relations to the broader comparative literature, rather than treating the United States as sui generis.

The article begins by presenting several hypotheses offered by historians and political scientists for why efforts to reshape government and society after civil wars fail, as happened in the case of Reconstruction. It focuses on three categories: structural, federal-level policy decisions, and policy decisions at the local level. The second section defines key terms, lays out my dependent variable, and makes the case for counterfactual analysis. The third section reviews the history of the Reconstruction period, focusing on the South's economic collapse, voting disputes, and especially white supremacist violence. The fourth section explains the failure of the federal government to suppress white supremacist violence, drawing on the theoretical factors identified in the first section to assess relevant issues. The fifth section speculates on possible alternative policies and how they might have affected the chances of Reconstruction's success. The article concludes with a discussion of the lessons of Reconstruction for understanding U.S. history, the study of post-conflict peacebuilding, and interventions in divided societies.

Possible Factors Explaining Failure

Scholars working on counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, peacekeeping, war termination, and related fields have hypothesized a number of factors that could influence government success in preventing or stopping violence after a

civil war and thus the ultimate success of any new political system imposed after a war ends. They ask, among other questions: How important is economic development? What is the role of peacekeepers? Do individual leaders have a significant impact on outcomes? How important is the strength of state institutions? How does prewar institutionalization and mobilization affect postwar outcomes? How do spoilers shape success or failure?

Some of these hypothesized factors are structural elements beyond the control of policymakers. Others stress the agency of those involved and the notion that different decisions on policy would have produced different results. Some decisions are made at the national (in the U.S. system, the federal) level, controlled by the president and Congress. Others are made at the subnational (in the U.S. system, the state or county) level, involving actors on the ground. Many are related to effective counterinsurgency policy, including the dangerous role of spoilers, troop-to-population ratios, and similar factors. In the case of Reconstruction, some of these structural factors and policies strengthened the rebels, whereas others inhibited effective government action. In practice, of course, the categories overlapped and, as is discussed later, shaped one another.

STRUCTURAL FACTORS

Structural factors can prevent counterinsurgents from succeeding. A state's geographic position, economic status, or other immutable factors (or at least those difficult to change in the short term) affect the likelihood, scope, and scale of violence. If structural problems are particularly difficult, counterinsurgents are doomed to failure, regardless of what the soldiers and leaders of the era do.

Some scholars stress the importance of the state's preexisting economic structure and overall levels of economic development in fostering democratization and a peaceful occupation.[11] Japan and Germany, though devastated and defeated in World War II, had high levels of industrialization and modernization, and both helped pay for their occupations over time.[12] These pay-

---

11. On economic development, see Michael W. Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, "International Peacebuilding: A Theoretical and Quantitative Analysis," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 94, No. 4 (December 2000), pp. 779–801, doi.org/10.2307/2586208. On democracy and the correlation with economic development after a civil war, see Virginia Page Fortna and Reyko Huang, "Democratization after Civil War: A Brush-Clearing Exercise," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (December 2012), pp. 801–808, doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2478.2012.00730.x.
12. Richard B. Finn, *Winners in Peace: MacArthur, Yoshida, and Postwar Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 37; and Carolyn Eisenberg, *Drawing the Line: The American Decision to Divide Germany, 1944–1949* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 89.

ments reduced the burden on the occupier. They also made it easier to restart both countries' economies and, in so doing, create stable governments that helped meet the goals of the occupations.[13] By this logic, economic problems in the defeated South would create an unstable environment and sour local citizens on their new governments, making violence and the failure of Reconstruction more likely.

After a civil war, the institutions of state power may be weak or nonexistent, particularly at the local level. Seth Jones, an expert in the study of terrorism, finds that countries with a high Islamic State and al-Qaida presence often appear at or near the bottom of government effectiveness rankings.[14] In the South, the lack of services, particularly law and order, would delegitimize the counterinsurgent-backed state governments and encourage the formation of armed groups. Without strong law and order, even small organizations could play the role of spoiler.[15]

How wars end also matters for the likelihood of postwar violence and the recurrence of civil war. Monica Toft argues that if one side wins decisively, as happened in the American Civil War, the eventual development of a democratic political system in the defeated territory is more likely because the winning side has stronger institutions.[16] By this logic, the North's wartime ability to collect taxes, direct manufacturing, and build and sustain its forces improved its ability to deploy troops, govern efficiently, and create conditions for quelling unrest and fostering democracy in the war's aftermath.

Another structural argument concerns prewar levels of mobilization and institutionalization. Potential rebels have technological and human resources as well as social capital that they can draw on as they foment unrest.[17] Slavery prevented social and political organization in the Black community before the

---

13. For a description of this thesis, see David M. Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards: Success and Failure in Military Occupation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 18.
14. Seth G. Jones, *Beyond Baghdadi: The Next Wave of Jihadist Violence* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 4, 2019), https://www.csis.org/analysis/beyond-baghdadi-next-wave-jihadist-violence.
15. Stephen John Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Fall 1997), pp. 5–53, doi.org/10.1162/isec.22.2.5; Kelly M. Greenhill and Solomon Major, "The Perils of Profiling: Civil War Spoilers and the Collapse of Intrastate Peace Accords," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Winter 2006/07), pp. 7–40, doi.org/10.1162/isec.2007.31.3.7; and Andrew Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, "Sabotaging the Peace: The Politics of Extremist Violence," *International Organization*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (Spring 2002), pp. 263–296, doi.org/10.1162/0020818023 20005487.
16. Monica Duffy Toft, "Ending Civil Wars: A Case for Rebel Victory?" *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Spring 2010), pp. 7–36, doi.org/10.1162/isec.2010.34.4.7.
17. Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014), pp. 17–56.

Civil War. Conversely, the white population was well organized. The South had an extensive state and local government structure, and society had been mobilized during the Civil War to fight for secession. Southern states also had in place a system of patrols to stop runaway slaves and deserters, which, in the postwar era, facilitated the creation of armed bands that roamed the countryside.[18] In addition, the well-established structures of state and local government challenged the ability of the U.S. Army and others to impose a new system.[19] If these resources are significant, rebels can mobilize for both violence and politics, enabling them to resist government authority more effectively.

Sustaining an occupation, tolerating casualties from any resistance, and otherwise enduring in the face of adversity all require political will at home, an amorphous but important concept that is often linked to the overall level of strategic interest.[20] Political will is likely to be stronger if the area has significant strategic or political value, such as the core territory of a country. By this logic, the U.S. government was more likely to go the distance to quell violence in the South after the Civil War.

POLICY FACTORS: FEDERAL LEVEL

National-level policy decisions determine and shape the counterinsurgent's overall goals, the level of resources, how troops and civilian authority are employed, and the conditions under which troop deployments end. The extended deployment of troops to the South and attempts to transform the former Confederacy's political system and society required numerous consequential decisions at the national level.

The decisionmakers themselves deserve scrutiny. Leaders can set the direction of policy, inspire the public to make sacrifices, help create institutions and channel resources, and otherwise play critical roles. The contrast in the quality of federal leadership is stark in the years that followed the Civil War.[21]

---

18. Elaine Frantz Parsons, *Ku-Klux: The Birth of the Klan during Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), p. 4.
19. John Gerring et al., "An Institutional Theory of Direct and Indirect Rule," *World Politics*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (July 2011), pp. 377–433, doi.org/10.1017/S0043887111000104.
20. Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian, eds., *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare* (Oxford: Osprey, 2011), p. 17.
21. Elizabeth N. Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011); Daniel L. Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Spring 2001), pp. 107–146, doi.org/10.1162/01622880151091916; and Margaret G. Hermann et al., "Who Leads Matters: The Effects of Powerful Individuals," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Summer 2001), pp. 83–131, doi.org/10.1111/1521-9488.00235.

Abraham Lincoln, one of the United States' greatest presidents, was assassinated as the war was ending, whereas Andrew Johnson, one of the country's worst presidents, took office at a critical time for the postwar order. "Andrew Johnson proved to be utterly the wrong man for the job," noted one Reconstruction historian.[22] By this logic, Johnson's many poor leadership qualities and hostility to the goals of Reconstruction made it less likely to succeed. Congress was an important player in Reconstruction, however, as was General, then President, Ulysses S. Grant. Their dedication and talents, among other factors, are also part of Reconstruction's story.

To meet the likely challenges, the counterinsurgent political and military leadership must devise clear goals and ensure that the military effort follows these political objectives. French counterinsurgency scholar and former soldier David Galula approvingly cites Mao Zedong to claim that counterinsurgency is 80 percent political.[23] Without an integrated effort, what force is used will not be used optimally, will not secure political goals such as establishing legitimacy for the new political system, and will be more likely to spur a backlash.[24]

Successful counterinsurgencies often require large numbers of troops. Troop numbers varied during Reconstruction, but they declined considerably as Reconstruction went on, despite high levels of violence. In October 1868, there were 17,657 troops in the South; a year later, this number had fallen to 11,237. By 1877, the number of troops in the South with a mission related to Reconstruction was less than 5,000.[25] Scholars of modern stability operations, however, suggest a troop-to-population ratio of 20 per 1,000 people, which, for the American South, would have been a troop level of 180,000, based on the population of the time.[26] Some research suggests that the number can be lower—just 2.8 per 1,000 people or 25,000 troops—once the violence is properly suppressed. Historian William Alan Blair puts the number at around

---

22. Douglas R. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 18.
23. David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2006 [1964]), p. 63.
24. David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, Field Manual No. 3-24, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5 (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, June 2014), pp. 1-8–1-10, paras. 1-27–1-33, https://fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf (henceforth cited as *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*).
25. Mark L. Bradley, *The Army and Reconstruction, 1865–1877* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2015), p. 58; and Gregory P. Downs and Scott Nesbit, "Mapping Occupation: Force, Freedom, and the Army in Reconstruction," American Council of Learned Societies, University of Georgia, March 2015, http://mappingoccupation.org/map/index.html.
26. James T. Quinlivan, "Force Requirements in Stability Operations," *Parameters*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Winter 1995), pp. 59–69, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol25/iss1/30.

20,000 soldiers being necessary for the duration of Reconstruction.[27] Violence will snowball, however, if there are insufficient troops.[28]

In addition to protecting the population, someone must provide services, administer justice, and distribute aid. In Iraq and Afghanistan, this was the "build" part of a three-stage "clear, hold, build" counterinsurgency strategy and the stage that proved the most difficult.[29] Without strong civilian and military capacity, would-be insurgents in the South would find it easier to mobilize supporters and terrorize the population, and they could do so with smaller numbers and fewer risks to themselves. In addition, the government would be less able to provide services and win over the population.

Although, ideally, peace and governance would be restored quickly after a civil war, the counterinsurgent power must prepare for a long struggle.[30] A RAND study found that modern insurgencies last approximately a decade on average.[31] A long troop presence creates its own problems, however. David Edelstein argues that successful military occupations are lengthy, but such long occupations create resentment among the population.[32] Another scholar of occupations found that Americans have "attention deficit disorder" when it comes to occupation, and that they start to become less supportive of a troop presence as the reasons for the initial occupation fade and casualties and costs mount.[33] The lack of an enduring presence enables insurgents to simply wait out government forces, using limited violence to keep institutions from coalescing and then using greater levels of violence as a troop presence draws down.

---

27. William Alan Blair, "The Use of Military Force to Protect the Gains of Reconstruction," *Civil War History*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (December 2005), p. 397, doi.org/10.1353/cwh.2005.0055.

28. Steven M. Goode, "A Historical Basis for Force Requirements in Counterinsurgency," *Parameters*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Winter 2009–10), pp. 45–57, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol39/iss4/9.

29. Joel D. Rayburn and Frank K. Sobchak, eds., *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, Vol. 1: *Invasion, Insurgency, Civil War, 2003–2006* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2019); Joel D. Rayburn and Frank K. Sobchak, eds., *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, Vol. 2: *Surge and Withdrawal, 2007–2011* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute and United States Army War College Press, January 2019); and Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010). For a critique of "clear-hold-build," see David H. Ucko, "The Five Fallacies of Clear-Hold-Build: Counter-Insurgency, Governance, and Development at the Local Level," *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 158, No. 3 (2013), pp. 54–61, doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2013.807586.

30. *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, p. 1-6, para. 1-18.

31. Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2010), https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG965.html.

32. Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards*.

33. Christopher Coyne, "Deconstructing Reconstruction: The Overlooked Challenges of Military Occupation," *Economics of Peace and Security Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2007), pp. 94–100, doi.org/10.15355/epsj.2.2.94.

The design of any withdrawal is also important, particularly if local institutions remain weak and vulnerable. When ending its troop presence, the outside power must either be sure of success or have some degree of conditionality that serves as a deterrent for future violence and preserves any gains made. Without such credible conditionality, local spoilers can simply say yes at the negotiating table and then renege on their promises after forces are withdrawn. In practice, this situation often results in a commitment problem, with peacekeepers unsure if any agreement will hold once troops are gone.[34]

POLICY FACTORS: LOCAL LEVEL

Governance works best when it has local support, which requires a government that enjoys at least some legitimacy. Establishing legitimacy, however, is difficult, as the leaders imposed by outside military forces often represent a new source of grievance.[35] If the local government cannot achieve legitimacy, insurgents will be better able to recruit, the government will not win over the population to provide information, and resulting violence will further delegitimize the government.

Part of gaining legitimacy is establishing a functioning government that can provide services, but counterinsurgents must be able to recruit competent local supporters (often referred to as collaborators).[36] In Vietnam, Algeria, and other countries, insurgents regularly targeted locals who worked with the government and tried to create shadow governments of their own.[37] When the national government can recruit local supporters, the government gains additional troops and intelligence, and individuals are willing to fight harder to defend the new institutions. When the government lacks significant numbers of local collaborators, the population is more likely to support the insurgents,

34. James D. Fearon, "Commitment Problems and the Spread of Ethnic Conflict," in David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, eds., *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion, and Escalation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 107–126; and Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes."

35. Benjamin Denison, *The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: The Failure of Regime-Change Operations*, Policy Analysis, No. 883 (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, January 6, 2020), https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/2020-01/PA-883-updated.pdf?queryID=bc75a6bbfb3c146060bb8b9335262938.

36. Paul K. MacDonald, "'Retribution Must Succeed Rebellion': The Colonial Origins of Counterinsurgency Failure," *International Organization*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (April 2013), pp. 253–286, doi.org/10.1017/S0020818313000027.

37. Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007); Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954–1962*, rev. ed. (London: Papermac, 1987); and Central Intelligence Agency, "Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency," 1986, https://fas.org/irp/cia/product/insurgency.pdf.

providing them with manpower and intelligence, and will use its political voice against the new institutions.[38]

Spoilers often emerge to prevent peace and disrupt the new order. Some spoilers are well armed or can easily draw on weapons and the ranks of former soldiers.[39] The zealotry of spoilers varies, but Stephen Stedman shows that even relatively small groups of individuals can undo a settlement.[40] Terrorists regularly engage in spoiling to undermine a peace deal or other negotiations, and insurgents can do so to weaken support for a new political system.[41] The failure to suppress spoilers can further delegitimize a government.

Definitions, Debates, and Counterfactual Analysis

To assess which of the key structural and policy factors above mattered most in explaining Reconstruction's failure, I employ the following methodology. First, I define counterinsurgency and terrorism to demonstrate that these terms fit the political violence of the Reconstruction era. Second, I describe the path-dependency and counterfactual analysis approach that I use to determine which of the factors are most responsible for Reconstruction's failure.

COUNTERINSURGENCY AND TERRORISM

Paul Staniland defines an insurgency as "a group of individuals claiming to be a collective organization that uses a name to designate itself, is made up of formal structures of command and control, and intends to seize power using violence."[42] This definition matches much of the violence of the Reconstruction era, where organized but irregular military forces and illegal organizations with names such as the Red Shirts and the KKK sought to displace Republican-led governments in the South and reestablish white control over the region and the Black population. Counterinsurgency can be defined simply as fighting an insurgency, but more broadly as involving efforts to create or restore government legitimacy, secure the population, and otherwise establish

---

38. Daniel Branch and Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Revisiting Counterinsurgency," *Politics & Society*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (March 2010), pp. 5–7, doi.org/10.1177/0032329209357880.
39. Robert Muggah and Chris O'Donnell, "Next Generation Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration," *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, Vol. 4, No.1 (2015), doi.org/10.5334/sta.fs.
40. Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes."
41. Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Summer 2006), pp. 49–80, doi.org/10.1162/isec.2006.31.1.49.
42. Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion*, p. 5.

the conditions that make it hard for insurgents to draw on popular support while building political support for the counterinsurgent side.[43]

Insurgents often use terrorism to help achieve their objectives. Bruce Hoffman defines terrorism as political violence carried out by a substate group or a set of networked individuals that is intended to create a broader psychological effect.[44] As the empirical review below indicates, substate groups such as the KKK sought to instill a broader fear that would intimidate the Black community and white Republicans and discourage Black voters and political activities.

Successful Reconstruction, my dependent variable, is a form of post-conflict peacebuilding that stresses ensuring human dignity and justice as well as meeting economic needs after a conflict.[45] What constitutes success for Reconstruction is historically contested. Some political leaders argued, at the time, that success meant the abolition of slavery, the recognition by Southern states that federal authority was supreme, and the restoration of the Union.[46] As historian Mark Summers contends, "To most Americans in 1865, 'The Reconstruction of the Union' was most important"—not ensuring racial equity.[47] Nor did the Civil War recur, another achievement given that more than 20 percent of civil wars flare up again within four years.[48] Others might argue that Reconstruction succeeded as a result of the tremendous political mobilization and economic and social gains of the Black community during this period; and indeed some gains in education, property ownership, and leisure time all lasted, despite enduring systemic inequality in these areas when compared with its white neighbors.

I take a more expansive (and more modern) view of success, using it to match the agenda of the Radical Republicans who dominated Congress after 1866. Success is defined as ensuring the conditions for social, political, and economic equality in the former Confederacy and building a true democracy that

---

43. For a discussion of many aspects of counterinsurgency, see *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*.

44. Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 1–44.

45. Wendy Lambourne, "Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: Meeting Human Needs for Justice and Reconciliation," *Journal of Peace, Conflict, and Development*, No. 4 (April 2004), pp. 1–24, https://www.bradford.ac.uk/library/find-materials/journal-of-peace-conflict-and-development/PostConflictPeacebuilding.pdf; and Neclâ Tschirgi, *Post-Conflict Peacebuilding Revisited: Achievements, Limitations, Challenges* (New York: International Peace Academy, 2004).

46. Blair, "The Use of Military Force to Protect the Gains of Reconstruction," p. 388.

47. Mark Wahlgren Summers, *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A New History of Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), p. 3.

48. Astri Suhkre and Ingrid Samset, "What's in a Figure? Estimating Recurrence of Civil War," *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2007), pp. 195–203, doi.org/10.1080/13533310601150776.

involved not only elections but also the democratic rule of law. These ambitious goals required preventing widescale violence against the Black community and its white supporters. Stopping violence, however, was necessary but not sufficient: social justice was necessary, too.[49] Given the openly racist agenda of the Democratic Party in the South at this time, success also required preserving Republican rule.

PATH DEPENDENCY AND COUNTERFACTUALS

To explain the failure of Reconstruction, I process trace different causal narratives, using both path dependence and counterfactuals in my analysis.[50] As Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman argue, case studies can be valuable for understanding path dependence, as they enable detailed analysis of historical events in ways that are suitable for rare cases and allow for the study of interaction effects, feedback loops, equifinality, and sequencing.[51] If path dependency is in effect, later events, such as the spread of violence, are highly sensitive to previous decisions; solutions that might have worked at the initial stage are less viable over time.[52]

Counterfactuals help scholars assess causal hypotheses by making "claims about events that did not actually occur."[53] They are valuable when large-N or even comparative casework is difficult. Counterfactuals are particularly useful when the number of observations of a particular case is low and multiple variables are in play.[54] It is difficult to make definitive claims from counterfactual analysis, however, even when there is a strong understanding of all the potential causal mechanisms in the system.[55] Consequently, my findings are suggestive, not conclusive, particularly when applied to other cases.

49. Guillermo O'Donnell, "The Quality of Democracy: Why the Rule of Law Matters," *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 15, No. 4 (October 2004), pp. 32–46, doi.org/10.1353/jod.2004.0076; Fortna and Huang, "Democratization after Civil War," pp. 801–808; Ruti G. Teitel, *Transitional Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Mohammed Abu-Nimer, ed., *Reconciliation, Justice, and Coexistence: Theory and Practice* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington, 2001).
50. James D. Fearon, "Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science," *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (January 1991), pp. 169–195, doi.org/10.2307/2010470; and Philip E. Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, eds., *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics: Logical, Methodological, and Psychological Perspectives* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).
51. Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, "Complex Causal Relations and Case Study Methods: The Example of Path Dependence," *Political Analysis*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Summer 2006), pp. 250–267, doi.org/10.1093/pan/mpj020.
52. Paul Pierson, "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 94, No. 2 (June 2000), p. 263, doi.org/10.2307/2586011.
53. Fearon, "Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science," p. 169.
54. Ibid., pp. 179–186.
55. A.P. Dawid, "Causal Inference without Counterfactuals," *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, Vol. 95, No. 450 (June 2000), p. 423, doi.org/10.1080/01621459.2000.10474210.

Analysis using path dependence and counterfactual analysis can involve "critical junctures." Giovanni Capoccia and Daniel Kelemen argue that critical junctures occur when there is a relatively short period of time in which actors are less constrained by structure and have a wider range of choices than usual, and the consequences of their decisions are more momentous, usually because of path dependence. Contingency, in such cases, is greatly heightened.[56]

In the next section, I focus on three aspects of path-dependent and counterfactual analysis: sequencing, critical junctures, and alternative policy choices. The sequence of events during Reconstruction was critical, as early failures to stop violence allowed it to grow more dangerous in subsequent years. I also contend that the first years of Reconstruction, the passage of the Enforcement Acts in 1870 and 1871, and the 1877 withdrawal of troops from Southern states were critical junctures with profound consequences for the failure of Reconstruction. Finally, I explore several "what if" questions to illustrate the relative importance of different policy choices.

The Troubled History of Reconstruction

Reconstruction was one of the most tumultuous periods in U.S. history, replete with astounding political progress for the formerly enslaved, a heretofore unprecedented federal government role in peacetime, and horrific violence. This section details several of the most important events of this period, including passage of the Reconstruction Acts and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution. Subsections examine the economic collapse in the South, progress in voting by the formerly enslaved, violence by white supremacist groups and the federal government response, and the events that soured Northern white public opinion on Reconstruction and led to its end.

A SHORT OVERVIEW OF RECONSTRUCTION

After the Civil War ended and Lincoln was assassinated in 1865, President Johnson, a former slaveholder himself, declared that the war's purpose had been fulfilled because it restored national unity and, with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment at the end of 1865, abolished slavery. He sought to re-admit Southern states to the Union on lenient terms that preserved white supremacy. At least some Southerners had accepted their defeat, including such

---

56. Giovanni Capoccia and R. Daniel Kelemen, "The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism," *World Politics*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (April 2007), pp. 348, 361–362, doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100020852.

notables as Confederate Lt. Gen. James Longstreet.[57] Most Radical Republicans sought more expansive goals.

In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, former Confederates dominated state governments and were chosen to represent their states in Congress. Those sent to Washington included Alexander Stephens, the vice president of the Confederacy, along with dozens of former Confederate congressmen and military officers.[58] To many Northerners, the South appeared unrepentant. In 1865 and 1866, Southern states enacted the so-called Black Codes, which aimed to ensure racial control in the absence of slavery. The specifics varied by state, but they included measures that denied Black residents the vote and other rights, including sitting on juries judging white people, owning firearms, and exercising the right to reject contracts.[59] Some states refused to recognize the Thirteenth Amendment officially (Mississippi would not ratify it until 1995).[60] It appeared that the antebellum order would quickly resume in the South, with the same leaders and similar political and social policies that ensured Black subordination—albeit with the important exception of slavery.

Black citizens organized quickly and sought to be treated equally, but the white Southerner backlash was immediate. In Memphis, Black Army soldiers, the primary force in the city, had publicly turned in their weapons on May 1, 1866, prompting white civilians and police to believe that they could act with impunity. Over the next three days, rioters killed 48 Black residents, raped Black women, and burned churches, homes, and schools.[61] Another massacre in New Orleans had a similar death toll.

These massacres and outrage over the Black Codes put Black rights on the national political agenda. As scholar and civil rights leader W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, "With perplexed and laggard steps, the United States government followed in the footstep of the Black slave."[62] For their part, Southern pro-Union

---

57. See William Garrett Piston, *Lee's Tarnished Lieutenant: James Longstreet and His Place in Southern History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013).
58. William Loren Katz, *The Invisible Empire: The Ku Klux Klan Impact on History* (Washington, D.C.: Open Hand, 1986), p. 17.
59. See, for example, Edward McPherson, "Mississippi Black Code, 1865," in *The Political History of the United States of America during the Period Known as Reconstruction* (Washington, D.C.: Philp and Solomon, 1871), pp. 80–82, reprinted in the *American Yawp Reader*, http://www.americanyawp.com/reader/reconstruction/mississippi-black-code-1865/.
60. Stephanie Condon, "After 148 Years, Mississippi Finally Ratifies 13th Amendment, Which Banned Slavery," *CBS News*, February 18, 2013, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/after-148-years-mississippi-finally-ratifies-13th-amendment-which-banned-slavery/.
61. Hannah Rosen, *Terror in the Heart of Freedom: Citizenship, Sexual Violence, and the Meaning of Race in the Postemancipation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
62. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Free Press, 1998), p. 77.

leaders installed by the U.S. Army realized that they could beat former rebels in elections only if Black citizens voted. The choice was "salvation at the hands of the negro or destruction at the hand of the rebels," according to one Republican newspaper.[63]

In the 1866 elections, Radical Republicans gained a two-thirds majority in both houses of Congress and refused to seat representatives from the old order. This supermajority also enabled them to override President Johnson's veto; support institutions to help the formerly enslaved; and pass the Fourteenth Amendment, guaranteeing rights to all citizens regardless of color.

Reconstruction is often seen as beginning in 1867, when Congress passed the three Reconstruction Acts (the fourth would be passed in 1868, as would the Fourteenth Amendment) over President Johnson's veto.[64] The Acts removed civilian governments in the South, suspending the state constitutions and putting the former Confederacy (except for Tennessee) under the rule of the Army in five military districts. The Acts required state governments to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment. The Army could replace civil officials, reject local courts, overturn laws, close newspapers, and otherwise held immense power that was unprecedented in U.S. history and went against strong U.S. traditions of civilian rule and limited government.[65]

There is no single charter or speech that lays out the goals of Reconstruction, and the priorities varied by leader and time period. For the congressional architects of the Reconstruction Acts, however, the goals were ambitious and, by the standards of the South before the war, revolutionary: Black equality before the law, unfettered Black suffrage, a modicum of Black economic independence, and Black representation in government.[66]

Reconstruction is often considered to have ended a decade later, with the "Compromise of 1877." After the close and disputed 1876 election, Republican Rutherford Hayes was accepted as president in exchange for agreeing to withdraw federal troops from the South. Following the Compromise, Republican political influence in the South dwindled.

As table 1 indicates, the demographic situation in Southern states during Reconstruction varied. In Mississippi, Louisiana, and South Carolina, newly

---

63. Quoted in Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 303.
64. When Reconstruction begins and ends is disputed, with some historians seeing it as a continuation of the Civil War, while others portray it as going beyond 1877, well into the early nineteenth century. See Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller, eds., *The Great Task Remaining before Us: Reconstruction as America's Continuing Civil War* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).
65. Gregory P. Downs, *After Appomattox: Military Occupation and the Ends of War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 14.
66. Foner, *Reconstruction*, pp. 281–411.

Table 1. Black American Population Figures and State-Level Political Results during Reconstruction

State	Percentage of Black Americans in 1870	Went Democratic (presidential)	Went Democratic (governor)
Tennessee*	26.41	1876	1870
Arkansas	25.22	1876	1874
North Carolina	36.56	1876	1877
Alabama	47.69	1876	1870
Florida	48.38	1880	1876
Louisiana	50.10	1880	1877
South Carolina	58.93	1880	1876
Virginia	41.86	1876	1874
Mississippi	53.65	1876	1876
Georgia	46.04	1876	1872
Texas	30.95	1876	1866
Kentucky*	16.82	1876	1859

SOURCES: On percentages of Black Americans in 1870, see Francis A. Walker, *1870 Census*: Vol. 1: *The Statistics of the Population of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872), p. xvii, https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1872/dec/1870a .html. On Democratic (presidential) results, see "United States Presidential Election of 1876," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified October 31, 2019, https://www.britannica .com/event/United-States-presidential-election-of-1876; and John M. Cunningham, "United States Presidential Election of 1880," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified October 26, 2019, https://www.britannica.com/event/United-States-presidential-election-of-1880. On Democratic governors in order of states on the chart, see Elbert Watson and David R. Sowell, "Brown, John Calvin (1827–1889) Papers, 1871–1875," GP 23, 2007, Tennessee State Library and Archives, https://sos-tn-gov-files.tnsosfiles.com/forms/GOVERNOR _JOHN_CALVIN_BROWN_PAPERS_1871-1875.pdf; Beverly Watkins, "Augustus Hill Garland (1832–1899)," *CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, last modified September 11, 2020, https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/augustus-hill-garland-106/; "Zebulon Baird Vance, 13 May 1830–14 Apr. 1894," in William S. Powell, ed., *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), *Documenting the American South*, https://docsouth.unc.edu/browse/bios/pn0001702_bio.html; Michael W. Fitzgerald, "Robert Burns Lindsay (1870–72)," *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, last modified September 26, 2016, http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1445; "George Franklin Drew," Florida Department of State, https://dos.myflorida.com/florida-facts/florida-history/ florida-governors/george-franklin-drew/; "Francis Redding Tillou Nicholls 1877–1880, 1888–1892," Louisiana Department of State, https://www.sos.la.gov/HistoricalResources/ AboutLouisiana/Louisiana Governors1877-Present/Pages/FrancisT Nicholls.aspx; "Wade Hampton," *History.com*, last modified August 21, 2018, https://www.history.com/topics/ american-civil-war/wade-hampton; John M. Coski, "James Lawson Kemper (1823–1895)," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, last modified March 23, 2021, https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/ kemper_james _lawson_1823-1895; David G. Sansing, "John Marshall Stone: Thirty-first and Thirty-third Governor of Mississippi: 1876–1882; 1890–1896," *Mississippi History Now*, December 2003, http://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/articles/265/index.php?s=extra &id=133; Robert Sobel and John Raimo, eds., "Gov. James Milton Smith," in *Biographical Directory of Governors of the United States, 1789–1978*, Vol. 1 (Westport, Conn.: Meckler, 1978), *National Governors Association*, https://www.nga.org/governor/james-milton-smith/; David Minor, "Throckmorton, James Webb (1825–1894)," *Texas State Historical Association*, last modified June 15, 2010, https://tshaonline.org/handbook/online/ articles/fth36; and Sanders, "Governor Beriah Magoffin," *Kentucky Historical Society*, https://explorekyhistory.ky.gov/items/show/37.

*Figures for Kentucky and Tennessee are given, but they were not part of Reconstruction, as they had met the conditions before the Reconstruction Acts were passed.

freed slaves were a majority, whereas in other states, they were a significant minority. The situation often ranged widely within states, with certain counties or parishes enjoying overwhelming Black majorities—an important factor at a time when local governance had far more relative power than it does today. Table 1 also indicates the pace of political change. By 1870, Democrats had "redeemed" (their term for returning the state to white rule) Alabama, Tennessee, and Texas. In 1874, Arkansas and Virginia joined the list of Democrat-run states, and by 1877, the entire South had Democratic governors.

ECONOMIC AND GOVERNANCE COLLAPSE IN THE SOUTH

When Reconstruction began, the South was economically devastated. One-fifth of white Southerners of military age, the core of the labor force, had died in the war, and even more had been wounded. Machinery and work animals also had been lost in the war. In addition, emancipation raised the question of who would harvest the crops, which in the past had depended on slave labor.[67] By 1868, however, the plantation economy had begun to stabilize, and the planter class again began to prosper, but many poorer white Southerners faced competition from Black labor.[68]

As dire as the economic situation was for the old order, it was even worse for the newly freed Black population. Slavery, with its rape, brutality, and family separations, had shattered much of the community's social capital, and land, animals, and equipment were all in the hands of white Southerners.[69] In response, Congress created the federal Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (the "Freedmen's Bureau") to protect the rights of the formerly enslaved, administer justice, and help them negotiate labor contracts and lease lands.

Yet, the racial power imbalance was profound. White Southerners conspired to prevent the formerly enslaved from buying land or starting businesses.[70] In addition, Democratic newspapers had far more circulation and influence than the new pro-Republican ones (whose editors and presses were also often targeted for violence), and they dispensed a steady stream of vitriol against the Radicals, at times even publicizing orders for groups such as the KKK.[71] Freed-

---

67. Ibid., pp. 125–129.
68. Michael W. Fitzgerald, "Ex-Slaveholders and the Ku Klux Klan: Exploring the Motivations of Terrorist Violence," in Bruce E. Baker and Brian Kelly, eds., *After Slavery: Race, Labor, and Citizenship in the Reconstruction South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2013), p. 153.
69. For a discussion of social capital, see Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).
70. Trelease, *White Terror*, p. xvii; and Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 106.
71. For a collection of arguments for the Radical agenda that extensively quotes hostile press, see

men's Bureau officials helped the Black community, but not enough to right the power imbalance. In the process, the Freedmen's Bureau alarmed white Southerners and disappointed Black citizens.[72]

In addition to economic duress, local government had collapsed in much of the former Confederacy, with criminal activity becoming increasingly common. The Klan and similar organizations often saw themselves as guardians of the law, opposing the assumed criminality of the formerly enslaved and organizing for what they saw as a possible race war. Indeed, by killing Black people, they believed they were preventing a race war through preemption and intimidation.[73]

VOTING UNDER RECONSTRUCTION
The right to vote was a political weapon used by both sides. Although the Black community made impressive progress on political participation, voting, by itself, would not be enough to preserve the rights of this community in the face of extreme violence.

The fate of Black voting rights was uncertain for several years before the 1870 passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, which barred laws that prevented voting "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Lincoln had made several conflicting statements about future Black rights, such as proposing giving the vote only to Black soldiers and "the very intelligent."[74] Johnson, for his part, agreed that "a loyal negro is more worthy than a disloyal white man" and favored allowing relatively wealthy and literate Black men to vote.[75] A strong racist, he did not want to enforce Black equality at the federal level. He also campaigned against the Fourteenth Amendment and promised that lands confiscated by the Freedmen's Bureau would be returned to their Confederate owners.[76]

After Congress rejected the initial election results in 1865 and 1866, which returned the slave-holding elite to power, the Republican Party won nearly every Southern state. During the first few years of Reconstruction, both sides sought to use voting restrictions to ensure power, and voting rights shifted regularly. Republicans feared they would lose elections if all ex-Confederates

"Is the South Ready for Restoration?" 1866, African American Pamphlet Collection, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/ca30000307/.
72. Parsons, *Ku-Klux*, p. 2.
73. Trelease, *White Terror*, pp. 7–17; and Michael Fellman, *In the Name of God and Country: Reconsidering Terrorism in American History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 114.
74. For a discussion of Lincoln's views and how they evolved, see Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), pp. 290–322.
75. Quoted in Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 180.
76. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, p. 216.

could vote and used fraud to disqualify many voters.[77] In many Confederate states, military authorities initially banned thousands or even tens of thousands of former Confederates from voting or holding office—a precedent for de-Nazification, de-Talibanization, and de-Baathification in subsequent U.S. occupations overseas. In Tennessee, 80,000 ex-Confederates were proscribed from voting in 1865.[78]

Conversely, after the Civil War ended, it was by no means obvious even to Northerners what the rights of the formerly enslaved should be. In the loyal border state of Maryland, Black citizens were not allowed to vote, and postwar efforts to extend the franchise to Black men initially failed in Connecticut, Minnesota, and Ohio, among other states. Because the Military Reconstruction Act of 1867 mandated that Black residents in areas under military rule in the South could vote, the election of 1868 would see many Black men participating in elections throughout the South but not in much of the North.[79]

Once Black Southerners won the right to vote, they often wielded considerable influence. Ulysses S. Grant won the election of 1868 by 300,000 votes—the 400,000 votes by recently freed slaves helped propel him to the presidency.[80] Because former Confederates were initially proscribed from political participation in many states, the influence of the formerly enslaved was even greater.

Despite the many restrictions, threats of violence, and general confusion, initial progress in Black political participation was impressive, even astounding. Newly freed slaves embraced opportunities to vote; join "Union Leagues" (i.e., Republican-affiliated clubs that sought to mobilize Black voters); acquire arms and land; and to otherwise enjoy the benefits of freedom.[81] The number of Black civil-society organizations, ranging from burial societies to debating clubs, skyrocketed, with Black churches playing a particularly important role.[82] In Mississippi, almost 80 percent of eligible Black men voted in the summer elections of 1868.[83]

In addition to political power, the Black community enjoyed more economic

---

77. Jon Grinspan, "How to Steal an Election," *New York Times*, October 24, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/24/opinion/sunday/stealing-elections.html; and James Alex Baggett, *The Scalawags: Southern Dissenters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004).
78. F. Wayne Binning, "The Tennessee Republicans in Decline, 1869–1876: Part I," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Winter 1980), pp. 471–484, https://www.jstor.org/stable/42626129.
79. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, p. 241.
80. Ibid.
81. Lou Falkner Williams, *The Great South Carolina Ku Klux Klan Trials, 1871–1872* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), p. 21.
82. Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 95.
83. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, p. 262.

influence and sought greater social status. Black laborers often sought to leave the farms where they had once toiled or to own land themselves, and many bargained over their wages, outraging planters.[84] The formerly enslaved exulted in their freedom. They wanted to be addressed as Mister or Missus, acquired guns and liquor, and refused to yield to white people on sidewalks. White Southerners complained that they were not properly servile. The resulting "insults" were a common spur to violence.[85]

Before 1867, no Black American had ever held elected office at the federal level. From 1869 to 1877, there would be two Black U.S. senators, fifteen congressmen, and more than six hundred state legislators—slightly less than 20 percent of Southern political offices in all. Hundreds more held local positions, which were particularly important at a time when government power was highly decentralized. Black South Carolinians, almost 60 percent of the state's population, held a majority in the lower house.[86] Black representation at the national level peaked in 1875, with eight members of Congress representing six different states.[87]

VIOLENCE AND MILITARY RULE

Violence was common throughout Reconstruction. White supremacist groups such as the Klan emerged throughout the South and, through the use and threat of force, intimidated or prevented Black people from voting and paved the way for Democrats opposed to Black equality to gain power.

At its founding in Tennessee after the war, the KKK was initially dedicated as much to amusement (masquerading was popular at the time) as to violence. By 1867, the movement spread and had grown more unified, and for several years, Confederate war hero Lt. Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest became its commander in Tennessee. Even with Forrest's leadership, the KKK is best thought of as a like-minded collection of local groups that initiated most of their violence without informing state or even county Klan leaders. Existing like-minded local groups also took its name, though, in some cases, they preserved their original ones, such as the Red Shirts, the Knights of the White Camelia in Louisiana, the Native Sons of the South, or the Knights of the Rising Sun

---

84. Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 132.
85. Trelease, *White Terror*, p. 11; and Foner, *Reconstruction*, pp. 79, 120.
86. Eric Foner, "South Carolina's Black Elected Officials during Reconstruction," in James Lowell Underwood and W. Lewis Burke Jr., eds., *At Freedom's Door: African American Founding Fathers and Lawyers in Reconstruction South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2021), pp. 166–176.
87. Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 538; and Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, p. 267.

in Texas.[88] Their primary purpose was political change, not murder. As with most terrorism, the psychological effect of their violence was great. "The Ku Klux terror colored nearly every aspect of Southern life and politics, often far beyond the immediate range of terrorist activity," argued one historian.[89]

Such groups were well armed and, given their military service, well trained. As Confederate armies lost on the battlefield in the war's final year, many of the surviving soldiers simply abandoned their units and walked home, taking their rifles with them—weaponry that would give them an advantage in several confrontations with more lightly armed Black residents.

Racial violence was popular among white Southerners. As the historian Allen Trelease contends, KKK participation "was also a patriotic venture which, like military service in wartime, often had the esteem and support of public opinion."[90] Often these groups drew on the majority of the white male population in their areas of operation.[91] Thus, the white supremacist groups had plenty of recruits, and the local white population would not willingly inform on their activities.

Although violence occurred for many reasons, it often spiked before elections, both state and federal.[92] Before the 1875 state elections, Democrats in Mississippi vowed to win "the election peaceably if we can, forcibly if we must."[93] In Alabama, attacks spiked before the 1868 presidential election and plummeted immediately afterward. They soared again before the August 1869 congressional elections and then dropped off.[94] Violence was particularly pronounced in parts of states where the racial balance was roughly equal, meaning that small shifts in voting rates could tip the election.[95] So-called night riding was common, when KKK members would fire into Republican and Black leaders' homes or invade them with no warning in middle of the night, demanding that they stop supporting Republican candidates and cease political organizing. To avoid becoming victims of violence, thousands of Black residents and pro-Reconstruction white Southerners slept in the woods

---

88. Trelease, *White Terror*, pp. xlv, 4–52; and Parsons, *Ku-Klux*, p. 25.
89. Trelease, *White Terror*, p. xii.
90. Ibid., p. 52.
91. Lorraine Boissoneault, "The Deadliest Massacre in Reconstruction-Era Louisiana Happened 150 Years Ago," *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 28, 2018, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/story-deadliest-massacre-reconstruction-era-louisiana-180970420/.
92. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, p. 292.
93. Quoted in ibid., p. 296.
94. Ibid.; and Jonathan M. Bryant, "Ku Klux Klan in the Reconstruction Era," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, August 11, 2020, https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/ku-klux-klan-reconstruction-era.
95. Williams, *The Great South Carolina Ku Klux Klan Trials*, p. 15.

rather than at home.[96] On election day, the KKK and other white supremacist groups would try to deny Black voters access to the polls or force them to vote Democratic.[97]

Republican politicians, especially Black ones, and community leaders risked the most. Of the hundreds of Black leaders who participated in constitutional conventions in the 1867–68 period, one in ten would become a victim of violence. Some activists would be tortured to death, their mutilated bodies dumped in public areas to send a message to other Republicans.[98] Republicans could not campaign, or even vote, in Alabama, Florida, and Georgia when Klan activity soared.[99] Much of the violence focused on Republican Party officials responsible for distributing ballots, encouraging voters to go to the polls, and guarding ballot boxes: killing or intimidating these officials could swing close elections.[100]

White supremacist groups targeted anyone suspected of Republican activism. One military officer reported that the goals of these groups was "to disarm, rob, and in many cases murder Union men and negroes" and "to intimidate every one who knows anything of the organization but will not join it."[101] Group activities included beating individuals, placing coffins on doorsteps of enemies as a warning, and otherwise obstructing and using fear against their enemies.[102] The victims might be killed or brutally whipped, and their homes burned to the ground. Rape, too, was common and often part of a deliberate campaign of intimidation.[103] White supremacists targeted symbols

---

96. For testimonials of violence, see Kidada E. Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).
97. William Gillette, *Retreat from Reconstruction, 1869–1879* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), p. 162; and Fellman, *In the Name of God and Country*, p. 136.
98. Fellman, *In the Name of God and Country*, p. 116.
99. Foner, *Reconstruction*, pp. 426–442.
100. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, p. 294.
101. "Report of Brevet Major General J.J. Reynolds, Commanding Fifth Military District," November 4, 1868, *Message of the President of the United States and Accompanying Documents*, 40th Cong., 3d sess., 1868, *Annual Report of the Secretary of War*, Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1868), pp. 704–705, reprinted in the *American Yawp Reader*, https://courses.lumenlearning .com/ushistory1os/chapter/primary-source-general-reynolds-describes-lawlessness-in-texas-1868/.
102. Trelease, *White Terror*, pp. 115–116.
103. For examples, see the testimony of Elias Hill, *Report of the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States*, 42nd Cong., 2d sess., Vol. 5, February 19, 1872 (Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee: South Carolina, Volume 3), pp. 1406–1408, as reprinted in Stanley Harrold, *The Civil War and Reconstruction: A Documentary Reader* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 206–209; "The Government of the United States Abandons You," in Dorothy Sterling, ed., *The Trouble They Seen: The Story of Reconstruction in the Words of African Americans* (Boston.: Da Capo, 1994), pp. 374–375, testimony of Abram Colby; Williams, *The Great South Carolina Ku Klux Klan Trials*, p. 35; and Lisa Cardyn, "Sexualized Racism/Gendered Violence: Out-

of Black progress and autonomy such schools, churches, and Union League facilities—one Alabama county saw twenty-six school burnings in the first six months of 1871.[104] White supremacists also used their economic power. To ensure that white Southerners stayed in (or returned to) the fold, they often boycotted white Republican businesses.[105]

White supremacist violence and intimidation took its toll on voting and, over time, on the balance of power and the control of the apparatus of government. In Columbia County, Georgia, the Republican vote plummeted from 1,222 to 1 from one election to the next, and several Georgia counties with Black majorities did not give Grant a single vote. In 1868, Louisiana held both state-level and presidential elections in April and November, respectively. As a result of white supremacist violence, one parish that gave almost 5,000 votes for the Republican governor in the spring gave zero votes to Grant in November; Republican votes in other parishes fell dramatically for similar reasons.

Local authorities felt powerless. In much of the South, the limited number of federal troops were deployed only in cities, and commanders did not aggressively target the budding white supremacist violence. Republican state governments often passed tough laws in response to the violence, but these laws were not enforced. Sheriffs, county prosecutors, local witnesses, and jury members were either sympathetic to the white supremacists or afraid of retaliation.[106] The Freedmen's Bureau in Texas reported in 1868 that "the Civil Authorities are really *afraid* to act."[107] Black citizens who testified before U.S. commissioners were often prosecuted for perjury at the state level.[108]

As the Democrats began to claw back power through violence, Republicans in Congress passed the Enforcement Acts (also known as the KKK Acts) in 1870 and 1871, which authorized the president to supervise elections, employ the Army to guarantee rights, and use the federal court system (not the state courts) to try suspects accused of violence related to civil rights. It also prohibited individuals from venturing out in disguise. The Acts even empowered Grant to suspend habeas corpus in parts of the former Confederacy. He did so in nine South Carolina counties, which troops occupied and where they made

---

raging the Body Politic in the Reconstruction South," *Michigan Law Review*, Vol. 100, No. 4 (February 2002), pp. 703–704, doi.org/10.2307/1290425.

104. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, p. 293.
105. Fellman, *In the Name of God and Country*, p. 120.
106. Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 435.
107. Quoted in Trelease, *White Terror*, p. 105 (italics in the original).
108. Everette Swinney, "Enforcing the Fifteenth Amendment, 1870–1877," *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (May 1962), pp. 209–210, doi.org/10.2307/2205188.

hundreds of arrests.[109] By 1872, the Klan's back was temporarily broken in several states, resulting in a dramatic decline in overall violence in those states.

The effort in South Carolina was the most serious check to the Klan during Reconstruction.[110] Use of the Enforcement Acts demonstrated that, if the federal government had consistently employed force aggressively, it would have been possible to suppress white supremacist violence. Thus, the Acts were a potential critical juncture.

Despite the encouraging results of the Acts, they were the exception when it came to the use of troops. The Army's size in the South shrank. Postwar demobilization had been rapid; in January 1866, the entire army comprised fewer than 90,000 troops, many of whom were deployed in the Texas-Mexico border area or to protect against raids by Native Americans. By the end of the year, the number deployed in the former Confederacy, excluding Texas, had shrunk to less than 20,000.[111] As table 2 indicates, troop levels fell in almost every state in the South from 1870 to 1877 despite high, and often growing, levels of violence in many of them. Similarly, the pace of military operations declined: in the fall of 1871, soldiers conducted more than 200 operations in Kentucky, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Tennessee alone. This number would fall to 71 by 1876.[112]

The Enforcement Acts changed, but did not end, white violence. When faced with military opposition, white resistance adapted. The KKK and similar groups, such as the Red Shirts and Knights of the White Camelia, learned to modulate their violence and otherwise walk the line between intimidation and provoking a reaction. High-profile massacres captured Northern attention and demanded a federal response. Lower-level violence and attacks in rural areas, however, rarely made headlines and did not provoke a crackdown.[113] The Klan and similar groups, already operating with only a loose hierarchy for many operations, became even more decentralized and harder to eradicate.

White supremacist groups also learned to cooperate more effectively. They crossed state lines to assist in suppressing the vote in neighboring states—at the time, elections were often held on different days, making this mutual

---

109. H.W. Brands, "Grant Takes on the Klan," *American History*, December 2012, p. 46; and Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, p. 301.
110. Fellman, *In the Name of God and Country*, p. 109.
111. Downs, *After Appomattox*, pp. 89, 262; and Grimsley, "Wars for the American South," p. 16.
112. Blair, "The Use of Military Force to Protect the Gains of Reconstruction," p. 397.
113. Otto H. Olsen, "The Ku Klux Klan: A Study in Reconstruction Politics and Propaganda," *North Carolina Historical Review*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (July 1962) p. 354, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23517289; Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, pp. 301–302; and Blair, "The Use of Military Force to Protect the Gains of Reconstruction," p. 397.

Table 2. Federal Troop Levels during Reconstruction, 1870–77

State	Troops 1870 (high/low)*	Troops 1877
Tennessee**	466/160	61/38
Arkansas	666/344	79/51
North Carolina	897/260	336/44
Alabama	719/478	336/23
Florida	643/331	572/310
Louisiana	893/512	1,506/345
South Carolina	563/250	959/150
Virginia	1,280/413	820/696
Mississippi	804/191	119/0
Georgia	1,036/680	479/149
Texas***	5,102/3,769	4,099/3,243
Kentucky**	666/344	84/0

* For the troop levels for 1870 and 1877, the numbers varied within the year and the high/low for that year is given, but the month of the peak varies by state. Gregory P. Downs and Scott Nesbit, "Mapping Occupation: Force, Freedom, and the Army in Reconstruction," American Council of Learned Societies, University of Georgia, March 2015, http://mappingoccupation.org/map/index.html.

** Figures for Kentucky and Tennessee are given, but they were not part of Reconstruction, as they had met the conditions before the Reconstruction Acts were passed.

*** Texas troop numbers are higher, but the majority of troops were deployed to prevent Native American raids and to guard the U.S.-Mexico border. Mark Grimsley, "Wars for the American South: The First and Second Reconstructions Considered as Insurgencies," *Civil War History*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (March 2012), p. 12, doi.org/10.1353/cwh.2012.0026.

aid possible. Similarly, ideas on how to use violence more effectively also spread. White supremacists in states such as South Carolina referred to the "Mississippi Plan" to describe how they expected to use violence to suppress the Republican vote.[114]

After Congress put the South under military rule in 1867, the authority of the military in domestic affairs rose to an unprecedented degree; depending on the attitudes of the particular commander or governor, policy could vary tremendously. Soldiers intervened in legal cases, banned liquor, set up schools, and registered voters. Maj. Gen. John Pope paid Black voters in his district to register. When Maj. (later Lt.) Gen. Philip Sheridan oversaw Texas and Louisiana, he helped form pro-Republican Union Leagues and removed unsympathetic officeholders. Johnson replaced him in 1867 with Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock, who was far more conservative, as

---

114. Nicholas Lemann, *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), pp. 146, 173; and Fellman, *In the Name of God and Country*, p. 112.

was Maj. Gen. John Schofield in Virginia, who questioned whether Black people could be effective at governing.[115]

Throughout this period, violence plagued the South, though comprehensive figures are lacking. Snapshots of different states at different times are painfully suggestive, however. In Louisiana alone, a congressional report found that white supremacists had killed more than 1,000 people, mostly Black Louisianans, between the April and November 1868 elections, and that they killed or wounded 2,000 more in the weeks before the 1871 election.[116] In the 1873 Colfax Massacre in Louisiana, white Democrats killed as many as 165 Black residents after a disputed election, and they even used cannons against Black forces.[117] The next year, thousands of white supremacists defeated police and militia forces in New Orleans in the Battle of Liberty Place in an attempt to overturn election results. Sheridan would estimate that white supremacists killed 2,141 Black citizens in Louisiana during Reconstruction (the number of white Republicans was not estimated).[118] In Texas, between the Civil War's end and 1868, white supremacists murdered 1,000 Black residents—a figure that is probably low.[119] In Tennessee, one white supremacist gloated, "When a white man feels aggrieved at anything a n——'s done, he just shoots him and puts an end to it."[120] In Arkansas, white supremacists killed more than 2,000 people in connection with the 1868 presidential election.[121] In many of these cases, white marauders used the rifles they had obtained from service in the Confederate military. Many Black locals fled to larger towns or cities, where there was more safety in numbers and where federal troops were stationed.[122]

As horrible as these accounts of murder are, the number of unknown deaths is probably far greater. In a few areas, the Army investigated deaths, but in many it did not. An Army officer in Texas reported, "The murder of negroes is so common as to render it impossible to keep an accurate account of them."[123]

---

115. Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 307; and Blair, "The Use of Military Force to Protect the Gains of Reconstruction," p. 391.
116. Trelease, *White Terror*, p. 135; Lemann, *Redemption*, p. 11; and Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, p. 296.
117. LeeAnna Keith, *The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror, and the Death of Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
118. Grimsley, "Wars for the American South," p. 16.
119. Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 120.
120. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, p. 204.
121. "Grant, Reconstruction, and the KKK," *PBS*, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/american experience/features/grant-kkk/.
122. Trelease, *White Terror*, pp. 42, 59, 92, 131.
123. "Report of Brevet Major General J.J. Reynolds, Commanding Fifth Military District," November 4, 1868.

Many of the formerly enslaved did not have last names and lived in rural areas, complicating the task of counting the dead, particularly when few at the state level sought to do so.[124] White Democrats controlled much of the press in most of the South, and they often refused to report attacks.[125]

White supremacists frequently targeted leading Republicans. On the eve of the 1868 election, the KKK murdered Republican Congressman James Hinds of Arkansas, the first-ever murder of a U.S. House member. When the 1875 election results split the Florida legislature evenly between Republican and Democratic members, terrorists broke the tie by assassinating E.G. Johnson, a Black state senator, to give Democrats a majority.[126]

Although Black militias could help quell the violence, many Southern whites saw Black mobilization as a threat, and thus Republican office-holders and military leaders did not augment their forces with Black units. In Louisiana, militias with white and Black citizens helped reduce violence by white supremacists.[127] Later efforts by local Black citizens to mobilize in self-defense almost invariably sparked fears of a broader insurrection.[128] Governor Robert Scott of South Carolina, who created a large Black militia, feared that it would "lead to a war of races."[129] One study of Texas found that the creation of Union Leagues and similar groups designed to organize the Black community led to white supremacist countermobilization and an increase in violence.[130]

THE END OF RECONSTRUCTION

As white Democrats won control of political power at both the local and the state levels, they used this power to enact laws that further disenfranchised the formerly enslaved. Over time, white Democrats were able to peel off parts of the Republican coalition in the South, as many white Southern Republicans shared the racial views of the Democrats but had disagreed with them on economic issues and were also vulnerable to social pressure from fellow whites.[131]

---

124. Egerton, "Terrorized African-Americans Found Their Champion in Civil War Hero Robert Smalls."
125. Fellman, *In the Name of God and Country*, p. 117.
126. Lemann, *Redemption*, p. 175.
127. Grimsley, "Wars for the American South," p. 21.
128. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, pp. 112, 240.
129. Williams, *The Great South Carolina Ku Klux Klan Trials*, p. 17.
130. Gregg Cantrell, "Racial Violence and Reconstruction Politics in Texas, 1867–1868," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (January 1990), p. 346, https://www.jstor.org/stable/30241330.
131. Trelease, *White Terror*, p. xxvii.

By the end of Reconstruction, the white community largely voted as a bloc for Democratic candidates.

Political corruption also soured many in both the South and the North on Reconstruction, decreasing support for the Radical Republican agenda.[132] Although government programs under Reconstruction fell well short of modern standards, public spending and associated taxation grew tremendously with federal funding of railroads and schools. Some leaders recognized that their time in office might be short and sought to cash in.[133] But, in some states, such as Louisiana, corruption had already been endemic (indeed, bribery there was not even a crime), and both parties were highly corrupt.[134] Critics of Reconstruction played up abuses, declaring that the involvement of the Black community in government made corruption inevitable.[135] Independent of Reconstruction, Grant's administration was plagued by scandal, decreasing overall support for it.

The cost of the occupation, its unclear endpoint, and the peacetime use of the military also raised concerns among congressional leaders and the public as a whole.[136] Many political and military leaders questioned an extended military role that superseded civil authority.[137] As Grant admitted when he rejected the Mississippi governor's request for help against violence there, "The whole public are tired out with these annual autumnal outbreaks in the South, and a great majority are now ready to condemn any interference on the part of the government."[138]

The priorities of Northern Republicans also shifted when the Panic of 1873 devastated the U.S. economy, ushering in what was referred to as the "Great Depression" until the 1930s, and further reducing popular support for the Republican Party and the spending associated with Reconstruction.[139] Northern leaders began to focus on trade, the gold standard, and taxation, rather than on the legacy of slavery. Justice Department officials were told to

---

132. Summers, *The Ordeal of the Reunion*, pp. 273–297.
133. Williams, *The Great South Carolina Ku Klux Klan Trials*, p. 12; and Fellman, *In the Name of God and Country*, p. 106.
134. Trelease, *White Terror*, p. xxix; and Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 385.
135. For one such polemic disguised as reporting, see James S. Pike, *The Prostrate State: South Carolina under Negro Government* (New York: D. Appleton, 1874).
136. Downs, *After Appomattox*, pp. 122–123.
137. Blair, "The Use of Military Force to Protect the Gains of Reconstruction," p. 394.
138. Quoted in Fellman, *In the Name of God and Country*, p. 134.
139. Andrew L. Slap, *The Doom of Reconstruction: The Liberal Republicans in the Civil War Era* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006); and Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, p. 306.

use the Enforcement Acts to focus only on the worst cases of Klan activity and to no longer charge individuals for simply being Klan members.[140]

In 1874, the massive Republican majority in Congress was replaced by a large Democratic majority in the House and a narrow one in the Senate, resulting in paralysis on racial issues.[141] In the 1876 elections, violence led to disputes about who had truly won Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina. As noted earlier, under the Compromise of 1877, Rutherford Hayes, the Republican presidential candidate, was awarded victory in these contests but agreed to withdraw federal troops from the South. Democrats, in turn, promised to respect the civil rights of Black Americans, which they did not. Although the electoral power and civil rights of Black Americans in the South did not end abruptly, the withdrawal of federal troops marked the point of no return. The few remaining stalwarts on Reconstruction found themselves with eroding support and declining political power, and Black political power and the hope of Black equality steadily declined in the South.

The ultimate effect of the failure to stop white violence was not lost on Republican leaders, even as it was happening. The governor of Mississippi noted that, by force of arms, "a race are disenfranchised—they are to be returned to a condition of serfdom—an era of second slavery."[142] Grant himself admitted that "the results of the war of the rebellion will have been in large part lost."[143]

Black political struggles did not end in 1877, and full subordination took decades to achieve. Despite restrictive Supreme Court rulings, the federal government enforced some civil rights laws into the 1880s, and Black officeholders continued to be elected well into the 1880s, particularly at local levels.

After 1877, however, with Democrats assuming power in every statehouse, violence shifted from the nonstate to the structural, state level, where Black subordination was backed by the power of law and elected officials. Reversing the tide of disenfranchisement was not impossible, but 1877 was a critical juncture: after this time, it would have required even more troops with a more expansive mandate for the use of force to overturn, rather than preserve, the elected state governments. Champions of Black equality would have had pressure at the congressional level, where Southern Democrats became entrenched. In 1878, Congress passed the Posse Comitatus Act, preventing the military

140. Lemann, *Redemption*, p. 66; and Swinney, "Enforcing the Fifteenth Amendment, 1870–1877," p. 207.
141. Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 523.
142. Gillette, *Retreat from Reconstruction*, p. 163.
143. Lemann, *Redemption*, p. 137.

from being involved in civil affairs. On the ground, fraud and intimidation at first ensured that Black voters would not matter to election outcomes. But as the nineteenth century went on, Southern states weaponized the law to systematically disenfranchise Black Americans. Mass disenfranchisement, Jim Crow laws, and decades of near-complete subordination of the Black population of the South resulted.

Nonstate violence continued to subordinate Black Southerners. White supremacists lynched thousands of Black Americans during the Jim Crow era. And because white supremacy was now backed by the power of the state, successors to the Reconstruction-era Klan would see themselves as handmaidens to, not opponents of, government power.[144]

Why Was White Supremacist Violence Able to Prevail?

White supremacists used violence to halt, and eventually reverse, the policies of Reconstruction. What enabled their success? The structural, federal policy, and local policy factors identified in the first section vary in their explanatory power. Structural factors such as the South's economic and governance problems clearly hindered Reconstruction, but, on balance, they were indeterminate: some favored success, whereas others made failure more likely. Policy mistakes, such as the failure to deploy sufficient troops, develop civilian capacity, or plan for a long-term occupation proved most important. To adjudicate which factors mattered most, I use counterfactual analysis, particularly in the policy sections.

ASSESSING STRUCTURAL FACTORS

Several structural factors shaped the likelihood of Reconstruction's success. Favoring the insurgents, the South suffered significant economic problems that made Republican rule less popular. The Panic of 1873 was a further disaster, diminishing popular will in the North. The plantation economy, however, began to recover somewhat as Reconstruction went on; yet, white planters remained opposed, and indeed led the opposition, to Reconstruction. The motivation of the violence was primarily racial and political, not economic.[145]

Local governance challenges loomed large, which also helped the white supremacist insurgents. The former Confederacy shared numerous character-

---

144. David Cunningham, *Klansville, U.S.A.: The Rise and Fall of the Civil Rights-Era Ku Klux Klan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
145. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, p. 289.

istics of a failed state, with a shattered economy and a collapse in law and or-
der in many parts of the South. Petty crime was paired with a constant fear of a
race war. The white supremacist groups billed themselves as forces of law and
order, punishing theft and supposedly defending white women.[146] The lack of
governance and violence probably had an endogenous relationship, with vio-
lence worsening governance, which in turn made violence easier.

As discussed in the first section, prewar endowments from mobilization and
institutionalization from the Civil War and antebellum periods helped white
supremacists organize, recruit, and arm for violence during Reconstruction.
Many white supremacists retained the weapons they had used in the Civil
War, and some had been involved in partisan warfare behind Union lines or
patrols to catch deserters and the enslaved.[147] Additionally, political and social
advancement within the Black community spurred a countermobilization.

Proscription, however, hindered white political mobilization in many states,
favoring the counterinsurgents. At the same time, the formerly enslaved also
mobilized quickly, despite their lack of pre-Reconstruction networks, further
aiding the Republicans. Part of this rapid mobilization was the result of assis-
tance from institutions such as the Freedmen's Bureau and the Union Leagues,
but the eagerness of the formerly enslaved to embrace their rights began im-
mediately after the war's end and was evident among observers of all political
stripes. Militarily, Black soldiers had served in the U.S. Army in large num-
bers, and many were eager to join state militias or otherwise serve.

Favoring success, the United States won a decisive victory in the war
and built its war-making and administrative capacity in the process. In
addition, the U.S. government saw the former Confederacy as strategi-
cally and politically vital. The South was America, and thus the interests were
truly existential, in contrast to control of a colony or less integral piece of terri-
tory. Moreover, at least by comparative standards with Vietnam, Iraq, and
Afghanistan, Army soldiers were familiar with the culture, religion, and belief
systems of the occupied population. In addition, the United States at the time
was far more casualty tolerant, having just suffered the bloodiest war in its his-
tory.[148] The dominant Republican Party also hoped to use Black suffrage to
augment its presidential and congressional majorities, giving it a strong politi-
cal interest in the success of Reconstruction.

In summary, the structural picture of the South during Reconstruction is

---

146. Olsen, "The Ku Klux Klan," p. 343.
147. Lemann, *Redemption*, p. 3; and Fitzgerald, "Ex-Slaveholders and the Ku Klux Klan," p. 150.
148. Coyne, "Deconstructing Reconstruction."

mixed, and failure was not foreordained, making this a critical juncture in U.S. history. Southern white supremacists did enjoy some structural advantages regarding mobilization, and economic and governance challenges made the task of Reconstruction far harder than it had to be. The federal government, for its part, enjoyed several important advantages in fighting white supremacist violence—notably, strong political will. Although it is always difficult to make comparisons across time periods, if anything, conditions might have favored the counterinsurgent in the nineteenth century. Scholars Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson found that the mechanization of warfare that began in the twentieth century, and the resulting reduced information gathering from and interaction with the population, have made modern counterinsurgents less effective than their nineteenth-century counterparts.[149] As discussed below, however, many U.S. government policy choices did not correct for structural problems, and some even exacerbated them—notably, in the instance of Black mobilization.

ASSESSING FEDERAL-LEVEL POLICY FACTORS

A range of bad decisions and poorly designed policies at the federal (national) level enabled white supremacist violence to persist and grow. After Congress curtailed President Johnson's power, federal leadership was largely supportive of Reconstruction. Rather, the failure to stop white supremacist violence emerged from unclear priorities and coordination: insufficient troop numbers, a weak mandate for the use of force, poor civilian capacity, and a lack of long-term planning.

FEDERAL LEADERSHIP. In the aggregate, individual national leaders did not enable white supremacist violence, though some—notably, President Johnson—certainly did little to stop it. Johnson lacked both the skill and the inclination to advance the rights of the formerly enslaved, seeking only the formal end of slavery and the restoration of the Union. A racist himself (even by the low standards of the time), Johnson was hostile to the cause of Black equality. His tolerance of the Black Codes, willingness to readmit former secessionists into the government, and opposition to the Freedmen's Bureau started the post–Civil War era decidedly against Black equality and undermined notables such as Longstreet, who accepted the South's defeat and the necessity of change.[150]

---

149. Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, "Rage Against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars," *International Organization*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (January 2009), pp. 67–106, doi.org/10.1017/S0020818309090031.
150. Eric L. McKitrick, *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Yet, Johnson's influence quickly became limited, and other leaders played important roles later in Reconstruction. Largely as a result of his positions on Reconstruction, Johnson was impeached and lost effective control over Reconstruction policy after the Republican sweep of the 1866 elections. Grant, who won the 1868 and 1872 presidential elections, favored Reconstruction, helped establish the Department of Justice to enforce it, and supported the crackdown on the KKK and the Fifteenth Amendment.[151] As General of the Army after the Civil War, Grant also played a key role in administering the South before becoming president, as did Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, another progressive figure.[152] In addition, regional military commanders and governors set much of the policy, and many strongly favored the rights of Black Americans. The head of the Freedmen's Bureau was also aggressive in using his power to help those once enslaved.[153] Overall, after Johnson's initial years in office, there was strong opposition to white supremacist violence at the national level.

A LACK OF CLEAR GOALS. Counterinsurgency doctrine calls for clear objectives shared among military and civilian leaders that then shape military operations, but such clarity was often lacking during the Reconstruction era, facilitating white supremacist violence. During the war, Northern Republicans did not agree on, or even deeply consider, the future political status of the formerly enslaved. As the abolitionist Wendell Phillips noted, the Emancipation Proclamation, and subsequent federal policy, "frees the slave and ignores the negro."[154] President Johnson and congressional leaders had different views on how to proceed on voting rights and federal authority, as did military commanders. This disagreement made it easier to do the minimum and under-resource operations.

Even Radical Republican leaders had prejudices and divided priorities. Thaddeus Stevens, who led Radical Republicans in the House, declared that "Negro equality does not mean that a negro shall sit on the same seat or eat at the same table with a white man."[155] Although most Northern Republicans remained committed to the goals of Reconstruction, some favored a focus on economic issues, and others feared federal overreach. Many Southern white Republicans opposed land reform, which Black Republicans saw as vital. In

---

151. Ron Chernow, *Grant* (New York: Penguin, 2017).
152. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, p. 221.
153. Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York: Metropolitan, 2019), p. 103.
154. Quoted in Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 36.
155. Quoted in ibid., p. 231.

addition, many white Republicans saw themselves as natural leaders of the Republican Party in the South, creating tension with the Black community as it exercised its rights and sought more leadership and patronage.[156] Splits within the Republican Party allowed Democrats to win elections in states such as Missouri and Virginia, with violence playing only a limited role in both places.[157]

Southern Democrats, in contrast, consistently prioritized the withdrawal of federal troops and the necessity of white supremacy. Although many prewar small farms had few enslaved people, and white farmers in mountainous areas often had none, they shared white supremacist values. To them, the social equality of Black citizens, who now demanded better pay and refused to be servile, let alone the presence of Black legislators and jurors, was infuriating.[158] Rape, intermarriage, and other supposed risks to white women were particularly feared and exploited.[159]

TROOP RATIOS, USES, AND CIVILIAN CAPACITY. For most of Reconstruction, the United States did not deploy enough troops to ensure the peace, and civilian capacity was weak to nonexistent, giving violent white supremacists far more freedom of action. The U.S. Army was responsible for nine million people living over 750,000 square miles, with many of the most vulnerable living in remote, rural areas with poor infrastructure. If one uses a conservative 1:50 troop-to-population ratio for modern stabilization operations, the number of troops required would be around 180,000 troops total. At peak times, the number of troops deployed to the South was between 10,000 and 15,000 in total, and the number was often far lower. Moreover, the logistics of the time were difficult given the lack of a developed transportation network or airpower, leaving more remote areas hard to police. One expert compared the Army's presence at the time to spokes on a wheel, with garrisons in major cities attached by road or rail lines.[160] Even if one uses Blair's far lower estimate of the required number of troops (only 20,000), the troop levels fell short.

When troops were deployed, however, they succeeded in suppressing the Klan and similar groups, protecting Black voting rights, and otherwise achieving the ostensible aims of Reconstruction. The Enforcement Acts, along with federal troops, enabled an effective crackdown on the KKK in several states and a curtailment of activities in several locales. In Texas, after years of brutal

---

156. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, p. 257.
157. Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 442.
158. Fitzgerald, "Ex-Slaveholders and the Ku Klux Klan," p. 154; and Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 12.
159. See Cardyn, "Sexualized Racism/Gendered Violence."
160. Downs, *After Appomattox*, pp. 14, 25.

violence, in 1869 the Army used cavalry to pursue suspects and tried many cases before military commissions. Organized, violent, white supremacist activity in the Lone Star state plunged.[161] In 1870 in North Carolina, the Klan helped swing ten counties to the Democratic side in elections; only where there were federal troops stationed did the Klan fail to suppress the Republican vote.[162] Overall, Black political mobilization surged in cities and rural parts of the South that federal troops occupied, while lagging in more remote areas with no troops.[163] Conversely, one report from the immediate postwar period found that assaults "increase just in proportion to their distance from United States Authorities."[164]

Yet, for all these individual successes, state government and national leaders did not consistently deploy troops in times of crisis, and the scope and scale of the crackdown was limited. Force deployments were invariably subject to the political winds of the moment, and even when troops were used, the overall numbers remained too small to ensure widespread security. In Mississippi, in the face of white violence, Republican Governor Adelbert Ames asked President Grant to send troops. The president refused, however, because the idea of using force was becoming increasingly unpopular in the North, and he feared that it would hurt Republican electoral chances in the key state of Ohio. The inaction led to open violence against Republican rallies and the murder of Black leaders in Mississippi, emboldening white militants in other states. The governor tried to reorganize local militias, largely composed of Black Americans, to boost his powers, but that only further inflamed hostile white Southerners.[165] Ames fled the state after Grant refused his request for protection, with Grant's attorney general writing Ames that "the whole public are tired out" with the outbreaks of violence in the South. On election day, white supremacists in several counties threatened to hang those who distributed Republican ballots.[166] The first successful impeachment of a governor in U.S. history occurred in 1871, after North Carolina's governor deployed federal troops against the Klan, outraging other state officials.[167] In South Carolina in

---

161. Trelease, *White Terror*, pp. 44, 147.
162. Olsen, "The Ku Klux Klan," p. 360.
163. Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 113.
164. Quoted in Downs, *After Appomattox*, p. 107.
165. Grimsley, "Wars for the American South," p. 17.
166. Lemann, *Redemption*, pp. 74–75, 136; quote is from Grimsley, "Wars for the American South," p. 17.
167. Jessica Jones, "Impeached Governor Not Hero of His Own Legacy?" Weekend Edition Saturday, *NPR*, April 16, 2011, https://www.npr.org/2011/04/16/135464270/impeached-governor-not-the-hero-of-his-own-legacy.

1875, Grant did send troops, who helped reduce the level of violence. The troops numbered only 1,000, however, and they could not cover the entire state or undo the years of terror that the Black population had already suffered. Troops were often instructed to work in support of local authorities, but these authorities usually favored, or at least did not actively oppose, violence against Black citizens and their Republican allies.[168]

Nor were there enough troops even if the federal government wanted to act. The United States had an aversion dating to its founding to a large peacetime military and to a military role in policing and governing U.S. citizens.[169] Financial pressure was intense, and Congress cut the size of the Army quickly in the war's aftermath. In 1877, the entire army, including chaplains and West Point cadets, comprised slightly more than 25,000 men.[170] Adding to the demand for soldiers, the Indian Wars led to the redeployment of U.S. troops—particularly cavalry needed for rapid pursuit of often mounted marauders.[171] During the 1871 crackdown, only 6,000 troops were garrisoned in the South, excluding those deployed in Texas for wars against the Native Americans.[172] In most instances, troop numbers stayed small, and in many states declined, even as violence grew.

Civil capacity at the state and federal levels was even worse. Law enforcement officials always lacked sufficient money, personnel, and courts to conduct hearings.[173] At its peak, the Freedmen's Bureau had only 900 personnel in the South. Although its authority extended throughout the South, its lack of personnel meant that the Bureau was nonexistent in many parts of the former Confederacy. William Tecumseh Sherman, then a lieutenant general, told the first head of the Freedmen's Bureau, "It is not . . . in your power to fulfill one tenth of the expectations of those who framed the Bureau." Without sufficient troops to protect them and make certain that their dictates were followed, the Bureau agents were "worse than useless," declared Maj. Gen. E.O.C. Ord, who commanded the Arkansas and Mississippi district.[174] Under pressure from white Southerners, Congress would terminate the Freedmen's Bureau in 1872.

NOT PLANNING FOR A LENGTHY OCCUPATION OR A PROPER WITHDRAWAL. The U.S. Army, President Grant, and other leaders of Reconstruction did not prop-

168. Trelease, *White Terror*, p. 32.
169. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil–Military Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 143–261.
170. Blair, "The Use of Military Force to Protect the Gains of Reconstruction," p. 398.
171. Egerton, *The Wars of Reconstruction*, p. 287.
172. Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 457.
173. Swinney, "Enforcing the Fifteenth Amendment," p. 218.
174. Quoted in Foner, *Reconstruction*, pp. 143, 148, respectively.

erly plan for a lengthy occupation or for how to ensure equal rights were honored after a troop withdrawal, further enabling white supremacist violence. At the time, the U.S. Army, and the federal government in general, had no experience in long-term occupations with a peacebuilding mission. Senior military leaders such as Maj. Gen. George G. Meade and Major General Hancock opposed interfering with civil governments. As wars against Native Americans on the Great Plains grew more pressing, the Army favored prioritizing that theater.[175] Time itself was an enemy, with other concerns rising to the fore and diverting attention from Reconstruction. From the start, many congressmen were uncomfortable with the unprecedented authority given to the federal government and wanted it to be temporary at most.[176] The economic problems after the Panic of 1873 and the rise of other priorities reduced the attractiveness of Reconstruction. Because of this lack of planning, the Army did not deploy sufficient troops, Congress did not increase the size of the Army and the Freedman's Bureau, elections were not given proper security, and other priorities competed more easily for resources.

As federal forces prepared to leave the South, white reformers often settled for paper promises rather than concrete guarantees that would ensure the use of force if the terms were not honored. After a contested Louisiana election involving violence, a "peace conference" was held in 1875 where Democrats agreed to guarantee voting rights in exchange for demobilizing and disarming Black militias.[177] In Mississippi, Governor Ames made a similar deal.[178] Lack of a credible guarantor, as work by Barbara Walter notes, made such deals worthless.[179] Democrats would renege on their promises, but the militias stayed demobilized. Many Northern Republicans were willing to settle for empty agreements in hopes of putting Reconstruction behind them, foreshadowing the "decent interval" that would appear in future failed interventions.[180]

ASSESSING LOCAL POLICY FACTORS

Governance at the state level suffered a lack of legitimacy among many white Southerners, aiding insurgents in their recruitment and operations and making it far harder for the federal government to halt the violence. A core aspect

---

175. Rable, *But There Was No Peace*, p. 209.
176. Summers, *The Ordeal of the Reunion*.
177. Lemann, *Redemption*, p. 131.
178. Fellmann, *In the Name of God and Country*, p. 135.
179. Barbara F. Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement," *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Summer 1997), pp. 335–364, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2703607.
180. Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval: An Insider's Account of Saigon's Indecent End Told by the CIA's Chief Strategy Analyst in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

of counterinsurgency is building government legitimacy and political support, thus gaining hearts and minds, or at least quiescence, as well as a greater ability to coerce. In the American South, however, as in many divided societies, a government that enjoyed broad support from Southern whites would have halted attempts to achieve Black equality, as eventually happened after 1877. The decision to proscribe former Confederate soldiers and senior officials had an effect similar to that of de-Baathification in Iraq, sending a signal that past social leaders were not welcome in the new power structure and thus delegitimizing the structure among important segments of society.[181] Allowing former Confederate elites to vote and participate in elections without ensuring Black voting rights, however, would have doomed many Reconstruction efforts from the start, as indicated by the results of the rejected 1865 and 1866 elections that restored the old order. Radical Republicans tried to solve this problem by working with Southern white Republicans, which enabled indirect rule, but they did not represent the bulk of white opinion in the South.

Nor was the U.S. government able to find effective local collaborators. As discussed in the counterfactual discussion below, part of the reason was a strong bias among whites of all political persuasions against militias with largely Black compositions and leaderships. Southern white Republicans proved vulnerable to social and economic pressure from other Southern whites, diminishing the Republican coalition over time. In addition, the national and state governments' inability to protect white Republican leaders greatly increased the price of local collaboration.

Table 3 lays out the different advantages that the federal authorities and the white supremacists enjoyed, drawing on the structural, federal-level, and local policy factors discussed above.

COMBINING THE FACTORS

The combined impact of many federal and local policy choices regarding white supremacist violence was to give the KKK and other white supremacist spoilers free rein. The lack of sufficient troops with aggressive mandates (with the brief, localized exception of the Enforcement Acts) allowed spoilers to disrupt governance, further reducing the ability of state and local officials to prevent violence, and thus further decreasing their legitimacy. The perceived illegitimacy of the new governments among many white Southerners provided violent white supremacists with broad support. Thus, they were able to persist, outlasting the will of the U.S. government.

---

181. Gillette, *Retreat from Reconstruction, 1869–1879*, p. 60.

Table 3. Comparing Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Advantages

	Favor Insurgent (White Supremacists)	Favor Counterinsurgent (Federal Government)
Structural Factors	economic and governance problems in the South	
	weapons and organizational endowments from the pre-Reconstruction era	proscription hinders white political mobilization
		decisive military victory in the Civil War
		rapid Black mobilization
		strong political will and casualty tolerance
Federal-Level Policy Factors	President Andrew Johnson's open racism and hostility to Black rights	President Ulysses S. Grant's strong support for Reconstruction, the important role of congressional leaders, and support for Black rights by many U.S. military commanders
	lack of clear, shared goals and priorities among leading civilian and military figures	
	insufficient troops	
	weak mandate for the use of force (with the exception of the Enforcement Acts)	
	weak civilian capacity	
	lack of long-term planning	
	lack of conditionality for withdrawal	
Local Policy Factors	failure to install governments perceived as legitimate	
	insufficient local collaborators to assist federal forces	

As expected, violence had a path-dependent effect. When violence emerged with the start of Reconstruction, the groups involved were relatively small. As troops were not deployed in a comprehensive way and violence went largely unpunished, groups such as the Klan served as a model for others and decreased confidence in Republican leadership. This inaction increased the risk of more violence, required even more troops, and weakened Republican state government legitimacy. With the violence spreading and the cost of suppressing it rising, Republican leaders would have had to pay a higher political price to quell the killing, creating a dangerous circle.

Roads Not Taken and Their Implications for Policy Today

U.S. national, military, and Republican state leaders did not pursue several options that might have offered a greater hope of success, which I present as counterfactuals below. The alternatives seem politically difficult given the attitudes of the time, but several were doable and might have changed the course of history. These alternatives not only are important "what ifs" for the past; they also have implications for contemporary conflicts.

ARMING THE BLACK COMMUNITY

In theory, the lack of sufficient troops and local protection for Republican leaders, voters, and Freedmen's Bureau officials could have been resolved by mobilizing, arming, and training the formerly enslaved as local militias to protect their right to vote and their communities—a modern equivalent of the Colombian government's use of militias against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia insurgency or France's use of Muslim Algerian *harkis* as auxiliaries against the National Liberation Front in the 1950s and early 1960s. The Black community in the South represented a large pool of motivated manpower, and, in the few cases when members were armed and incorporated into militias, they proved effective. Some were already trained and armed, having brought their rifles home after fighting in the war.[182] In Tennessee, Black militia units helped the state government repress the Klan.[183] Similarly, in Mississippi, white supremacists prevented Black citizens from voting; an exception was the town of Grand Gulf, where Black residents came to the polls carrying arms.[184]

Although they did not use this language, white policymakers feared that arming Black citizens would lose the "hearts and minds" of the white community, which Republicans still hoped to win. As Du Bois laments, "It was the silent verdict of all America that Negroes must not be allowed to fight for themselves. They were, therefore, dissuaded from every attempt at self-protection or aggression by their friends as well as their enemies."[185] Indeed, the backlash would have been immense, and U.S. authorities typically prohibited Black residents from forming their own militias or from creating

---

182. Blair, "The Use of Military Force to Protect the Gains of Reconstruction," p. 401.
183. Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 439.
184. Lemann, *Redemption*, p. 150.
185. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*, p. 482.

them under government auspices.[186] "Mobilizing these [the formerly en-
slaved] was the equivalent of arming one political party against the other,"
noted Trelease, inflaming conservative sentiment and increasing fears of a race
war.[187] In South Carolina, the Republican governor, Robert Scott, put almost
100,000 Black Carolinians in the militia (some as a form of patronage). This
move led to massive countermobilization among the white community:
"Arming Black citizens convinced whites that they, too, must arm themselves
for self-protection," wrote one historian.[188] As the bloodshed grew, Scott dis-
armed the units to appease white Southern opinion.[189] In general, even sup-
portive organizations such as the Freedmen's Bureau opposed Black militias,
believing they further inflamed white Southerners.[190] The Black community
was caught in a local security dilemma:[191] a failure to arm would leave them
vulnerable, but taking up arms would give rise to the white community's
worst fears.

For Black militias to be widely used, white Republican politicians would
have had to set aside their hope of reconciling white Southerners to the new
political system. In addition, they would have had to put aside their own racist
beliefs about the necessity of white leadership and the dangers of supposedly
less enlightened Black men and women. Given the prevailing attitudes, how-
ever, neither action was likely, and each would have further undercut support
in the North for Reconstruction.

In contemporary conflicts, arming one community can produce a backlash
by others. In the eyes of a fearful rival community, taking up arms for sup-
posed self-defense proves that the mobilizing community is hostile or threat-
ens the power balance. In Iraq, for example, the United States worked with
the Shiite government that represented a once-opposed majority, and in
Afghanistan with the government nominated by non-Pashtun minorities who
had formed part of the Northern Alliance. In both cases, the result was back-
lash from the formerly dominant community.

MORE TROOPS AND AN ENDURING OCCUPATION

Federal troops, if used more aggressively and in greater numbers, could
have prevented the intimidation and voter suppression that was vital for

---

186. Blair, "The Use of Military Force to Protect the Gains of Reconstruction," p. 401.
187. Trelease, *White Terror*, pp. xxxiv–xxxv.
188. Williams, *The Great South Carolina Ku Klux Klan Trials*, p. 28.
189. Foner, *Reconstruction*, p. 439.
190. Trelease, *White Terror*, p. 106.
191. Barry R. Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," *Survival*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Spring
1993), pp. 27–47, doi.org/10.1080/00396339308442672.

Democratic political victories in many Southern states. Had the Radical Republicans been able to ensure a long-term troop presence, Black political power might have solidified—especially in states such as South Carolina, which had a Black majority. In essence, the troop presence would have lasted for decades after the war itself ended, similar to the U.S. presence in Germany and South Korea, among other countries.

Americans during the Reconstruction era, however, were highly suspicious of a strong federal government, and the continued arrogation of civil powers to the Army had only limited support. Ongoing racism kept support for Black rights limited, and reports of corruption (both real and exaggerated) further diminished support. Even if the troop presence had continued beyond 1877, to preserve the gains of Reconstruction, Congress would have had to greatly expand the size of the Army—an option no one was considering—and have troops deploy far more extensively and use force more aggressively.

Although today the American people's suspicions of a strong federal government and a large peacetime military are far lower than in the past, there remains only a limited appetite for continued counterinsurgency campaigns. In Vietnam in the 1960s and early 1970s, and in both Afghanistan and Iraq today, support for the fight weakened over time, despite initial enthusiasm.[192] If violence is high and the cause itself does not enjoy broad support, declining enthusiasm for such campaigns may be likely over time.

A variant of the more troops approach was also to anticipate, and plan for, a white backlash and suppress it before it could gain momentum. In anticipation of resistance, the U.S. government and the Army could have confiscated rifles from surrendered Confederate soldiers and detained potential leaders. If the United States had taken these steps, initial violence likely would have been lower, and the shaky political and social gains made by the Black community more consolidated. They also would have made subsequent uses of force easier, as the opposition would have been weaker.

Given President Johnson's firm opposition, such planning would have required new political leadership. As with the recommendation for bigger numbers of troops deployed for a longer period, enlarging the military in peacetime would have been politically difficult in light of prevailing attitudes. Although initial violence would have been lower given such planning, the bitter attitudes would take many years to overcome, and at least some violence

likely would have erupted as troops were drawn down. Perhaps more important, it would have taken a remarkable sense of foresight among national leaders, especially as the United States at this point in its history did not have the considerable experience with counterinsurgency and occupation that it would later gain (though, even then, it often fails to remember this experience until an insurgency is well developed).

Recognizing the need for such advanced planning, however, is important if scholars and policymakers are to learn from Reconstruction and the insurgencies that broke out after various U.S. interventions. Planners should anticipate resistance, even in cases where the initial victory is easy and an insurgency seems unlikely.

REFRAMING IDENTITY CLEAVAGES

Insurgents try to exploit identity cleavages to their advantage. Counterinsurgents can try to thwart such attempts, promoting an array of intersectional identities that might exist in any given locale to reframe the conflict in ways favorable to their cause.

Although white Southerners mostly agreed that Black citizens should be subordinate to white citizens, they often differed on economic policies—a potential point of division that clever Republican political leaders might have exploited. Before and during the Civil War, the planter class dominated Southern politics. The war worsened the divide, draining small farms of manpower while large plantations with many slaves could still be productive. The ability of wealthy white Southerners to avoid conscription by producing a substitute (including twenty enslaved workers to provide labor for the war effort) also rankled.[193] In addition to wartime grievances, the Southern economy produced additional class divisions, especially after the plantation economy began to stabilize by 1868 while smaller farms still faced ruin. In addition, the Freedmen's Bureau in some states helped more poor white Southerners than it did Black residents, a potential source of unity.[194]

Economic differences among white Southerners were unable to transcend race, however. Indeed, violence itself united white Southerners of different classes, and, over time, economic pressure and social ostracism brought many white Southern Republicans into the ranks of Southern Democrats.[195] Class and economic concerns among white Southerners became more important for

---

193. Foner, *Reconstruction*, pp. 14–16.
194. Grandin, *The End of the Myth*, p. 103.
195. Fellman, *Blood Redemption*, p. 132.

Northern Republicans than progress on Black equality. To ensure that divisions among white Southerners were the primary source of political identity, Republicans would have had to play down issues of Black equality, thus depriving themselves of potential voters and a cause many of them genuinely embraced. Even today, U.S. politicians have regularly turned to racial rhetoric to gain support, often overcoming class or other divisions in the process.

The failure to put economic divides ahead of racial ones suggests the power of preexisting identity cleavages, a common problem for intervening powers after conflicts. In Libya, for example, the United States tried to promote unity governments and use economic assistance to buy off warlords. These efforts could not overcome tribal and regional divides, and indeed the allocation of economic aid often became a source of new quarrels among local militias.[196]

DESTROYING THE ECONOMIC POWER OF THE OPPOSITION

Part of the power of white Southerners came from their dominant economic position—for example, through land ownership and greater access to capital—especially when compared with the impoverished state of the formerly enslaved. The U.S. government could have redistributed the property of those who played important roles in the Confederacy, provided massive economic assistance to poor Black farmers, and otherwise tried to rectify the economic imbalance—essentially the Freedman's Bureau on steroids. Although the architects of Reconstruction considered such dramatic measures, caution ruled their thinking, and they chose not to enact them.[197]

In 1865, then Maj. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman issued Special Order 15, redistributing 400,000 acres along the Georgia and South Carolina coasts to the formerly enslaved. Stevens, Charles Sumner, and other abolitionists backed such measures, and 40,000 of the formerly enslaved would eventually be resettled there. Later, Sherman would provide many with mules, hence the enduring "40 acres and a mule" motto.[198] Seizing and redistributing land could have been replicated throughout the former Confederacy. As part of the broader white Republican effort to reconcile white Southerners, however, even

---

196. Frederic Wehrey, *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), pp. 86–88.

197. Roger L. Ransom, "Reconstructing Reconstruction: Options and Limitations to Federal Policies on Land Distribution in 1866–67," *Civil War History*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (December 2005), pp. 364–377, doi.org/10.1353/cwh.2005.0066; and Heather Cox Richardson, "A Marshall Plan for the South? The Failure of Republican and Democratic Ideology during Reconstruction," *Civil War History*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (December 2005), pp. 378–387, doi.org/10.1353/cwh.2005.0067.

198. Henry Louis Gates Jr., "The Truth behind '40 Acres and a Mule'" (n.d.), https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/the-truth-behind-40-acres-and-a-mule/.

Sherman's limited effort was discontinued (and most of the resettled population evicted) at the end of 1866.

Land redistribution would have been just and would have decreased the economic leverage used to coerce newly freed Black citizens, but it went against the laissez-faire mindset that dominated the thinking of the time.[199] Even if implemented, however, land redistribution would probably have had only had a limited impact. Compared with their white neighbors, Black Americans were poorly armed and would have had to rely on the government for protection. White landowners could, and would, simply seize their land at gunpoint, and local courts would uphold such action. Indeed, land redistribution would have given many dispossessed white farmers an even greater incentive for violence. Such a redistribution would have required a long-term approach involving an enduring occupation and political control.

Conclusion

"The past is never dead. It's not even past." Nowhere are William Faulkner's words more poignant than in U.S. racial history. The post–Civil War South offered numerous opportunities for violence, which Southern white Democrats exploited, and federal authorities failed to repress. The structural problems existing in the wake of the war at times made the challenge harder, but by themselves were not decisive. The architects of Reconstruction failed to plan properly, deploy enough troops in the South, give them an aggressive mandate to use force decisively whenever and wherever white supremacist violence appeared, or otherwise use the agency they had to defend the new political system. This failure gave the KKK and other violent groups opportunities to suppress Black voters and otherwise restore a white-dominated social and political order.

The staggering violence that occurred during Reconstruction, the gross suppression of human rights, and the unbending of the arc of the United States' moral universe get short shrift in U.S. history classes, as does the remarkable, but brief, progress in political representation by the formerly enslaved. The teaching varies by state or region, with the violence often downplayed or the period ignored altogether. Often there is a focus on "feel good" stories about abolitionists or isolated cases of progress without proper context.[200] Out-

---

199. Ransom, "Reconstructing Reconstruction," pp. 364–377; and Richardson, "A Marshall Plan for the South?"
200. Kristina Rizga, "How to Teach the Civil War in the Deep South," *Atlantic*, December 7, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/12/how-teach-civil-war-deep-south/577 588/.

side the classroom, the disenfranchisement, brutality, and murderous results of Reconstruction are too often ignored. As Julian Hipkins III, the global studies coordinator at Theodore Roosevelt High School in Washington, D.C., notes, "U.S. history is often taught in this continuous arc of improvement, but post-Reconstruction destroyed that myth."[201] The United States, like other countries guilty of major crimes against its own people, must reconcile with its history.[202]

The violence of Reconstruction, in turn, has had echoes in the decades that followed. Victories by white racists during Reconstruction gave them a repertoire of violence to draw on in subsequent years when their superior social position faced new threats. Night riding, election fraud, assassination, and similar tactics would continue in the Jim Crow era.[203] The racism embedded in the economy, politics, and society of the post-Reconstruction South changed the United States profoundly, with effects including lower levels of Black wealth and education and the massive Black migration to Northern cities in the decades that followed.[204] In the 1920s, following the blockbuster film "Birth of a Nation," which glorified the overturning of Reconstruction and depicted the Reconstruction-era Klan as heroes, white supremacists refounded the KKK, and it would become a major political force in many Southern states as well as Northern ones such as Indiana. The same script of political violence to protect the white-dominated political and social order would be followed again in the 1950s and 1960s to combat integration. Indeed, the United States today still lives in Reconstruction's shadow, with anti-Black voter fraud and restrictions, white paramilitary violence, and appeals to racism painfully common.

The failure of national, state-level, and military leaders to stop white supremacist violence and the resulting failure of Reconstruction shed light on theories of post-conflict societies, counterinsurgency, occupations, counterterrorism, and related literatures. Structural factors such as the state of the economy and the level of governance shaped events but, by themselves,

---

201. Quoted in Avis Thomas-Lester, "Forgotten in the Classroom: The Reconstruction Era," *Washington Post*, January 14, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/forgotten-in-the-classroom-the-reconstruction-era/2018/01/14/f39c5814-d2d8-11e7-b62d-d9345ced896d_story.html.
202. For lessons on the international side, see Jennifer Lind, *Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010).
203. Michael J. Pfeifer, *The Roots of Rough Justice: Origins of American Lynching* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2011), p. 88.
204. Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Vintage, 2011); and Kriston McIntosh et al., "Examining the Black-White Wealth Gap," *Brookings Institution Press*, February 27, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/02/27/examining-the-black-white-wealth-gap/.

did not determine success or failure. Similarly, although white supremacists enjoyed initial advantages in their ability to mobilize and in having access to weapons, assistance from the federal government to the Black community blunted their effects in some ways. Indeed, had the government armed Black militias, the consequences may have been more profound. Individual leaders mattered, but they were on both sides of the spectrum during Reconstruction, making it difficult to attribute causality to leadership for the entire Reconstruction era.

Policy failures at both the federal and state levels played a profound role in Reconstruction's demise. The federal government and military leaders involved in Reconstruction did not consistently support local collaborators and failed to convince most white Southerners of the legitimacy of Republican-led state governments. Upon withdrawal, the federal government did not arrange the departure of Army troops to manage the commitment problem related to ensuring Black rights, which declined once troops had left. Perhaps most important was the lack of military capacity and will to repress spoilers. Radical Republicans and military leaders generally understood the true character of their opponents, but they lacked the power, or the determination, to stop them. This finding validates Kelly Greenhill and Solomon Major's argument that, "as such, the real key to deterring and defeating would-be spoilers lies in the possession and exercise of the material power to coerce or co-opt them, rather than in the capacity to discern their true character or personality type."[205]

The experience of Reconstruction validates general lessons on the importance of deploying sufficient troops with a strong mandate, a unified strategy, and the risks of spoilers. It also demands that intervening states anticipate, and plan for, a possible insurgency and a contested occupation, even if the initial military campaign is going well. Finally, it underscores the point that political agreements that cannot be enforced are meaningless.

Building a true democracy in any society is difficult, and it is particularly hard after a conflict. Reconstruction's experience suggests both limits and lessons. Radical Republicans focused on voting, but true democracy demands the democratic rule of law. The rule of law, in turn, must operate at both the local and the national level. It also requires new, or at least vastly reformed, judiciary and police systems and military forces that act as a constabulary when necessary.[206] Because the democratic rule of law was lacking, or was insufficiently supported in the South, white supremacists were eventually able to use elections and other tools of democracy as a force for injustice.

---

205. Greenhill and Major, "The Perils of Profiling."
206. O'Donnell, "The Quality of Democracy."

Half measures are the bane of many military efforts, and Reconstruction is a sterling example of the problems they create. The Compromise of 1877, which recognized the end of slavery but entrenched Black inequality, showed what was possible at the start of Reconstruction and did not require a decade of painful efforts and staggering death toll. As would happen again and again, the difficult measures needed to win the peace were not thought through or resourced.

Like the failed effort at Reconstruction, attempts to build stable democracies leave many people at risk. Southern white Republicans risked being killed, driven from their homes, and socially ostracized. These considerable risks paled beside those faced by Black Americans, especially those in leadership positions. Similarly, those who collaborated with the United States in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, and other places faced additional risks when hostile forces contested or seized territory.

Yet, such a warning against half measures, the difficulty of democratization, and the risks to those who work with the occupiers is unsatisfying. The study of Reconstruction highlights a problem with compromise itself. If only violence is considered, one could argue that the Compromise of 1877 reduced the death toll in accord with political science articles recommending the incorporation of former combatants into government, a high degree of local autonomy, and concessions to win over embittered locals.[207] The post-Reconstruction era, though still bloody, was probably less murderous than the Reconstruction era: high thousands or even tens of thousands probably died during the ten years of Reconstruction, as noted above, while the Equal Justice Initiative documented the terror lynching of 4,084 Black Americans from 1877 to 1950.[208] Compromise in the name of stability, however, also meant surrender on the issue of Black voting rights and equality, cementing injustice into the postbellum foundation of the country. To keep the flame of freedom burning, a longer, often draining, fight would have been necessary.

---

207. For discussions on the importance of negotiations to prevent war recurrence, as well as their many problems, see Charles T. Call, *Why Peace Fails: The Causes and Prevention of Civil War Recurrence* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2012); Caroline Hartzell and Matthew Hoddie, "Institutionalizing Peace: Power Sharing and Post–Civil War Conflict Management," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (April 2003), pp. 318–332, doi.org/10.1111/1540-5907.00022; and Tricia Juhn, *Negotiating Peace in El Salvador: Civil-Military Relations and the Conspiracy to End the War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

208. *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, 3rd ed. (Montgomery: Equal Justice Initiative, 2017), p. 4, https://eji.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/lynching-in-america-3d-ed-091620.pdf.