

**Reconstructing Reconstruction**

*Reconstruction*, the term used to describe the years following the American Civil War, is one of the most hotly debated and poorly understood periods in U.S. history. When the Civil War ended in 1865, the South was in shambles. An economic system based on enslaved labor was gone. Southern states were no longer represented in Congress. The South desperately needed political, social, and economic changes.



The first African American members of the United States Congress, c. 1872

After Abraham Lincoln's death, Vice President Andrew Johnson became president. Johnson was a pro-Union Democrat from Tennessee. He sought to follow Lincoln's plan and allow the Southern states to rejoin the Union quickly, without many negative consequences for their secession. The Republican Senate, led by a small but vocal group of Radical Republicans, thought that Southern states deserved some punishment and should not be able to rejoin the Union so easily. They wanted to set up military governments and have strict requirements for states to rejoin the Union. President Johnson fought Congress, but the Radical Republicans eventually won the battle.

In the period from 1865 to 1877, when federal troops controlled the South, the Freedmen's Bureau set up schools across the South to teach formerly enslaved African Americans how to read and write. For the first time, African Americans could vote and were elected to office. Though there were positive gains, they didn't last. Reconstruction ended in 1877, and federal troops withdrew from the South. From 1877 until the 1950s, racial equality remained a low priority for the U.S. government.

Beginning in the late 1800s, most historians agreed with the views of historian William A. Dunning. Dunning saw Reconstruction as a failure, with the primary victims being white Southerners. Historian W. E. B. Du Bois was the first to challenge this view in the early 1900s. He pointed out positive aspects of Reconstruction from the perspective of African Americans. Views of Reconstruction have changed over the years, with some people claiming it was a failure and others claiming it was a success. Since then, historians have debated various viewpoints about the ultimate outcomes of Reconstruction. Which viewpoint do you think is correct?

**View #1: Reconstruction Was Corrupt**

According to Dunning, Reconstruction was supported by Radical Republicans who wanted to punish the South. He depicted Reconstruction as a "corrupt outrage" that these Northerners wanted to inflict on the South. In other words, the Reconstruction was perpetrated by the Republican party as both a political move and as revenge.

State and local governments during Reconstruction were often installed by the Radical Republicans. According to Dunning's school of thought, this led to the emergence carpetbaggers, or Northerners who moved to the South to run businesses and buy property at low costs, who profited from the South's defeat. Thus, Dunning and others of his opinion sought and presented evidence that Reconstruction led to political corruption, heavy (if not extortionate) taxation, and significant growth of public debt.

This school of thought also views the destitution and poverty of many enslaved persons, as well as white Southerners, as a consequence of Reconstruction. An important part of Dunning's argument is that the African Americans of the South, most of whom had never lived as free men and women in the United States, were suddenly "forced" into positions of freedom and sometimes power, for which their lives had not prepared them. Dunning and others believed that most African Americans were not capable of understanding and responsibly using the rights granted to them. They argued that African Americans were given too much power, too soon.

According to the Dunning school of thought, Reconstruction was a failure because it kept Southern states from controlling their own destinies. Radical Republicans, they said, tried to take advantage of the war-stricken region. They wanted to punish wealthy whites and strip away their former way of life. White Southerners fought back by forming terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan to "save" themselves from "Negro Rule." Popular films like 1915's *Birth of a Nation* reflected this view. Many white Americans came to believe this perspective was true.

Until the 1950s, most scholars followed Dunning's thinking. They painted a picture of corrupt governments led by greedy Northerners. In their view, Radical Republicans did not have a sincere interest in ensuring equal rights. Instead, they said that the carpetbaggers sought to gain power by manipulating newly freed African Americans and encouraged several African Americans to run for public office so that the carpetbaggers could control them. This view of many Southern whites assumed that formerly enslaved African Americans were ignorant and incapable of making their own decisions. Reconstruction, according to Dunning, was about excessive taxation, corruption, and a mad grab for power.

**View #2: Reconstruction Empowered African Americans**

W. E. B. Du Bois was one of the first scholars to challenge the Dunning school of thought. In 1935, Du Bois, an African American professor, followed up an earlier scholarly article with a book that proclaimed that Reconstruction was not as corrupt as Dunning made it out to be.

Du Bois did not deny that there were corrupt politicians. He argued, however, that there was no more corruption in the South than in the North—especially when it came to brokering railroad deals. He also pointed out that corrupt white Southern politicians were quick to demonize black citizens and elected officials in an effort to regain power. Du Bois's academic work was the first to highlight the achievements of African Americans as major players in history, not bystanders.

Du Bois's view emphasizes the achievements of African American educational institutions that eventually led to the public education system. Followers of this school of thought look to how African American churches and the Freedmen's Bureau educated and assisted with legal and property rights. Du Bois argued that many whites felt threatened when African Americans successfully joined free society.

Du Bois argued that Dunning's perspective did not consider the achievements of African Americans or the discrimination they faced. He argued that scholars had written history this way because of racism.

To Du Bois, Reconstruction failed only because it ended too soon and didn't follow through on the promises made to African Americans. Once the federal troops withdrew in 1877, the federal government directed its attention elsewhere.

Most Reconstruction reforms were reversed by "Redeemer" Democrats.

Southern states adopted sweeping discriminatory laws that prevented African Americans from voting, owning property, and enjoying the same rights as white citizens.

Combined with the terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan, African Americans in the South soon lived in circumstances that

were not much better than slavery. In DuBois's analysis, the Freedmen's Bureau was a "great human institution" whose powerful and mostly successful work was cut short for political reasons.



Portrait of W. E. B. Du Bois

## Making Up Your Mind

Historical accounts typically reflect the values of the time in which they were written. Were scholars like Dunning “bad guys,” or did they see things differently than we do today? What do you think?

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

1. Who were carpetbaggers?
  - A. Southerners who sided with Northern business and government leaders
  - B. African Americans who participated in businesses and governments after the war
  - C. Northerners who moved South to run businesses and governments after the war
  - D. Southerners who moved North to run businesses and governments after the war
2. Which statement best reflects William Dunning’s opinion of former slaves’ position during Reconstruction?
  - A. African American men should be able to vote for the first time.
  - B. Racial inequality reigned, despite slaves’ freedom, until the 1950s.
  - C. The Freedmen’s Bureau was founded to benefit African Americans.
  - D. They should have been integrated into free society more slowly and with more care.
3. Which statement best reflects W. E. B. Du Bois’s view of Reconstruction?
  - A. It was successful on all fronts.
  - B. It was the most corrupt period of American history.
  - C. African Americans made little academic or social progress during the period.
  - D. It was successful in gaining rights for African Americans, but the federal government failed to follow through on its promises.
4. Why do you think most Americans accepted Dunning’s interpretation of Reconstruction in the late 1800s and the first half 1900s? How might history have been different if Americans had rejected Dunning’s views and accepted DuBois’s views? What happened in the 1950s and 1960s that caused scholars to take another look? Use details from the reading passage in your answer.