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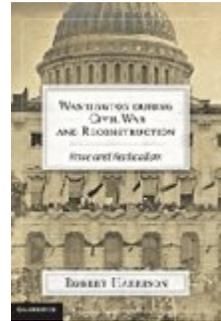
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Harrison. *Washington during Civil War and Reconstruction: Race and Radicalism.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. x + 343 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-00232-6.

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Reconstruction Washington and the Wrecked Promise of American Political Development

“Washington,” Robert Harrison explains in this clear, careful study, “was absolutely central to the political dynamics of Reconstruction” (p. 17). The capital, subject to the exclusive jurisdiction of Congress, gave Republican policymakers a chance to test their agenda for emancipation and freedpeople’s rights unencumbered by questions of state versus federal authority. The city illustrated how the racial and civil rights challenges that followed emancipation played out under urban conditions. And Washington dramatized Reconstruction’s limits. The capital witnessed a concentrated version of the hostility, disenchantment, and faltering dedication that caused the effort to secure full citizenship for African Americans to fall short of its goals across the South. Historians of Washington, nineteenth-century American cities, and Reconstruction have long recognized the importance of the city’s political and social turmoil between the start of the war in 1861 and the 1878 Organic Act, which rendered permanent the government of the city by federally appointed commissioners. The implementation in 1867 of equal manhood suffrage in municipal elections foreshadowed the drive for black political rights throughout the South. As numerous contemporaries remarked, the repudiation of elected local government in the republic’s capital in stages between 1871 and 1878 presaged the retreat from Reconstruction everywhere.

Until 2010, the most comprehensive account of the city in the era was James H. Whyte, *The Uncivil War: Washington during the Reconstruction, 1865-1878*. Published in 1958, during the initial wave of Reconstruc-

tion revisionism, Whyte sought to overturn misunderstandings from the decades when Lost Cause rationalizations and apologies dominated Reconstruction history. Many historians had discussed aspects of Reconstruction Washington since but in articles or sections of books about other themes. In the last two years, two long-awaited, worth-the-wait studies of Reconstruction Washington have appeared. When read together, they provide a powerful portrait that draws upon the half-century of research and analysis since Whyte of the political, social, economic, racial, cultural, legal, and even philosophical issues that swirl around the period. Kate Masur, *An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle for Equality in Washington, D.C.* (2010), emphasizes, as the title suggests, disputes in the city and Congress over the legal, ideological, and practical meaning of equality in the aftermath of emancipation. Masur’s book connects most directly not to urban or governmental history but to the historiographic analysis of Reconstruction overall and to the black experience in the era throughout the South. Cities, government, and public policy were the strengths of Harrison, the Welsh scholar who completed this manuscript shortly before his death in 2007. Harrison conceived his book in conversation with Masur’s work, then in progress. He acknowledged the centrality of the popular politics and day-to-day struggles and experiences that Masur stressed, and he worked to provide institutional and policy context for this “political organizing, grassroots activism, and community development” (p. 184). Instead, he drew upon political science and historical concepts, such as the analytical approach

known as “American political development,” to examine Reconstruction Washington for insights it offers into the American national state in the aftermath of the war.

Washington’s centrality to Reconstruction arose in part because of the capital’s unique situation within the U.S. polity and among American cities. As a bailiwick of the U.S. Congress, the federal district stood outside the gnarled problems of federal-state relations that hovered over Reconstruction in the former Confederate states. From a social and economic perspective, the overriding problems of Reconstruction involved securing an improved situation for blacks in the rural South while rebuilding southern agriculture on the basis of free labor and not slavery. Contemporaries understood cities as essential but as following “a different trajectory” within Reconstruction’s mainly rural-oriented political economy (p. 319). In the weakly urbanized Deep South, towns such as Mobile or Charleston became focal points for black political activism and black-white conflict. In larger southern cities such as New Orleans or Memphis, in border cities such as St. Louis and Baltimore, and in northern cities with a large black presence such as Philadelphia and New York, Reconstruction intertwined in confusing ways with the class and ethnic tensions that already surrounded industrial urbanization and corporate capitalism’s displacement of the older merchant-artisan town economy. Washington’s status as the capital, in combination with its web of cultural and political ties to the South and its nature as rapidly growing city, ensured that all the era’s ambitions, agendas, and conflicts would come together there in a magnified and volatile fashion.

Wartime Washington, Harrison writes, “was a Southern city, but very much a city of the Border South.” As in Baltimore or St. Louis, slavery was already on the wane, as three times as many free blacks as slaves lived in the District in 1860. But slavery’s “adherents clung fiercely to the institution” and to the racial attitudes to rationalized it (p. 10). Most Washington whites—even many wartime migrants from the North—were aghast at the prospect of an unconstrained African American presence in the city’s economy, life, and politics, especially as tens of thousands of contraband slaves and other freedpeople moved into the federal district from surrounding states. Most national Republicans, meanwhile, had come to see the capital as embarrassingly and dangerously infused with the spirit of the South. They were determined to transform Washington into a showcase for the northern principles that they meant to prevail in the reconstructed South and in the nation. That Republicans could not agree on what those principles were, how to imple-

ment them, and how hard to press them when they ran into opposition added to the confusion of the Reconstruction capital and helped lead to the era’s disheartening failures.

Harrison starts with the familiar story of the vast disjuncture between the grand capital that Civil War-era Unionists envisioned and the straggling, creaky, and vulnerable city from which they directed the war to hold the country together. Even after suspected disloyalty was rooted from the Washington City government early in the war, local officials resisted any responsibility for black migrants, huge numbers of whom sought refuge and work in the capital even before the District Emancipation Act of 1862. Harrison’s opening chapter adds details on tentative federal efforts to supply wartime Washington with police and fire departments and other public safety measures, and especially on federal struggles to deal with practical and political problems created by the black influx into the city.

Disparate efforts to find labor, housing, and relief for former slaves devolved toward the end of the war upon the Freedmen’s Bureau, the subject of one of the book’s most innovative chapters. Harrison stresses the unusual mission of DC branch of the bureau: “an agency created to manage the transition from slavery to freedom in the [former Confederate] states” turned into an urban welfare, employment, and housing bureau (p. 61). The sheer magnitude of DC’s contraband population “as well as the unwelcoming attitude of the municipal authorities” prompted this experiment. The author suggests that present-day critics of the bureau, including Masur, “judge bureau agents by anachronistic standards” (p. 62) that do not sufficiently account for the fiscal, organizational, and political constraints at work on U.S. government in the era.

In line with other recent, policy-minded studies of this experiment in expansive government, Harrison emphasizes what the Freedmen’s Bureau accomplished despite being “handicapped by its limited financial resources, restricted legal authority, and abbreviated life span.” The bureau was also hampered by “narrow and restricted” attitudes toward poor relief, which vastly underestimated the difficulty of moving people toward economic independence, while overestimating the supposed attractions of dependence (p. 108). This despite relentless criticism from on-the-ground activists such as Josephine Griffing, the former abolitionist who provided copious evidence that the bureau’s preoccupation with economy in its operations and with quick self-reliance for freed-

people would remain utterly unrealistic until the newcomers had time and resources to establish themselves in the city. While not denying that some bureau officials shared racist assumptions about blacks' supposed irresponsibility and lack of initiative, Harrison argues that the bureau's practices in Washington reflected the period's attitudes toward the urban poor overall more than toward African Americans in particular. One of the Washington bureau's politically risky undertakings involved resettling nearly 5,000 freedpeople in the North. Between 1865 and 1868, the bureau sent nearly twice as many blacks from the federal district northward than southward, despite anxiety on the part of the northern Republicans that constituents would tolerate efforts to aid blacks only so long as they stayed in the South.

To Harrison, the "impressive achievements" of the Freedmen's Bureau "give some indication of the kind of intervention that was needed to alleviate the problems of Washington's black poor." The fact that "nothing took its place" after the bureau's dissolution 1868 brings one back to a standard critique by historians of Reconstruction as a public-sector enterprise to reshape society: its "failure to incorporate an economic agenda," that is to say, to construct economic foundations for black equality (p. 318). Only a few radical Republicans regarded civil rights and economic security as needing equal attention right away. As in the South, most Republicans gave priority to measures to extend political and legal rights to Washington blacks. This was partly on account of their own ideological predilections and partly from awareness of the limits of northern white tolerance of redistributive policies.

Accordingly, Harrison spends the next three chapters revisiting the story of the rise and fall of the city's Reconstruction Republican regime from the District Emancipation Act of 1862 through the troubled mayoralty of the radical Republican Sayles Bowen (1868-70). These events are already familiar at least in outline to most Washington historians, and in any case they form the heart of Masur's first-rate book. Harrison uses his skills as an historian of politics and policy to enhance the story empirically and analytically. He traces the extent to which congressional Republicans indeed treated Washington as an "experimental garden" (p. 109) for emancipation, black male suffrage, black schools, and other measures later extended to the South. In congressional votes, factional alignments on Reconstruction in Washington and the South closely overlapped. Harrison further documents just how mediocre and provincial Washington's municipal government was in the years leading up to black suffrage and how mortgaged to the white

racist support were the local Unionists who replaced supposedly pro-Confederate municipal officials at the start of the war. Using techniques for estimating electoral support by race, the author provides evidence in support of the common perception that Washington's Republican Party in the late 1860s depended almost entirely on black votes. For blacks, Harrison explains, jobs were the overriding issue after the demise of Freedmen's Bureau employment efforts. Bowen's personal shortcomings form a familiar motif in accounts of Reconstruction Washington. Yet even a mayor with more patience and interpersonal skill would have had difficulty navigating between constituent demands for public works employment and expectations in Congress and among DC businessmen of tangible progress on the long-sought program of physical improvements to the ill-served, shabby city.

The Bowen regime's failures lead Harrison to meditate on the federal district's most fundamental institutional and structural dilemma: the capital's constitutional and fiscal dependence on a Congress for whom the city was only occasionally and reluctantly a priority. In another innovative chapter, the author provides case studies that underscore the "haphazard and often mean-spirited way" in which Congress oversaw its "stepchildren in the District of Columbia" (p. 212). As other writers have also documented, Congress in effect reserved to itself much of the authority of a city council while at the same time "devot[ing] little attention to the task" (p. 213). Except for a few members who developed a well-informed interest in the city, Congress intervened "fitfully and begrudgingly," based on moods, hobbyhorses, and "prejudices rather than ... serious reflection on local circumstances" (p. 215). Despite all this, some social service institutions did emerge that were for the period—well organized and funded. Examples include St. Elizabeths Hospital and the Columbian Institution for the Deaf, Dumb, and Blind, the future Gallaudet University. These successes occurred in "idiosyncratic" circumstances, when a well-connected political figure happened to understand a problem and round up support. Congress at times created agencies with adequate authority to tackle recognized problems, such as the District Board of Health of 1871-78. It then proceeded to undercut these agencies with erratic funding and meddling.

The government of the federal district thus came to illustrate "in an exaggerated form" the cross-currents and incoherences of the nineteenth-century American polity (p. 267). Disarray over the funding and implementation of street paving, sewerage, and other public works, along

with tangled stalemates involving railroad routes, the “putrid, fetid, poisonous, pestilential” Washington Canal (p. 247), and similar matters inspired the governmental agenda of the pro-development faction in the Washington Republican Party, led by politician and contractor Alexander R. Shepherd. Pro-development Republicans became convinced that the way to overcome the capital’s backwardness was to create a political system that could, in Shepherd words, “devise and carry out, as rapidly as possible, some system of improvements,” with minimal accountability to the public or scrutiny in Congress and with minimal distraction from Reconstruction-era racial politics.[1]

Having thereby elaborated on the Shepherd faction’s grounds for frustration with the capital’s existing governmental system, Harrison concludes with another oft-told story: the rise and fall of Shepherd’s Territory of the District of Columbia and the ensuing decision to impose a system of appointed commissioners and congressional control of the DC budget in exchange for a promise (which did endure into the early 1900s) of a federal contribution of 50 percent to the city’s annual budget and infrastructure expenditures. Harrison again draws on his skills as a political historian to back up standard analyses with empirical details. The paralysis of the Bowen administration followed by the imperiousness, recklessness, and chicanery that attended Shepherd’s Comprehensive Plan of Improvements together argued for Congress finally adopting a predictable system of oversight and fiscal support. Voting patterns and congressional debates reinforce the consensus among DC historians that the shift toward an entirely appointed commission, while prompted to some degree by the city’s administrative and fiscal dilemmas, was unimaginable apart from Republican desire to distance the party from

its own Reconstruction experiments in African American rights and citizenship.

Washington, in Harrison’s account, serves as a case study in Reconstruction, in urban governance, and in American state development. For other historians of the federal city, many of his findings and much of his analysis will not prove surprising. The book’s advantage comes from its careful research and explication and its interweaving of disparate historiographies related to the South and race relations as well as urban affairs and national governance. Had the author lived to see the book through to publication, he might have revised it to draw out the implicit comparison of the federal role in Washington to the equally difficult relations between other national states and their capital cities. As this book and Harrison’s earlier writings illustrate, it was an advantage to have a scholar with his broad, comparative perspective engaged by DC’s policy and governmental history. Washington historians will be grateful to Harrison’s colleagues in the United Kingdom for having seen this manuscript through to publication. Between Harrison’s *Washington during Civil War and Reconstruction* and Masur’s *An Example for All the Land*, Washingtonians now have a durable foundation for understanding this eventful but dismaying period, when the capital took a decisive turn toward becoming “worthy of the nation” in physical appearance and public works and services, but at the cost of the city’s ability to stand as a showcase of the country’s republican and democratic principles.

Note

[1]. Shepherd quoted in Alan Lessoff, *The Nation and Its City: Politics, “Corruption,” and Progressive in Washington, D.C., 1861-1902* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 95.

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