

**Allen C. Guelzo.** *Reconstruction: A Concise History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 192 pp. \$18.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-086569-6.

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The Reconstruction era has received a wealth of scholarly attention since the publication of Eric Foner's magisterial overview thirty years ago.[1] Historians have undertaken a wide range of specialized studies of the period since then, focusing on a range of topics that include westward expansion, economic development, gender, literature, law, religion, and more. There has never been a better time to be a Reconstruction-era scholar, and the future of such studies looks promising.

A serious intellectual problem still looms in the background, however. While scholars recognize the importance of studying Reconstruction, countless K-12 and higher educational institutions still struggle to find time for students to study this vital period. Public historians have not fared much better. The first National Park Service site dedicated to interpreting Reconstruction was not established until 2017, and many Civil War historical sites either relegate Reconstruction to a short footnote or ignore it altogether. Has America's collective memory of Reconstruction truly improved since Foner proclaimed it to be one of the most misunderstood periods in US history?

While specialized studies in recent years have undoubtedly improved historians' understanding of Reconstruction, the field has long needed a talented scholar to break down these divergent studies into a short, punchy synthesis. Ideally, this

book would be accessible to a newcomer who, after a few short readings, could leave with a stronger understanding of what happened during this confusing time. It could be assigned in classrooms, discussed in book clubs, and sold at historical site gift shops. Clocking in at a short 130 pages, Allen C. Guelzo's *Reconstruction: A Concise History* fits the bill perfectly.

*Reconstruction* provides readers with an overview of the era's political history. Focusing largely on the actions of the federal government during the era, Guelzo makes four salient points that provide the intellectual foundation for his book. First, he argues that Reconstruction successfully restored the federal Union that was shattered by civil war. While continued resistance to federal authority and widespread racial violence against African Americans complicated this effort, Guelzo correctly points out that every state eventually returned its allegiance to the American Union. Second, contrary to claims that the South was overwhelmed by federal despotism after the war, Guelzo points out that there were "no conquered provinces, no mass executions for treason" for former Confederates, and that their return to citizenship was relatively quick and lenient. Third, while acknowledging that the freed-people enjoyed only limited economic success during Reconstruction, he argues that many

African Americans enjoyed property ownership for the first time, and some enjoyed a transition to the middle class. Finally, Guelzo contends that the concept of "legal equality [for] all Americans under the banner of citizenship" was finally realized during Reconstruction. Notwithstanding the many attempts to dismantle Reconstruction, this spirit of legal equality has continued into the present and has ensured that "injustice, racial prejudice, and inequality have repeatedly been hammered down" by American law (pp. 11-12).

The first four chapters of *Reconstruction* focus on the aftermath of President Abraham Lincoln's 1865 assassination and the policies of the Andrew Johnson administration. Guelzo highlights the process by which Johnson—initially the darling of Radical Republican congressmen with his calls to punish former Confederates and make treason "odious"—came to assert his authority by currying favor with the same people he claimed to have detested. Claiming sole authority on matters of Reconstruction, Johnson issued presidential proclamations on May 29, 1865, that granted amnesty to most former Confederates and established a new state constitution in North Carolina, and which loom large in Guelzo's interpretation. In both proclamations Johnson paved the way for a quick end to Reconstruction without interference from Congress, which was not scheduled to reconvene until December. Most former Confederates enjoyed the quick "restoration of all rights and property, except as to slaves," while those exempt from the proclamation were required to seek a pardon from the president in person. Meanwhile, Johnson's plan for rebuilding North Carolina's state constitution aimed to provide a blueprint for other states in the former Confederacy by requiring that their new constitution outlaw slavery and repudiate secession.

Guelzo highlights the problems of both proclamations in quick fashion. For Guelzo, Johnson was perfectly willing to abandon an emerging Republican coalition of black and white Unionists

to gain favor with former Confederates. By demanding that the Confederacy's high military and political leaders seek a presidential pardon rather than initiate legal proceedings through Congress, Guelzo argues, Johnson wanted those leaders to "come to him on bended knee and experience some of the humiliation he had lived with as a 'plebian.' After that, he was more than satisfied to trade the garb of Moses for that of Pharaoh" (p. 21). Moreover, only residents who were eligible to vote in 1860 and had received amnesty were allowed to participate in these various state conventions, which essentially prevented African Americans from having any say in the future of their state governments since they were not eligible voters at that time.

Accusing Johnson of using executive power at the expense of congressional authority, the Republican-majority Congress fought back through several methods. It barred the South's political leadership that had been elected under Johnson's proclamation from entering its halls; overrode Johnson's repeated vetoes of legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1866; passed a series of laws in 1867 essentially transferring authority over Reconstruction policy to themselves; impeached Johnson in 1868; and ratified the 14th Amendment, which established a national definition of birthright citizenship, mandated equal protection of the laws, and repudiated all Confederate debts.

Chapters 4, 5, and 7 focus on the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant and the growing opposition to military reconstruction in the South. On the one hand, Guelzo portrays the Grant administration's efforts to protect African Americans in their new-found citizenship and voting rights as a noble promotion of civil rights. He gives particular credit to Attorney General Amos Akerman, who presided over the prosecution of Ku Klux Klan terrorists by the federal government in 1870 and 1871. On the other hand, he argues that "Grant did not initiate policies so much as react to crises," suggesting that the administration was slow to respond to

racial violence and not innovative policy-wise (p. 70). While Grant certainly hoped the white South would stop the violence without executive interference, one must remember that the president alone could not enforce law and order in the South. The Grant administration's efforts may seem laggard by today's standards, but various federal enforcement measures—including the creation of the US Department of Justice to fight the KKK—were seen by classical liberals within Grant's own party as a gross consolidation of federal power. Despite having a Republican majority for most of his presidency, Congress worried over the possibility of handing over too much power to President Grant. For example, Senator Carl Schurz argued that blacks "misused" their suffrage rights to vote mischievous politicians into office and thus were responsible for the violence and anarchy that came their way. Excessive enforcement, he warned, would "carry that revolution much farther in the direction of an undue centralization of power."<sup>[2]</sup>

Guelzo also criticizes the rampant political corruption of the era, exacerbated in large part by expensive infrastructure projects and scandalous politicians who did not always have the taxpayers' best interests in mind. The taxation of white yeoman farmers to build schools, railroads, and internal improvements subsequently "drove them into supporting the cotton elite," according to Guelzo (p. 76). While he is right to criticize the corruption of the Grant administration, Guelzo sometimes relies too much on assertions made by implacable foes of Grant and his Reconstruction policies. Guelzo approvingly cites Henry Adams as an authority on the Grant administration, but Adams was actually a disgruntled office-seeker who famously stated in his autobiography that the "the evolution from President Washington to President Grant was alone evidence enough to upset Darwin."<sup>[3]</sup> Similarly, Guelzo's assertion that the various southern states were full of corruption is corroborated by James Pike, an avowed racist who believed enfranchising blacks had been a

grave mistake. These sources are far from objective. Moreover, Grant is unfairly blamed for the Credit Mobilier scandal, which actually took place during the *Johnson* administration (pp. 97, 100).

President Grant was reelected in 1872, but the wheels of Reconstruction were already close to falling off. In-fighting within the Republican Party was one source of tension. While Guelzo highlights the role corruption played in leading some Republicans into the breakaway Liberal Republican faction, those same critics also called for lower taxes, lower tariffs, the restoration of voting rights for former Confederates, and an end to military intervention in the South. For them, Grant's use of executive powers to enforce Reconstruction was dangerous. Democrats throughout the country who had always resisted Reconstruction and the expansion of black rights grew tired of the expense and effort to enforce the Civil War Amendments and related congressional legislation. When a devastating economic panic hit the country in 1873 and Democrats regained control of both houses the following year, the beginning of the end was near.

Perhaps the strongest aspect of *Reconstruction* is chapter 6, in which Guelzo explores the ways the Supreme Court hastened Reconstruction's demise. He convincingly argues that while previous historians have focused on the divide between the legislative and executive branches of the federal government during Reconstruction, those same scholars have failed to acknowledge that the Supreme Court also sought to expand its power against the other branches. This consideration is important given that Congress sought to cement the results of wartime emancipation through the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments and not simply acts of congressional legislation. By solidifying these acts through the amendment process, Congress sought to limit both the executive *and* the judicial branches' ability to overturn civil rights legislation. Guelzo cites Congressman John Bingham, who argued that these amend-

ments constituted "political not judicial questions, and can be decided only by the political department ... and from that decision there is no appeal" (quoted on p. 91).

The Court's influence during the Civil War had waned as President Lincoln invoked his powers as a wartime executive. Its membership subsequently felt an acute need to reclaim their power during peacetime. Guelzo asserts that the end of Reconstruction came about in part because the Court's primarily moderate and conservative members embraced a very narrow interpretation of the federal government's ability to enforce the 14th Amendment and related legislation. Citing the *Slaughterhouse Cases* (1872), *Blyew v. US* (1872), *US v. Cruikshank* (1876), and *US v. Reese* (1876), Guelzo points out that the decisions of these cases "hobbled both the Enforcement Acts and the Fourteenth Amendment to protect individuals from the actions of other individuals" (p. 96). In other words, the Court argued that the 14th Amendment prevented states from violating the "privileges or immunities" of individual citizens, but that it could not be applied to the actions of one private citizen toward another. By tacitly permitting discrimination against African Americans by private individual and corporate actors, the Supreme Court of the Reconstruction era set the table for future Jim Crow legislation and the abandonment of federal civil rights enforcement at the turn of the twentieth century.

Guelzo's most contentious claim that will no doubt arouse heated debate among historians is his argument that Reconstruction was a pure bourgeois revolution "outside the boundaries of Marxist theory" (p. 11). According to him, the Republican push for an economic system based on free labor—the belief that workers should have the right to freely contract their labor and that, through hard work and thrift, wage laborers would eventually become bourgeois owners of land and property—was purely capitalist in nature.

Guelzo makes two different arguments to support his thesis. One engages previous Reconstruction historiography. The Dunning school scholars of the early twentieth century, according to Guelzo, was excessively "progressive" in their racism and distrust of popular democracy, which blinded them to the liberatory aspects of free labor. Meanwhile the "anti-Dunningites," starting with W. E. B. Du Bois and James S. Allen in the 1930s and continuing through Kenneth Stampp, John Hope Franklin, and John and LaWanda Cox during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, were excessively Marxist in their interpretations and subsequently unable to view Reconstruction through any other lens besides "class and revolution" (pp. 9-10). Both of these classifications are awkward and debatable. Not all Dunning School scholars could be considered "progressive," and scholars like Stampp and Franklin could hardly be called Marxists. In fact, Stampp actually characterized Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* as "naïve" for portraying the era as a Marxist "proletarian movement."<sup>[4]</sup> Nevertheless, these distinctions allow Guelzo to portray himself as a conservative counterpoint to previous Reconstruction scholarship that he believes has been dominated by scholars of a leftist persuasion.

Guelzo also contends that Reconstruction's end came about not because of liberal capitalism (which numerous Marxist historians have argued), but because the white South continued to embrace a feudalistic economic structure that placed black workers into serfdom. By promoting feudalism, the South rejected a genuine capitalist society that would have privileged profits over racist subjugation, impoverishing the region for many generations to come. Northern Republicans' free labor vision would have remade the South's economy to promote manufacturing, mining, and the development of a vast infrastructure and trade network. Racist indifference from northern Democrats who remained skeptical of free labor and continued resistance to liberal capitalism among white Southerners destroyed what the

abolitionist Fredrick Douglass described as an effort to "cause Northern industry, Northern capital, and Northern civilization to flow into the South (quoted on p. 44).[5]

While Guelzo's theory of a pure bourgeois revolution is compelling and worthy of further discussion, two significant concerns emerge that *Reconstruction* does not address, in the opinion of this reviewer. For one, the goals of politicians are not always the same as those of their constituents. As a study of top-down politics, Guelzo does not address how common citizens reacted to the goals of liberal politicians. While northern Republicans wished to create a thriving middle class of like-minded Americans committed to free labor and political equality, many of those same politicians worried about various interest groups who sought to expand the definition of those terms beyond standard norms. For example, supporters of the emerging Greenback Party argued that the government needed to do more to provide aid for struggling workers, while farmers' cooperatives pushed for the same in agriculture. Women advocated for the right to vote while African Americans sought expanded civil rights legislation to end discrimination in public facilities and education.

The effect of these growing movements after 1870 was an increasing fear among moderate and conservative politicians about the potential rise of socialism, unfair redistribution of wealth, and unchecked democracy that would overwhelm and replace the standard free labor vision. As Heather Cox Richardson argues, "those who believed they could make it on their own saw themselves as part of the 'great middle' between rich monopolists and the lazy poor who were trying to harness the government to their own needs. They distrusted certain suffragists, African Americans ... as well as certain kinds of businessmen and workers, believing they wanted special government aid, which, if given, would destroy the American system of evenhanded government." [6] In this

sense a prevailing fear of socialism made white southern oppression of black workers—whether feudalistic or capitalist in nature—less of an issue than the possibility of a radical democracy that could potentially overthrow the social order. Concerns over class and racial tension intersected to simultaneously quell the voices of both Reconstruction's most radical citizens *and* the more conservative advocates of a capitalist, national system of free labor.

The other significant problem is likewise rooted in Guelzo's focus on the politics of Reconstruction to the neglect of economics. Despite his contention that Reconstruction was a pure bourgeois revolution, Guelzo provides no discussion of many vital economic debates that challenged the prewar free labor vision. Those debates included economic industrialization, the rise of labor unions and cooperatives to advocate for workers' rights, the increasing number of labor strikes taking place through the country, specie versus paper as a form of national currency, tariffs versus free trade, strategies to fight inflation after the Panic of 1873, a national system of taxation, the payment of public debts from the Civil War, and the correct role of government in addressing these issues.[7] By leaving out these crucial discussions (which could have been included in a short ten- to fifteen-page chapter similar to the one about the legal aspects of Reconstruction), Guelzo's economic arguments sometimes appear to be based more on assertion than actual evidence.

Historians and lay audiences should nevertheless read Guelzo's fine book and draw their own conclusions. Overall, *Reconstruction's* brevity and clarity serve as major assets that will draw a wide range of audiences to the book. It is perhaps the finest introduction to Reconstruction to have been recently published, and will prove to be a wonderful starting point for discussing the history of Reconstruction for years to come.

Notes

[1]. Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988).

[2]. Schurz quoted in Xi Wang, "The Making of Federal Enforcement Laws, 1870-1872." *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 70, no. 3 (April 1995): 1033, 1051.

[3]. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918), 266.

[4]. Kenneth Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (New York: Random House, 1965), 218; and W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1935).

[5]. See also Allen Guelzo, "Defending Reconstruction," *Claremont Review of Books* 18, no. 2 (Spring 2017), accessed August 23, 2018, <https://www.claremont.org/crb/article/defending-reconstruction/>; and Allen Guelzo and Patrick Rael, "Slavery and Emancipation," *Claremont Review of Books* exclusive online content, June 27, 2016, accessed August 23, 2018, <https://www.claremont.org/crb/basicpage/slavery-and-emancipation/>.

[6]. Heather Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 2.

[7]. A good, short introduction to these topics is Nicolas Barreyre, "The Politics of Economic Crisis: The Panic of 1873, The End of Reconstruction, and the Realignment of American Politics," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 10, no. 4 (Oct. 2011): 403-23.

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