On Revising Reconstruction History: Negro Suffrage, White Disfranchisement, and Common Sense

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ON REVISING RECONSTRUCTION HISTORY: NEGRO SUFFRAGE, WHITE DISFRANCHISEMENT, AND COMMON SENSE

One of the most continuous and pertinacious themes of Reconstruction history is the notion that the Radical control of the South was based on a broad, ill-gotten electorate made up largely of Negroes. While scholars have made some inroads in challenging this interpretation,¹ a great deal of additional research needs to be done before any definitive revision can be made. Compounding the difficulty is the fact that many of the vital statistics are incomplete, thus the historical record may never be conclusive.

In the meantime, the traditional view—a view more compatible with sectional loyalties and romantic myths—lingers. Predicated on the assumption that vast numbers of Negroes were enfranchised while thousands of southern whites were being denied the ballot, it holds that a Radical Congress overthrew without cause the legitimate state governments established in the immediate post-war period. Negro suffrage and southern white disfranchisement, the tradition goes, were the twin keys to the success of the carpetbag governments. It was bellowed from both North and South during the Reconstruction; and historians of almost all persuasions have perpetuated it ever since. One student has asserted that "white majorities were cut down or wiped out entirely,"² a view repeated so frequently that few have dared to question it. That such universal opinion could be based on such tenuous and fragmentary evidence is one of the enigmas of Reconstruction history.

According to the Eighth Census (1860), two southern states—South Carolina and Mississippi—had Negro majori-

¹ Of the several revisionist studies, two of the best are: John Hope Franklin, Reconstruction: After the Civil War (Chicago, 1961); and, Kenneth M. Stampp, The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877 (New York, 1965). Both works, while pointing to the accomplishments and failures of these years, suggest that the South was more a victim of its own inertia than any Radical conspiracy.

ties. By 1870, Louisiana probably became the third. The Negro percentages of the populations in the other southern states in 1870 ranged from 48.8 in Florida to 25.2 in Arkansas. Three of them—Alabama, Georgia, and Virginia—had, like Florida, populations that were over 40 per cent Negro. It was obvious from the outset that any plan to enfranchise the freedmen, unlike suffrage proposals in the North, would involve vast numbers of blacks. In giving the ballot to 800,000 ex-slaves, one northern critic lamented, "considerations of mere temporary expediency, of mere party advantage, fall paralyzed to the ground." We in the North, refusing to grant impartial suffrage in our own states, force it upon others "by the bushel." "A little retail negro suffrage here, where it can do little harm, is denied," Congressman Samuel Sullivan Cox observed; "wholesale negro suffrage there is enforced where it is supreme."

According to most critics, the freedman’s appalling ignorance would destroy the democratic process in the South. Many ex-slaves, they complained, had never heard of the candidates they were asked to support. Others allegedly could not identify their home county or give their exact ages. A few critics went so far as to claim that some freedmen were of such low intelligence that they had trouble remembering their own names. After interviewing an illiterate field hand in Georgia, a northern traveler regretfully conceded that this man represented the lowest intelligence "among that class on whom it is proposed to confer the right of suffrage." As Tennessee’s Governor Brownlow put it: impartial suffrage would "open the ballot-box to the uninformed and exceedingly stupid slaves of the Southern cotton, rice and sugar fields." While the governor was obviously referring to the

8 The Ninth Census (1870) showed a fractional Negro majority in Louisiana, but an admitted undercount for both races makes a precise determination impossible.


6 Whitelaw Reid, After the War: A Southern Tour, May 1, 1865 to May 1, 1866 (New York, 1866), p. 371; The American Annual Cyclopedia and Register of Important Events (84 vols., New York, 1870-1903), 1865, p. 781.
Negroes of the Black Belt, he was not overlooking the presumed dangers of impartial suffrage in his own state. There was no doubt, of course, that the ignorance of the vast majority of the freedmen was staggering; thus most whites, without considering the causes of or the remedies for that ignorance, concluded that Negro suffrage would lead to the absolute ruin of the South. As a northern poet put it:

'Cause now I'se got de franchise
Dough I neber goed to school,
And if Massah Bullock's 'lected,
I gits forty acres and a mule!7

For a variety of reasons, there was an almost ingenuous confidence among white Southerners that northern public opinion would not permit the Congress to force Negro suffrage on the South. The truculent words of northern racists were reassuring. "[J]udging by myself, and comparing the limited extent of my prejudice against the colored race with that of the generality of the Northern people," one writer sanctimoniously declared, "I do not believe that the people of the North will allow large armies to be raised for any such unfair and oppressive purpose."8 More important, the returns from the state elections in the North seemed to justify this optimism. To be sure, the Democratic party's surprising show of strength in such Republican strongholds as Maine, New Hampshire, and Minnesota was especially encouraging. A month after the elections of 1867, white conservatives in Little Rock, Arkansas, pledged to "preserve the principles of the national Constitution by co-operating with the Democratic party of the Union." "In view of the astonishing results of the recent elections in different portions of the Union," they added, "the voices of the Democratic and Conservative masses of the North call upon us to assist in defeating the attempt of radicalism to destroy our old constitutional government and set up in its place one in which others than white men shall have the controlling influence."

Democrats in Louisiana met in the following year and, on the

7 La Crosse Democrat, May 12, 1868.
8 William Archibald Dunning, Essays on the Civil War and Reconstruction and Related Topics (New York, 1898), pp. 189-190; Hartley, Universal Suffrage-Female Suffrage, p. 32.
basis of the same elections, expressed confidence that northern Democrats and conservatives would not let them down.9

Nevertheless, other southern whites, less optimistic than their neighbors and refusing to take heart from northern elections, displayed genuine fear over possible Negro disfranchisement. In fact, there were signs during the early months of Radical Reconstruction that some of them, sensing the inevitable, hoped to capitalize on the black vote and recruit it for their own purposes. While such moves never amounted to much, they did suggest an attempt to make the most of what seemed to be an intolerable but unavoidable development. In 1879, Wade Hampton, a former Confederate general and later governor of South Carolina and a United States Senator, boasted that he had been the first white man in the South to recommend Negro suffrage, and that many "intelligent and reflecting whites" had agreed with him.10 Hampton was only guessing, of course. In February, 1866, a Texas conservative had offered his state a sweeping plan, including three alternatives, for extending the ballot to the Negro.11 Seven months later, John H. Reagan, former Postmaster-General of the Confederacy, wrote to Governor Throckmorton of Texas and urged him to consider limited Negro suffrage in order to guarantee white supremacy. Otherwise, he insisted, the Radicals would force mass Negro suffrage on the state.12 Nonetheless, Hampton's boast that other whites agreed with him, though misleading, was true.

Attempts by southern conservatives to exploit the Negro vote, of course, were examples of political expediency rather

9 New York Herald, November 6, 9, 1867; Ann. Cyc.: 1867, p. 55; 1868, p. 432.
11 E. Degener, The Minority Report in Favor of Extending the Right of Suffrage, with Certain Limitations, to All Men without Distinction of Race or Color Made in the Texas Reconstruction Convention (Austin, Tex., February 24, 1866). The three plans were: universal suffrage by the end of 1866; universal suffrage by the end of 1876; and universal suffrage to all "born free" by 1866. The convention refused to consider any of the plans.
12 The letter set off a storm of controversy among several Democratic editors in the North. See especially Columbus Crisis, November 21, December 5, 1866; New York World, November 19, 20, 1866.
than a genuine concern for the freedman's civil rights. The idea of using the ex-slaves to check the economic encroachments of poor whites and the countermoves of political enemies must have appealed to more than a few former slaveowners. If Negroes are granted the ballot, a northern writer predicted, "I for one should not at all be surprised to see the great majority of them voting the ticket of their masters." Governor Brownlow recommended the forced removal of all the Negroes in his state to a separate territory because "the great majority of them would be influenced by leading secessionists to vote against the Government, as they would be largely under the influence of this class of men for years to come, having to reside on and cultivate their lands." 13

Though not always including an endorsement of suffrage, white conservatives did occasionally express sympathy for the freedmen. In December, 1867, delegates to a meeting in Richmond, Virginia, resolved to do all that they could for the Negroes, insisting, however, that the ballot belonged in the hands of the whites only. Conservatives in South Carolina, where Negroes outnumbered whites by three to two, were much more generous and expressed a willingness, "when we have the power," to grant the Negroes, "under proper qualifications as to property and intelligence, the right of suffrage." Even with these ambiguous conditions, the statement was surprising. A short time later, Democrats in Texas announced a desire to see all the freedmen protected by the laws of the state. Pleading for the restoration of white rule, the Democratic State Central Committee of Louisiana even asked the Negro leaders of their state for support. 14

While predictions of a Negro-supported white conservative oligarchy were certainly exaggerated, they were menacing enough to frighten northern Negro leaders who saw in them a Republican excuse for backing down. In July, 1865, delegates to a convention of colored men in Philadelphia insisted

that there was absolutely no basis for the suspicion that former slaveowners would control the southern Negro's vote. The Negro cannot be made to do, "now that he is free, what he could not be forced to do when a slave," the convention proclaimed. As to the charge that the Negro's gross ignorance would corrupt the ballot and make him the tool of a beguiling white Southerner, the delegates pointed to that class of poor whites exploited by the racists and resolved: "That the apparent anxiety to preserve the ballot-box from the influence of the ignorance of the colored man is proved, by the class of [white] men invited and urged to the polls at every election, to be but a hypocritical and malignant subterfuge." In short, those who most feared a white planter oligarchy based on a manipulated uneducated Negro electorate were themselves exploiters of hatred, prejudice, and ignorance.\(^\text{15}\)

Since southern Negroes had majorities in at most three states, impartial suffrage in the South involved more than simply enfranchising the freedmen. According to the traditional interpretation of Reconstruction history, Radical Republicans hoped to disfranchise thousands of southern whites, a move that would easily create black majorities in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Virginia. Theoretically, this would add fourteen men to the United States Senate who, representing Negro majorities, could obstruct any legislation; or voting with the Radical senators from the northern states, pass any bill. To the white Southerner the outlook must have seemed, at best, grim, and, at worst, catastrophic.

Suggestions of mass disfranchisements had first appeared during the war when certain congressmen had proposed test oaths for southern whites as a condition for the reinstatement of civil rights.\(^\text{16}\) After Appomattox, what began as a remote suspicion became a genuine fear, at least among the most fanatical opponents of the government. On Saturday morning, April 15, 1865, a few hours after Lincoln's death, a

\(^{15}\) Ann. Cyc., 1865, p. 694.

\(^{16}\) One student, Harold M. Hyman, *Era of the Oath: Northern Loyalty Tests During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Philadelphia, 1954), has concluded that the oaths generally were ineffective, thus further deflating the argument that vast numbers of ex-Confederates were excluded from government. Moreover, it must be remembered that it was Andrew Johnson's wholesale distribution of pardons to former rebel officials that triggered a great deal of the congressional resistance.
Copperhead extremist savagely denounced an alleged abolitionist plot to secure "Nigger Supremacy" by disfranchising southern whites. It is not just a matter of a few thousand, he complained. On the contrary, Frederick Douglass and Horace Greeley are determined to enfranchise all blacks and disfranchise all whites. After military reconstruction began in 1867, many whites were certain that their original fears had been justified. The venomous La Crosse Democrat attacked the "black niggers from the cotton fields and the white niggers from New England" for stealing the ballot from respectable white Southerners and giving it to illiterate blacks.

In a separate pamphlet, Democrat editor Marcus Mills "Brick" Pomeroy accused the Radicals of encouraging multiple registration among the freedmen. "[T]he hideous villainy of the reconstruction infamy lies, not in giving the negroes suffrage," the Chicago Times lamented in the summer of 1868, "but in disfranchising white men and so legislating as to give the negro party ascendancy." In the South, of course, white conservatives were convinced that mass disfranchisement was an accomplished fact. Thus did the extremist critics of the government propagate a notion that has lingered for a century.

In truth, the fear of white disfranchisements may have been the most exaggerated reaction of the entire Reconstruction era. Since the Radicals did overthrow the white conservative state governments that had been set up under the Johnson Reconstruction program, most alarmed observers carelessly concluded that there must have been mass disfranchisements. But their conclusions—as well as those of many since—simply

17 New York Weekly Day Book, April 15, 1965; La Crosse Democrat, February 25, 1868; [Marcus Mills Pomeroy], Condensed History of the War, Its Causes and Results: Plain Home-Told Facts for the Young Men and Working Men of the United States (n.p., 1868), p. 11; Chicago Times, July 15, 1868; Edward A. Pollard, The Lost Cause Regained (New York, 1868), pp. 37-39. A few alarmists even predicted the disfranchisement of northern whites. On July 23, 1868, Congressman S. S. Cox asked a Brooklyn audience: "If Congress can overturn white suffrage South, can it not establish black suffrage North, and withhold it from the whites? If the States South have not the sovereignty power in this regard, have the States North?" A few days later, editor Wilbur Storey of the Chicago Times named one Anthony O. Hesing as the leader of a drive, already in progress, to disfranchise northern whites. See Cox, Speeches of 1868, p. 7; and, Chicago Times, July 29, 1868.
do not stand up after a careful examination of the evidence; and, where the evidence is scanty or nonexistent, they do not pass the test of common sense. Known disfranchisement statistics, pertaining only to the preliminary elections held under the Reconstruction Acts of 1867, are available for five states—Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida—and in all five, white disfranchisements did not give Negro voters a majority. South Carolina and Florida were the only states with more registered Negroes than whites. In the former state the whites, with slightly over 40 per cent of the total population, were in the minority to begin with, thus the disfranchisements were hardly necessary to insure a "Negro ascendancy." While it was true that registered Negroes in Florida outnumbered registered whites by a substantial amount, the total number actually disfranchised was so small that, after Negro disfranchisements were subtracted, there was a net loss of only one hundred and fifty white registrations.

In the other three states for which statistics are available, the registered whites retained their majorities in spite of the disfranchisements. Over 16,000 were disfranchised in Virginia, but the whites retained their majority by over 14,000. Registered whites in North Carolina outnumbered registered Negroes by a wide margin: 34,000 out of a total of 179,000 registrations. Oddly, Georgia provided what was probably the best rebuttal to the charge that the Radicals disfranchised whites for the sole purpose of guaranteeing a Negro majority. Though 10,500 were denied the ballot, whites nonetheless retained a narrow margin of slightly over 1,000 voters.


19 The exact figures are: South Carolina: white registrations, 46,882; Negro registrations, 80,550; white disfranchisements, 8,244; Negro disfranchisements, 625. Florida: white registrations, 11,914; Negro registrations, 16,089; white disfranchisements, 350; Negro disfranchisements, 200.
out of almost 200,000 registrations. If the Radicals had been determined to insure a Negro majority in this state, they could have done so easily by merely disfranchising 1,000 more whites—but they did no such thing. In addition, critics of the government almost always ignored the fact that Negroes were also disfranchised—1,118 in the Carolinas—usually for serious crimes. In short, in at least half of the ten reconstructed states, the disfranchisement of white voters did not create Negro majorities.  

The argument does not end here. In the five states where disfranchisements were not recorded, the registrations alone are revealing. Louisiana and Mississippi had registered Negro majorities, but since Mississippi and probably Louisiana had more Negroes than whites to begin with, this should not have been surprising. As in South Carolina, disfranchisements were not “necessary.” In Texas and Arkansas the situations were similar to those in Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia; the white voters retained registered majorities in spite of alleged disfranchisements. Only in Alabama, where the freedmen constituted slightly less than half of the total population (47.7 per cent in 1870), did the figures suggest that disfranchisements could have created a black majority. Here, Negroes had a five to three margin in voter registrations. Yet to get such a result, the Radicals would have had to disfranchise over 60,000 whites. For them to have gone to such lengths is difficult to believe because they could have had the same result—a simple Negro majority—by merely disfranchising a few thousand whites. Thus the traditional complaint loses much of its force for the only state where it made any sense in the first place.  

An example of how much guess-work has been involved in

20 The exact figures are: Virginia: white registrations, 120,101; Negro registrations, 105,832; white disfranchisements, 16,343; Negro disfranchisements, none recorded. North Carolina: white registrations, 106,721; Negro registrations, 72,932; white disfranchisements, 11,688; Negro disfranchisements, 493. Georgia: white registrations, 96,333; Negro registrations, 95,168; white disfranchisements, 10,500; Negro disfranchisements, none recorded.  

the standard view of Reconstruction history can be seen by simply adding the known disfranchisements under the Reconstruction Acts. They total 47,125 for five states; yet many sources, estimating for all ten states, cite a number far higher—some as high as 200,000.22 A look at the figures makes these guesses seem rather absurd. The five states with recorded disfranchisements accounted for 53 per cent of the total southern white population, including the three largest states. If one merely doubled the known disfranchisements to account for the other five states, the total is considerably less than 100,000. A computation based on the state with the most known disfranchisements would result in an overall estimate of 97,000. Or one based on the state with the highest percentage of known disfranchisements would be about 108,000. In short, no matter how the figures are juggled, they strongly suggest that both the contemporary estimates and the guesses that many have made since were gross exaggerations.

This is not to say that disfranchisements were not significant in the carpetbag control of the South. The difficulty lies in the fact that the statistics are very meager and apply only to the preliminary elections under the Reconstruction Acts. Moreover, there is no guarantee that the existing facts are accurate. After all, the military districts were instruments of the Congress; it may not have been politically expedient to advertise in the North the fact that large numbers of whites were being disfranchised in the South. The fact that five states failed to record any disfranchisements is itself enough to make one suspicious of the figures that do exist. In addition, the figures for Florida and Georgia, since they were so conveniently rounded off, are especially suspect. In other words, the test of "common sense" works both ways.

It also needs to be pointed out that subsequent state and local elections provided many additional opportunities for the Radicals to improve their political positions (or for the conservatives to undermine them); and Congress took it upon itself to deny the ballot to former rebel officials, though certainly not on a massive scale. In any case, the point is not that there were few disfranchisements, but that the critic

of the government had so little real evidence on which to base his complaints and thus that much of the contemporary and subsequent criticism of the Radicals is groundless. Indeed, it is far safer to say that there was no widespread, permanent disfranchisement in the South until late in the nineteenth century when white conservative state governments began the mass disfranchisement of Negroes.

A far more credible explanation of both the registration and disfranchisement figures and the subsequent course of southern politics is that the white people of the South lost control of their state governments by refusing to register; or, in some cases, after registering, refusing to vote.\(^ {23} \) They wallowed in self-pity and whined over the odious Radical grip from Congress when they should have been blaming themselves—a reaction that had plenty of eyewitnesses. As arrangements were being made for the various state constitutional conventions under the Reconstruction Acts, the editor of the Charlottesville (Virginia) Chronicle bitterly criticized those white Southerners who, “sullen and discontented,” had declared they would refuse to register. Their announcement that they “would prefer military government to negro suffrage” was based on a delusion. The only way to guarantee white control, he insisted, was for all eligible white men to register and vote.\(^ {24} \)

The southern boycott was also obvious to Northerners, including some of the same Copperheads who complained of mass disfranchisements. The editor of the Columbus Crisis, an avowed opponent of Radical Reconstruction, denounced those Southerners who, “paralyzed by supineness,” were just as responsible for the detestable carpetbag governments as the enfranchised blacks. By organizing on Democratic principles, he insisted, the southern whites could easily cast off the Radical-Negro yoke—but they refuse to do so. In Congress, Senator Aaron H. Cragin, Republican from New Hampshire, cited the results of the constitutional referendums in nine of

\(^{23}\) This latter situation was motivated largely by the fact that, under the first Reconstruction Act, it was easier to defeat a proposed Radical state constitution by registering and not voting than by not registering or by registering and voting against it. A supplementary bill quickly changed this practice.

\(^{24}\) Charlottesville Chronicle, June 18, 1867.
the ten reconstructed states to show that it was the white voters, and not the Negroes, who were responsible for the new state governments. While many southern whites apparently supported the Radical programs, most did nothing. Though it was within their power to control the elections, Cragin concluded, they nevertheless refused to register: "If a man sleep upon his rights shall he complain if he lose them?" Indignation and apathy, not disfranchisements, were major deterrents to white voter registration in the South. Many whites were either defiant or they simply did not care. In either case, they forfeited their right to self-government by keeping their names off the registration rolls or refusing to vote.

There were several reasons for the political abdication of the southern white conservative, some so obvious that critics frequently overlooked them. For example, many whites simply could not accept the idea of standing alongside a Negro—perhaps one of their own former slaves—at the polls. "God save the people of the South," a northern congressman cried, "from the depredations by which they would be obliged to go to the polls and vote side by side with the negro." In addition, the continuous racist reference to the "savage African" certainly frightened many. One observer conceded that most "white voters deny themselves the franchise, rather than be brought in collision at the polls with a race whose savage fiendishness is well known, and whose weapon of defence is a 'razor.'" Some stayed away from the polls in order to avoid an implied recognition of racial equality; while the refusal to register was, for still others, simply an act of protest. To show their contempt for the Radicals, they decided to disassociate themselves completely from all things related to Reconstruction.

More generally, the feeling of humiliation and disillusionment shared by most white Southerners was extremely im-

25 Columbus Crisis, April 1, 1868; Congressional Globe, 40 Cong., 2 Sess., January 30, 1868, pp. 849-850.
26 Marion Mills Miller (ed.), Great Debates in American History (14 vols., New York, 1913), VII, p. 440, quoting Congressman Andrew Jackson Rogers, Democrat of New Jersey; J. R. Hayes, Negrophobia "On the Brain," in White Men, or an Essay upon the Origin and Progress, both Mental and Physical, of the Negro Race, and the Use to be Made of Him by Politicians in the United States
important. Surrounded by the ruins of war, disenchanted over the "Lost Cause," stunned by the presence of an army of occupation, and reluctant—after putting their faith in men who had led them into a disastrous war—to become involved in politics and government, many southern whites, like General Lee, decided to refrain from participation in political affairs. A defeated, war-weary population, faced with the monumental task of rebuilding a ravaged countryside, had no time for the luxury of partisan politics and, as Howard K. Beale has observed, "remained politically indifferent through the various turns of political fortune." In short, the southern white man, while complaining of mass disfranchisements, surrendered the right to control his own affairs. It must have been quite obvious from the beginning that the Radicals were going to have things their way; and that the establishment of military districts indicated that they were going to depend on federal bayonets, not Negro voters. Had southern whites turned out in force, it is probable that the Radicals would have resorted to the most obvious expedient: simply secure the disfranchisement of more whites. This probability may have discouraged many from even bothering to make the trek to the registration office. But the existence of such an apprehension, however justified, while it served as a convenient excuse, cannot detract from the fact that many southern whites did not even try and thus were guilty of complicity in their own misery.

One of the reasons for the durability of the traditional version of Reconstruction history is the customary political habit of defining one's terms to suit one's purposes—and the post-war opponent of the government was no exception. Northern and southern critics, despite their obvious sincerity, based their complaints of Negro political domination on some rather illusory arguments. To begin with, they defined "majority" in a peculiar way. As they put it, the freedmen did not need a numerical majority in order to enjoy a political majority. Rather, if the total number of eligible Negro voters

(Washington, D. C., 1869), pp. 6-7. William A. Russ, Jr., MVHR, pp. 178-179, agrees that there were many who, after registering, refused to vote.

was greater than the difference in the number cast for each party, the Negroes had a "majority." By selling their votes to the candidate who promised them the most, and by voting as a bloc, the ex-slaves presumably would have the balance of power. Strangely, few defenders of the Radical program challenged this definition.

Though inherently false, such nebulous thinking appeared again and again in complaints against the government's reconstruction policies. Congressman Daniel Voorhees, a staunch Indiana racist, claimed that seventy electoral votes from the Negro-dominated South could decide a presidential election, regardless of the vote in the North. "The negroes of Georgia, in their dense barbarity, are to out vote the free-men of Indiana in the choice of a chief magistrate," he lamented. "The negro on the levees of the Mississippi is to drown the voice of the intelligent farmer of the North. . . . [T]he negro shall make the next President." Speaking before the Jackson Central Association in New York City, Horatio Seymour, disregarding the fact that senators represented states rather than populations, declared that "you cannot give three millions of negroes more Senators than are allowed to fifteen millions of white men living in New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Iowa, Kentucky, Missouri, and Michigan."28 Since the ten southern states would have the same number of senators as any ten northern states, Seymour apparently ignored his listeners' ability to multiply ten times two. Speaking strictly in terms of proportion, Seymour was technically correct. But this basis of representation has been true of all senators since the adoption of the Constitution. The Governor's reference to it was obviously little more than a specious attempt to excite and distort.

To the really zealous critic, mathematical deception was an art. With a bewildering display of clamorous histrionics, Francis P. Blair, Jr., tried to show how a few million

28 Columbus Crisis, October 29, 1868; Democratic Party, Indiana, Proceedings of the Indiana Democratic State Convention, held in Indianapolis, Wednesday, January 8th, 1868 (Indianapolis, 1868), pp. 25-26; James D. McCabe, Jr., The Life and Public Services of Horatio Seymour: Together with a Complete and Authentic Life of Francis P. Blair, Jr. (New York, 1868), p. 222.
freedmen would have more congressmen than twenty million whites. On another occasion he attacked the Reconstruction Acts for allegedly making "three millions of ignorant negroes . . . supreme over six million of the white race in the South." The congressmen and electoral votes controlled by the Radical-led ex-slaves are "relied upon to overcome the majority against the Radicals in the North, and enable a minority to control a majority in both sections."29 In short, Blair contended that two minorities, when added together, would outvote two majorities. Other critics, through speeches, editorials, pamphlets, and articles hammered away at this theme so relentlessly that few dared to challenge them.30

The Negroes of the South, of course, "dominated" no state or national election, a fact that has been obvious to anyone who has looked beyond the façade of racist rhetoric. References, both graphic and verbal, to the legislatures of South Carolina and Louisiana have appeared with such regularity that one is left with the impression that all of the reconstructed states were so organized and that black legislators recently freed from slavery controlled them. Yet, even in the five states where Negroes had registered majorities, whites retained virtually all important positions of leadership and made almost all major decisions. Moreover, Negroes who held local or minor offices usually did so at the pleasure of a white official; while the handful who did hold important positions generally served with distinction. As a prominent southern editor admitted, "leaders of the Radical party, with professions of Negro suffrage hot in their mouths, have been sending advice to the Southern Conventions that Negroes should not run for Congress, or aspire to any conspicuous office; that they should be satisfied to fill the lowest seat in

29 Chicago Times, August 8, 1868; McCabe, Life and Public Services of Horatio Seymour, pp. 460-461, 487-497.
30 Ann. Cyc., 1868, p. 495; Columbus Crisis, October 23, 1867; Philadelphia Ase: April 2, May 17, 19, 25, June 13, 20, 1866; March 8, 1867; September 23, 1868; New York Herald, September 9, 1867, February 7, 1868; Detroit Free Press, August 11, 30, 1867; New York World, July 12, 1868; La Crosse Democrat, February 26, 1868; S. S. Cox, Speeches of 1868, p. 11; Horatio Seymour, Public Record: Including Speeches, Messages, Proclamations, Official Correspondence, and Other Public Utterances of Horatio Seymour; from the Campaign of 1856 to the Present Time (New York, 1868), p. 300; McCabe, Life and Public Services of Horatio Seymour, pp. 460-461.
political synagogues." Carpetbaggers in South Carolina, a northern traveler observed, were beginning to fear the Negro’s desire for public office. As the white supremacist La Crosse Democrat’s "De Intelligient Woter" put it: "Dis ijee ob nigro suprimecy is gittin’ intirely too much feared an’ talked ob and even de Ripublicans was beginning to be scared on it, too."

The critic’s “balance of power” definition only made sense in a state where the parties were evenly divided and a substantial number of Negroes could be counted on to vote together—which was nowhere. A carpetbag congressman from Mississippi complained that the southern Negroes frequently were unpredictable as a political bloc. If the racist’s specious definition of majority was valid, he argued, the Negroes of New York could have decided some presidential elections.

In short, there was never any danger that the southern state governments would fall under the control of the Negroes, a fact strikingly underlined by the speed with which white conservatives regained control when they took the initiative. Tennessee, restored to the Union before military reconstruction had begun, became, in October, 1869, the first former Confederate state to return to the control of the white conservatives. Whites in Virginia regained control of their state government in the same month and engineered the state’s restoration to the Union in January, 1870; thus the Old Dominion never fell into official carpetbag hands. In the next seven years, the other nine states followed the same course. “Bill Arp’s” caustic observation that “slavery for the white foaks and freedum for the nigger runs mity well together now-a-days,” was completely groundless; and the traditional interpretation of Negro suffrage and white disfranchisement under the Reconstruction Acts equally indefensible.

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