

The Ordeal of the Reunion: A New History of Reconstruction

Douglas R. Egerton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Egerton, Douglas R. (2015) "The Ordeal of the Reunion: A New History of Reconstruction," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 17 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.17.2.26

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol17/iss2/25>

Review

Egerton, Douglas R.

Spring 2015

Summers, Mark Wahlgren *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A New History of Reconstruction*. University of North Carolina Press, \$40.00 ISBN 9781469617572

A Wider View of Reconstruction

For too many Americans, the Reconstruction era is an afterthought, or worse yet, a confusing postscript to four years of Civil War that provided considerable clarity. No serious scholar would today deny the centrality of slavery and its extension as the cause of the conflict, but with the return of peace in 1865—or at least the cessation of formal hostilities—the story grows murkier. Scholars cannot even agree on precisely when Reconstruction began, or exactly when it ended. Partly for that reason, library shelves bend beneath the weight of books chronicling the four years that followed the bombardment of Fort Sumter, while the number of pages devoted to its aftermath are few in number by comparison. Perhaps also the long shadow cast by Eric Foner's magisterial *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* kept some potential chroniclers at bay. Although now twenty-seven-years old, Foner's thick synthesis surely led some historians to believe that little was left to say about the era.

As the nation approaches the sesquicentennial of the war's end, that finally has begun to change, and among the important new volumes is *The Ordeal of the Reunion* by Mark Wahlgren Summers. The Thomas D. Clark Professor at the University of Kentucky, Summers is the author of a number of highly regarded studies of the Gilded Age, most especially *Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion: The Making of a President, 1884*; *A Dangerous Stir: Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction*; and *The Era of Good Stealings*. Summers obviously knows this terrain well, and the secondary scholarship cited here is as impressive as is the list of newspapers and archival collections he consulted during the five years devoted to producing this volume.

Summers has two goals here, and both are admirably accomplished. First, he seeks to demonstrate that the vast majority of white Republicans, particularly those in Washington, sought to reconstruct a just and enduring framework for the Union, but without fundamentally altering the prewar framework of federalism and popular democracy. Summers, of course, is not the first historian to note the essentially conservative origins for the early Reconstruction era, and as early as 1974 Michael Les Benedict published his influential article, "Preserving the Constitution: The Conservative Basis of Radical Reconstruction." To the extent that Foner used the term "unfinished revolution" in his subtitle, he too argued that there were preservationist undertones within the Republican Party and clearly suggested that as a reform movement, Reconstruction did not go far enough.

Unlike Benedict, however, Summers has pages enough to explore this theme, and he moves beyond the halls of power in Washington to examine the equally traditionalist attitudes of the generals stationed in the former Confederacy. Where civilian courts were functioning, even if they rarely dispensed justice, officers were often enthusiastic about letting them handle matters. Although hardly fond of white southerners, Union commanders understood that Americans throughout the nation worried about employing authoritarian means to rebuild their country, fearful that an eventual return to republicanism would not be an easy road. The more the military intervened in civilian affairs, generals fretted, the more the entire process of reunion might be discredited, and the harder it would be to win over the hearts and minds of white southerners. Yet Summers also places these concerns in a larger Atlantic context. Missouri Republican Carl Schurz, he notes, had fled true repression in the 1840s, and had Americans witnessed the way that Hungarian revolts were brutally crushed, they might have thought twice about the ongoing occupation of the southern states. "If the North had done like the czars and emperors," Summers writes, "Confederate generals would have become carrion long ago rather than teaching school, promoting railroad enterprises—and helping write the Democratic national platform in New York" (page 116).

The one place that conservatism did not reign, Summers observes, was in the American West. In the territories, the federal government regarded indigenous peoples as conquered provinces. Its people were denied the right to vote, their lands were confiscated, and their towns and villages sacked. White Georgians complained about the behavior of General William T. Sherman's men, yet southern planters, Summers observes, "saw no such destruction as Kit

Carson's troopers inflicted on the orchards and livestock of the Navajo people" (page 180). As Heather Cox Richardson noted a decade ago in *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War*, postwar conflicts with Native Americans not only influenced federal policy toward the South, but it also had an impact on the government's inability to squelch white vigilantism. As more and more troops were shifted to the territories to deal with the Apaches and the Lakota, that left fewer soldiers to guarantee safe and fair elections.

Summers' second goal is to situate his thesis into a larger narrative of the period, and so this volume will also prove useful for readers in search of a basic history of the era. Apart from the West, most of Summers' story takes place in Washington, and as a result he says surprisingly little about the black activists across the nation who actually objected to a conservative restoration of antebellum federalism. Few enough white politicians, perhaps, merited the adjective of Radical, but most black Republicans happily embraced the term. Few of them, however, earn more than a cameo in these pages. Frederick Douglass appears only five times, once in the context of his stewardship of the failing Freedman's Savings and Trust Company. Republican leaders, of course, rarely afforded black politicians positions of authority or power on Capitol Hill, and few remained in Washington long enough to develop the seniority necessary to wield real influence. Senator Blanche Bruce, moreover, was notoriously quiet during his single term in the Senate, rarely rising to engage in debate. Even so, Bruce gets only two mentions, while Hiram Revels, the only other black man to sit in the Senate during this period, earns but three. Joseph Rainey, the first African American congressman, appears not at all. Although *Ordeal* is already a lengthy book, black politicians on the state level never tired of peppering the War Department with requests for soldiers to provide protection for black voters, and had their voices appeared more often in the text, readers would understand that not all Republicans preferred a conservative, civilian-based solution to the ongoing violence in the South.

Summers is also a bit kinder to Andrew Johnson than are most recent scholars. Early on, he presents an impressive amount of evidence that demonstrates that the vast majority of southern whites understood how badly they had been beaten, and how much their damaged economy and ruined towns and cities required assistance. At the time, many agents with the Freedmen's Bureau blamed both the black codes and the rising tide of violence against blacks on Johnson's leniency, believing that a firmer hand might have silenced

the reactionary minority and emboldened men like James Longstreet, who were prepared to accept defeat and move on with their lives. If not as critical of Johnson as is historian and biographer Annette Gordon-Reed, however, their disagreement is simply one of degree. In these pages, Johnson emerges as a pugnacious loner who lacks the considerable political gifts of his predecessor. Although a courageous Unionist during the conflict, the Tennessee tailor was quite possibly the worst man for the daunting job. The “higher he rose,” Summers remarks, “the more he exposed his limitations” (62).

For a large book, *Ordeal* is a quick read, and Summers has a lively, engaging style. Readers of a certain age—and that include this reviewer—will catch a number of clever allusions, such as one to a famous Barry Goldwater speech. Summers has an amusing taste for choosing titles that mirror classic works, from Allan Nevins’ *Ordeal of the Union* to Theodore White’s *The Making of the President* and George Dangerfield’s *The Era of Good Feelings*. Readers who suspect that there is little new to be said about the years after Appomattox will be both enlightened and pleasantly surprised by the time they finish this important book.

Douglas R. Egerton is Professor of History at Le Moyne College, Syracuse, and the Merrill Visiting Professor at Cornell University. His books include Gabriel’s Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802; Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election That Brought on the Civil War; and The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America’s Most Progressive Era.