

### Capitol Men: the Epic Story of Reconstruction Through the Lives of the First Black Congressmen

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## Review

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**Dray, Philip** *Capitol Men: The Epic Story of Reconstruction through the Lives of the First Black Congressmen*. Houghton Mifflin, \$30.00 hardcover ISBN 9780618563709

### The Role of African Americans in Reconstruction Politics

Philip Dray, whose previous book *At the Hand of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black Americans* (2002) was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, seeks to fill a historical hole by telling the story of Reconstruction through the lives of the sixteen African Americans who served in Congress after the Civil War. The central argument, as much as there is one in this primarily narrative work, is that "in general, they brought an impressive degree of competence and dedication to their jobs" and "gave America a great gift, a demonstration of the loyalty and intelligence of its newest citizens" (353). Historians of Reconstruction and nineteenth-century America will recognize Dray's thesis as an interpretation that has dominated scholarship of the period for a couple of generations. Dray, however, appears to think his book is cutting edge. He insists that even after the negative image of African American officials that dominated earlier scholarship was dispelled by "greater objectivity," that "black representatives nonetheless remained marginal figures" (352). The dust jacket more grandly proclaims that "despite their status as congressmen, they were made to endure the worst humiliations of racial prejudice. And they have been forgotten--often neglected or maligned by standard histories of the period." This would certainly be news to Eric Foner, who wrote the standard history of Reconstruction in 1988. Acknowledging that he was building upon decades of previous work, Foner declared in the preface that his first theme was "the centrality of the black experience" and that "the pages that follow pay special attention both to the political mobilization of the black community and to the emergence and changing composition of a black political leadership" (xxiv-xxv). The four congressmen who Dray specifically identifies on page 352 as remaining

marginal in historical literature are mentioned on forty-one pages of Foner's book, and three of them have major biographies. Foner also published in 1993 the nearly three hundred-page *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction*. Dray obviously intended his book for a popular audience, and thus one might excuse some hyperbole and lack of scholarship. Unfortunately, *Capitol Men* is so riddled with errors that it is unsuitable for either a scholarly or a popular audience.

The list of important scholarship that Dray ignores is impressive and only a sample can be provided. The portrayal of African American politicians as thieves in earlier historical literature bothers Dray, however, he has trouble putting them into the context of the time because he never uses Mark W. Summers numerous books on corruption during the era. *Capitol Men* has nine pages specifically on riots in New Orleans, but never mentions James K. Hogue's recent book on the subject. There are sixteen pages on the Freedmen's Bureau and not a single reference to any of Paul A. Cimbala's work, the leading expert on it. Despite paying significant attention to South Carolina, Dray never mentions Judy Saville's prize winning work covering African American political clubs in the Palmetto State during Reconstruction. Dray argues that Reconstruction could not overcome the North's mounting apathy and desire for reconciliation, though he fails to understand the complexity of what was going on in the North without the help of scholars like Heather Cox Richardson. Perhaps most telling is that the bibliography cites Eric Foner's *A Short History of Reconstruction* (1990) rather than the full version. It does not seem too much to expect that an author would use the unabridged version of the standard work on Reconstruction when writing a book about the era.

The books Dray does rely upon say as much as those he disregards. In the acknowledgements Dray cites eleven books that "were instrumental in guiding my approach to Reconstruction" (377). The average publication date of the eleven books is 1978 and only two have been published in the last twenty-five years. Steven Hahn's 2003 *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* is an important work, but the only other one published since 1984 is Nicholas Lemann's *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* (2006). Lemann is a journalist, and Sean Wilentz explained in the *New York Times* that "in reaching for the attention of general readers with a brief, highly concentrated narrative, *Redemption* simplifies too much" (September 6, 2006). Dray's preference for journalists writing history is also reflected in his inexplicable use of Claude Bowers's infamous 1929 *The*

*Tragic Era: The Revolution After Lincoln* as a source. This is not an instance of using Bowers to show how previous generations portrayed Reconstruction, for Dray repeatedly and uncritically cites Bowers--and often only in the notes so an unsuspecting reader might not realize that the information is from one of the most racist and discredited accounts of Reconstruction ever published. In some instances Dray relies upon Bowers for quotes, which is problematic enough, but in at least a couple of places he takes Bowers's historical analysis at face value (24, 35, 44, 122, 126). The irony is that toward the end of *Capitol Men*, Dray tells how John Roy Lynch, an African-American congressman from Mississippi during Reconstruction, fought against the dominant interpretation of Reconstruction in the early twentieth century found in books like *The Tragic Era*. According to Dray, "Lynch was merciless in taking the white author [Bowers] to task for numerous inaccuracies" in *The Tragic Era* (368).

Numerous inaccuracies likewise abound in *Capitol Men*, many of which reflect basic misunderstandings of the Civil War era. For example, most northerners at the time would have been surprised to learn that, according to Dray, "the main purpose of the Civil War [was]--the end to chattel slavery and the reunion of the nation based on the concepts of national citizenship and equal rights" (332). James McPherson, among others, has demonstrated that most northerners were primarily motivated by the preservation of the Union and republican liberty. Even when ending slavery later became a secondary war aim equal rights never motivated more than a handful of northerners (McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades*, 1997, 116). Similarly, historians have spent the last generation trying to debunk the pernicious myth of black Confederate soldiers, yet Dray insists that "the militarization of blacks was originally a Southern strategy; Negro regiments were formed in Georgia, Tennessee, and Louisiana in the early month of the war. The Confederacy's battlefield success in 1861 and 1862, however, convinced its leaders that there was no need to use black troops" (10). Dray cites McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988) for this passage--though there is nothing to support this in the cited pages. He should have referred to Bruce Levine's *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves during the Civil War* (2006), which demonstrates that "the Confederate government would tolerate no slaves--indeed, no men who were not certifiably white--under arms. Yes, a few individual southern communities (such as New Orleans and Mobile) permitted some free people of color to serve in home guard and other local-defense units . . . . But these localized exceptions to the rule would not be permitted to overthrow the rule itself" (Levine,

*Confederate Emancipation*, 19). Dray insists that Andrew Johnson "was added to Lincoln's ticket in 1864 to help the administration reach out to Southerners after the war," when the Tennessean was actually chosen to reach out to northern Democrats and border state voters just to win the fall election (23).

Dray fares no better discussing Reconstruction. He devotes an entire paragraph to explain why Republicans passed the Fifteenth Amendment partly because "prior to the war, a black person was counted as 3/5 of one person in calculating southern representation in Congress; now that blacks were citizens and stood to be counted as whole individuals, their aggregate would increase the number of Southern representatives in Congress" (62). There are a couple of problems just in this partial sentence. First, Dray incorrectly conflates blacks with slaves, for according to the Constitution, the distinctions for representation are free people and "three-fifths of all other persons." Second, Republicans had taken care of this issue in the Fourteenth Amendment, whose second section declares that if any state denies the right to vote to any male citizens over twenty-one it will lose a proportional amount of representation. Dray also dramatically misinterprets the important election of 1874, when the Republicans lost control of the House of Representatives. According to Dray, "in part this expressed the nation's weariness with Reconstruction but more specifically its unease with the Senate's approving vote, which made passage of Sumner's civil rights law appear imminent" (178). Foner and most other historians, though, insist that "only the depression [of 1873] can explain the electoral tide that swept over the North in 1874," a factor Dray never considers in analyzing the election. These are just a sample of the many errors in the book (Foner, *Reconstruction*, 1988, 523). There is a need for both scholarly and popular works on Reconstruction. Sadly, judged by either criterion *Capitol Men* is a tragic failure.

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