

Notes on Reconstruction

In the second half of 1865 the new Southern state governments were rapidly organized under the "soft" Lincoln-Johnson plans. Elections were duly held for Senators and Representatives in Congress. When that body convened in December 1865, a considerable number of distinguished Southern members were on hand to claim their seats.

The appearance of these ex-rebels was an understandable but costly blunder. The voters of the South, seeking their ablest representatives had turned instinctively to experienced statesmen. But, unhappily, most of the outstanding leaders of the Southern States had been "tainted" with active association to the "Lost Cause." Among the delegations elected to Congress were four former members of the Richmond Congress. Worst of all, there was wispy but brainy Alexander Stephens, former Vice-President of the Confederacy, still under indictment for treason.

The appearance of all these "whitewashed rebels" infuriated the Radical Republicans in Congress. The war had been fought to restore the Union but the Radicals now saw that they could promote their own ends by postponing that restoration. During the conflict the Republicans in Congress had enjoyed a relatively free hand after the South had seceded, and they were eager to retain this advantage. Therefore, in December 1865, the first day of the Congressional session, they banged shut the door in the faces of the newly elected Southern delegations.

The Republicans, looking to the future, were alarmed to note that a restored South would be stronger than ever in Congress. Before the war a Negro had counted as three-fifths of a man. Eleven Southern states had seceded; they had lost the war; and now they were entitled to twelve more votes in Congress than they had previously enjoyed because the Negro was now five-fifths of a man. Thirty of their votes were based on Negroes who as yet could not cast a ballot. The old adage was evidently being reversed to read, "to the vanquished belong the spoils." Again the question was asked in the North--who actually won the war?

The Radicals had good reason to fear that ultimately they would be ejected from the seats of the mighty. The Southerners might join hands with the ex-Copperheads and discontented farmers of the Northwest, and win control of Congress. If this happened, they could destroy the industrial and financial successes that had been attained behind the smoke screen of the Civil War. Specifically, the Southerners might lower the high war tariffs, overthrow monopoly, repeal the Homestead Law, and curtail the lavish grants of land to the railroads. The ex-Confederates might even go so far as to repudiate the national debt and re-enslave the Negro. These last two possibilities, though remote, struck fear into the hearts of Republican bondholders and ex-abolitionists alike.

The Radicals in their efforts to avert these calamities had one ace in the hole--the Negro vote. If they could give the ballot to the docile, ex-slave and induce him to do their bidding, they would hold a powerful hand. They probably could cancel out the efforts of the Southerners to

unite with the numerous Northern agrarians to destroy the Republican strangle in Washington.

Republican agitation for Negro suffrage was prompted by both idealistic and Selfish motives. Idealists like Senator Charles Sumner were striving not only for Negro freedom but also for racial equality. These ardent reformers believed that the ex-bondsmen should have the ballot for protection against the whites, and for the development of their own civil and civic responsibility as well. But numerous Radical Republicans were plainly more interested in the welfare of the party than in that of the Negro. They would "Republicanize" the South by making the "freedman" an unwitting tool of their own schemes, and ride into power on his lash-scarred back.