

Re-examining Reconstruction

RETREAT FROM RECONSTRUCTION 1869-1879

By William Gillette
463 pp. Baton Rouge, La.
Louisiana State University Press. \$27.50

NEW MASTERS

*Northern Planters During the Civil War
and Reconstruction*
By Lawrence N. Powell
253 pp. New Haven
Yale University Press. \$15.

By EUGENE GENOVESE

RECONSTRUCTION will probably continue to haunt Americans as long as the nation remains racially rent. It was the story of an unprecedented missed opportunity, as well as of Southern white terror and the grim consequences of Northern white racism. William Gillette and Lawrence N. Powell, in their very different books, give us a better idea of how and why matters ended so badly.

Professor Gillette, who teaches history at Rutgers, displays a sharp eye for the intricacies of political battles. He will not settle for gross generalizations that pretend to account for an outcome but somehow cannot explain exactly who did what to bring it about. He focuses on national policy during the Grant Administration, but begins with the Johnson years and ends with a particularly impressive critique of the Hayes Administration. Professor Gillette is especially good on the political manifestations and ramifications of Northern racism and the complexities of Northern hostility toward and support for black suffrage; he offers an extended account of what he aptly terms the "pitiable" efforts of the Federal Government to guarantee free and fair elections.

Although his judgments on specific political personalities and events are usually convincing, his judgments on some larger problems are less so. For example, he attacks Grant for having been conciliatory when he should have been firm and vice versa; after much moaning and groaning about the unwise or improper use of force, he concludes that Grant did not use enough. In the same vein he tells us that some Southern Republican regimes deserved to be saved and others did not — that each had to be treated separately. But his attempt to pick and choose among good and bad elements in the only political movement with any chance of carrying out a radical policy is close to nonsensical. As Thaddeus Stevens once asked after being told that a colleague was a scoundrel, "Yes, but is he our scoundrel?"

Thanks to God, beneficent and merciful liberal professors rarely determine national policy, especially during a period of revolutionary upheaval. The Republican Party during Reconstruction was faced with the choice between consolidating its power in the South and decimating its opponents, or giving up all hopes for a genuine black liberation. Professor Gillette does help us understand why a radical solution was not to be, by scrupulously tracing the policy of reducing Federal troop detachments to levels too low to enforce the law but just high enough to antagonize

Eugene Genovese, who teaches history at the University of Rochester, is the author of "Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made" and "From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World."

the unreconstructed whites. He also reminds us that Federal troops, especially the decisive cavalry units, were going West to crush the Indians and soon would be going North to crush the labor movement.

Yet racism and party politics, narrowly defined, hardly tell the story. It is one thing for Professor Gillette to argue the primacy of politics over economics; it is another for him to write as if W. E. B. DuBois, Robert P. Sharkey and David Montgomery, among others, had not laid bare the political economy of Reconstruction and, in particular, the reasons that an emerging class of big-business men had little sympathy for the rights of Southern blacks. The problem does not, as Professor Gillette seems to think, primarily concern the political machinations of particular businessmen, but the exigencies of the national economy — e.g., the need to restore cotton exports — and the prospects for an alliance of Northern Republicans with Southern Democrats to guarantee a pro-business national policy. Professor Gillette cannot expect us to believe that the business community had no great part in shaping Northern "public opinion," which he sees as restraining Republican radicalism.

Lawrence N. Powell's "New Masters," despite its limited scope, deepens our understanding of the social forces at work during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Professor Powell, who teaches history at Tulane, makes a sweeping guess that between 20,000 and 50,000 Northerners tried cotton planting from 1862 to 1876. More convincingly, if less precisely, he judges them to have been "ubiquitous." In "New Masters," he offers a composite study of 524 Northerners in six states of the Deep South, but the degree of their representativeness remains unclear. They were typically in their early 30's, well educated and drawn primarily from business and the professions. Few had had experience with farming, and fewer with cotton growing. Many had been anti-slavery, and some went South for idealistic reasons — to help the freedmen or to reclaim the South for God and bourgeois civilization. Most, how-

ever, were on the make. And many more were trying to recoup wartime losses.

Whatever the politics, social position or ideology of the newcomers, they were overwhelmingly driven by a thirst for pecuniary gain, willing to speculate and in a hurry. As a result, even Northerners who began with good will toward the freedmen could turn on them when black self-assertion interfered with profits. Professor Powell does a good job of tracing and explaining the mixed reception that Northern planters got from both blacks and whites in the South. Relations between Northern and Southern planters were conflict-ridden and often exploded in violence against the intruders.

Yet Southerners initially welcomed Northerners. Not only did they badly need the capital, but they expected the Yankees to change their views once they got a taste of life with blacks. Indeed, Professor Powell believes, although he cannot prove it, that these Northerners played a decisive part in the survival of the plantation system. In time, many Northerners did come to think and act like those ex-slave holders they had come to re-educate and reform, and just as often the ex-slave holders came to think and act like the hated Yankees — or, rather, to emulate their most unattractive and selfish qualities.

Professor Powell's methodology produces a suspicious number of "manys" and "somes," but he has done what he could with fragmented materials. His sensitive narrative nicely balances general discussions with telling anecdotes, and his interpretations are uniformly intelligent and generally convincing. Among other contributions, he illuminates the cultural contrast between North and South and between black and white, thereby deepening our understanding of the antebellum as well as postbellum South.

With the freedmen, the Northerners got more than they bargained for. Typically, the Northern planters expected the freedmen to be readily educable to bourgeois values, if not already imbued with them. The

Continued on Page 40

Blocked due to copyright.
See full page image or
microfilm.

Philip Weiss

History

Continued from Page 9

freedmen, however, had their own ideas about work — and about almost everything else. The cause of the conflict, says Professor Powell, was not the freedmen's unwillingness to work hard — a familiar and silly charge — but their unwillingness to work according to Yankee notions of steadiness. In truth, blacks did not want to work for Northerners at all, nor for any other white men. They wanted their own land and, when denied, resurrected the tactics of slavery times to win whatever concessions they could for themselves and their families. The Northerners, who had expected to get much more and better work out of the field hands through "kindness" and market incentives, often wound up getting less than the white Southerners had.

Building upon the splendid work of Willie Lee Rose, Professor Powell shows how little interest the Northern planters had in freeholds for the freedmen. The cult of free labor and free men, when applied to blacks, somehow did not include free soil. To the contrary, like businessmen and the "public" throughout the North, the planters of the postbellum South, regardless of origin, wanted to recapture the world market for cotton, for that was where the big and quick money was to be made.

The freedmen knew what they wanted: the right to vote, proper marriages, churches and schools. But above all, they wanted land — not because of some sentimental attachment, much less because they valued it above their churches, but because they knew that land alone could anchor everything else and provide better prospects for their families. They sought to produce more food, keep their women away from gang labor and send their children to school. Only when those demands were satisfied were they prepared to worry about a cash crop. They cared not a whit about the projected role of the cotton crop in the nation's balance of payments, and, worse, resisted the sophisticated workings of the trickle-down theory of economics. But the Republican "moderates" buried their hopes early; by 1868 the matter was settled.



On these matters Professors Powell and Gillette are excellent. Each shows, using different examples, how strongly Northern support for the more radical features of Reconstruction policies rested on the hope that blacks could be induced to remain in the South. What Professor Powell adds at this point is a fine analysis of Northern illusions about the wonder-working force of the capitalist market and the ease with which the freedmen could be fit in as docile proletarians. He writes, "The ex-slaves by and large were manipulating the market for their own purposes. They might have been in the market, but they were not of it." Hence, those Northerners who went South with the most generous of motives, who endured outrage and violence at the hands of unreconstructed rebels, and who doggedly tried to provide good employment opportunities for the freedmen could relate no better to the deepest of black economic aspirations than could those who went South to make a dollar any way they could.

And, as Professor Gillette implies, the economic argument that land redistribution alone could guarantee black political power wavers, for land redistribution itself required political power. To parcel out the plantations among freedmen and white farmers would have been a revolutionary act that would have provoked sudden, widespread violence from the landowners. Indeed, the extent of the violence, often sadistic, carried out by white Southerners

whose basic property rights were being respected indicates what would have happened if "Black Republican outrages" had ever become outrageous enough to threaten property directly. Nothing short of an expanded army of occupation could have executed so radical a policy, and, in ways Professor Gillette carefully elaborates, Northern opinion increasingly demanded demobilization in general and the restriction of troop deployment in the South in particular.

And beyond land redistribution loomed two nightmares for sensitive souls in the North. First, to hold the land in a competitive market, the freedmen and white farmers would have needed maximum protection against bankers, money lenders, national corporations and swindlers, and nothing short of a political apparatus, militarily secured, could have provided it. Second, no part of this radical scenario had a chance as long as white conservatives remained alive and well in the South, for they alone had the political and military experience, the money, the social position and the mystique of the Lost Cause to impose their will on a defeated and disoriented people. To put it bluntly, some portion of the leadership of the old regime had to be killed. Without revolutionary terror, the blacks had no prospects.

Southern conservatives had grasped a hard lesson from the start: they had everything necessary to condemn the blacks to another century of ghastly oppression; therefore, the outcome would depend upon the political will of the North to decapitate the Southern leadership. It is usually said that such a cure would have been worse than the disease, that a civilized country could not have afforded so bloody a solution as the execution of several thousand brave and personally honorable Confederate leaders. I suppose so.

Still, one might calculate the number of blacks who did not survive the consequences of Moderation, Liberalism, Reconstruction and Grant's "Let Us Have Peace": those lynched and slaughtered outright and those broken in body or spirit by generations of enforced peonage, terror, beatings, rape and daily humiliation. If the corpses are properly counted, I suspect that the record will show tens or hundreds of dead blacks for every white man spared. ■