

A Splendid Failure: Postwar Reconstruction in the American South

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Review

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Fitzgerald, Michael W. *A Splendid Failure: Postwar Reconstruction in the American South*. Ivan R. Dee Press, \$26.00 hardcover ISBN 9781566637343

A New Perspective on Reconstruction

A full understanding of the Civil War is not complete without knowledge of the Reconstruction that followed. The war ended in 1865, leaving unresolved many of the issues raised during the conflict, including emancipation and civil rights for former slaves and the reintegration of former Confederates and former Confederate states into the Union. In *Splendid Failure*, Michl Fitzgerald, a professor of history at St. Olaf College, builds upon his previous work on post-Civil War black and white politics to provide a concise primer on Reconstruction. Fitzgerald borrows his title from W. E. B. DuBois: If the Reconstruction of the Southern states . . . had been conceived as a major national program of America, whose accomplishment at any price was well worth the effort, we should be living today in a different world. . . . The attempt to make black men American citizens was in a certain sense all a failure, but a splendid failure.

Fitzgerald understands Reconstruction as splendid in that Americans even attempted it. Most white Americans in the antebellum era shared beliefs in white superiority and black inferiority. Most white northerners did not wage war against the South in order to abolish slavery. For these reasons, Fitzgerald views the attempt by some Americans to establish racial equality in the South as remarkable. He emphasizes Reconstruction's splendid aspects by shifting readers' attention from the violence of Reconstruction currently emphasized in Reconstruction historiography (most recently and notably in Steven Hahn's prizewinning *A Nation Under Our Feet*). Fitzgerald argues that violence in the Reconstruction South was generally localized and sporadic and that President Ulysses S. Grant's suppression of the Ku Klux Klan through the Enforcement Acts brought relative stability to the South by the early 1870s. He examines the

gains blacks and their white allies secured during Republican rule in the South. Fitzgerald asserts that blacks' influence, though temporary, proved meaningful beyond the end of Reconstruction. Fitzgerald does not, however, tell the story of the long-term implications of blacks' Reconstruction-era integration into political and civil society.

Fitzgerald's book, then, is largely the story of the failure of Reconstruction. His main contribution in this regard is his emphasis on the role of southern Republicans. Fitzgerald argues that the actions of Republican leaders in the South, both white and black, contributed to the failure of Reconstruction. He highlights the importance of northern public opinion in sustaining Republican Reconstruction efforts. Fitzgerald believes that historians, in their attempts to correct the inaccuracies of the Dunning school, have erred too far in their rehabilitation of southern Republicans. He details the significant amount of financial mismanagement by both white and black Republicans in southern state governments. He suggests that this corruption alienated white northerners who blamed black politicians, thus calling into question the wisdom of the racially egalitarian thrust of Reconstruction. In this context, Fitzgerald contends, white northerners withdrew their support for Reconstruction. Fitzgerald notes other factors leading to the failure of Reconstruction, but provides little rationale for his interpretive focus on southern Republicans.

Fitzgerald critiques southern Republicans for the missteps which ultimately derailed Reconstruction. But he fears that Reconstruction would probably have failed anyway. As he notes in his preface, What they did may not have ultimately mattered, given the underlying state of national sentiment; as the passions of the war dissipated, perhaps nothing could have sustained egalitarian commitments (x). Fitzgerald's Reconstruction, then, appears more doomed than splendid.

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