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## Reconstructing the Past and Our Reconstruction Present: The Long Struggle to Teach Divisive Concepts - Panel 3

Robert D. Bland

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**RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST AND OUR  
RECONSTRUCTION PRESENT: THE LONG  
STRUGGLE TO TEACH DIVISIVE CONCEPTS –  
PANEL III**

ROBERT D. BLAND<sup>1</sup>

*“In our present moment, as we see just as many signs of a Third  
Redemption,’ as we see of a Third Reconstruction, it is important to  
remember the previous struggles over history and memory ...”*

First, I want to thank Eric Amarante for the inviting me to take part in this celebration of Fran Ansley. I had the opportunity to meet Fran for the first time in the past month, but I feel lucky to be a latecomer to the large and generative intellectual community that she has built and be in a collaborative space to learn from some of these scholars, local leaders, and other folks who are trying to make the state of Tennessee a better place at the grassroots level.

The goal of my talk today is to not only speak historically about Reconstruction and its legacy, but also weave the story of the post-Civil War era into some of our current discussions around history education, the teaching of supposed “divisive concepts,” and the ways our current moment resembles earlier struggles over how the past was commemorated.

“I shall never forget the scene in 1876, when Col. A. C. Haskell, Chairman of the Democratic State Committee[,] at the head of the Democratic members of legislature[,] forced his way into the Hall of Representatives then occupied by the Republican members,” reflected Henry A. Wallace in 1918.<sup>2</sup> “Pandemonium reigned for time.”<sup>3</sup> Just a teenager working as a page in the South Carolina statehouse during the 1876 election, Wallace witnessed white supremacist forces reject the legitimacy of a biracial Republican Party and successfully lead a coup d’état that “redeemed” the state for white supremacy. Now an elderly man living in Harlem, Wallace tried his best to remember the fading legacy of the Reconstruction for the newly formed Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH). “It will be utterly impossible to give dates after a lapse of nearly fifty years” he

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1. Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of History, University of Tennessee

2. H. A. Wallace, *Letter from H. A. Wallace to Monroe N. Work (1917)*, 5 J. NEGRO HIST. 1, 93 (1920), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/23200/23200-h/23200-h.htm>.

3. *Id.*

lamented.<sup>4</sup> Just three years earlier, his friend and mentor Robert Smalls had passed away, and Wallace was keenly aware that he was among the last generation of Black Americans with a living memory of reconstruction. “There are very few of us now left to tell the tale, and that in a very unsatisfactory way.”<sup>5</sup>

Formed in 1915 in the basement of the Wabash Ave YMCA on Chicago’s Southside, ASNLH emerged during this country’s first struggle over the role of Black history. The same year that the organization was founded, *Birth of a Nation* premiered on movie theater screens across the nation, catapulting an already popular white supremacist account of the Reconstruction era to new heights. Popular works of fiction, high school textbooks, and the American historical profession all shared and reproduced a dismal account of Reconstruction—and especially Black self-government—that would, in turn, provide the intellectual defense for segregation and disfranchisement, animate the rise of the Second Ku Klux Klan, and organize a fragile political and economic order that kept poor and working-class southern whites tethered to the region’s ruling elite despite their divergent class interests. “American public opinion has been so prejudiced against the Negroes because of their elevation to prominence in southern politics,” the study’s lead researcher argued, “that it has been considered sufficient to destroy their regime and forget it.”<sup>6</sup>

The violence of this forgetting produced a Black intellectual movement that sought to undo the damage caused by the hydra-headed myth of the Lost Cause. Building on an earlier generation of politicians, journalists, activists, and teachers, the founders of ASNLH used Reconstruction as a cornerstone of their larger historical project. Recognizing the postbellum era to have both a repository of important heroes that could be included in textbooks for Black children and a useful weapon in the fight for civil rights and political equality, the early scholars for ASNLH recognized that struggles over the production of history not only shaped current understandings of the past but also opened future pathways in the ongoing struggle for Black freedom.<sup>7</sup>

In our current moment, as we see just as many signs of a Third “Redemption” as we see of a Third Reconstruction, it is important to

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4. *Id.* at 90.

5. *Id.* at 105.

6. *Id.* at 63.

7. On the production of a Black counter memory during the Jim Crow era, see W. FITZHUGH BRUNDAGE, *THE SOUTHERN PAST: A CLASH OF RACE AND MEMORY* 138–82 (2005).

remember the previous struggles over history and memory. The original Redemption was a moment when a violent counterrevolutionary movement reestablished a hierarchical world rooted in white supremacy. Our current Third Redemption appears in the forms of a resurgent white nationalism, dramatic rollbacks of civil and voting rights, and, most recently here in Tennessee, the targeting of Black state legislators for not upholding the decorum of the state house. It also reflects an ongoing authoritarian impulse in American life that finds its most full-throated expression when confronted with the specter of Black political power; and requires us to understand the earlier history wars over reconstruction. To see the rise of state-level bills that have targeted the teaching of critical race theory – which has become a stand-in for teaching the histories of Black Americans, Indigenous people, and LGBT communities, especially in their struggles against white supremacy, settler colonialism, and homophobic and transphobic violence – as simply “culture war” issues misses the way that culture wars are always inextricably connected to larger anti-democratic and anti-working class attacks.<sup>8</sup>

Put more directly, by paying attention to the early twentieth century war over Black history, we can begin to see the way that past generations of scholars and activists struggled against a prior antidemocratic regime—the South’s system of Jim Crow. In their efforts to defeat the Solid South’s political order, earlier Black scholars and activists were not only battling for civil rights and racial equality but also fighting for a truly multiracial social democracy that centered human dignity.

The series of interviews that ASNLH conducted with the living participants of Reconstruction were part of a larger project to introduce a new Black history that centered the story of civil rights, political equality, and racial uplift. “No systematic effort has hitherto been made to save the records of the Negro during the Reconstruction period,” asserted Monroe Nathan Work, the Tuskegee Professor who led the ASNLH Reconstruction research study.<sup>9</sup> While Work was deeply attuned to the way that the historical profession and popular culture spread the myth of the Lost Cause, he also understood that a “silencing of the past” had already occurred before Confederate sympathizers began producing their account. The scholar of memory Michel-Rolph Trouillot has argued that silences enter the process of historical production at four different moments: the moment of fact

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8. On an earlier iteration of the battle over social studies curriculum at the K-12 level, see GARY B. NASH ET AL., *HISTORY ON TRIAL: CULTURE WARS AND THE TEACHING OF THE PAST* (1997).

9. Wallace, *supra* note 1, at 63.

creation, the moment of fact assembly, the moment of fact retrieval, and the moment of retrospective significance.<sup>10</sup> While we are keenly aware of the influence of William Archibald Dunning and the generation of historians that he trained in placing silences at the moment of fact retrieval, as well as the work of organizations like the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Sons of Confederate Veterans in creating silences at the moment of retrospective significance; Monroe Work and his fellow scholars at ASNLH wanted more attention paid to the first two silences. For ASNLH's researchers, finding survivors who witnessed the Reconstruction era AND building a Black Reconstruction archive for future scholars would offer future writers, researchers, and historians a greater arsenal to confront the misrepresentation of the Black past. "Your idea in collecting data relative to the Reconstruction Period is a laudable one," praised one surviving witness of Reconstruction. "[A]nd the wonder is, and the pity of it is, that it had not been thought of long ere this."<sup>11</sup>

The production of this new historical infrastructure faced real challenges from the funding networks that supported research in the social sciences and humanities. Seeking \$25,000 from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Fund to produce two books, one on the Black Family and the other on Reconstruction in South Carolina, ASNLH founder Carter G. Woodson was disappointed to discover that the foundation would only provide \$5,000, an amount he fully understood "inadequate" to compensate the organization's researchers and cover the printing costs of the finished manuscripts.<sup>12</sup>

Negative letters of support from the nation's leading white historians likely played a major role in reducing the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Fund's support for ASNLH's research budget. Ulrich B. Phillips, a professor at the University of Michigan who was a fierce defender of slavery, told the philanthropic fund's review committee that "Woodson and Taylor produce books too hastily."<sup>13</sup> J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton, a professor at the University of North Carolina who espoused support for the Lost Cause in his work, told the

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10. MICHEL-ROLPH TROUILLOT, *SILENCING THE PAST: POWER AND THE PRODUCTION OF THE PAST* (1995).

11. Wallace, *supra* note 1, at 105.

12. *Carter G. Woodson to Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial*, in LAURA SPELMAN ROCKEFELLER MEMORIAL PAPERS, ROCKEFELLER ARCHIVES, <https://dimes.rockarch.org/>.

13. *J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton to Sydney Walker*, in LAURA SPELMAN ROCKEFELLER MEMORIAL PAPERS, ROCKEFELLER ARCHIVE CENTER (1929), <https://dimes.rockarch.org/>.

foundation that the work of Carter G. Woodson and Alrutheus Ambush Taylor was “rather biased, naturally, and have a touch of propaganda.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite this opposition, Alrutheus Ambush Taylor managed to publish *The Negro in South Carolina during Reconstruction*, the first monograph by a Black historian on the Reconstruction era.<sup>15</sup> In 1924, NAACP president Walter F. White praised Taylor’s intellectual achievement but also lamented that the book would “probably be completely ignored by the white South and North.”<sup>16</sup> He did hold out hope that Taylor’s history of Reconstruction could be used to challenge “the stories . . . so familiar to the followers of the Rev. Thomas Dixon and D. W. Griffith.”<sup>17</sup>

That same year, Alrutheus Ambush Taylor invited Thomas E. Miller, one of the last living Reconstruction era congressmen to sit on a panel at ASNLH’s annual meeting. Joined by NAACP leader James Weldon Johnson, the three men connected the history of Reconstruction to the interwar struggle for civil rights. Miller would spend much of his later years traveling across the country engaged in a fight to preserve the legacy of the Reconstruction era. On July 30, 1927, Miller gave a speech in Charleston where he argued that the state needed to build a monument to honor his friend, mentor, and war hero Robert Smalls.<sup>18</sup> At a 1930 event in Chicago, he was joined John R. Lynch, his sole political contemporary from the Reconstruction era.<sup>19</sup> Oscar DePriest, in his first term as congressman for Illinois’ first congressional district, joined Miller and Lynch, drawing a clear line between his status as the first Black person to serve in the Congress since Reconstruction and the last two living members of the Reconstruction Generation.<sup>20</sup>

There are lessons to be gained from paying attention to the memory work of the Reconstruction generation. In his recent book *The South: Jim Crow and Its Afterlives*, Adolph Reed, Jr. has noted that he is of the last age cohort that holds a living memory of de jure

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14. *Id.*

15. ALTRUTHEUS AMBUSH TAYLOR, *THE NEGRO IN SOUTH CAROLINA DURING RECONSTRUCTION* (1924).

16. BRUCE E. BAKER, *WHAT RECONSTRUCTION MEANT: HISTORICAL MEMORY IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH* 116 (2007).

17. *Id.*

18. *Miller, Addresses Negro Pythians*, *THE STATE* (July 30, 1927).

19. *6000 Honor Race Congressmen: DePriest, Lynch, Miller, Present*, *PITTSBURGH COURIER* (Feb. 22, 1930).

20. *Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History*, *BROAD AX* (Sep. 20, 1924).

segregation.<sup>21</sup> Responding to what he perceives as misuses of the Black past, Reed, Jr. cautions against transforming the complex Jim Crow world into a ham-fisted cudgel. Indeed, while there should be some trepidation about immediately transforming Black history into a usable past to fight against the threats to civil and democratic rights, I think it is worth seriously returning to the legacy of Reconstruction for its parallels to our current moment. Caught in a moment when the Jim Crow order was at its apex, the Reconstruction generation witnessed the broader political and cultural world and the most influential voices in the historical profession propagate Lost Cause platitudes, and historians of the Black past looked back to the reconstruction era for lessons on how to confront seemingly insurmountable odds. Despite our own challenges with this current moment, we would also benefit from listening both to voices of young people and to leaders who have wisdom from previous fights for equality, justice, and liberation.

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21. ADOLPH REED, JR., *THE SOUTH: JIM CROW AND ITS AFTERLIVES* (2022).