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# INTRODUCTION

# Reconstruction and World Democracy

It was the greatest and most important step toward world democracy of all men of all races ever taken in the modern world.

-WILLIAM E. B. DU BOIS, THE GIFT OF BLACK FOLK, 1924

In April 1865, America's grueling war against the slaveholders' rebellion ended with the Union victorious, slavery on the verge of extinction, and the American experiment in democracy sustained. At home and abroad, supporters celebrated the Union victory as a welcome harbinger of human progress and a "new birth of freedom," in Abraham Lincoln's felicitous words. Days later, John Wilkes Booth, enraged by Lincoln's promise to grant voting rights to Blacks, fired the shot at Ford's Theatre that propelled a wave of horror, grief, and outrage around the world.

News of the assassination traveled to nearly every inhabited part of the globe. In large cities, people poured into the streets, gathered in public halls, and milled outside U.S. diplomatic posts to learn more about what happened in America. Hundreds of public meetings took place in the days, weeks, and even months that followed. Workers, students, women's groups, former slaves, exiled revolutionaries, and people

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from every social station gathered to listen to tributes to the fallen American leader and endorse resolutions to carry on the cause he died serving. "We are the fellow-citizens of John Brown, of Abraham Lincoln, and of Mr. Seward," a group of students in Paris told John Bigelow, America's minister to France. "We young people, to whom the future belongs, must have the courage to found a true democracy."<sup>1</sup>

A flood of similar messages, eulogies, speeches, condolence letters, and other tributes to Lincoln poured into U.S. diplomatic posts abroad. Bigelow was amazed at the public response and the courage of French students, Masons, republicans, and other opponents of Napoleon III's Second Empire to brave the police and government censors by issuing messages often laced with biting political innuendo. He sent a batch to Secretary of State William H. Seward, who lay bedridden at his home in Washington, recuperating from a terrible carriage accident and a vicious knife attack from one of Booth's fellow assassins. After the assailant's pistol jammed, he lunged at Seward with a Bowie knife and nearly severed his cheek from his jaw. Seward could barely walk without help or speak due to a heavy leather-clad iron brace that stabilized his jaw. But he was eager to return to duty, and when he saw the bundle of condolence messages Bigelow sent from Paris, he realized their value.

Here was the unfiltered voice of the "public mind" politicians and journalists always wrote about, though rarely with reliable evidence. Many messages came from workers and ordinary citizens, handwritten on plain paper. Others came grandly decorated with calligraphic lettering on parchment or even velum, some with heavy black mourning borders, others adorned with colorful ribbons and wax.

The messages of condolence voiced solidarity with America. They proclaimed Lincoln a martyr to the Great American Republic, as admirers called it, and to the universal cause of emancipation of enslaved Africans and "universal emancipation" of the oppressed everywhere. Many letters recounted the story of the humble rail-splitter who, by diligent labor and dedication to learning, prepared himself to become president of a nation at arms, the personification of republican virtue at war with the slaveholding aristocracy.

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Seward had the letters translated, published, and bound in handsome, gilt-lettered volumes. He sent them out to every nation in the world and each person and organization contributing to the book. The public response to Lincoln's martyrdom abroad signaled widespread enthusiasm for Lincoln and the American cause. They also transmitted a genuine revival of confidence among reformers and revolutionaries and sounded a reveille for a new birth of freedom abroad.

In Europe, notably Britain, France, and Spain, the resurgence of reform spawned new political organizations promoting the demands of workers for political rights, new antislavery movements, international peace leagues, and the proliferation of progressive political journals. It gave rise to huge public meetings full of speeches and defiant public demonstrations in support of democratic reform. These noisy assemblies also demonstrated awareness of the international connections between the Civil War in America, workers' rights in Britain, the Italian Risorgimento, Giuseppe Garibaldi's march on Rome, the execution of Maximilian in Mexico, and myriad other events, people, and ideas coursing through the Euro-American world.

The story of the new birth of freedom abroad after the Civil War is what this book is about. Most of the action occurs within Reconstruction's usual time frame, about 1865 to 1871, yet it takes readers outside the familiar national boundaries to Mexico, Alaska, Canada, and Cuba and across the Atlantic to Britain, Spain, France, and Rome. Though the international perspective adopted here is novel, the book also focuses on more traditional subjects of politics and foreign policy with the familiar players, such as secretaries of state William Seward and Hamilton Fish, presidents Andrew Johnson and Ulysses Grant, and myriad members of Congress, senators, and diplomats. This is an international history involving matters of state, but it explores the less familiar interconnections between nations and the pervasive transnational influence of ideas, famous heroes, models of government, reform, and revolution.

Whenever possible, I have given the stage to the actors who made this history, allowing readers to hear their voices and sense their passion. They will witness extraordinary oratory rising from foreign parliaments

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and raucous histrionics from the public squares of many lands. From the Cooper Union in New York City, a favorite venue for political speech, we will hear militant Irish Fenians, Cuban revolutionaries, exiled Mexicans, and others summoning Americans to their cause. From London's St. James Hall, readers will listen to advocates of the working class denouncing the privileged aristocracy and calling for a new birth of democracy in Europe. Out of the streets of Paris will come "Red" republicans chanting *Déchéance! Déchéance!* calling for the overthrow of Napoleon III and his Second Empire. In Madrid is heard the voice of European republicanism, Emilio Castelar, imploring the Spanish Cortes to follow Lincoln's example of immediate emancipation. And we will hear Karl Marx addressing the new International Working Men's Association, aka the Communist First International, congratulating Abraham Lincoln, the "single-minded son of the working class" whose emancipation edict signaled the "reconstruction of a social world."

This book departs from the usual confines of Reconstruction history, which until recently has remained a tightly nation-bound story that requires no attention to the world beyond America. Historians of slavery and emancipation have produced a rich body of comparative studies, but few others have included foreign affairs in their treatment of Reconstruction.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1960s, historians of Reconstruction have been obsessed with discrediting the influential interpretation of the "Dunning School" that became implanted in textbooks and the popular imagination since the end of the nineteenth century, coinciding by no accident with the undoing of Reconstruction. William Archibald Dunning, an eminent historian at Columbia University, propagated an ideologically driven narrative of Reconstruction as a travesty visited on the South by vindictive Radical Republicans who were determined to upend white supremacy by enfranchising former slaves, whom Dunning deemed unfit for democratic governance.<sup>3</sup>

The guiding light for revisionist historians was William E. B. Du Bois, a leading African American scholar and civil rights leader. His book, Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America,

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1860–1880 (1935), was a tour de force of empirical scholarship combined with a passionate denunciation of the Dunning School and the exaltation of African Americans for their unsung role in redeeming America's democracy (as the book's original subtitle underscored). Du Bois's book remained in the shadows of the Dunning School until a new generation of historians rediscovered it during the "Second Reconstruction" and the Black civil rights movement beginning in the 1950s. Du Bois's legacy would guide revisionist scholarship along two major imperatives: Blacks' positive role in Reconstruction's history must be central, and the baleful influence of the Dunning School must be refuted by empirical research and discredited for its underlying racist motivation.

In the new wave of scholarship on Reconstruction since the 1950s, nowhere was the debt to Du Bois more evident and more impressively repaid than by Eric Foner in his revisionary synthesis, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (1988). Foner set forth a compelling story of African Americans and white Radical Republicans struggling to build a biracial democracy. He buried the Dunning School, which had no heirs willing to defend the old orthodoxy by this time. Foner's widely acclaimed book was so broad in scope, meticulously researched, and convincing that one admiring reviewer, Michael Perman, dubbed it the "finished revolution." With the Dunning School vanquished, Du Bois redeemed, and a well-defined argument as to the meaning of Reconstruction, the only question remaining, Perman said, was, "What is left to be done?"<sup>4</sup>

Some historians answered Perman by pushing the geographic boundaries of Reconstruction beyond the South to the North and West and expanding its chronological limits toward the end of the nineteenth century. This "Greater Reconstruction," as some called it, was a national story that examined some of the familiar themes of expanding federal authority, racial strife, and white supremacy, but now regarding Indians, Chinese, and Hispanics in the West.<sup>5</sup> Richard White's *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865–1896* may do for the Greater Reconstruction what Foner did for Southern Reconstruction: provide a coherent synthesis of a big story.<sup>6</sup>

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Still, the reigning narrative of Reconstruction history remains nation bound as though the rest of the world does not exist. Though rarely noticed, Du Bois had framed America's Reconstruction story within the larger context of world history. He was a cosmopolitan who saw America's racial divide as part of a global clash between European whites and the "colored" races, African, Asian, and all non-whites. "The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line," he told the Pan-African Congress meeting in London in 1900. Had America's national experiment in biracial democracy succeeded, Du Bois told readers, it might have been a significant advance for world democracy. But Du Bois's hint toward an international approach went unnoticed.<sup>7</sup>

Thirty years after *Black Reconstruction*, in 1965, David Potter wrote a suggestive essay on the impact of the Civil War on the world, particularly the revival and convergence of liberalism and nationalism. It was one of several efforts to expand the horizons of American historians and overcome what Potter complained was their habit of "navel-gazing." But international history and political ideology went against the primary current of the revisionists' attention to African Americans and race.<sup>8</sup>

As we pass through the 150th anniversary of Reconstruction, there are welcome signs that historians are heeding Potter's call. A flurry of conferences, essays, and books seems to herald an exciting new international direction in Reconstruction studies. As usual, the many conference papers and collections of essays often fly in many directions and are necessarily narrow in focus.<sup>9</sup> Several recent monographs and auspicious dissertations develop intriguing links between Latin American countries and America during Reconstruction.<sup>10</sup> At this nascent stage, no single theme or question appears to direct the recent burst of new research, yet it shows the international approach is full of future promise.

What is missing thus far, and what I hope this book provides, is a volume encompassing the panoramic scope of radical change in the 1860s and advancing a coherent interpretation of what it all means. My fundamental premise is that there were *two* Reconstructions, domestic and international, each complementary and grounded in a common republican

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ideology. Domestic Reconstruction aimed at pacifying the South, abolishing slavery, dethroning the slaveholding aristocracy, and rebuilding the South on a firm republican foundation.

In the American hemisphere, international Reconstruction sought to ensure national security by ridding the Americas of predatory European empires and creating a zone of friendly, independent, ideally republican nations, "buttresses," as William Seward called them, surrounding and supporting the United States. The underlying premise of U.S. foreign policy was that monarchy, aristocracy, and slavery were inherently hostile to republican institutions and that government, by consent of the people, ensured peace within and between nations.

To justify domestic Reconstruction, Radical Republicans employed a once obscure clause in the U.S. Constitution committing the federal government to "guarantee to every State in this Union a Republican Form of Government." The foreign policy equivalent of the "guarantee clause" was a muscular new version of the Monroe Doctrine that emerged, not as formal policy from William Seward and the State Department but from outrage in Congress and the public square against France's sinister design to erect a monarchy on the ruins of the Mexican republic. Initially a warning against further European colonization of the Americas, after 1865, proponents of the Monroe Doctrine propagated the idea that the entire Western Hemisphere must be a haven for republicanism and that monarchy and slavery were no longer welcome. In this meaning, the Monroe Doctrine's new slogan, "America for Americans," became a Pan-American cause.

This book has a different take on William Seward, the principal architect of post–Civil War foreign policy, and his successor, Hamilton Fish. While Charles Sumner and other Radical Republicans focused on rebuilding a republican South, William Seward set out to make the American Continent safe for republicanism by driving out European imperialists, ending slavery, and fostering the spread of republican principles abroad.

The main thrust of international Reconstruction, I argue here, was anti-imperialist, antislavery, and pro-democracy. It played out in two theaters of action. In the American Continent, U.S. foreign policy was

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the leading force. In Europe, it was the inspiration of the Union victory, Lincoln's martyrdom, and the example of a thriving democracy that effected change.

The most tangible achievement of international Reconstruction was the withdrawal of European empires from the American Continent and the decolonization of British North America. Within days of one another, in the spring of 1867, France pulled its troops out of Mexico, Russia sold Alaska to the United States, Britain proclaimed the Dominion of Canada, an autonomous home-rule state, and Spain agreed to accept U.S. mediation in wars it had provoked with Peru and Chile. Spain had already vacated Santo Domingo, and in October 1868, Cuban rebels fed up with their Spanish rulers proclaimed independence. These European powers had many factors to calculate before deciding to withdraw, but America's proven military prowess and powerful ideological appeal with the European people were foremost among them.

U.S. foreign policy during Reconstruction was anti-imperialist in another sense. Contrary to the familiar claim that Seward and America remained enthralled by Manifest Destiny, the only significant acquisition during this period, indeed during the half century between 1848 and 1898, was the Alaska Purchase. Further to this point, during the Johnson and Grant administrations, the United States spurned several opportunities for annexing new territories. These included outright invitations to annex Santo Domingo (the Dominican Republic), the Danish West Indies (Virgin Islands), and the Spanish Caribbean (Cuba and Puerto Rico).

International Reconstruction also should be credited with hastening the abolition of slavery in the Americas. Seward turned U.S. foreign policy against slavery early in 1862 when he signed a treaty that finally put the United States on the right side of Britain's effort to suppress the African slave trade. The Lyons-Seward Treaty sounded a death knell for slavery in Cuba and signaled the antislavery turn in U.S. foreign policy. Later, Seward forcefully stopped Maximilian's scheme to reintroduce slavery in all but name as part of a plan to colonize northern Mexico with ex-Confederates. Seward also objected strongly to Maximilian's plans to enlist enslaved Sudanese soldiers in Maximilian's imperial army.

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"It is settled," Seward let it be known, "that African slavery, in any form, ought henceforth to cease throughout the world."<sup>11</sup>

When Spain failed to deliver on promises to abolish slavery after its democratic revolution in 1868, Seward's successor, Hamilton Fish, used the threat of recognizing Cuban rebels to coerce Spain into passing what they called the Fourth of July Law in 1870. The Moret Law, as it was also known, put in motion a plan for gradual abolition, which Fish protested as disingenuous. He kept up the pressure, and in 1873 Spain abolished slavery outright in Puerto Rico and promised the same for Cuba once the rebels lay down their arms. Brazil, the only remaining slave nation, followed the same path by enacting a "free womb" law in 1871. The final death of slavery came to Cuba in 1886 and Brazil in 1888. After roughly four centuries, the vast and hugely profitable regime of African slavery in the Americas had ended.<sup>12</sup>

Coinciding with their retreat from the American hemisphere after 1865, European powers experienced a wave of reform and revolution that toppled thrones and challenged aristocratic oligarchies. Whatever role the United States had in stirring European reform, it was by inspiration and indirect influence, not foreign policy or government propaganda. The same European powers that withdrew from the Americas after 1865, Britain, France, and Spain, faced restless agitation for democratic reform at home. The American Civil War created rallying points for the opposition in each case.

Britain's workers and middle class had come around to supporting Lincoln and the Union by early 1865. They learned to use America as a benchmark against which to measure their limited political rights and grim standard of living. In 1865 the International Working Men's Association (a.k.a. the First International), cofounded by Karl Marx, launched the Reform League to "conquer political power" for workers. The League mobilized a massive protest movement and took to the streets. When the workers defied a government ban on public meetings in Hyde Park, a pall of fear spread across the country that Britain was on the brink of genuine social revolution. The League's show of strength forced Parliament to pass the Reform Act of 1867, which doubled the number of voters and placed Britain on the road to democracy.

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One year later, in September 1868, Spain's Glorious Revolution overthrew the decrepit Bourbon throne of Queen Isabella II and established a democratic government that astonished Europe. Spanish opposition liberals became enchanted with America as a model of modernity and democratic freedom, and the new constitution of 1869 borrowed heavily from the U.S. model. Despite that, Spain, like Britain, sought to democratize within the traditional casing of monarchy rather than risk a pure republican form of government. Spain's democratic experiment did not last long, but it left behind a liberal constitutional monarchy and a commitment to end slavery.

Thanks to Napoleon III's disastrous Grand Design for Mexico, France's liberal opposition gained support. Once cynical about America's claims as "the great republic," the French left became enamored of Lincoln and the Union and embraced America as a standard of liberty it demanded for France. Napoleon III tried to appease the opposition by easing censorship and bowing to limited democratic reform. To rally support for the "liberal empire," Napoleon III led France into a disastrous war against Prussia that abruptly ended the Second Empire. In Paris, radical republicans and socialists went to the barricades to proclaim the Paris Commune as the vanguard of a radically new social order.

Though the Papal State of Rome was not among the powers of Europe, its pontiff, Pope Pius IX, exercised enormous moral power, always against the tide of modern secular liberalism in the Americas and Europe. He became the embodiment of Catholic reaction, author of the *Syllabus of Errors*, which denounced religious tolerance and liberalism generally, and host to the Vatican Council, which ratified the syllabus and declared the pope infallible. When France pulled its troops out of Rome to fight the Prussians, the Italian army stormed the gates and proclaimed the city the new capital of united Italy. Liberals everywhere cheered the fall of papal Rome as another sign of the new birth of freedom.

This book illuminates a capacious Age of Revolution that encompassed the Americas and Europe for a century between the 1770s and 1870s. Fired by ideas of natural rights and human equality coming out of the radical fringe of the Enlightenment, this transatlantic Age of Revolution witnessed a relentless struggle between the advocates and

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enemies of those ideals. That struggle defined the modern age and continues to do so.

There were disturbing contradictions and sad failings in domestic and international Reconstruction. Woman suffragists, led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and others, had supported emancipation and equality for former slaves and made their claim to the same rights accorded newly freed African Americans but were made to wait for an entire half century.<sup>13</sup> While the United States pursued noble goals at home and abroad during Reconstruction, the government carried out horrific wars and atrocities against Indians in the trans-Mississippi West. In its brutality, racism, and claims to be civilizing its victims, America's Indian policy resembled the most objectionable features of imperialism that lay ahead, even though its purpose was not to wring wealth from Native Americans in the manner typical of imperialist systems. The "Indian Question," according to Commissioner of Indian Affairs Francis A. Walker, was how to remove them as "an obstacle to the national progress" and what to do with them after ceasing to obstruct the extension of railroads and white settlement. Walker's solution was to remove Indians to reservations, out of the way of "national progress." But insofar as Indians continued to resist "national progress," it was left to the Army to deal with them through a brutal campaign of genocidal warfare.

As for Chinese immigrants, whose labor was indispensable to the national progress Walker celebrated, they were also subjected to horrible exploitation and prejudice, then banned altogether from further immigration in 1882. Underlying the nation's treatment of African Americans, women, Indians, and Chinese immigrants was a common thread of "scientific" theories of inherent human differences in their fitness for full citizenship as members of the republic. Racism in its modern "scientific" guise served to justify the undoing of Reconstruction's domestic and international aspirations.<sup>14</sup>

I wrote this book during an unusually perilous time for democracy in America and the world. Nearly every day, some television pundit reminds us of the relevance of Reconstruction, whether about new voter

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suppression laws, police violence against Black citizens, impeachment, or insurrection. At no time has the history of Reconstruction commanded a more disturbing relevance. On the last page of *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois lamented, "The unending tragedy of Reconstruction is the utter inability of the American mind to grasp its real significance, its national and worldwide implications."<sup>15</sup> I hope readers will find in this book a bracing reminder of a moment when much of the world looked to the United States not as a perfect model of democratic success but as an inspiration to continue the forever unfinished task of realizing democracy's promise for America and the world.

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