
Introduction

A week after the 2004 presidential election, a friend sent me a map of America with the red and blue states superimposed over the Confederate and Union states of the Civil War years. The Republican red states fit almost perfectly over the southern states that supported the Confederacy and the western plains that were territories during the 1860s, and the Democratic blue states fit closely over the states that had supported the Union. The caption of the map suggested that today's voters were still fighting the same issues over which they went to war in 1861. I was fascinated by the map, but not convinced by the caption. "This is exactly what my new book is about," I wrote back. "But it's not the Civil War that made today's map match the earlier one. The story is all about reconstruction."

This is the book that explains why today's political map looks like a map of the 1860s. It argues that in the years between 1865 and 1901, a new definition of what it meant to be an American developed from a heated debate over the proper relationship of the government to its citizens. In spring 1865, Americans everywhere had to ask themselves how the different sections of the country could reconstruct themselves into a nation that offered individuals economic opportunity and political freedom at the same time that it protected private property. By 1901, a newly formed "middle class" had answered that question by embracing a worldview that divided the nation into two groups. On one hand, they believed, were hardworking Americans—those who believed that success came through hard work and that all Americans were working their way up together. On the other hand were special interests—those who believed that there were fundamental conflicts in society that must

be adjusted by the federal government. Regardless of how much money they made, those who believed they could make it on their own saw themselves as part of “the great middle” between rich monopolists and the lazy poor who were trying to harness the government to their own needs. They distrusted certain suffragists, African Americans, and veterans, as well as certain kinds of businessmen and workers, believing that they wanted special government aid, which, if given, would destroy the American system of evenhanded government. At the same time, because they defined themselves as true Americans, members of this middle class willingly harnessed a growing national government to their own interest, for it was the government’s job, they believed, to promote the good of all Americans. Paradoxically, American individualists came to depend on government support while denying it to others.

This process was not as simple as today’s politicians would have us think, with small-government Republicans fighting against big-government Democrats who wanted to create a welfare state. In fact, in the mid-1800s, it was the Republicans, not the Democrats, who stood for big government and Democrats who insisted on government limitations. Instead, the process was a complicated story in which sectional animosities, racial tensions, industrialization, women’s activism, and westward expansion cut across party lines to create both a new definition of what it meant to be an American and a new vision of the government’s role in the lives of its citizens.

The stark division that contemporaries saw in nineteenth-century America was not as simple as they thought, either. From the very beginning of the postwar era, the government that Republicans had constructed to benefit everyone equally actually privileged eastern businessmen over southern and western farmers and laborers. Laws, the economy, and tradition firmly placed whites over blacks and most immigrants, and men over women. Then, too, protesters of these conditions were not all radicals attempting to monopolize the state, as their opponents claimed. Many, in fact, adopted the mainstream ideology and wanted relatively mild adjustments to society to make that dream a reality for them.

Although questions about the relationship between the government and its citizens were hardly new in 1865, one thing made the post-Civil War years critical for American identity: during the war, for the first time in American history, Congress had imposed national taxes. After the war, individuals—taxpayers—had a new and powerful interest in their government and were concerned about who should be able to vote about how their money was

spent. The correct sphere of government was no longer an academic question, but of personal financial interest to every American. This new relationship between government and citizens meant that the question of who should have a voice in government took on great practical meaning. Who was, or should be, a citizen of the new nation? Should African Americans vote? Women? Immigrants? The poor? Would they make reasonable decisions about the expenditure of tax dollars?

These were not academic questions either, for during the war the Republican Congress had strengthened the national government, expanding its power dramatically with an army and a navy of more than a million men, and increasing its role in the economy with new legislation to develop the nation. Then, in January 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment, ending slavery, indicated the firm intention of Republican congressmen to strengthen the national government. With its second section declaring that “Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation,” it was the first amendment in the history of the American Constitution that increased, rather than limited, the power of the national government. Nineteenth-century attempts to balance freedom, taxation, and government power were the central story of post-Civil War America. Their ultimate outcome defined a desirable American citizen and an ideal American state.

My interest in this process was sparked by the disparity between the way people a century and a half ago disparaged the government at the same time they developed it. I knew that for all their fervent talk about “self-made men” and “laissez-faire government,” late nineteenth-century Americans did not, in fact, decrease the size and activity of the national government. They increased it. How did they justify this contradiction? This question interested me deeply, for the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s brought this same paradox to the fore in modern American political rhetoric. It gives us antigovernment rhetoric from the South and western plains, regions that receive far more in federal aid than they pay in taxes. At the same time, the Northeast and West Coast support government activism although they receive back from the national government considerably less money than they pay in. In 2003, for example, taxpayers in Mississippi received a federal outlay of \$1.83 for every dollar of federal tax they paid, while taxpayers from Massachusetts saw only \$.78 come back to the state for every dollar they gave to Uncle Sam. Yet in 2004, Mississippi voters spoke firmly against government activism and Massachusetts voters spoke strongly in favor of it. Clearly there is a stark regional

contrast in American thought between the reality of government activism and Americans' image of it. How did nineteenth-century Americans negotiate this contrast?¹

In order to find out, I tried to put myself as closely as I could into the position of an educated nineteenth-century American, worried about the future of the nation, my family, and myself. I read newspapers, novels, memoirs, and histories of the late 1800s; looked at paintings; and listened to music. As I did so, the world I saw around me appeared very different from the one I had read about in history books. Most histories of "Reconstruction" focus on the South and its morass of racial problems. But nineteenth-century Americans never focused on racial problems in the postwar South to the exclusion of the issues of postwar industrialization and urbanization that appeared dramatically as early as 1866. Also, women were prominent in postwar records, exercising an increasingly visible role in American life and causing plenty of comment, both positive and negative. It seemed to me that the mindset of the era must have somehow incorporated the growing public activities of women, and that histories of the period that pushed women's actions into their own sphere, divorced from American society in general, were missing an important part of the story.

Finally, it was evident that the reconstruction years could not be understood without acknowledging the central importance of the American West. The postwar years were the heyday of westward expansion, miners, the American cowboy, Plains Indians, and gunfighters. These events and characters were everywhere in the historical record. Indeed, as I worked, the obvious suddenly dawned on me: the nation's strongest cultural images of the postwar years came from the West. Only a few of us could pick out a photograph of even the most prominent African Americans or industrialists—let alone a labor organizer or women's activist—but most Americans have heard of Jesse James and Geronimo, and few people in the world wouldn't recognize the American cowboy. The history of the West was part and parcel of the story of the reconstruction years and must be put back into it. Postwar "reconstruction" was the literal reconstruction of the North, South, and West into a nation in the aftermath of the Civil War. That rebuilding stretched from the end of the Civil War until the start of the twentieth century.

How did nineteenth-century Americans justify the expansion of government activism and still retain their wholehearted belief in individualism? Upwardly mobile members of American society opposed government activism to promote the interests of workers, big businessmen, minorities, and

certain activist women, perceiving their demands as an attempt to advance a view of America as a land of class conflict rather than of economic harmony. Those in “the middle” between rich and poor firmly opposed government action on behalf of such “special interests,” insisting instead that the government should promote the good of all Americans. By skillfully defining those who believed in economic and social harmony—themselves—as true Americans rather than a special interest, while denigrating activist workers, African Americans, Populists, robber barons, and so on as un-American, middle-class Americans could argue for government intervention on their own behalf without fearing the destruction of the American system of government.

Workers had demanded government activism on behalf of labor since at least 1866, but when the government first curbed the excesses of business and established the principle of intervention in the economy at the end of the century, it did not do so to protect organized labor. Denying that government must balance the interests of workers and farmers against those of big business, the same congressmen who opposed labor activism for its apparent suppression of individual liberty undercut certain business practices on the grounds that businessmen were trampling on the American ideal of a level playing field in the economy. Intervention in the economy went on to become even more active, venturing into social welfare legislation, when middle-class women activists argued that the government must protect the ideal middle-class family.

Yet even as members of the American middle class deliberately harnessed a newly active national government to their own interests, they retained a vision of America as a land of individualism. This contradiction was possible because of the blinding postwar image of the American West. Regardless of the harsh realities of the late nineteenth-century West, the peculiarities of the postwar years made it represent economic opportunity, political purity, and social equality. When a Republican government dominated by northeasterners and far westerners tried to impose freedom on the South, ex-Confederates immediately developed antigovernment rhetoric. This antigovernment stance spread to the plains and mountain West despite the region’s complete dependence on the government, as angry settlers opposed a range of federal actions, from the awarding of army beef contracts to Indian policies. Then, as the Republican Party became loathed by its opponents as a patronage-spewing behemoth acting in the interests of African Americans and rich eastern businessmen, antigovernment protesters across the nation idealized the rural West as the opposite of the urban Northeast. This western antigovernment mindset

flexed its muscles in the Spanish-American War when Theodore Roosevelt pointedly led a “cowboy” regiment up San Juan Hill to fight a conflict popularly justified as an attempt to take the nation away from eastern politicians and money-grubbing businessmen, returning it to independence, self-reliance, and morality. After the Spanish-American War, America was a land where an activist government supported individualism, and those who endorsed this contradictory ideology exported it to other nations through both trade and military conflict. In 1901, Theodore Roosevelt—that “damned cowboy,” as a spokesman for the eastern establishment called him—sat in the White House, directing an activist government that served a peculiarly American middle class.

The pages that follow try to show what the nation looked like to nineteenth-century Americans. In order to do that, I have attempted to avoid portraying the era as one of abstract Forces—industry, labor, suffragists, immigrants, African Americans—conflicting over Big Issues. I have written this book as a narrative history about the experiences of a number of actual Americans who lived in the era from 1865 to 1901. When choosing my characters, I required that they lived through almost the entire period and that they left behind enough of their own words to tell their own stories. Ex-Confederate Wade Hampton and western scout Buffalo Bill, poet Julia Ward Howe, educator Booker T. Washington, and Sioux leader Sitting Bull, among others, fulfilled my requirements; labor pioneer William Sylvis, who died in 1869, and leading black politician W. Beverly Nash, who left few records, did not. As I researched these individuals, I was astonished at how often the lives of those who embraced a developing middle-class ideology crossed, suggesting that they recognized an affinity for those who thought like themselves and actively worked to spread their worldview across the country. Less prominent Americans who left fewer records aren’t introduced as individuals; rather, they show up on the shores of New York Harbor watching the illumination of the Statue of Liberty, in a New Orleans freedmen’s meeting, in Missouri helping Jesse James hide from government agents, in a California mining camp trying to make a fortune. They are William Graham Sumner’s “forgotten Americans” who hated the idea of welfare legislation, the people who cheered when Ida B. Wells got dragged out of a white railroad car or applauded President Grover Cleveland’s use of the army against the Pullman strikers. They are also Theodore Roosevelt’s ideal hardworking citizens, black cowboy Nat Love’s race-blind westerners, Americans who begged the government to go to war to save the lives of Cuban women and children.

They are both the worst and the best of America. This book is designed to tell the story of the construction of their worldview.

This middle-class ideology was both the greatest triumph and the greatest tragedy of reconstruction. It was an astonishingly inclusive way to run a country, making certain former slaves and impoverished immigrants welcomed participants in middle-class America, offering to them opportunities they could not have imagined in other countries, and it advanced women's position in a dramatically short time. But this ideology also rendered Americans unable to recognize systematic inequalities in American society. Anyone who embraced the mainstream vision came to believe he or she was on the road to a middle-class life, no matter what the reality of his or her position actually was. When things went wrong, individuals had no one but themselves to blame for failure, even if its causes lay outside their control. A man unemployed during a recession or a woman beaten by her husband could find little sympathy in the middle-class worldview. More strikingly, though, this mindset deliberately repressed anyone who called for government action to level the American economic, social, or political playing field. If a group as a whole came to be perceived as looking for government handouts its members were aggressively prohibited from participating equally in American society, and all of the self-help in the world wasn't going to change that. This middle-class vision also limited women's role in society by basing their power on their positions as wives and mothers, not as independent, equal individuals. The powerful new American identity permitted many individuals to succeed far beyond what they might have achieved elsewhere, but that exceptional openness depended on class, gender, and racial bias.

The political contours of this division have changed over the decades, but the divided vision of the nation is still a potent part of Americans' current mindset. It was certainly part of the 2004 electoral puzzle that made the red states, with their large government subsidies, vote so vehemently against what they perceived as government aid to "special interests." And red staters who trumpet America's greatness as a land of opportunity are right: the American ideology is truly great. This mindset is also, though, what made blue staters vote for a government that would level the economic, social, and political playing fields between different groups. The blue staters, too, are right; America has serious systematic inequalities embedded in its society. America is neither excellent nor oppressive; rather, it is both at the same time. In 1865, Americans had to reconstruct their shattered nation. Their solution "reconstructed" America into what it is today.