

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	v
Unit 1: Guide to Critical Thinking	
Purpose of This Unit.....	1
When is an Argument Not a Fight?	1
Assertions	2
Evidence	2
Reasoning	4
by Cause-and-Effect	5
by Comparison	7
by Generalization	8
by Proof	11
by Debate	13
Assumptions	15
Values	16
Arguments—Model and Five Main Parts	18
Unit 2: Reconstruction	
Lesson 1 Identifying Sources	19
Lesson 2 Evaluating Sources	20
Lesson 3 Evaluating Evidence about Reconstruction.....	22
Lesson 4 Recognizing and Assessing Cause-and-Effect Reasoning	24
Lesson 5 Identifying and Evaluating Generalizations	26
Lesson 6 How Corrupt Were Reconstruction Governments?	29
Lesson 7 To What Extent Was Reconstruction a Tragic Era?	34
Lesson 8 What Does Visual Evidence Show about Reconstruction Attitudes toward Blacks?	53
Lesson 9 Why Was the Fourteenth Amendment Passed?	57
Unit 3: Industrialization and Response	
Lesson 10 Evaluating Evidence	65
Lesson 11 Identifying and Evaluating Comparisons	68
Lesson 12 Identifying and Evaluating Cause-and-Effect Reasoning	70
Lesson 13 Identifying and Analyzing Types of Reasoning	72
Lesson 14 Should the Government Role Be Laissez-faire or the General Welfare State?	74
Lesson 15 What Is Significant About the Life of John D. Rockefeller?	91
Lesson 16 Introduction to the Oil Business	95
Lesson 17 What Were Conditions Like for Workers in the Meat-Packing Industry Around 1900?	110
Lesson 18 What Brought About the Progressive Movement?	142
Unit 4: Workers, Immigrants, and Farmers in the Late 1800s	
Lesson 19 Assessing the Strengths and Weaknesses of Evidence	151
Lesson 20 Recognizing and Assessing Cause-and-Effect Reasoning	154
Lesson 21 Recognizing and Evaluating Types of Reasoning	157
Lesson 22 Identifying and Evaluating Proof and Debating Reasoning	159
Lesson 23 What Were American Cities Like in the Late 1800s?	163
Lesson 24 What Was the Town of Pullman Like?	167
Lesson 25 Should the United States Restrict Immigration?	177
Lesson 26 Why Was the Immigration Act of 1924 Passed?	185
Lesson 27 What Does the Omaha Platform Show About the Populists?	189
Bibliography: Major Sources Used for Lessons	195

LESSON 6 How Corrupt Were Reconstruction Governments?

After the Civil War, the country had to decide on terms for bringing the Southern states back into the Union. President Johnson allowed them back into the Union on generous terms. But Republicans, especially Radical Republicans, disagreed with the President. In the Reconstruction Act of 1867, they voted to send

United States soldiers to the South to make sure blacks could vote. Soon Republican whites and blacks controlled the Southern governments. In this lesson, two historians take opposing positions on how corrupt these Republican governments were.

Historian A

(1) Northern “carpetbaggers,” working with Southern “scalawags,” came to the South after the Civil War to take advantage of the unfortunate situation there. Carpetbaggers wanted to make money and seize political power for the Republican Party. Scalawags wanted power and money for themselves.

(2) Under the Radical governments of the carpetbaggers and scalawags, blacks could vote, but many wealthy whites (plantation owners) could not. As a result, elections in the South were a farce. Thousands of ignorant, irresponsible blacks, directed by their white bosses, voted without knowing even the names of the men for whom they were voting.¹

(3) The Northern Radicals were lying when they they wanted Negroes to vote and hold office in the name of justice. This is shown when one notices that few of the Northern states allowed the Negroes to vote and none ever promoted a Negro into any office.

(4) The South was now plunged by this misgovernment into corruption and plundering beyond belief. Radical Republican Legislatures, supported by military power, piled up expenses against their poor states to fantastic heights. In Florida the cost of printing in 1869 was more than the entire cost of the state

government in 1860. In Arkansas a Negro was given \$9,000 for repairing a bridge which had originally cost \$500. In South Carolina the legislature voted extra pay of \$1,000 to the Speaker for his efficient service when he lost \$1,000 on a horse race.

(5) A Congressional Committee reported that one of the leading carpetbag (Republican) governors made over \$100,000 during his first year in office though his salary was \$8,000.² Another carpetbag governor was charged with stealing and selling the food of the Freedmen’s Bureau which was intended for the relief of helpless and ragged ex-slaves. F.J. Moses, scalawag, stated that he received \$15,000 while governor of South Carolina for approving a large printing bill.³

(6) Naturally, decent white men in the South detested this misgovernment. Resentment on the part of whites led to violence by the Ku Klux Klan and others. The Radical Republicans in Congress had run the South at gunpoint which gave them political power for a time, but when that time ran out, blacks and whites were hostile toward each other. Republican rule needlessly crippled the political and economic systems of the South and set back the rights of blacks for generations.

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Endnotes for Historian A

- ¹ W.L. Fleming, *Documentary History of Reconstruction*. (Cleveland, OH, 1906-1907), Vol. II, p. 44.

Statement of Samuel Hale, a Unionist (a Southerner who supported the North during the Civil War), in 1867 to a Congressional Committee:

“I wish you could have seen the poor, ignorant blacks giving their ‘bits of paper,’ as they called their printed ballots, when they knew no more of the names on them...than you did.”

- ² *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 39, Report of Mr. Speer and Mr. Archer of the Congressional Investigating Committee in 1872. House Report No. 92, 42 Congress, 2nd Session, p. 24.
- ³ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 41, Statement by F.J. Moses in 1873, contained in Report on Public Frauds in South Carolina, p. 317.

Historian B

(1) After the Civil War, Republicans in Congress voted to send troops into the South to protect the rights of blacks freed from slavery by the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment. Southern state governments were now controlled by three groups of Republicans — carpetbaggers, scalawags, and freedmen. These Republican governments have been attacked for being corrupt, but these criticisms are unfair. Actually, the Reconstruction governments were no more corrupt than other governments at the time, and they accomplished many worthwhile reforms.

(2) Among the Northern carpetbaggers who moved to the South were, to be sure, some who were interested in power and profit. Most were in ordinary occupations, however, such as teachers and missionaries, who were sincerely interested in helping the freedmen. Scalawags have likewise been stereotyped as traitors looking for political power. But scalawags were simply Southern whites who didn't like government in the South under the Democrats. Quite naturally, they turned to the other political party to bring about change.

(3) The new Republican state governments wrote very good state constitutions which contained a number

of important reforms, such as free public education. On the other hand, there was definitely some corruption in the governments. But the corruption has to be set in its proper context.

(4) First, much of the increased spending was construction, especially railroad construction, and most of the profits from the corruption involved in railroads did not go to the Republicans. The people who profited most from the bribes were the Southern construction contractors, business investors, and railroad promoters. Most of the debt increases in Southern states resulted from grants and guarantees to railroad promoters, among whom were always some native white Democrats.¹ In Florida, more than 60% of the debt was from railroad bonds. Most of Alabama's reconstruction debt—\$18,000,000 out of \$20,500,000—was from state bonds for money to assist railroads.

(5) White Democrats in several states greatly exaggerated the actual increase in the size of the state debts. In Mississippi, the Democrats claimed the Radicals had added \$20,000,000 to the state debt, when it was, in fact, only \$500,000. The claim by Democrats of the debt increase for Alabama was \$30,000,000 when it was only \$2,500,000. In most other

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Historian B

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states, when loans to the railroads were subtracted, the increases in state debts for which Radicals were responsible appear far smaller. Actually, a good deal of white planter protest against alleged corruption in the Radical government was really against Radical tax policies, which made them pay their fair share (they had paid very low taxes before the Civil War) and pay it for services (such as education) to Negroes.

(6) As a matter of fact, taxes, government spending, and public debts were bound to increase in the Southern states after the war no matter who controlled the state governments. For there was no way to escape the cost of physical reconstruction—such as the repair of buildings and bridges. And much of this physical reconstruction took place while Radicals were in office. They expanded the state railroad systems, increased public services, and provided public school systems—in some states for the first time. Since schools and other public services were now provided for Negroes as well as for whites, a considerable increase in the cost of state government could hardly

have been avoided. In Florida, between 1869 and 1873, the number of children in public schools tripled, while in South Carolina the number quadrupled.

(7) The period after the Civil War was a time of great corruption in government, as shown in the incredible swindling by the Tweed Ring in New York City. Further, the state governments in the South after the Democrats took control again in the 1870s often turned out to be just as corrupt as the Republican governments they had criticized. One Democratic state treasurer embezzled \$316,000 and eight other state treasurers were convicted of embezzlement.

(8) The corruption of the Republicans was not unusual; their spending was certainly reasonable given the circumstances; and the corruption was not limited to them alone. The white Southerners who were so critical were often hypocrites who were involved in corruption themselves. The Reconstruction governments accomplished a great deal under difficult circumstances. It is time to stop exaggerating the faults of the Reconstruction governments and look at the record fairly.

Endnotes for Historian B

¹ Ellan Lonn (a historian), *Reconstruction in Louisiana After 1868*. (New York, 1918), pp. 36-37:

“Such measures [railroad bond issues] were supported by members of both parties, often introduced by Democrats, in every case supported by a large majority of Democrats in both houses.”

Q Historian A

1. What is the main idea of Historian A's argument?

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Historian B

7. What is the main idea of Historian B's argument?

8. What assumption does Historian B make in Paragraph 6, first and second sentences?

9. Find one piece of evidence and evaluate it.

10. Evaluate the reasoning in the following.
 - a. Paragraph 2, first and second sentences.

 - b. Paragraph 5, last sentence.

11. Which words in the first sentence of Paragraph 3 make a value judgment?

- _____ 12. What does Historian B seem to feel largely determined the history of Reconstruction?
 - A. Laws and politics.
 - B. Economics.
 - C. The development of new machines and tools.
 - D. Individual people and what they do.
 - E. Groups of people and their beliefs.