

How Bad Was Reconstruction?

KENNETH S. LYNN

THE ERA OF RECONSTRUCTION, 1865-1877, by Kenneth M. Stampp. Knopf. \$4.95.

For the past seventy years and more, we have been living with the myth that the post-Civil War "Reconstruction" of the vanquished South was a "tragic era"—to use Claude G. Bowers's famous phrase. Some of the propounders of this view were Southerners seeking historical justification for their resentment of outside interference. But a striking number were Northerners. Whether they accepted the social-Darwinist outlook of the 1890's that government aid for private individuals, whatever their color, was immoral, or were influenced by Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) into believing that "the agitation over slavery was inimical to the Nordic race, because it thrust aside all national opposition to the intrusion of hordes of immigrants of inferior racial value," or were anti-New Dealers who viewed Franklin Roosevelt's attacks on states' rights with conservative alarm, they were united in the conviction that the radical Republicans of the 1870's had been a wicked crew.

IN THE 1930's, however, a counter-myth arose that interpreted the Reconstruction era in a much kinder light. Some of these new myth-makers were Marxists who glorified the attempts of various scalawag leaders to break up big plantations so that every man might have forty acres and a mule. Others were Negroes seeking vindication for the only governments in American history that had brought members of their race to the center of power. Still others were men of conscience who were as outraged by the South's cruelty to the Negro in the twentieth century as William Lloyd Garrison had been a hundred years before. As the fight for civil rights was intensified, the adherents of this counter-myth grew in numbers and scholarly distinction.

Their arguments have been synthesized by Professor Kenneth M. Stampp of the University of California in *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877*, a historical accomplishment that parallels what Bowers did for the earlier myth in *The Tragic Era*. If Bowers's book, published in 1929, was essentially an elegiac work—a tribute to a "Jeffersonian" America that received the death blow in the very year of its appearance—*The Era of Reconstruction* rides the strongest political wave of our time.

Professor Stampp readily admits the shabby aspects of the Reconstruction period—"the corruption was real, the failures obvious, the tragedy undeniable." And he is remarkably fair-minded in his assessment of even the most vulnerable aspects of Bowers's position. But, quietly yet convincingly, he demonstrates that the white people of the South were not treated with "unprecedented brutality" by the Reconstructionists, as legend would have it, but with amazing charity. Only a handful of Confederate civil officers were even arrested; none were ever brought to trial; and only Jefferson Davis (who was held for two years) remained in prison for more than a few months. As for the troops, they surrendered and went home—as Lee did—unmolested. By 1872, former Confederate leaders had become governors of states, members of Congress, and Cabinet advisers of Presidents. Stampp also makes a good case for the humanitarian ideals of the radicals—their interest in establishing schools for Negroes, in obtaining land for them, and in guaranteeing their political rights. In refreshing contrast to the economic cynicism of Charles A. Beard's generation, he argues reasonably and well that a concern for the Constitutional rights of corporations was by no means the only motive behind the agitation for the Fourteenth Amendment.

IT IS in its treatment of Lincoln that the Stampp counter-myth becomes dubious. For those of the Bowers persuasion, Lincoln's assassination was the first act of a national disaster. The author of *The Era of Reconstruction* takes a different view. He points out that the Great Emancipator stated at one time or

another that the slaves should be freed gradually, that colonization of the entire Negro population of the United States in either the West Indies or Africa was the ideal solution to our race problem, and until then the free Negro must resign himself to an inferior status in American society.

Stampp also emphasizes that Lincoln's interest in a peace without vengeance was not so much the product of that tragic compassion which Bowers had emphasized but the act of a consummately clever politician who wished to encourage the remnants of the old Whig Party in the South to reconstitute themselves as Republicans. By a generous treatment of the defeated rebels, Lincoln hoped to secure for his party a broader national base. Thus in a reversal of roles, the counter-myth casts Lincoln as the "hardheaded realist," while Thaddeus Stevens & Co. become the "sentimental idealists."

Once this reversal has been accomplished, the book moves straight toward its concluding paragraph: "The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which could have been adopted only under the conditions of radical reconstruction, make the blunders of that era, tragic though they were, dwindle into insignificance. For if it was worth four years of civil war to save the Union, it was worth a few years of radical reconstruction to give the American Negro the ultimate promise of equal civil and political rights." Thus we are left with the judgment that only the radical course could have led to Constitutional guarantees of freedom. Like the Civil War, Reconstruction was an inevitable tragedy, but in the long run worthwhile.

The question Stampp never faces is, What if Lincoln had lived? It is not necessary to resort to the simplicities of Bowers to believe that a less radical formulation of Negro freedom might have permitted a genuine two-party system to come to life again in the South, and that in time this rivalry could have led to a competition for the allegiance of the freedman. In any event the use of Federal power, indispensable in our own time to the success of the civil-rights movement, was not the cure for social injustice a hundred years ago.

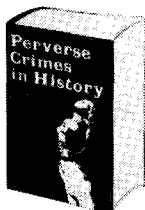
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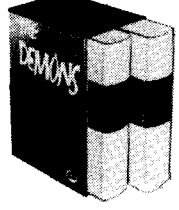
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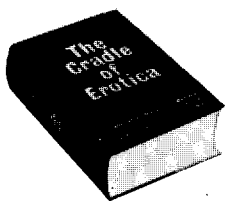
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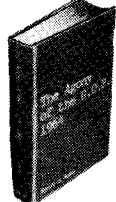
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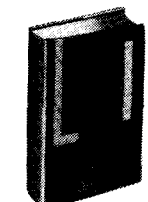
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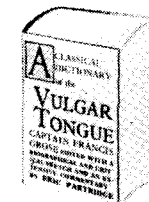
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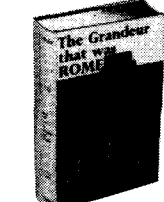
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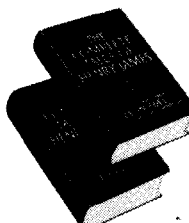
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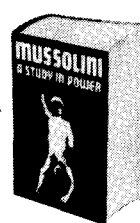
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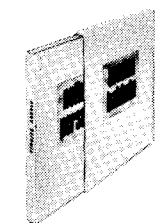
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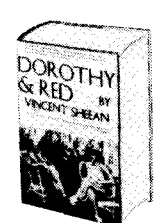
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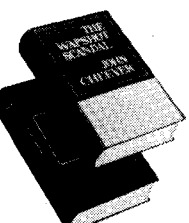
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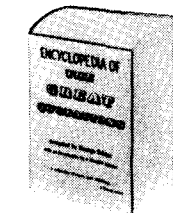
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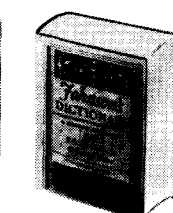
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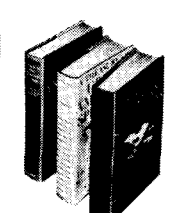
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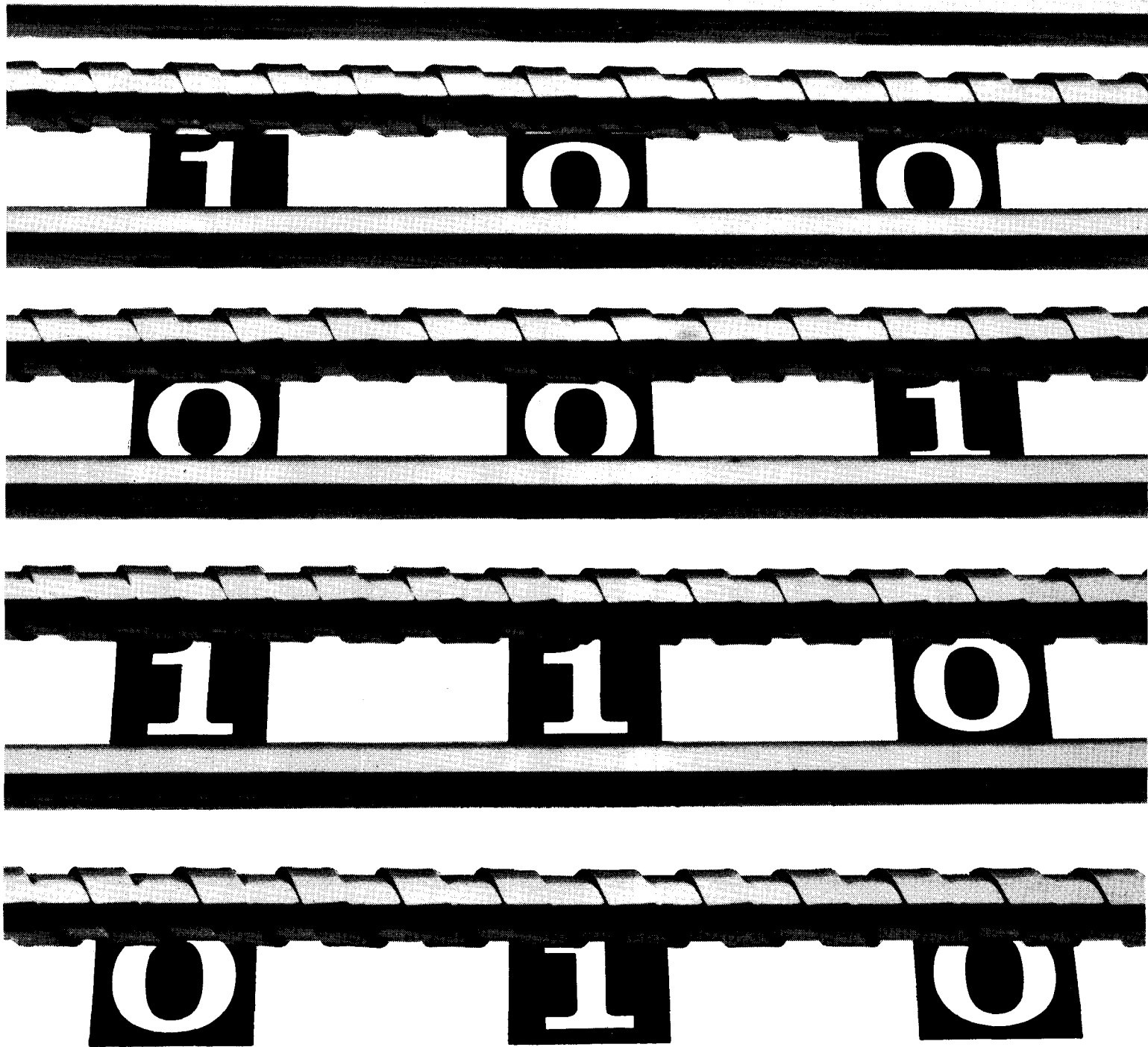
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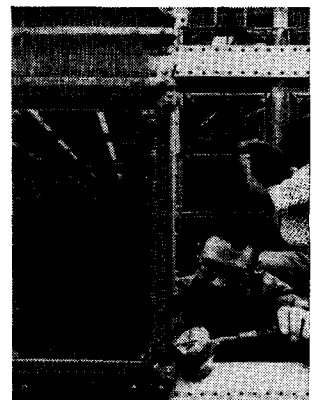
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