

Reconstruction: The Re-Building of the United States After Its Civil War

“There were swaying chimneys, tottering walls, streets impassable from piles of brick, stones, and rubbish. Men stood speechless, haggard... gazing at the desolation.’ Many must have felt that way in defeat, though newly freed African Americans were exultant.”¹

Nowhere is this sentiment shown more clearly than in Howell Cobb’s, *An Unreconstructed Southerner* (1868). Cobb’s letter reflects the bitterness white Southerners felt following the American civil war. Many white Southerners felt cheated out of property, angered at what they perceived as biased laws against them, and were insulted that federal troops were placed in the South to help reconstruct the country and expressed anger with President Andrew Johnson.

Many white Southerners felt they were cheated out of property following the American civil war. Cobb mentions how Southern estates have been ruined by the war which gives commendation to the part of the quote that speaks about “swaying chimneys, tottering walls, and impassable streets”² along with the Southerners themselves. Ironically, they didn’t feel the same way when it came to the slaves they owned. Southerners viewed slaves as their property. When slaves became emancipated, their former owners viewed this as a loss of their property.

Southerners were angered at what they perceived as biased laws against them. Cobb writes that the laws that were being implemented were illegal and unconstitutional. His view was

¹ James West Davidson and others, “From *Reconstructing the Union*”, In *Experience History: Interpreting America’s Past*, 446. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2011.

² Howell Cobb, “From *An Unreconstructed Southerner* (1868)”, David E. Shi, Holly A. Mayer, In *For the Record: A Documentary History of America*, Fourth edition, 2, New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010.

much the same as how many southerners felt that the laws were making their “former slaves their masters”. Southerners viewed this as a form of “negro supremacy”.³ He viewed these new laws as a way for the Union to substantiate negro supremacy.

Howell Cobb and the Southerners he represented felt that the presence of federal troops was insulting to them. The troops were placed there as a way to aid in the reconstruction but Cobb tells of how the Southern people use every means they have available to resist the federal troops. He tells of “opposing appeals and protests”.⁴ He scornfully calls the federal troops and the Union conquerors and makes it known that he resents them. He has the same resentment for President Andrew Johnson. Cobb makes President Johnson out to be unqualified to hold the office of the presidency. But in the same instance, he states very matter of factly that he hopes the country will be united once again.

Cobb writes that even though the South has been “wronged and ruined he hopes for better days and happier hours”⁵ when the country is united once again. Although the South was left in ruins and looked desolate, the “newly freed African Americans *were* exultant”.⁶ Cobb’s reflections in the letter greatly reflect how Southerners felt like “victims of cruel legislation and unjust laws”.⁷ However, at the end of his letter, Cobb does write that he is hopeful the atonement of the country is close at hand.

³ Cobb, *An Unreconstructed Southerner* (1868), 9

⁴ Cobb, *An Unreconstructed Southerner* (1868), 9

⁵ Cobb, *An Unreconstructed Southerner* (1868), 9

⁶ Davidson, *Reconstructing the Union*, 446

⁷ Cobb, *An Unreconstructed Southerner* (1868), 8