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A Political Revolution: The Result of the American Civil War and the Reconstruction

“Revolutions entail not only mass mobilization and regime change, but also more or less rapid and fundamental, social, economic and/or cultural change, during or soon after the struggle for state power,” justifies Jeffery Goldwin, Ph. D., a New York University sociology professor with a research background regarding political violence, social movements, and revolutions (Akpeninor). Revolutions have existed throughout the history of the world since the beginning of time and sprout from a combination of a variety of core issues. The religious Reformation in Europe during the 14th century is an example as are the political turnover in Haiti in the late 1700’s and the Russian Revolution of 1917 that anchored itself with a platform against military strategies (“Revolution”). These revolutions have placed their mark in history and created a lasting effect through the centuries in the framework of society and its inhabitants. The Civil War in the United States, a conflict that transformed American political thought, is another example of a powerful revolution (“Introduction”). A revolution rooted in a fight for liberties, the American Civil War catalyzed the Reconstruction period, which revolutionized the United States into an era of political reformation. Moreover, the Reconstruction period, born after the Civil War and concluding in 1877, is categorized as “one of the most turbulent and controversial eras in American history” due to the power of the American nation to infuse the democratic principles into society (“Introduction”). This prominent age turned the United States into a political battlefield for the politically divided

nation; however, statesmen collaborated to rebuild and to unite the broken United States of America by securing “the blessings of liberty,...and... prosperity” (“Preamble”). The era during the American Civil War profoundly altered the United States and turned the Reconstruction age into a political revolution for a united American nation because of new political ideas of the southern Republican controlled congress, the new amendments of the United States Constitution, and the centralization of government.

The rise of the Republican Party in the South changed politics through the attempts to revive African American participation, the mobilization of African American leaders, and the participation of African American voters. Political corruption arose in the forms of manipulation and intimidation to control American Americans and their influence on society through voting rights (Brinkley 414). During the Reconstruction era, a white supremacist political group called the Klu Klux Klan (KKK), acted as a military force and used violence to encourage males to vote for the Democratic Party in order to eliminate the Republican controlled South. The Republican congress responded to the “wave of black repression” with the KKK Acts in 1870 and 1871 (Brinkley 414). These enforcement acts were considered the “most radical measures of the era” in which voters could not be denied their right to vote based on race; these laws gained their importance because they propelled the Voting Rights Act of 1965 by initiating a precedent to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s (“Voting Rights”).

Even though the voting rights issue did not end with the Reconstruction era, it inspired many African Americans to rise and to establish a new political leadership platform. The enlightenment period of the radical reconstruction brought a “more active role in the political, economic, and social life of the South” with the Republican domination in the 1866 elections; it

introduced a new era for African Americans ("Black Leaders"). With the ratification of the 14th and 15th amendments and the spread of political activism towards African Americans through parades, protests, and community meetings, African Americans challenged themselves with the task of serving in a political office because African Americans never had a voice to speak for them (Foner). The Reconstruction Acts of 1867, passed by the Republican Congress, broke the barriers that allowed 2,000 African Americans to serve in a political office from the local to federal level. African American influence presented itself in legislation because of the 17 African American men from Southern states that composed the original makeup of the Congressional Black Caucus. That same year, the state constitutional convention of 1867 was the first time that African Americans and Caucasians participated in a political event together. This event was a sign of unity for the American nation and served as a forerunner to the first African American president, Barrack Obama.

The processes and the political strategies formed in effect to the actions of the Republican congress signaled the political base to propel African American activism. Fredrick Douglass, an abolitionist writer who is known as the "Father of America's Civil Rights Movement," laid the initial building blocks for the "modern civil rights movement" which reappeared 75 years after the ratification of the 15th amendment ("Who Was"). Douglass used his vision of a United States that would be strengthened by the freedom from discrimination to persuade President Lincoln to recruit African Americans into the Union army under his leadership during the Civil War. Fredrick Douglass "saw immediately that if former slaves could fully participate in the fighting, they could not be denied full citizenship in the Republic," and represented the beginning of the unification of the nation in addition to the closure of an

unequal pay-gap between Caucasians and African Americans in the army. (“Fredrick Douglass”). Historians believe that notable African American leaders like Fredrick Douglass built a lasting “legacy for the future” which served as a gateway for President Barrack Obama because Douglass overcame the pressures from society and changed political history with his actions (Lynch).

As a result of the increased political action directed by African American leaders, especially Frederick Douglass who lobbied with congressmen about the passage of an amendment that would ensure the voting rights for African Americans, the initiation of the legal participation of African American voters occurred in 1870 with the 15th amendment (“African Americans”). Nevertheless, the 15th Amendment did not prevent Democratic Southerners from issuing forms of social discriminations like Black Codes which prevented African Americans from voting. In response, the radical Republicans dedicated their decade reign in Congress to enhancing the voter participation of African Americans. As a political vacuum that existed due to the absence of Confederate leaders and soldiers, African American leaders pressed the federal government to include “African American suffrage” in the newly resolved governments (Weisberger). This encouraged Carpetbaggers from the North to inject progressive ideas from their respective Northern states while drafting new state constitutions for the southern states under the motivation that “black suffrage would allow the Republican party to build a base in the South” (Mintz). It was only when the Supreme Court of the United States banned poll taxes in 1966 that voter turnout among African Americans dramatically increased (Walsh). In 1964, only 6% of the African American population voted; furthermore, in 1969, three years after the release of the 1966 federal case *Harper v. Virginia Board of*

Elections, voter participation reached 59%. Even though the process for the ability in the African American community to increase their voter participation lasted almost a century after the passage of the 15th Amendment, evidence of African American voting has increased morale in minority communities and influenced the addition of the 24th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Three amendments to the United States Constitution, the 13th, 14th, and 15th, erupted from the radical Republican congress. Firstly, the 13th Amendment (1865) eradicated slavery in the South and terminated the ineffectiveness of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 that transformed “the fight to preserve the nation into a battle for human freedom” (“Thirteenth Amendment”). The fight continues today since the ambiguous language of “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude...shall exist *within* the United States” presented in the 13th Amendment challenges the modern practice of slave labor within non-U.S. territories (Wolff). The rise of globalization pioneers a demand in “labor exploitation” in countries like Burma, India, China, and the Ivory Coast to increase the economic health of the United States. Modern evidence of slave labor overseas by U.S. international corporations compares to the mistreatment of African American in slavery before the proposition of the ratification of the 13th Amendment in the post-American Civil War era, and the comparison questions the political rights of the people today.

Secondly, the 14th Amendment (1868) affirms the idea that “everyone born in this country is a United States citizen is one of the sacred building blocks of our democracy” (“Defending the 14th Amendment”) It redefined citizenship and protected the civil and equal rights of African Americans as a direct reaction to the Supreme Court Case, *Dred Scott v.*

Sanford in 1857: The 14th amendment restrained the power of states to prevent restrictions on the rights of the citizens by declaring Black Codes void. Despite the controversial influence of Confederate values in congressional seats during the late 1860's, the 14th Amendment served as the foundation of several historic landmark U.S. Supreme Court cases that altered history and society: *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896); *Gitlow v. New York* (1925); *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954); *Mapp v. Ohio* (1961) (NCC staff). The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) supports this case by stating that the 14th Amendment is "used as a vehicle for lawsuits upholding...important constitutional rights, such as the right to freedom of expression and the right to freedom from unlawful searches and seizures" because the rights of the American people have built the framework for the justice system for future generations (Migdal).

Lastly, the 15th Amendment (1870) was the final of the three Reconstruction Amendments. It outlawed governments from the local to federal level to hinder a citizen's voting rights "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude" ("15th Amendment"). This provision of the U.S. Constitution changed the political structure of elections with the abolition of states' rights on voting procedures and regulations while attempting to anchor the civil rights movement for all minorities. In comparison to the pre-13th Amendment era, the ratification process of the 15th Amendment promoted African American social gatherings; African American slaves during the Civil War were not able to discuss political matters and their opinions on elections due to the fear of rebellion and uprisings from their white plantation owners ("African Americans"). Represented from 17 different states, African Americans held their "first national meeting of black Americans in the history of the United States" in the place of the heart of the government- Washington, D.C. ("African Americans").

This important convention sparked the initiation of Frederick Douglass into the political arena as the “elected president of the convention” where he remained a vision of hope in the minds of other African Americans. One African American activist, Martin Luther King, Jr., propelled the termination of the discrimination in voter registration drives during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s, decades after the convention in Washington, D.C. because the 15th amendment contained limited impact on the closure of Jim Crow laws. (“Selma”). King ignited a peaceful march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, as a sign of disbelief in the American government, and President Johnson, under the political influence of deceased President John F. Kennedy, convinced both legislative houses to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1965. This historic passage of law replanted the legal consent for African Americans to vote on all levels of government, but more importantly it closed social restraints on voting policies that previously discriminated African Americans to their right to vote given by the 15th Amendment in 1870. The ratification of the 15th amendment demonstrated the initiation of developing unity in the United States.

The foundation of the National Bank Act of 1863, the creation of the Homestead Act of 1862, and the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad engineered the centralization of the American government during the Civil War. With no tax plan installed to finance the Civil War and state banking systems failing to innovate an effective system to pay the debt accumulated from the costly war, politicians and economists designed, created, and developed the National Bank Act of 1863 (“National Bank”). The National Bank Act of 1863 planned a strategy “to create a national banking system, float federal war loans, and establish a national currency” while reaching the goal of acquiring financial stability by selling government bonds (“National Bank”). Before the induction of the National Bank Act, from 1832 to 1862, American

banks were regulated from the state level. This act marked the end of the “free banking era” where the federal government abstained from influencing the economic activity of state banks (“States in Charge”). Two years after the enforcement of the National Bank Act of 1863, 800 state banks had transferred their state power to federal authorities with an additional increase of 150 converted national banks over the course of the next five years due to a 10% tax imposed on bank notes released by state banks (“States in Charge”). Instead of individual state banks regulating their concentrated sphere of influence, federal banks imposed their merged influence on a national scale and thus constructing a consolidated model for the economic system.

Another law implemented as a result of the Civil War was the Homestead Act of 1862 (Kehoe). This act allowed the federal government to market 160 acres of land to former Civil War veterans in gratitude for serving in the brutal war. The Homestead Act of 1862 spurred a movement for increased immigration and increased cultural diversity in communities which shaped the identities of modern states like Nebraska (“Homesteading Significance”); Immigration rose to the number one issue of the party platform at the Republican National Convention in May of 1860 and influenced the expansion of participants in the federal program (Bell). Within the 30 states that embraced homesteading, the federal government permitted minority groups, such as immigrants, women, and African Americans, to participate (“Homesteading Significance”). The integration of minorities into the program spurred a progressive movement or social change that pioneered a path for minority rights, especially the addition of the 19th amendment in 1920 to the U.S. Constitution for a women’s right to vote.

In order for citizens to reach the western lands of the United States, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Pacific Railroad Act of 1862 six months after the declaration of the Homestead Act ("The Central"). The Pacific Railroad Act of 1862 entitled to the formation of the Union Pacific Railroad to construct America's transcontinental railroad from Sacramento, California to Omaha, Nebraska. Historically, the Civil War called for over 30,000 miles of track in both the North and South, and it was an important component of the war due to the necessary transportation of people, machinery, and supplies ("The Industrial Revolution"). Earlier inefficient privately-owned railroads utilized different size gauges while the country needed an efficient communication system for both the war and westward expansion ("North and South"). While the Transcontinental Railroad gave rise to the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers - one of America's most historic worker unions- and laid the foundations for modern worker unions, the six year race to finish the 1,907 mile railroad between the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroad companies turned into a political bloodbath as the Northern "free" states and Southern "slave" states battled to compromise where to place the railroad ("The Railroad Unions"). Additional turmoil arose in Congress when Asa Whitney mentioned the involuntary use of Native American territory and Native American rights ("Asa Whitney"). Despite the tensions that erupted from the building of the transcontinental railroad, May 10th, 1869, marked a bold day in America's history because two distinct political groups of Americans organized the fulfillment of binding political ideas together as an attempt to accomplish a deed for the common good of the people of the United States.

By fusing the components of the installation of a radical Republican congress, the admission of three U.S. Constitutional amendments, and the centralization of government

during the Civil War and the aftermath of the Reconstruction, a new era of political ideas revolutionized into the United States. Radical Republicans passed pieces of legislature to combat anti-voting participation for African Americans which inspired a sense of civic duty and political activism for the African American community to engage in politics and fight a battle for their rights (Foner). Other notable leaders, such as President Abraham Lincoln, enacted the 13th Amendments, and African American leaders like Fredrick Douglass then pushed for the 14th and 15th Amendments which granted African Americans legal rights to American citizenship and voting. Furthermore, the political battle over slavery between the North and South provided a future gateway to a more united nation and centralized government due to the of a new railroad and banking system, but it was not limited to the birth of land opportunities originally designed for civil war veterans ("North and South"). American author, Samuel Clemens, while using the pseudonym Mark Twain, wrote that the Civil War and the decade following the war, "uprooted institutions that were centuries old, changed the politics of a people, and wrought so profoundly upon the entire national character that the influence cannot be measured short of two or three generations" (McPerson). Twain notes that the Civil War and the Reconstruction era profoundly altered American history; it is important not to exclude the impacts on world history and the perceptions of how people across the globe view Americans today. The American Civil War lasted four violent and costly years; however, the political impacts of the Civil War and the Reconstruction era turned America into a revolution that its political implications and consequences are felt by Americans across the country in the 21st century.

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