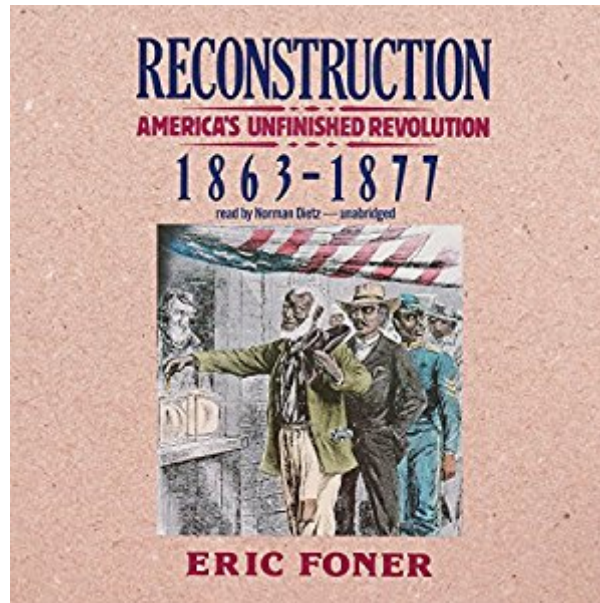


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# Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877



## Synopsis

The period following the Civil War was one of the most controversial eras in American history. This comprehensive account of the period captures the drama of those turbulent years that played such an important role in shaping modern America. Eric Foner brilliantly chronicles how Americans, black and white, responded to the unprecedented changes unleashed by the Civil War and the end of slavery. He provides fresh insights on a host of other issues, including the ways in which the emancipated slave's quest for economic autonomy and equal citizenship shaped the political agenda of Reconstruction; the remodeling of Southern society and the place of planters, merchants, and small farmers within it; the evolution of racial attitudes and patterns of race relations; Abraham Lincoln's attitude toward Reconstruction; the role of "carpetbaggers" and "scalawags"; and the role of violence in the period. This "smart book of enormous strengths" (Boston Globe) has become the classic work on the wrenching post-Civil War period, an era whose legacy reverberates in the United States to this day.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 30 hours and 43 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Blackstone Audio, Inc.

Audible.com Release Date: March 25, 2016

Language: English

ASIN: B01DCFWAR0

Best Sellers Rank: #23 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Politics & Current Events > Political History & Theory #41 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Public Affairs & Policy > Social Policy #98 in Books > History > Americas > United States > Civil War

## Customer Reviews

If you really want to understand America's current race issues and struggles--- read this book. As is usually the case with history, and as is illustrated very carefully by Foner, we are living in 2015 with the results of unsolved issues from after the Civil War. Because his research digs deep into local documents--county court hearings and personal diaries--we get to hear what happened during reconstruction from the micro level--how it succeeded and how it failed-- in the words of the people who lived through it and were impacted by every legislative move. Foner makes it clear that stitching

the Union back together was incredibly difficult, unprecedented and full of missteps. Who knew!? What I love is that this is NOT history told by just the people in power; it is about the little guy/girl too. The book is beautifully written and easy to read. I could not put it down. I found myself saying over and over (aloud, and much to the annoyance of my husband), "So that is why this problem still exists today!" I can't wait to read his new book.

Foner's work is new to me so I did not read the edition that is not updated and cannot point out the differences. I cannot say enough about this historian professor author and his work. I cannot imagine being without it now that I have found it. The story of reconstruction must be impossible to understand or tell for the themes, the influences, the elements, all so complex, so HUGE and so MEANINGFUL in our history then and our body politic now. I would recommend this for anyone who wants to understand and is willing to face our history full on and see how and why things stand as they do today, how and why it has taken so long, how and why it appears that we do learn, we do evolve, and we also do choose not to.

I gradually read Eric Foner's comprehensive *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, updated ed. (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2014) on Kindle over a period of several months. The first edition was published in 1988. It is not possible to capture adequately in this review the breadth of Foner's research and analysis. Suffice it to say that he covers probably every important political, social, and economic development, both in the North and the South, during the years 1863 through 1877. The present review focuses on some but not all of his themes. I was impressed by Foner's meticulous documentation of the factual developments he discusses. For the most part, Foner lets the facts speak for themselves. Although he has an analytical framework, his interpretation is informed more by historical facticity than by a preconceived ideological orientation. His extensive knowledge of the facts on the ground is remarkable. This work clearly represents a lifetime of study of these decades of American history. One thread that runs through this work is the influence of classical liberalism and its intellectual precursors on Reconstruction and beyond. I recently read C. B. Macpherson's *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, a book written by a Canadian professor that did not address American history. Macpherson focused on the seventeenth-century English philosophers and thinkers who formed, as it were, the intellectual basis of the later laissez-faire theories of Adam Smith and his contemporaries in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Macpherson demonstrated that these seventeenth-century thinkers (Thomas

Hobbes, the Levellers, James Harrington, and John Locke) considered those who earned wages "as distinguished from self-employed artisans, business people, independent farmers, and great landholders" as almost subhuman creatures not entitled to participate in the electoral franchise. I might add that a residue of this way of thinking is the fact that the employer-employee relationship is still called the "master-servant" relationship in the employment law of many American states. This may also have something to do with Thomas Jefferson's famous preference for independent rural "yeomen" over denizens of cities. Fast-forward to the mid-nineteenth century. The Republican Party, of which Abraham Lincoln was the first president, originally opposed slavery and later supported civil and even political (electoral) rights for African Americans. The Republicans of that time brought us not only the elimination of legal slavery (the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution) but also citizenship, due process, and equal protection of the law (Fourteenth Amendment) for African Americans and other residents of the United States. The Fifteenth Amendment recognized that African American males could not be denied the right to vote on the basis of their race. But these developments were largely motivated, and limited, by classical liberal concepts. Thus, although most "Radical Republicans" of the Reconstruction era favored equal legal rights for African Americans, their willingness to use the federal government to help African Americans was mostly restricted to formal legal equality. In the face of the post-Civil War reign of terror of the Ku Klux Klan and its successors, Republican politicians came to tire of extraordinary federal governmental intervention to protect blacks and ensure that they would be treated equally before the law. In another iteration of classical liberalism, many former slaves wanted the federal government to break up the large plantations and redistribute the land among the freedmen. They thought, on the basis of both practical considerations and the dominant classical liberal thinking, that they could not really be free until they were liberated not only from slaveholders but also from employers (often, their former masters). The Republican Party as a whole was not willing to go this far. Instead, the party, under the titular leadership of President Ulysses Grant, descended into a complicated morass of political corruption. Some of the former Radical Republicans came to believe that such corruption was a result of the overinvolvement of the federal government in Reconstruction as well as crony capitalism in the form of governmental subsidization of railroads and other "capitalistic" enterprises, not to mention protective tariffs. Leading political, economic, and social figures even advocated a return to property qualifications for the franchise. They saw the extension of the vote to nonpropertied classes "including but not limited to the freedmen" as having led to the pervasive corruption that characterized the late 1860s and 1870s. They also felt that the political leadership of

the "best men" (in their view, the large plantation owners in the South and the industrialists in the North) would be impossible as long as the franchise was not restricted to voters with substantial assets. Then came the Panic of 1873 and ensuing depression—the worst economic downturn that the nation experienced before the 1929 crash. By this time, thanks in part to governmental favors, large corporate enterprises were beginning to dominate entire industries, and a permanent wage-earning class was established, often peopled by immigrants. These developments inaugurated an extended period in which laborers demanded certain legal protections (the eight-hour day, abolition of child labor, the right to unionize, and so forth) that the dominant industrialists considered communistic. The first of many "Red Scares" occurred at this time, motivated in part by news of the Marxian Paris Commune of 1871. Accordingly, industrialization during and after the Civil War—caused not only by natural economic forces but also by deliberate Republican policies of special governmental favors to railroads and industry—became for the first time a permanent fixture in the American political economy. Along with industrialization came the political conflicts that characterized later decades of American political history. The present review can only touch on a few of the many themes that Eric Foner elaborates in his groundbreaking book on Reconstruction. The work is breathtaking in its scope and in its dexterous handling of a multitude of factual developments during the Reconstruction era. Every serious student of American history should read it.

Lucid, comprehensive, and presented with enough detail to place the reader in the times of "Reconstruction" so that the perspectives of many groups can be simultaneously understood and incorporated into a broader view of the history of the times. Important to read to gain an understanding of "race" in our own day. In my view, the absence of a meaningful biological definition of race supports an argument that Foner's book appears to endorse, namely that "racial distinctions" are based on a fiction created to sustain slavery before abolition and later became tools for sustaining socioeconomic relationships between former slaves and their former owners.

Foner's Reconstruction is as complete a picture as I can imagine of the awful history that is reconstruction. The book is readable and interesting but at the same time it sacrifices nothing in the way of scholarship and thoroughness. The result for me has been a new understanding of the period diametrically opposed to what we, in the 60s, were taught, including the political forces, the interplay between Republicans and Democrats, and more importantly between the factions inside the Republican Party and within the black population that was fighting for equality and for land. The

result is disturbing in terms of its shortcomings, but also promising in the passage of two Amendments to our Constitution that have been essential in the fight for completing the reconstruction that is still going on.

Great book. Wonderful analysis of reconstruction as can only be expected by Eric Foner, but some genius decided that they wouldn't put any page numbers into the Kindle version. Worthless to use as a reference without the page numbers. Returning the Kindle version and buying a paperback copy. Just to be clear, this is a five star book but the Kindle version is worthless to historians and students wanting to cite their sources.

Tremendous. Essentially a text book, so hard to read straight through given density of original material, but pretty much the book you need to read if this subject is of interest. I'm sure I will refer to it again and again.

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