

New Spirits

Americans in the "Gilded Age," 1865–1905



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PART I



The Wedge

Three years after the Civil War, an itinerant journalist living in San Francisco ventured some predictions about the transcontinental rail line that would soon connect California to New York. In "What the Railroad Will Bring Us," Henry George developed the arguments he later presented in *Progress and Poverty*, a book that went through more than a hundred editions in the twenty years after its publication in 1879. *Progress and Poverty* shocked readers by challenging their belief in progress. The author observed that railroads, economic growth, and industrialization held out the hope of prosperity for everyone, but they delivered to only part of the population. George had watched rents escalate in San Francisco while more and more local people became wage workers in factory and service jobs. Unlike other observers, he saw that these were not temporary or marginal side effects but an integral part of the nation's economic transformation. "Widespread destitution is found in the midst of the greatest abundance," he observed. "Where population is densest, wealth greatest, and the machinery of production and exchange most highly developed—there we find the deepest poverty, the sharpest struggle for existence."

George hastened to note that economic growth *did* bring wealth to many Americans. The problem, he argued, was that the new forces "do not act upon the social fabric from underneath, as was for a long time hoped and believed, but strike it at a point intermediate between top and bottom. It is as though an immense wedge were being forced, not underneath society, but through society. Those who are above the point of separation are elevated, but those who are below are crushed down." George noted that these problems had arisen in monarchies and democracies, high-tariff and free-trade countries. He concluded that they were structural to capitalism, especially in its emerging corporate form. The new economy, George predicted, would destroy traditional agriculture, trades, and crafts and "make sharper the contrast between the House of Have and the House of Want."

The extent to which one accepts Henry George's critique depends on how one defines "Have" and "Want." Was the measure of "Have" the ability to put money in the bank? If so, then in George's lifetime the Wants far outnumbered the Haves. If the prospect of home ownership was the measure, then the numbers looked better,

putting perhaps half above the wedge. Was it freedom from hard physical labor? More Americans rose above the wedge. Was it the ability to be one's own boss? Many more fell below it. The enjoyment of more consumer products, including more variety on the table? More above. In a global economy, though, poverty among workers overseas might need to be counted in the totals. And it was even more daunting to try to measure the development of democracy, cultural achievement, and spiritual growth. Capitalism promised *material* progress. Even if it delivered that to every person on the globe, other measures remained in question.

Part I of *New Spirits* turns first to the material, exploring the transformations wrought in the nineteenth-century United States by revolutions in technology, finance, and economic policy. Controversy over the role of government, especially in helping distribute economic risks and rewards, had helped precipitate the Civil War, and it remained a critical issue of the postwar decades. This, along with the many legacies of the war itself, is the subject of Chapter 1. Chapter 2 explores the speed and reach of telegraphs, railroads, and steamships and the more general impact of the rise of fossil fuels. Chapter 3 examines the world of work as experienced by those below and above Henry George's "wedge." Chapter 4 considers some of the ways in which Americans used, debated, deplored, and celebrated the power of money. Was the United States, as many critics charged, becoming a money-obsessed society? What were the benefits and pitfalls of rapid material progress? Were traditional values being displaced, and if so, was that a cause for celebration or for mourning?

CHAPTER 1

An Uneasy Peace

What is freedom? Is it the bare privilege of not being chained? . . . If this is all, then freedom is a bitter mockery, a cruel delusion.

—CONGRESSMAN JAMES A. GARFIELD

On New Year's Day, 1863, on a Union-controlled island off the coast of South Carolina, Colonel Thomas W. Higginson bore witness to a great human triumph. For weeks he had been drilling the First South Carolina Volunteers (Colored) as they prepared to join the Union Army, but to recognize President Lincoln's final Proclamation of Emancipation, which went into effect on January 1, camp commanders declared a holiday. Former slaves gathered from miles around to hear a local preacher read the executive order that made them officially free. "The very moment the speaker had ceased," Higginson reported, "and just as I took and waved the flag. . . there suddenly arose close beside the platform a strong male voice (but rather cracked and elderly) into which two women's voices instantly blended." The assembly broke into an impassioned verse of "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing!" "I never saw anything so electric," Higginson wrote. "It made all other words cheap; it seemed the choked voice of a race at last unloosed. . . Art could not have dreamed of a tribute to the day of jubilee that should be so affecting; history will not believe it." Against all odds, the aspirations of a people in bondage and of the U.S. government had converged. Higginson's soldiers would henceforth fight for a freedom President Lincoln had ruled to be rightfully theirs.

Ironically, the men and women gathered at Camp Saxton were among only a handful who were actually liberated by Lincoln's proclamation. Many thousands had already escaped and freed themselves in the chaos of war; millions still lived in parts of the Confederacy that U.S. forces had not conquered. Lincoln, in his capacity as commander in chief, had issued the proclamation as a military measure to punish seceded states, and for the time being it left slavery intact in Union border states such as Maryland and Kentucky. Not until 1865 did the Thirteenth Amendment officially abolish slavery nation-wide and Union troops enforce that measure with victory on the battlefield. Nonetheless, those who attended the celebration in South Carolina had good reason to hope that Lincoln's proclamation

marked the beginning of the end. When the United States fully ceased to practice slavery two years later, the trend toward New World abolition became unmistakable. Spain would sustain slavery in Cuba until 1886, while Brazil, the last holdout, abolished the institution two years later. In law, at least, four centuries of New World racial slavery had come to an end.

Immense as this transformation was, it was only one of several great revolutions, both national and global, carried forward by the American Civil War. A new United States, led by the victorious North and West, consolidated its boundaries from Atlantic to Pacific. The United States began to assert its power on the world stage while it continued to wrestle with domestic conflicts. Confederate general Robert E. Lee may have surrendered in April 1865, but in some ways the U.S. Civil War continued for decades afterward. So central was the war's legacy to American politics that the 1880 presidential campaign featured four ex-Union generals, running on the Republican, Democratic, Prohibition, and Greenback-Labor tickets. At each election, veterans in uniform marched in torchlight parades, and Republican candidates made pilgrimages to giant reunions organized by the powerful Union veterans' association, the Grand Army of the Republic. Even party symbols reflected the war: Cartoonist Thomas Nast began to draw the Democratic Party as a kicking donkey, symbol of the rebellious South; in 1876 he added the elephant, with its proverbially long memory, to represent Republicans' fixation on the Union.

While politics centered on war rhetoric and imagery, outright bloodshed continued sporadically throughout much of the 1870s. Parts of the South were accurately described as continuing war zones, with dozens of large-scale episodes of terror and many more local crimes carried out by loosely organized groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and Knights of the White Camellia. Freedmen's leaders were beaten, shot, or burned alive in their homes. There was little doubt of the motive when a woman in Henry County, Georgia—wife of a black Union veteran and Republican leader—was gang-raped at gunpoint by a group of Confederate veterans. The Republican governor of South Carolina testified in 1871 that an "actual state of war" existed in several counties. In 1880, at the end of his presidency, Rutherford B. Hayes observed, "I saw things done in the South which could only be accounted for on the theory that the war was not yet ended." Like his predecessor, Ulysses S. Grant, Hayes promised to "end the war and bring peace," which suggested how little peace had yet been accomplished.

THE SCARS OF WAR

When eighteen-year-old Isaac Moses Perski, a Russian Jew fleeing the czar's military draft, landed in New York in 1882, one of his first purchases was a picture book about the U.S. Civil War. Perski could see the war's legacy all around him in the city where he settled. Slavery was dead; African Americans in New York, as elsewhere, were building new institutions, founding churches and businesses, and creating nationwide networks of advocacy and mutual aid. The war had helped

Table 1.1 A Growing Urban Population

	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900
U.S. population	31,444,000	38,558,000	50,156,000	62,947,000	75,995,000
Urban population	6,217,000	9,902,000	14,130,000	22,106,000	30,160,000
Percent urban	19.8	25.7	28.2	35.1	39.7
Percent rural	80.2	74.3	71.8	64.9	60.3

While the majority of Americans still lived in rural areas (defined by the census as places with 2,500 or fewer inhabitants), the urban population increased spectacularly after the Civil War. By the turn of the century, thirty-eight American cities had passed the 100,000 mark of population, and more than 66 percent of northeasterners lived in urban areas. Note that during each decade, the U.S. population as a whole grew between 20 and 30 percent. Figures in the table above have been rounded to the nearest thousand.

Source: Robert G. Barrows, "Urbanizing America," in *The Gilded Age*, ed. Charles W. Calhoun (Wilmington, DE, 1996), 93, 95.

create New York's first millionaire class and fill the burgeoning tenement wards. In fact, the war had helped build New York itself. In all parts of the country, urbanization accelerated rapidly during the 1860s and 1870s. By the time Perski arrived, more than half of northeasterners lived in urban areas, and New York's population had recently surpassed one million. By 1900 it would double again.

While the former Confederacy remained in turmoil, Perski saw plenty of scars on the human landscape of the North. Thousands of veterans suffered lingering effects of wounds and wartime illnesses ranging from dysentery to syphilis. The Union alone counted more than 20,000 amputees. Contemporary testimony suggests that alcoholism rose sharply in both North and South after soldiers returned home. Confronted by an antiliquor reformer, one veteran scoffed that "we men of blood and iron, who have seen death in every shape and color without flinching, . . . we want something stronger than water, tea, or coffee." Many veterans dosed themselves with opiates, vast quantities of which had been administered in wartime hospitals. Morphine took the nickname "soldier's joy," while hypodermic drug use became known among pharmacists as "army disease."

Almost every aspect of American culture was reshaped by the Civil War. Veterans' writings brought a hard edge to journalism and literature in what one scholar calls "the chastening of American prose style." Colonel J. W. De Forest of Connecticut was still in the army when he published one of the first works of American realism, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* (1867). The author bluntly depicted battlefield carnage, and he refused to punish bad characters and reward good ones, as Victorian convention required. Ambrose Bierce, a Union veteran who suffered recurring nightmares and trauma from his war experiences, also built his fiction around scenes he had witnessed: dead men's faces being eaten by pigs and a soldier writhing in the dirt after a shell removed the top of his skull. One of Bierce's favorite sayings was "nothing matters." His fellow

Union veteran Robert Ingersoll, who in 1863 had declined to reenlist because he could “bear no more bloodshed and mutilation,” became the country’s most prominent *agnostic*, a word that entered general usage after the war. Immense crowds flocked to hear Ingersoll hail Union victory and question the existence of God.

The war deaths of more than 1.5 percent of the nation’s population—630,000 soldiers and perhaps 30,000 civilians—provoked major social upheavals. In the devastated war generation, thousands of young women gave up hope of marriage or remarriage. Thrown into desperation by the loss of a breadwinner, many war widows went looking for work, and their plight was so obvious that it helped establish women’s right to earn a living by their own labor. Thousands of women pursued careers as teachers and nurses, while others went into reform and foreign mission work. “The exigencies and inspirations of the great civil war,” wrote one missionary journal in 1879, “were the best of preparations. They evoked from the heart and brain of American women undertakings of national significance, and gave us, for the first time in our history, some adequate consciousness of our power.”

The women’s temperance campaign, one of the largest grassroots movements of the 1870s and 1880s, was partly a response to postwar conditions. The United States had seen considerable temperance activity before the war, but the plight of alcoholic veterans, as well as women’s new prominence as reformers, intensified the campaign. Joining a wave of spontaneous local protests in the decade after the war, some women entered saloons to pray and sing; others circulated petitions asking officials to withhold licenses from liquor dealers. The national Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) coalesced in 1873, claiming more than a million members by its peak in the late 1880s. Under the guidance of its charismatic leader, Frances Willard, after 1879 WCTU members founded kindergartens, soup kitchens, free lunch rooms, and libraries; advocated prison reform and public health measures; endorsed an eight-hour day for workers; and denounced domestic violence. Willard also advocated women’s suffrage, and when Republicans resisted the temperance agenda she persuaded the WCTU to back the Prohibition Party, taking women directly into partisan politics. In adopting this strategy, Willard drew on the legacy of antislavery. Her father had been a Wisconsin legislator whose Free-Soil Party had once, in the 1850s, “held the balance of power” on the question of slavery in the federal territories. For a decade Willard’s party strove to win the same kind of power.

The war experiences of one woman, Clara Barton, helped prompt the United States to accept new international standards for human rights. Early in the war, forty-year-old Barton volunteered as a nurse in the Army’s desperately understaffed field hospitals. She later remembered staunching wounds with corn husks when bandages ran out. At Fredericksburg, she recalled, she had to “wring the blood from the bottom of my clothing, before I could step, for the weight about my feet.” After the war Barton traveled to Europe, where she met founders of the Red Cross and other humanitarian organizations. By 1881 she and her allies in the United States had established the American Red Cross, and a year later she won a related victory: due to Barton’s almost single-handed lobbying, Congress ratified the 1864

Geneva Convention, agreeing to uphold international standards for treatment of wounded soldiers and prisoners of war. Through the Red Cross, Barton aided victims of natural and human-made disasters across the United States, including forest fires, floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, and yellow fever epidemics in the South. By the 1890s the American Red Cross began work overseas, supplying relief during a Russian famine and aiding refugees after the massacre of Armenians in Turkey. Barton became an outspoken leader of the international peace movement.

The Union and Confederacy had trained three million men to fight, and not all of them went home to live peacefully. The weapons of war were widely in evidence in the late 1860s and 1870s. With government permission, discharged veterans from both sides of the conflict took their sidearms home with them, and at the same time cheap handguns proliferated as patents expired on the famous Colt and Smith & Wesson revolvers. Shop windows displayed pistols with names such as Czar and Dictator, and in the decade after the war guns replaced knives and poison as the weapon of choice for both murder and suicide. Sensationalist newspapers exaggerated the threat posed by violent crime, but the headlines were right about the depredations of the country’s most notorious ex-soldiers. Frank and Jesse James had been Confederate raiders in Missouri’s vicious guerilla war. Using the railroads for mobility and surprise, they robbed a West Virginia bank in 1866, a Kentucky bank two years later, and a Missouri train in 1876. Jesse James, who never officially surrendered to the Union, was finally shot dead in 1882, the same year Russian immigrant Isaac Perski landed in New York.

RECONSTRUCTING THE SOUTH

The South’s secession from the United States temporarily gave the North sweeping political control, just at the moment when the upstart Republican Party won national power. Republicans had a powerful vision of government activism, and in the decade after 1861 they implemented an ambitious array of new policies and programs. But at the same time, Unionists never formally acknowledged the Confederacy’s existence. Throughout the secession crisis and the war, their chief aim was to reincorporate the South completely into the nation. Thus, ironically, the South’s return to the Union undermined the program of the Republicans—who led the Union War effort. By the end of the long and grueling conflict, most Republicans hoped to transform the ex-Confederacy through Emancipation, free labor, economic development, and African-American citizenship. Democrats resisted that vision. Southern Democrats, in particular, fought to preserve as much as they could of the Old South’s political, economic, and social order.

This result was not inevitable. After the surrender of their army, many former Confederates were prepared in 1865 for drastic changes in their society. “What new relations between us & our negroes will be established we cannot tell,” wrote one Georgia planter in resignation, “but there is no doubt it will be a radical change. . . . We will be compelled to conform to the new conditions under which we are placed.” He predicted optimistically that freedmen “will now have a choice where to labour.

This will ensure good treatment & the best terms. The most humane, the most energetic & the most judicious managers have the best chances in the race for success. I expect to see a revolution in the ownership of landed estates."

Such sentiments suggest that much could have been accomplished if policies toward the defeated South had been wisely planned and administered. But Abraham Lincoln's assassination in 1865 brought Vice President Andrew Johnson to the White House. Johnson proved to be a disaster. "He is obstinate without being firm, self-opinionated without being capable of systematic thinking, combative and pugnacious without being courageous," observed one disgusted Republican who had tried to work with the new president. "He is always worse than you expect." Johnson, a Tennessee Unionist Democrat, had been placed on the 1864 ticket to shore up support for Lincoln's reelection among Democrats and independent voters. As president he seemed, at first, to advocate vigorous reformation in the South, but in practice he was weak. Though he swore publicly to hang leading rebels, Johnson privately extended pardons to many wealthy Confederates and restored their lands. Presented with evidence of widespread murders and mob violence carried out by southern whites against blacks, he showed no interest in protecting freedmen.

Ex-Confederates read these signals and concluded that they could act with impunity. Within months of their military defeat, various former Confederate states enacted "Black Codes" that set terms for the subordination of former slaves. Under the Codes, freedmen and women could be forcibly indentured for long periods, beaten, deprived of pay if they protested, and have their children taken away to serve and work for whites. When southerners topped this by electing high-ranking ex-Confederates to state and federal positions, Johnson was shocked, though his own vacillation had precipitated the defiance. By the summer of 1866, when Johnson undertook a speaking tour to defend his policies, he was openly heckled in Cincinnati and other midwestern cities. General U. S. Grant privately dubbed him a "national disgrace."

Strengthened by sweeping victories in the midterm elections of 1866, Congressional Republicans seized the helm. They passed a series of new laws aimed at transforming southern society and protecting freedmen's rights. When Johnson vetoed their proposals and tried to punish Radicals by purging his cabinet, Congress impeached the president in February 1868. The showdown and trial wasted enormous political energy that, under better circumstances, could have been directed toward Reconstruction policy itself. Republicans ultimately failed, by one vote, to remove Johnson from office. Nonetheless, the impeachment forced Johnson to back down. From 1868 onward, Congressional Republicans salvaged Reconstruction as best they could. With the Reconstruction Act of 1867 they divided the former Confederacy into five military districts and outlined new requirements for states' readmission to the Union.

Union war hero Ulysses S. Grant, elected to the presidency in 1868, lent his stature to this Radical Reconstruction, which lasted from roughly 1868 to 1874. Among the Radicals' most enduring achievements were three landmark amendments



Group of freedpeople near the canal, Richmond, Virginia, April 1865. This informal portrait was taken by John Reekie (studio of Alexander Gardner) just after the Confederate capital fell to U.S. forces. Most African Americans were living in hardship amid the Confederacy's collapse, but their freedom was now secure. Courtesy Library of Congress.

to the U.S. Constitution, the first two of which had been passed earlier by Congress, and all of which won ratification between 1868 and 1870. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery. The Fourteenth Amendment established the primacy of federal over state citizenship, declaring that no state could "deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law." For the first time, after this amendment's ratification, the U.S. Constitution asserted the federal government's authority to protect all Americans' rights from infringement by a state. The Fifteenth Amendment granted voting rights to men of all races, sending hundreds of thousands of freedmen to the polls. Republicans supported these

amendments with enforcement apparatus, such as the creation of the cabinet-level Department of Justice in 1870. Faced with mounting violence by the Ku Klux Klan, whose members terrorized Republicans, Congress passed an 1871 law allowing the president to use both federal courts and the U.S. Army to put down conspiracies that deprived citizens of their rights. President Grant undertook vigorous enforcement, driving the Klan underground.

With the unprecedented expansion of U.S. citizenship, some Republicans even endorsed women's suffrage, which emerged during Reconstruction as a subject of serious national debate. In the campaigns to ratify the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments, suffragists pressed hard to include voting rights for women. Though the effort failed, a number of suffrage advocates tried to vote in the election of 1872, hoping to persuade judges that the language of the new Fourteenth Amendment included women as full citizens. In *Minor v. Happersett* (1875), the U.S. Supreme Court decisively rejected this interpretation. Women, they declared, could gain the ballot only when voters expressly chose to extend it to them. Voters in two territories had already done so: Wyoming in 1869 and Utah in 1870. Many Americans began to support such measures in the context of Reconstruction—not always because they took a positive view of the expanded franchise. “If we give



Atlanta University, graduating class of 1903, a portrait of achievement four decades after Emancipation. All the graduates in this picture were “Negro” according to prevailing racial definitions. Courtesy Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center.

Negroes, and Chinamen, and everything else a right to vote,” asked one disgruntled Californian, “why in the name of God don’t you give [women] equal rights?” On the other hand, suffragist Olympia Brown argued that black women “need the ballot more than anyone in the world.”

Meanwhile, Republican Reconstruction governments in the South undertook an array of activist measures. State legislatures sought to foster economic growth by building railroads and offering incentives to business. They established state-run asylums and orphanages, and they replaced gallows and whipping posts with penitentiaries. Most dramatically Republicans introduced public education, which had been virtually unknown for either blacks or whites before the war. Enrollments quadrupled in the space of a few years, and some schools—such as New Orleans’ public schools and Kentucky’s private Berea Literary Institute—were even racially integrated. Missouri’s new public schools system enrolled more than 280,000 students by 1870 and won nationwide praise. At the same time, Republican city governments installed new amenities like streetlights and sewage systems. Many southern states created boards of health to combat yellow fever, and some provided free smallpox vaccinations.

It is difficult to mark one precise moment when all these various initiatives came to a close. In many ways, the greatest moments of opportunity had already been lost during Andrew Johnson’s term. Republicans tried as late as 1890 to pass a new federal law to enforce fair elections in the South, and they almost succeeded. But in the shorter run, what most decisively ended Reconstruction was a severe economic depression that began in 1873, spreading hardship nationwide. Tax revenues dried up; state governments curtailed their ambitious new programs. As the Grant administration struggled to protect southern blacks, the northern public—and soon, federal courts—greeted these efforts with increasing hostility.

One turning point was a horrific episode in the village of Colfax, Louisiana. Louisiana’s Republican Party had splintered into factions; white supremacist Democrats, who refused to accept the state government’s legitimacy, operated with increasing boldness. One Republican was dragged from his bed and beheaded. Another opened a New Orleans newspaper and found his own obituary, printed by enemies as a warning. Faced with such threats, Republican leaders in Colfax Parish fled, abandoning local black farmers to a wage of vigilantism. Several dozen families trekked to town, dug trenches, and prepared to defend themselves. At dawn on Easter Sunday, armed Democrats gave the farmers thirty minutes to send their wives and children away. Then they attacked on horseback, supported by an artillery piece they had concealed across the river. When sixty men retreated inside the courthouse, the attackers set it ablaze and shot everyone who emerged. Then they marched forty prisoners into the woods and shot them dead. One elderly black man survived under the pile of bodies, to testify to what he had seen.

The Colfax Massacre provoked nationwide outrage, and federal investigators indicted ninety-eight men under a recent civil rights statute. But they could only secure three convictions. Then, in the case of *U.S. v. Cruikshank* (1876), the Supreme Court overturned even those three. The justices ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment

could only prevent a *state* from violating citizens' rights; the federal government had no power over individuals, even those who organized themselves into private armies to seize political power. *Cruikshank* and a series of related decisions gutted almost all the postwar laws that Congress had designed to protect civil rights.

Most white northerners were becoming equally disinclined to intervene. Only a minority supported freedmen's rights, and the shock of a sudden economic depression made other issues seem far more urgent. A year and a half after Colfax, when President Grant sent troops to halt a Democratic coup in Louisiana, northern editors widely denounced the move. At a public meeting in Boston, leading abolitionists were booed when they spoke in favor of Grant's action. Such men, wrote the *New York Times* dismissively, "represent ideas in regard to the South which the majority of the Republican Party have outgrown."

The 1874 funeral of U.S. senator Charles Sumner, a passionate advocate of justice for freedmen, marked the eclipse of Republicans' progressive wing. In the midterm election of 1874, voters repudiated the whole Reconstruction program and chose Democrats in overwhelming numbers. With Democrats firmly in control of the House of Representatives, the chance for further Reconstruction legislation was dead. Violence and voter intimidation returned in parts of the South during the presidential election of 1876—so much so that it proved difficult to decide the extremely close race between Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel Tilden. Had the election been fair and free across the South, Hayes would have won. Ultimately, a special commission voted along party lines to recognize Republican electoral votes from parts of the fiercely contested South. Hayes took office; in exchange for Democrats' agreement not to resist his election, he removed the last federal troops from the South.

The consequences of political reaction were dramatic, as shown by the aftermath of an 1876 strike in coastal South Carolina. During the harvest season, freedmen walked off the job on big rice plantations, protesting sharp wage reductions and some employers' custom of paying in "scrip" that could only be used at the planter's own store. The black community united behind the protest with mass meetings and parades; employers were forced to pay higher wages or let rice rot in the field. The strike worked, in part, because South Carolina's Reconstruction government declined to intervene. When a delegation of planters demanded that the governor send for federal troops, he refused. Republicans simply allowed the power struggle to play out between workers and employers. Privately, some were amused at the spectacle of elite South Carolinians, who had just instigated a war to defend "states' rights," pleading for federal troops to police their plantations.

Though rice plantations extended farther down the coast into Georgia, the Combahee strike stopped abruptly at the state border. The reason was that in Georgia, ex-Confederate Democrats had seized power and largely excluded blacks from voting. When Georgia rice workers threatened to join the strike, planters informed them that "a company of soldiers was ready at a moment's notice in Savannah, to cross the river, and sweep out of the plantation all disaffected negroes." "This was strictly true," reported one planter, "and had the desired effect."

The lesson was not lost on elite South Carolinians. While the Combahee strike was still in progress, Democrat Wade Hampton, a wealthy planter and ex-Confederate general, launched his candidacy for the South Carolina governorship. During his campaign, vigilantes assassinated several Republican politicians, murdered thirty black militiamen in Aiken County, and assaulted would-be voters. Election results were nonetheless so close that they remained in dispute until March 1877, when the deadlock between U.S. presidential candidates Hayes and Tilden was resolved. South Carolina Democrats agreed to accept Hayes as president in exchange for Hampton as governor. Hampton implemented the kinds of policies that secured Georgia rice-growers' power: restrictions on black voting rights, steep cuts in landowners' taxes, and repeal of fair-labor laws.

Politicians like Wade Hampton often claimed that they sought to reduce the size and scope of government. To some extent this was true: southern Democrats did slash property taxes and cut an array of Reconstruction programs and services. But in other ways, southern state governments exercised far greater powers than they had before the war. Despite their attacks on Republican corruption, most continued to broker deals with railroads and other business interests. "You are mistaken," one Democrat wrote to a northern colleague, "if you suppose that all the evils... result from the carpetbaggers and the negroes. The Democrats are leagued with them when anything is proposed that promises to pay."

The most notorious example was the convict lease system, a monstrous public/private hybrid that flourished across the South after 1880. Through it, legislatures authorized state courts to loan out thousands of convicts to private firms that paid a fee for their labor and promised to feed, clothe, and shelter them. Convicts were mostly African American, but they included poor whites and, in Texas, many Mexicans. The system grew to immense proportions: at its peak, Alabama received 73 percent of all state revenue from convict leasing. Set to work in mines and turpentine camps, leased convicts endured extraordinary brutality. In a typical Mississippi camp, they slaved from 4:30 A.M. until after sundown, "as long as it is light enough for a guard to see how to shoot." Before the 1890s, female convicts were often chained in bunks with male strangers. Beatings were routine; few inmates left without permanent scars, and overwork, scurvy, and typhoid killed as many as 5 percent of leased convicts each year, escalating to three times that level in disease-prone summers.

Convict leasing made a few insiders very rich. Among them was U.S. senator Joseph Brown, ex-Confederate governor of Georgia. Brown's Raccoon Mountain Coalmine employed convict laborers, courtesy of the state of Georgia, for \$15 per year. Brown, who netted \$98,000 annually from Raccoon Mountain alone, became a millionaire. His notorious mine inspired the black folk song "Joe Brown's Coal Mine": "Sez that's the train I leave here on, / Sez I'm bound to that sundown job."

Defenders of convict lease called it a small-government measure, one that saved taxpayer dollars by reducing the cost of prisons. But viewed from another angle, convict lease was an appropriation of government power for private ends on a scale few could have imagined in the days of slavery. Joe Brown's business in

some ways mirrored the northern railroad industry. It used government subsidies to promote enterprise while helping private interests amass spectacular fortunes. Though public debate centered on the question of how big government should be, the underlying question was often "Whose interests should it serve?"

RECONSTRUCTING THE NATION

Though historians sometimes describe the late nineteenth century as an era of *laissez-faire*, when government was weak, that notion would have baffled both Unionists and ex-Confederates. Advocates of smaller government responded to what they saw, at the time, as a central government that was exercising extraordinary and unprecedented powers. Republicans set out, before and during the Civil War, to develop new initiatives that would help ordinary Americans. In doing so, they took an attitude toward government more like that of today's Democrats than today's Republicans. (We will explore, in Part III, how and why the parties began to change places in the late 1890s.)

Republicans used government power to promote economic development and industrialization. First and foremost, that meant railroads, which provided fast, powerful networks for travel and trade. Transcontinental railroads seemed crucial to Republicans, who believed these railroads would bind the nation together with ties of commerce and communication, discouraging future sectional conflicts. Since railroad building was expensive, policy makers offered aid. Between 1861 and 1872, Congress subsidized transcontinental railroads with grants of a staggering 100 million public acres and \$64 million in tax incentives and direct aid. State and local governments vied to offer railroads their own subsidies. By the late 1890s, the United States boasted three transcontinental lines and a total of 183,601 miles of track, about 42 percent of the world's total. By then, the nation's roads were capitalized at \$35 billion and employed almost 800,000 men.

Republicans undertook an array of other pro-business initiatives, notably high protective tariffs. First implemented in 1790 as a revenue measure, tariffs required overseas manufacturers to pay a tax for the privilege of selling goods in the United States. In the antebellum decades, northern mill owners had argued for much steeper "protective" tariffs to shield U.S. industries from foreign competition. Representatives from rural areas, especially the South, had blocked them, since tariffs on manufactured goods did not raise farmers' crop prices but cost them when they went shopping. After the South left the Union, Congress instituted higher tariffs and kept them in place for most of the rest of the century. Tariff rates were crafted to serve both economic and political goals, protecting textiles, steel, and iron and also sugar and wool, which were linked to critical constituencies in swing states. What the tariff did not cover was cotton and wheat, the great export crops so critical to southern and western farmers.

Tariffs brought in the bulk of federal revenue during the postwar decades, earning more than \$2.1 billion in the 1880s alone. That income paid off the massive Union war debt with remarkable speed; two decades after the war, the U.S.

Treasury was accruing large surpluses. At the same time, American industries grew spectacularly behind the tariff barrier. Real gross domestic product rose an average of more than 4 percent a year for decades after the Civil War, and while many factors led to this high growth rate, tariffs played a key role. Such protected industries as sheep ranching and steel were among the fastest-growing parts of the economy. The western sugar beet industry was launched with the help of the sugar tariff. American-born cane planters in Hawai'i and Cuba, in fact, worked desperately for annexation so they could be classed as domestic producers and obtain the same advantage.

The United States emerged from the Civil War with far greater power to flex its economic and political muscle in places like Hawai'i and the Caribbean. During the war, leaders of both the Union and the Confederacy, like their forerunners in the early republic, fretted over the prospect of European intervention in the war. After Union victory the tables turned: British politicians listened anxiously as Congress debated whether to ask Britain to hand over Canada. Acknowledging that it owed reparations because Confederate raiders such as the CSS *Alabama* had been built in English shipyards, Britain submitted to international arbitration and paid the United States \$15.5 million.

William Seward, secretary of state from 1861 to 1869 under presidents Lincoln and Johnson, developed a sweeping vision of global economic power. While European strategists believed that political conquests led to increased trade, Seward argued the reverse: if America achieved "commercial ascendancy," then political dominance would follow in its wake. In pursuit of this goal, Seward initiated talks with China to ensure an open market for American products and to arrange for Chinese immigrants, a source of cheap labor, to enter the United States. Seward advocated purchase of overseas sites for naval ports and coaling stations to strengthen trade. Faced with opposition at home, he won only two acquisitions, tiny Midway (an uninhabited Pacific island) and Alaska, purchased from Russia in 1867. Seward, however, accurately predicted that the United States would eventually control Hawai'i, the Philippines, and an isthmian (Panama) canal that American engineers would construct.

The most ambitious Republican proposals included measures to address the impact of war itself. A pension system for Union veterans, far more extensive than the programs provided in previous American wars, supported disabled veterans and widows, orphans, and dependent mothers and sisters of the Union dead. Branches of the U.S. National Soldiers' Home sprang up to care for the most disabled men. Showcases of Union pride, they featured libraries, telegraph offices, and the latest in medical care. Outside its gates, each home attracted a string of saloons—painful reminders of the war's psychic toll—but the homes' landscaped grounds became popular picnic sites for tourists. At the home outside Dayton, Ohio, visitors could stroll through acres of gardens and admire two scenic lakes and an aviary.

Public education was high on Republicans' agenda. In the immediate aftermath of war, the Freedmen's Bureau not only mediated legal disputes and provided