

People Fought Postwar Reaction 80 Yrs. Ago

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In this period of resurgence of imperialist reaction following victory in the People's War, it is well to remember an earlier period of American history in which there was a similar development—which was beaten back by the organized struggles of the people.

The two years following the Civil War were marked by government policy to restore Bourbon reaction to power in the South, and thus to lose all that the great liberating war had won. President Johnson was pardoning the leaders of the Confederacy and restoring their ownership of the great plantations. He proposed the readmission of the secessionist states into the Union on the basis of governments chosen by their 1860 electorates—those who could vote before the Civil War.

The big slaveholders of the Old South were re-emerging to dominance in southern state governments; the polltax, Grandfather Clause, and other devices were

being adopted to disfranchise the millions of recently-freed slaves and the masses of poor whites; "Black Codes" were being set up in all the former slave states, restoring the Negro people, in fact, to slavery; and the traitors who had led the fight to divide the Union were actually being returned to the Congress of the United States.

During 1865-87, post-war reaction was definitely on the march, even as now, and the faint-of-heart were "certain" that the values for which the Civil War had been fought and won were destined to be lost. But they were wrong — because the forces of progress were struggling too, and they fought so effectively that this whole reactionary trend was completely reversed.

PEOPLE'S CONVENTIONS

Stevens, Sumner, Douglass and their "Radical Republican" associates fought President Johnson at every turn, advancing proposals for a truly progressive reconstruction. The freedmen gathered in

great Negro People's Conventions in all the southern states—incidentally their first organized political expression in the South—to protest the trend toward reaction. The former slaves, who were cultivating the lands abandoned by their slave-masters during the war, fought back tenaciously against government efforts to dispossess them.

EIGHT YEARS OF STRUGGLE

Sections of the southern poor whites began to move closer toward alliance with the Negro masses as a necessary means of defending their own liberties. Frederick Douglass led a protest delegation to the White House and, when rebuffed by Johnson, turned, in leaving, to declare: "The President sends us to the people. To the people we will go."

In time the progressive masses of the North and South were so aroused over the reactionary program of Johnson that the President came near being impeached. The "radicals" in Congress took

charge of Reconstruction, established an enlightened military dictatorship in the defeated Confederate states, and for a period of eight years carried forward that truly glorious democratic revolution which Howard Fast has recounted so vividly in **Freedom Road**.

Postwar reaction was beaten, at least temporarily, and the goals for which the liberating Civil War was fought and won were well advanced toward achievement.

In this 1945-46 period of post-war reaction, we sometimes become unduly awed by the fact that imperialism is launching a major drive for complete dominance of the world. But let us recall that Bourbon reaction tried a similar comeback after the Civil War—and was beaten back.

The present drift toward imperialism and war can be reversed—and if the people are aroused for effective struggle, it surely will. This is a lesson we would do well now to recall from an earlier period of American history.