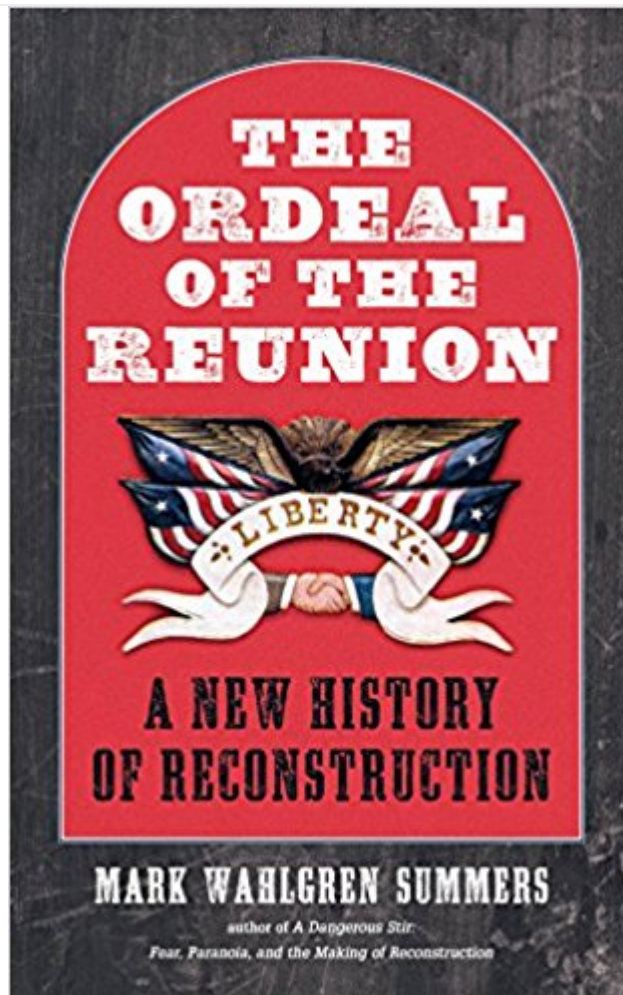


# {essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia

## The Ordeal of the Reunion: A New History of Reconstruction



Volume 48 (2015)

### Reviewed Work(s)

*The Ordeal of the Reunion: A New History of Reconstruction*. By Mark Wahlgren Summers. Littlefield History of the Civil War Era. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014. Pp. x, 517. \$40.00.

Mark Wahlgren Summers seeks to discover what the term “Reconstruction” meant to Americans of the postbellum period, rather than superimpose modern interpretations of history onto the past. Summers argues that, “to most Americans in 1865, ‘the Reconstruction of the Union’ was more important” than achieving civil rights for black Americans (3). White Americans in the North embraced racial equality only so far as it assisted reunion. To understand Reconstruction and its complexities, Summers steps outside of the traditional Southern setting to consider Reconstruction’s implications for the entire United States, particularly the North and the Western territories, and even for nascent American imperialism. Summers’s thesis is that, from the perspective of white Americans who valued security and national reunion over racial justice, Reconstruction was a success that reassembled and strengthened the nation. For black Americans, however, the period remained a failure.

A narrative history, *The Ordeal of the Reunion* is synthetic to a great degree, and early in the text Summers acknowledges his debts to a number of leading historians. Summers also admits that he does not think his text can surpass Eric Foner’s landmark *Reconstruction*. By stating that Reconstruction was a success, Summers initially appears to concur with the findings of Foner and, most recently, Gregory P. Downs. [1] However, a closer look at these volumes reveals that the authors define Reconstruction’s successes in quite different ways. Foner and Downs argue that a coalition of black Americans and Radical Republicans achieved great successes in regard to civil rights, but these achievements were fleeting, ended by a wave of white terrorism. Summers emphasizes Reconstruction’s success in rebuilding white society. Additionally, Summers treats Reconstruction as an immediate return to peacetime, whereas Downs argues that the U.S. government remained on a wartime footing from until 1871.

*Ordeal* retells the key incidents of Reconstruction with eloquent prose and a plethora of eccentric historical figures. Summers guides the reader skillfully, albeit with overwhelming detail, through the Republicans' revolt against Andrew Johnson, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, President Grant's failure to prevent government corruption, and the massacres of black Americans in Colfax and Hamburg. He concludes with Reconstruction's demise, triggered by Rutherford Hayes's contested presidential election and the Redeemer Democrats' takeover of the South. The expanded geographic and thematic scope of Reconstruction is the most distinctive part of Summers's narrative. Summers investigates the Indian Wars, Secretary of State William Seward's often-unsuccessful attempts to buy foreign land, and social movements like temperance and women's suffrage, which sought to construct a better Union. The attention, federal support, and private capital sunk into these (inter)national ventures, coupled with considerable economic corruption and the Panic of 1873, distracted white Northerners from the Southern white assault on black freedom. According to Summers, most white Americans decided by the early 1870s that Reconstruction was working well enough: "[T]he issues that had been at the heart of it [were] settled in practical terms – a reunited nation, a free labor system, and a formal guarantee of equal treatment before the law" (305). The Redeemers, Fusionists, and other white supremacists that rose to dominate the South exploited the North's loss of interest in Reconstruction. These Southern whites argued that dismantling Radical Reconstruction was merely their way of fighting corrupt government officials, akin to the efforts of Northern social reformers.

While fundamentally a synthesis, *The Ordeal of the Reunion* boasts a richness of primary sources and original research typically reserved for monographs. Summers cites documents from forty-three archives and over one hundred nineteenth-century newspapers. The text also features striking political cartoons by nineteenth-century artist Thomas Nast.

Despite these laudable aspects, Summers does not fulfill his ambitions for the book. Summers writes at the outset that he will explore white Americans' concerns about national security, but aside from his discussion of the Indian Wars, Summers does not thoroughly investigate the concept of security in Reconstruction-era America. Furthermore, Summers does not make a persuasive case that most Americans saw

Reconstruction as a success. Whether they were Radical Republicans, moderates fed up with wartime occupations, Southern white supremacists vying for power, or black Americans fighting for their lives, all of the individuals who fill the volume seem unhappy with Reconstruction. Indeed, the Nast cartoons articulate a powerful defense of Northern emancipationist beliefs. Nast's politics contrast sharply with the white supremacy of Southern Redeemers. As such, when Summers contends that Reconstruction, even with its limitations, "was far better than many Americans had expected in that first wonderful, terrible spring [of 1865]," he contradicts his narrative's many anecdotes of civil unrest (396).

Lastly, although Summers portrays many attacks on black freedom, he defines Reconstruction largely through a white lens. There is a longstanding historiographic debate about whether to emphasize the advances or failures of Reconstruction. Notably, Eric Foner's *Reconstruction* stresses the significant yet fleeting achievements of black civil rights, while David Blight's *Race and Reunion* emphasizes the conservative politics of Reconstruction and the limitations of civil rights reform. Yet Foner and Blight fundamentally agree that Reconstruction failed because of the damage to black freedom. In contrast, even after detailing the rise of white supremacy, Summers posits that most whites were correct to regard Reconstruction as a success, given the preservation of the Union, centralized government, economic growth, and territorial expansion. It is not only that Summers describes white Americans who interpreted Reconstruction as a success; Summers *himself* deems Reconstruction a success. The moral tragedy of the South, combined with the many anecdotes of Northern corruption that Summers narrates in his book, makes it difficult to understand Summers's reasoning. He acknowledges the failures of Reconstruction (397-9), but he might have articulated better the dissonance between white triumphalism and the many failures of Reconstruction. The book's thesis in its current form, foregrounding the opinions of whites and minimizing the implications of racial violence for the country, does not explain Reconstruction adequately.

Students unfamiliar with the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction will find *The Ordeal of the Reunion* useful. Indeed, as part of an anthology series, *Ordeal* should be read in a sequence with other Civil

War texts, and not simply on its own. Educators may also appreciate having an alternative to Eric Foner's *Reconstruction*. However, the significant flaws in *Ordeal's* thesis and organization prevent an unqualified endorsement. *Ordeal* can be read alongside and in conversation with Foner's classic text, but the flawed *Ordeal* should not – and, as Summers predicted, *cannot* – replace Foner.

**Daniel Gorman Jr.**

*Villanova University*

[1] Gregory P. Downs, *After Appomattox: Military Occupation and the Ends of War*(Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 2015).



Published by

 [View all posts by](#)

**Book Reviews**

19th century, Civil War, Politics, Race, Social History

**COMMENTS ARE CLOSED.**

FIND US ON:

» [Facebook](#)

» [Twitter](#)

---

ADMIN:

» [Log in](#)

» [WordPress.org](#)

PROUDLY POWERED BY WORDPRESS | **THEME: BASKERVILLE 2 BY ANDERS NOREN.**

UP ↑