Radical Reconstruction: the Texas Choice

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On May 18, 1861, William Pitt Ballinger of Galveston, Texas, wrote to Henry H. Williams of Baltimore, Maryland,

I fear we have fallen on evil times. I shall never believe the disruption of the Union was necessary. I was one of the 30 in Galveston who voted against it. But there is no alternative now but to become conquered subjects of the North, or fight for our independence to the last gasp.¹

His observation neatly capsulated the potential fate of Texas and the Confederacy; and yet more than two years were to pass following the Confederate surrender before the South became, in fact, a "conquered province."

During this period, political leaders both north and south wrestled with the constitutional questions raised by the war, and vainly tried a less drastic alternative that would avoid the logical consequences of total military victory. Such was the objective of the Lincoln-Johnson administration, an objective which failed attainment because Texans, like other Confederates, ultimately preferred the humiliation of being conquered to the expediency of being contrite.

When viewed against the background of four bloody years of fratricidal warfare, the concessions originally sought by the victors seem reasonable, if not innocuous. The right of secession must be denied; slavery ended; and guarantees provided for the future loyalty of the people in the seceded states with assurances that their new governments be organized by non-Confederates. Had the North and South been two nations with manifestly different systems of government, the task of reconstruction on the above terms would have been easy enough, but such was not the case, for both shared the same constitution which made no specific provision for revolution, and by the prevailing Jeffersonian standards, reserved to the states the right to decide, in large measure, the civil rights of their citizens. Under these circumstances, two major questions had to be answered; could the state governments of the South be organized according to northern demands without doing violence to accepted republican theories of government; and could the freedman be guaranteed the civil rights which inured to his being set free? If military force was used in lieu of democratic methods, many statesmen feared a dangerous precedent would be set that would eventually destroy the republic. The reliance on democratic methods, however, would require voluntary acceptance of the lenient reconstruction proposals so that, in effect, the South would be given the responsibility of making the choice. Its decision would determine the course of reconstruction.²

Texas should have been a select state to test the scheme of voluntary reconstruction. Unoccupied by invading armies until after the war's end, her territory was unscathed, and except for the scarcities imposed by the Union blockade, her economy was still intact. Many of her political leaders looked forward to surrender, and plans were confidently made to erect a loyal government to greet the Union armies when they arrived. Some Texans felt the

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This optimism caused leading Texas newspapers and prominent statesmen to advocate cooperation with federal authorities rather than resistance. From his prison cell in Fort Warren, Massachusetts, John H. Reagan, former Confederate Postmaster, counseled Texans, "Your condition as a people is one of novelty and experiment, involving the necessity of political, social, and industrial reconstruction; after a sweeping and thorough revolution in all these respects; and this is to be accomplished in opposition to your education, traditional policy, and prejudices." P.W. Gray, former Confederate congressman, declared that "Our effort... should be to restore our people and our state to their constitutional relations to the federal government, and in good faith regulate our institutions according to the radical changes which have taken place.”

This cooperation, it was thought, would be reciprocated by the newly appointed governor, A.J. Hamilton, The Marshall Texas Republican, whose editor, R.W. Loughery, was a former "fire eating" secessionist, suggested in June 1865 that the new governor "by kindness and conciliation, and by protecting the industrial interests of the State, can attach the people to him as no other governor has before." The Texas State Gazette declared, "He has been a wholesome check upon the rampant spirit of partisan contests for political preference—a balance wheel in the political machinery to whose ability the people are indebted for much of the conciliatory spirit which influenced them..." P.W. Gray wrote "... from my knowledge of Hamilton, I do not apprehend vindictiveness. He will be conciliatory." In return for an admission of defeat, Texans expected concessions from the victor in the form of conciliatory rule.

The extent of further concessions they were willing to make was clearly defined from the beginning and did not include an admission of guilt. Dr. Ashbel Smith and William Pitt Ballinger announced this position to General E.R.S. Canby when they went to Louisiana before the war's end to discuss surrender terms. Texans, the General was told, did not feel "any regret for their past opinions... or offered any disavowal of them." His theme would be echoed later by numerous county conventions which professed loyalty to the Union, but insisted that secession and slavery were illegal as the consequence of the "decision of the sword." Texas Confederates were willing to admit defeat—in this sense they were conquered—but their pride prevented them from giving sign of contrition. They had revolted like the Americans of 1776. "They succeeded, we failed," wrote Guy M. Bryan who asked, "Is failure a crime in the eye of the liberal, refined, and educated?" Governor Hamilton's policy, ex-Confederate General J.F. Harrison thought, would not be to oppress such men who had "acted honestly in defending long cherished principles." Because he had fought for these principles, P.W. Gray did not "feel morally guilty of crime or treason." He had only "violated that construction of the Constitution and laws that was contended for." Under these circumstances neither past nor future allegiance could be doubted. This kind of rationale made it easy for Texans to take the loyalty oath in good conscience, although many advocated the more practical reason of gaining control of local government.

Their apparent sincerity, ironically, would strain their relationship with the comparatively mild provisional government of A.J. Hamilton, because although the Governor did not seriously challenge the loyalty oaths or provide an impediment to pardons, he was not hesitant to contrast the Texans who fought for the Union with those who supported the Confederacy. "I have been..."
willing to accord to many of those who gave their support to the cause of Secession, honorable and patriotic motives," he said in his Address to the People of Texas, "though candor obliges me to say that their perversion of judgement filled me with...astonishment. And I think that all right minded men of that class ought now to be able to see they were deceived."14 This type of criticism, together with Hamilton’s refusal to call for immediate elections to choose a constitutional convention, eroded the early optimism of ex-Confederates that a speedy return to the Union would occur without some further concessions, and contributed to the exaggerated, but uniformly hostile attitude held by most Texans towards the Governor.

The lack of any clearly designed reconstruction policy by either the Johnson administration or the Congress further complicated Hamilton’s task. Lincoln’s veto of the Wade-Davis Bill had left the responsibility for reconstruction in the hands of the President, whose authority was based on his constitutional role of Commander-in-Chief. The corresponding authority of the provisional governor was unclear, because there was no definite delineation of military and civilian duties, and because in the absence of fighting, continued military activity could be interpreted as a violation of the basic tenets of the Lincoln-Johnson reconstruction program. Ashbel Smith pointed out the anomaly when he declared, "The surrender of our troops has made us all citizens of the United States, and this is true whatever may have been our wishes to the contrary."15 In a democratic republic, could there be military rule in peacetime?

For his part, Hamilton did not anticipate any trouble with the military because he did not believe the determination of the relative jurisdictions of civil and military tribunals to be in his purview. He knew that civil authorities alone could not enforce the law, and that loyal citizens, particularly Negroes, could not be given the protection of the courts without the presence of a military force. Plainly, military authority superseded that of the provisional government. "There is no Constitutional State Government," he wrote General H.G. Wright. Therefore his government existed only at the will of the President, and his authority as Provisional Governor was limited to those measures necessary to write a new constitution and form a new government. Only when this new government was accepted by Washington would military authority be superseded by civilian authority.16

Hamilton’s practical interpretation of his role, in reality, conformed more to the reconstruction theories of the radical Republicans than to those of President Johnson. Like the radicals, he doubted the Johnson theory that the goals of reconstruction could be fully achieved by voluntary action. Reports coming from various parts of the state convinced him that the verdict of the war concerning slavery was not being accepted, and that freedmen were being mistreated, sometimes murdered.17 Accordingly, he had no objection to trial of such offenses before military tribunals; on the contrary, he thought it was mandatory. "The Government having declared the Negro free, is committed to the protection of their freedom," he wrote. Should civil authorities alone be entrusted with the protection of their civil rights, "the effort would be a farce at best—possibly a tragedy," he warned.18

Subsequent events would prove that the treatment of the Negro was the litmus test for acceptable reconstruction governments, but several months were to pass before Texan intransigence to the will of Congress became sufficient to compel complete military control. Until then, Johnson’s voluntary submission theory had an opportunity to be tested. On June 25, 1865, Governor Hamilton declared that the people of Texas were "invited to engage in the
work of reconstructing local government for themselves," so that they could "occupy by their own act, their former position in the Union."19 As a first step to restoring order, he made massive appointments of local magistrates, depending only on the loyalty oath to separate unionists from unregenerate Confederates. He had little choice. The functions of local government had changed little since 1861, and, in effect, Hamilton's generous acceptance to loyalty oaths and his generally uncritical support of applications for pardons for Confederate office holders provided a continuity of government on the local level sorely needed in the chaotic aftermath of the collapse of Confederate rule. For most Texans, the Civil War had meant a change of government in title only; their sheriffs and J.P.s remained the same.20 Obviously there were not enough uncompromised Texas unionists to take their place, and in the few instances where the attempt was made, the reaction was immediate and hostile. "Consult the people over whom you appoint officers, and know their wishes," a correspondent advised Governor Hamilton. "Do not be misled by little, petty, lying, pretended union men," he warned.21

The willingness of Texans at the local level to submit to the victims of voluntary reunion was of critical importance for President Johnson's moderate reconstruction program. If they did not heed the advice of prominent Texans like John Reagan, and if they succumbed to the racial arguments and appeals to southern pride made by unreconciled Confederates, little chance existed for democratically achieved reconstruction. Reports coming to Austin were not encouraging. A.K. Foster of Halletsville warned Hamilton that the "rebels know your kind, sympathizing disposition, and are banking on it . . . to get appointments from their own ranks under your authority." "Such men care no more about an oath than a hog does about Sunday," wrote J.M. McAlphin of Cass County. Hamilton's unionist supporters had little faith in their rebel neighbors. "Conciliatory measures will not suit a majority of the citizens of this country," Charles Ames wrote from Marion County, "The plan is working here now for the disloyal citizens to take the oath and beat the loyal citizen at voting." A.A. Devalon wrote from Corpus Christi that his neighbors were "welded to their idols . . . They must know that we are masters, and masters intend to be."22 This pessimism was reflected in the reports Hamilton sent to Washington. Most Texans seemed willing to obey the laws, were glad to have the protection of the Government, and were anxious to accept every benefit it conferred, he wrote President Johnson, "Still it must be confessed that a great many, even of this class, have had their minds and their hearts to perverted by past teachings that they accept the favor of Government as a matter of course without feeling any corresponding obligations of their part to make the slightest sacrifice to sustain the Government or its policy."23 Burdened with such doubts, Hamilton delayed eight months before calling for elections to choose a constitutional convention.

The ensuing campaign for convention seats clearly revealed how far the understanding of the essentials of Johnson's reconstruction program filtered into the ranks of the populace. Their selection of convention delegates demonstrated their reluctance to accept the leadership of Texas loyalists, and the campaign rhetoric of the candidates revealed how far both secessionists and pre-war unionists who served the Confederacy went to appeal to the emotions of a people recently defeated in a war in which Texas loyalists were the enemy. The Republican opponent of Sawyers A. Bradshaw for a convention seat from Ellis County wrote Hamilton that Bradshaw was openly championing his Confederate loyalty. "He came down with John Brown's raid, Helper's Book, Sharp's Rifles . . . and was cheered at Waxahachie till glass fell
out of the windows." Guadalupe County voters elected unpardoned General John Ireland to the convention, causing A.S. Wright to exclaim, "Pretty Logic! Ireland engineered us out—he yet believes he was right—to be consistent we elect him to engineer us back." Ireland was not alone because in the ranks of the secessionists elected were such prominent Confederates as H.R. Runnels, O.M. Roberts, R.S. Walker, and T.N. Waul.

The extent the convention went to amend the Texas constitution to satisfy the national congress was determined by its majority's own stubborn states' rights principles and attitudes about Negro civil rights, and by the political atmosphere in Washington, D.C., where President Johnson had already vetoed the Freedman's Bureau bill and was taking a position against the Civil Rights Acts and the Fourteenth Amendment. In his opening address to the convention, Hamilton stated in mild terms what came to be considered the radical position. The new constitution must guarantee the blacks their minima of legal decency. "Justice required that this now despised race shall be protected in the beneficial enjoyment of the great boon which has been accorded them," he said, and warned, "Any system of laws, therefore, intended to deprive them of the actual fruits of liberty will meet with resistance from the Congress of the United States." Asking that the convention take the proper steps to restore peace and tranquility, he added that there was actually little choice, because in the long run "the views of the nation" would triumph. Because of the impression given to Washington, the governor also opposed the convention membership of unpardoned Confederate generals.

The call for black civil rights served to harden the conservative and radical positions of the convention delegates, although ample evidence already was available that the basic divisions were well-drawn before the convention began. The Marshall Texas Republican editorialized on January 2, 1866:

On the 7th of February, the State Convention will assemble at Austin. Fresh from the people, and with full knowledge of the condition; socially and politically, we trust they will proceed to organize, as speedily as possible, a civil government. Until this is obtained, there can be no security. The radical party, rendered insane by the power which they have acquired and unjustly retained, and full of hatred to the people of the South are prepared for fresh exactions. No character, nor amount of self-abasement or humiliation by our people will satisfy them. They are aiming at nothing short of our complete prostration; and the transfer of the political power of these states to the emancipated Blacks.

This public hostility to the alleged radical party was stated with just as much vehemence in private by the soon-to-be President of the convention, J.W. Throckmorton. "If the Southern states are not to be received back as equals in every sense," he wrote B.H. Epperson on January 21, "... if they have to send men to Congress who left the country in the hour of distress, why surely we had better not be represented." As for civil rights for the blacks, he thought that their right to testify in courts, "would be an entering wedge to sitting on juries, suffrage, and finally to perfect social and political equality." On the subject of constitutional amendments, "I have made up my mind to oppose any changes except those required of a degraded and fallen people."

The debates of the convention served as a sieve to filter out the radicals from the conservative ranks. In broad classification, the delegates represented three pre-war political groups: Texas unionists who opposed secession and either fought for the Union or refused service in the Confederacy; Texas
unionists who opposed secession, but for various reasons supported the Confederacy; and Texas secessionists. Conceivably, a coalition of anti-secessionists could have been strong enough to make the necessary changes in the constitution and form a government with policies and leaders acceptable to the national congress. A test case for their combined strength came early in the convention when a resolution was introduced to declare the Ordinance of Secession void ab initio; that is, secession was void from the beginning. The defeat of the resolution indicated that the convention was controlled by the secessionists forces who, when the debates over Negro civil rights began, quickly received within their ranks the quondam unionists. "The Paschal or administration party, are a unit, and will I think go lengths if they could, that our folks (Union men as they claim to be) would repudiate, and they would turn to us 'fire eaters' for protection against all kinds of radicalism," R.S. Walker wrote from the convention. The Paschal forces he referred to were those led by James A. Paschal, A.H. Latimer, William M. Taylor, and A.P. Shuford. The opposition leaders were publicly reported to be secessionists, J.W. "Smoky" Henderson and Judge O.M. Roberts, and pre-war unionist John Hancock. Convention President J.W. Throckmorton was reported to be supporting the latter.

The results of the convention conformed with what the majority of the members considered to be President Johnson’s minimum requirements, and taken at face value, the newly amended constitution could be described as progressive. The civil rights it allowed freedmen did not substantially differ from the privileges granted by the United States constitution; in fact, more specific rights were delegated by the Texas constitution than by the pre-fourteenth amendment national document. With few exceptions, the convention delegates who were considered radicals, including E.J. Davis and J.W. Flanagan, signed the document. However, the subsequent contest for governor, held against the background of the inflammatory battle in Washington between the unyielding President Johnson and the Republican controlled congress, made the results of the convention deliberations irrelevant. The opposing camps formed at the convention quickly identified either with the radical Republicans, or with President Johnson and his supporters in the North, and the highly exaggerated rhetoric of the summer campaign to elect state officers reflected the desperate battle engaged in Washington where Johnson's fate became tied inextricably with that of the reconstructed Texas government.

After some early support was elicited for John Hancock and B.H. Epperson, a coalition of ex-Confederates formed the Conservative Union ticket, naming J.W. Throckmorton and George W. Jones to be candidates for governor and lieutenant-governor respectively. Their choice of the title "conservative" was particularly useful, for their opponents would be more easily associated with the "radicals" in Washington, and because the normal political usage of the term was broad enough to include pre-war Democrats and Whigs. A conservative became one who opposed "radical" reconstruction, and who did not abandon his patriotic identity with the Confederate South. "Rebellion and Treason," P.W. Gray wrote. "are growing to be considered most favorable virtues."

The political rewards for these virtues were not overlooked by J.W. Throckmorton. He carefully aligned himself with southern nationalists during the constitutional convention, and appealed to southern pride during the course of the campaign. His strategy was well conceived, although his victory was pyrrhic. Twenty-two delegates to the convention publicly endorsed him. They came both from the ranks of the anti-secessionists—John
Hancock—and the secessionists—O.M. Roberts, and they all voiced a common theme: they were standing with President Andrew Johnson in the battle to save constitutional government. In a newspaper advertisement circulated throughout the state they announced their support for Throckmorton because he backed President Johnson's policy of restoration which was "based on the constitution." They knew he was opposed to Negro suffrage and "the hasty and inconsiderate elevation of the Negro to political equality." The opposition in Texas, they claimed, were adherents of the radical branch of the Republican Party in the North "who have declared their intention to reduce us to a condition of territorial vassalage, and to place us below the level of those who were once our slaves." These Texas radicals, it was charged, "are determined to aid and abet Stevens, Sumner, and Phillips in their opposition to the policy of the President." Their names, thirty-four of them, were published in the Marshall Texas Republican "in order that our readers may be advised of who these extreme radicals are," and included E.M. Pease, the Republican candidate for governor.

The political stance of the Pease-Flanagan ticket differed little from that of provisional Governor Hamilton. "No people in the world were ever suddenly placed in a more trying and embarrassing situation than we now are," Pease thought. The Negro had to be treaded as a freedman "in regard to all personal rights," and if the state constitution and laws were not framed on that basis, he warned, military and not civil authorities would exercise jurisdiction. "The old secession politicians are very active against me," he wrote his daughter, "and if the people still follow their consels [sic], I shall be defeated." The vote count was 49,277 for Throckmorton to 12,168 for Pease—"about the same as it was in 1861 for secession," Pease remarked.

Throckmorton's victory was obviously a triumph of the political forces in Texas who aligned themselves with Andrew Johnson, and their subsequent behavior rightly or wrongly identified the President with the unrepentant ex-Confederates in Texas. Secessionists O.M. Roberts and David Burnet were elected to the United States Senate; Governor Throckmorton stoutly opposed the adoption of the fourteenth amendment and the presence of the Freedman's Bureau; and the military occupation forces were confronted with increased numbers of charges of atrocities committed against freedmen. When Johnson's political fortunes reached their nadir with the start of impeachment proceedings, Texas shared a similar fate. In August, 1867, Governor Throckmorton was removed from his elected position by General Philip Sheridan, and E.M. Pease was appointed in his stead.

The experiment in voluntary submission begun by Abraham Lincoln was ended. To many Texans it marked the "triumph of the military, and the death of civil government." Governor Pease had a different opinion. "The great majority of the white population of our state seemed to have profited very little from their past experience," he said in his inaugural address. The alternative to their control would be "a new coalition of loyal whites and blacks," he forecasted.

The new coalition did not represent the majority of Texans, most of whom had supported the Confederacy, but it did represent the majority of the national electorate as the elections of 1868 were to show: a majority which would ultimately be the judge of the proper use of the constitution.

NOTES

1William Pitt Ballinger to Henry H. Williams, May 18, 1861, in Henry H. Williams, Papers, Rosenberg Library Archives, Galveston, Texas.


P.W. Gray to James H. Starr, July 25, 1865, James Harper Starr Papers, in Eugene C. Barker Texas History Center Archives, University of Texas, Austin, Texas (Hereinafter cited as Starr Papers).

Marshall *Texas Republican*, June 30, 1865.

*Texas State Gazette*, July 18, 1865.


Houston *Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, June 19, 1865.

For Jefferson County, see *Texas State Gazette*, August 19, 1865. For Grimes, Austin, and Washington counties, see *Texas State Gazette*, September 19, 1865.


J.E. Harrison to A.J. Hamilton, August 19, 1865, in Files as Governor of Texas, Correspondence, Texas State Archives, Austin, Texas (Hereinafter cited as Hamilton Correspondence).


A.J. Hamilton, Address to the People of Texas, Executive Record Book, 55-57. Texas State Archives, Austin, Texas (Hereinafter cited as Hamilton Executive Record Book).

*Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph*, June 14, 1865.

A.J. Hamilton to Major General H.G. Wright, September 27, 1865, Hamilton Correspondence.

For example see S.L. Richardson, Van Zandt County, to A.J. Hamilton, September [no date] 1865; Thomas Ford, Philip Howard and S.S. Nichols, Bosque County, to A.J. Hamilton, September 6, 1865, Hamilton Correspondence.

A.J. Hamilton to Major General H.G. Wright, September 27, 1865, Hamilton Correspondence.


*Dallas Herald*, August 19, 1865.

M.J. Hall to A.J. Hamilton, September 24, 1865, Hamilton Correspondence.


A.J. Hamilton to President Andrew Johnson, Hamilton Executive Record Book, 133-137.
A. Wright to A.J. Hamilton, January 22, 1866; A.S. Wright to A.J. Hamilton, January 23, 1866, Hamilton Correspondence.

Marshall Texas Republican, March 2, 1866.

Marshall Texas Republican, January 26, 1866.

J.W. Throckmorton to B.H. Epperson, January 21, 1866, in B.H. Epperson Papers, Eugene C. Barker, Texas History Center Archives, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.


Marshall Texas Republican, March 2, 1866.

President Johnson stands firmly as a wall between us and destruction. His courage should inspire us with some hope that sooner or later our remaining rights shall be awarded to us . . . ," wrote O.M. Roberts to James H. Starr, October 6, 1866, Starr Papers.

About Throckmorton, C.C. Cleveland wrote, "... although differing from the majority in the beginning on the question of secession, yet he yielded to the action of his state—went with her and in the hour of his country's greatest need, did his duty nobly—objectionably only to such men as Hamilton, Pease, and Bell and men of that stripe—a mere faction who would consign us to the tortures of radicalism should the Stevenses, Sumners, and Wades of Congress succeed in defeating the reconstruction policy of the President . . . ," C.L. Cleveland to James H. Starr, May 15, 1866, Starr Papers.

P.W. Gray to James H. Starr, May 31, 1866, ibid.

"Our candidates for Governor and Lt. Governor are both using the secessionists old feeling for personal ends, . . ." wrote P.W. Gray to James H. Starr, ibid.

Texas State Gazette, April 7, 1866.

Marshall Texas Republican, April 28, 1866.

E.M. Pease to James H. Starr, August 19, 1865, Starr Papers.

E.M. Pease to Carrie Pease, May 8, 1866; E.M. Pease to Carrie Pease, June 30, 1866, in the Graham-Pease Collection, Austin Public Library Archives, Austin Texas.

Fred W. Moore, General Land Office, to James H. Starr, August 19, 1867, Starr Papers.

E.M. Pease, Executive Record Book, 249-255, Texas State Archives, Austin, Texas.