



# Public Education and the Welfare State: The Case of the Freedmen's Schools

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## ***Public Education and the Welfare State: The Case of the Freedmen's Schools***

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**Amanda Claybaugh**

ALTHOUGH THE UNITED STATES DID NOT ESTABLISH A WELFARE STATE until the middle of the twentieth century, the federal government did attempt to provide for the needy during the Reconstruction period (1865–77) that followed the U.S. Civil War (1861–65). These attempts did not lead in any direct way to the twentieth-century welfare state, but the contemporary responses to them set the terms, I will argue, on which Americans continue to think about welfare to this day. Indeed, the Reconstruction era foretells the fate of the U.S. welfare state in the twentieth century, predicting quite accurately which programs would expand and which would contract, which would be always vulnerable and which would be forever sacrosanct. For this reason, Reconstruction helps us understand why the U.S. welfare state is so often attacked—and how it might be better defended.

The story begins with the Civil War, which proved to be a humanitarian disaster. Neither the Union nor the Confederacy was prepared to sustain armies that numbered in the hundreds of thousands. As a result, rations were often erratic; uniforms were often inadequate; and battles, particularly in the early years of the war, were often fought with no provisions made for medical care. In response to this situation, voluntary associations formed and took responsibility for supplying and superintending army hospitals and providing for soldiers more generally. Nor were the soldiers the only ones in need. As the Union army moved across the southern states, many slaves came forward to meet it, convinced that the soldiers had been sent to set them free. The slaves arrived at Union lines in desperate condition, needing food and shelter, but also wanting churches and schools. At first, Union officers did what they could to help the slaves, but it soon

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became clear that their ad hoc efforts would not be enough. Once again, voluntary associations stepped in to fill the breach: the so-called freedmen's aid societies that sent teachers and missionaries to the freed people as well as clothing and food.

As the Civil War went on, however, it became clear that even the heroic efforts of the voluntary associations would not be enough—that the government might need to get involved. In 1863, the War Department sent a committee to investigate the condition of the freed people in the southern states, and the committee recommended that the federal government form a Bureau of Emancipation. The government was slow to act on this advice, but finally, in March 1865, on the cusp of Reconstruction, it established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, popularly known as the Freedmen's Bureau. The Freedmen's Bureau was the less radical alternative to another possible solution—namely, the redistribution of southern lands—but it was nonetheless quite radical for its time. Through the Freedmen's Bureau, the federal government took on an array of functions that it had never before assumed: it negotiated and enforced labor contracts, set fair wages and forced employers to pay them, reunited families and relocated the displaced, and provided clothing, shelter, food, and medical care to all who needed them. And a year after its founding, the Freedmen's Bureau was put in charge of the hundreds of schools that the freedmen's aid societies had already established across the southern states.<sup>1</sup> During the Reconstruction years, the federal government would also acknowledge its obligation to care for soldiers—first the dead, then the living.<sup>2</sup> Immediately after the war, the federal government devoted considerable resources to reburying the Union dead in national cemeteries and investigating the identities of all unidentified bodies and the fate of all missing soldiers. As Reconstruction went on, the federal government also began paying pensions to soldiers who had been injured and to the widows and orphans of those who had died.

In the contemporary responses to these governmental efforts, we can see a characteristically American tendency at work: the tendency to draw certain distinctions among the various forms of assistance that a welfare state provides. Scholars may define a welfare state as comprising “social security, health, social welfare, education and training, and housing,” but ordinary Americans, as the sociologist Theda Skocpol has observed, “make a sharp conceptual and evaluative distinction between ‘social security’ and ‘welfare.’”<sup>3</sup> Because of this distinction, certain forms of welfare are simply not recognized as welfare at all. This distinction began, I would argue, during Reconstruction, when voters came to think of assistance as something to which soldiers were entitled and on which freed people had no claim. As a consequence, the system of soldiers' pensions grew dramatically in the decades after the war, until fully one-third of men in the northern states were receiving what had become, essentially, a provision for old age.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, the Freedmen's Bureau struggled from the beginning of its existence until its premature end. The

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of these schools, see Robert C. Morris, *Reading, 'Riting, and Reconstruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> For an account of the government's growing recognition of its obligations to those who had fought in its service, see Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2008), xiv.

<sup>3</sup> This is the standard scholarly definition of “welfare state,” here taken from Ian Gough, *The Political Economy of the Welfare State* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 4. Theda Skocpol, “The Limits of the New Deal System and the Roots of Contemporary Welfare Dilemmas,” in *The Politics of Social Policy in the United States*, ed. Margaret Weir, Ann Shola Orloff, and Theda Skocpol (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 296.

<sup>4</sup> Theda Skocpol offers the definitive account of these pensions and their relation to the subsequent development of the U.S. welfare state in *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 1992).

committee that recommended that a Bureau of Emancipation be established also cautioned that it not be made permanent, and the Freedmen's Bureau, once it was finally established, was authorized for only one year. Worse, it was allocated no money at all and forced to rely on whatever the Union army was willing to contribute. A year later, when Congress reauthorized the Freedmen's Bureau, this time appropriating money for it as well, the bill was vetoed by Andrew Johnson; Congress was able to override his veto, but the fate of the bureau was by then quite clear. It would remain in existence until 1869, but in an ever more weakened form. During Reconstruction, then, "welfare" for the poor was opposed to soldiers' "social security"; moreover, "welfare" also acquired the racial cast that continues in popular thinking to this day. For just as the popular shortening of the bureau's name drew attention toward the freed people and away from the white unionist "refugees" who were also receiving governmental aid, so too subsequent "welfare" programs have been falsely identified with African Americans.

But Americans, I want to argue, tend to draw a second distinction as well: a distinction between "welfare" and public education. We can see this distinction at work in the success of the freedmen's schools. In 1870, a year after the bureau had been abolished, there were three thousand such schools still in operation, serving roughly 150,000 freed people, as well as eleven normal schools training some freed people to become teachers themselves. After Reconstruction ended, these schools came under local control, but they were not shut down. On the contrary, as the historian Jacqueline Jones has shown, they stood as the foundation on which public education in the southern states would be built.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, this public education was segregated and, in many ways, inadequate, but nonetheless, the early efforts to teach the freed people, unlike the early efforts to feed and clothe them, did give rise to a lasting expansion of government. The success of the schools is quite surprising since teaching the freed people was much more radical than merely feeding and clothing them. After all, it had been illegal in the slave states to teach a slave to read. And after emancipation, the first efforts to teach the freed people were met, in the northern states, with skepticism and derision, while in the southern states, they were sometimes met with violence: during the early years of Reconstruction, schoolhouses were burned down and schoolteachers run out of town. Over time, however, the skepticism went away, and even the white southerners became reconciled to the schools.

In what follows, I will try to make sense of the Reconstruction era preference for the freedmen's schools over the Freedmen's Bureau. The freedmen's schools were so popular, I will show, precisely because they were seen as the bureau's opposite. Celebrating the schools was often a way of implicitly criticizing the bureau—and with it, the emergent welfare state. But the contemporary tendency to see the schools and the bureau as opposed ignored the extent to which the two institutions were actually intertwined. They emerged together and worked in tandem, and the fact that they were seen as distinct shows how thoroughly public education, like Social Security, can present itself as having nothing to do with "welfare" at all. For this reason, the freedmen's schools have much to teach us about how to represent the welfare state in compelling ways. So, too, do the freed people themselves. In the final section of this article, I will attempt to piece together the freed people's own views of welfare and suggest that these views point toward an account of welfare that is less vulnerable to the familiar attacks.

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<sup>5</sup> Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865–1873* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 12.

## THE FREEDMEN'S BUREAU AND THE FREEDMEN'S SCHOOLS

The efforts to aid the freed people reveal the differences among three competing modes of social assistance. In the nineteenth century, in Great Britain as well as in the United States, the charity that had prevailed in earlier eras was complemented by a new mode of social assistance called social reform. Where charity had entailed individual acts, social reform relied on voluntary associations, such as temperance associations and women's rights clubs, as well as freedmen's aid societies. And where charity had entailed donations of concrete aid, such as alms for the poor, social reform provided such aid only reluctantly, believing that aid "demoralizes" its recipients by rendering them unable or unwilling to work. Reformers focused instead on altering the conditions that make aid necessary, believing that they could rectify injustice and inequality by altering how people think and feel—by encouraging the free to sympathize with the enslaved or factory owners to sympathize with their workers and also by training the needy in the habits of "self-help."<sup>6</sup> The earliest efforts to assist the freed people conform to the reformist view of social assistance: the freedmen's aid societies did sometimes donate clothing and even food, but they devoted most of their energy to persuading those in the North to care about the freed people and to supporting the teachers and missionaries who would teach the freed people to help themselves.

As it became clear, however, that these reformist efforts would not be sufficient to meet the freed people's most pressing needs, at least some of the reformers involved in aiding the freed people began to work toward creating what was not yet called a welfare state. Welfare states differ from both charity and reform not only because they see government as the proper source of assistance, rather than individuals or voluntary associations, but also because they reconceptualize need. In a welfare state, need is understood, not as an individual failing, but as the product of structural forces, as when some degree of unemployment keeps inflation down, and so, the political theorist Norman Barry has argued, the welfare state also redefines need as an "entitlement" that "flow[s] from membership in a community."<sup>7</sup> To be sure, no one arguing that the government should aid the freed people would have expressed themselves in precisely those terms, but this is nonetheless the view of social assistance that at least some of them were moving toward.

The efforts to assist the freed people thus proceeded in the midst of a partial transition from reformist to welfare state thinking, and the tensions between these two ideologies can be seen in contemporary depictions of the Freedmen's Bureau and the freedmen's schools. The two institutions were, as I have said, quite entangled with one another, and yet they were typically depicted as distinct, first in the mainstream northern magazines and later in the southern ones as well. More specifically, these magazines tended (rightly) to depict the Freedmen's Bureau as experimenting with new forms of governmental aid, while (wrongly) depicting the freedmen's schools as a reassuringly familiar version of social reform. These depictions thus help us understand why an emergent welfare state thinking was viewed with hostility or, at best, ambivalence—and they also remind us that reform remained, for most people, the most compelling mode of social assistance, even as its limitations were becoming clear.

The Freedmen's Bureau is, of course, described quite differently in the northern and the southern magazines. When the bureau is considered as part of a military occupation, the northern magazines always defend it, while the southern magazines often attack it. (*The Old Guard*,

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller discussion of the differences between charity, reform, and the welfare state, see my *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Norman Barry, *Welfare*, 2nd ed. (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), 31.

for instance, compares the bureau to an intruder who binds the head of the household so that he may “debauch” the rest of the family.)<sup>8</sup> But when it is considered as part of the governmental provision of aid, the southern and the northern magazines begin to converge in their views. To be sure, the northern magazines, even the Democratic-leaning *Harper’s Monthly*, do defend the provision of aid, explaining why it is necessary at this particular time, but they also hasten to reassure their readers that not too much aid is being provided—and that it will not be provided for very long. Underlying this ambivalent defense are two objections to the bureau that the southern magazines share and, indeed, express more explicitly.

The first objection is to the fact that the bureau had radically expanded the federal government in both size and function. A Tennessee newspaper complains about the bureau’s assumption of new functions, calling it “a novelty to the Government” that would have been possible only during the revolutionary time of war.<sup>9</sup> A *De Bow’s* writer agrees that the bureau was functioning as something new, a “distinct and separate government for the negroes,” while another feared that this “absurdity” has not yet come to an end, that the Freedmen’s Bureau might yet be followed by a “Woman’s Bureau” or an “Orphan’s Bureau.”<sup>10</sup> And a third complains about the bureau’s size and expense, calling it a “vast machine” that requires “the comfortable sum of nearly eleven millions of dollars” a year.<sup>11</sup> The northern magazines make the same point in a more comic register, offering bemused descriptions of the bureau as a vast bureaucracy, self-perpetuating and beyond the people’s control. Even the *Nation*, which was founded to be an organ of radical Republican views, mocks the bureau in this way. Inaugurating a weekly column devoted to reporting on the bureau’s doings, the *Nation* recounts the bureau’s “official history,” which is presented simply as a series of documents. All agency in this history belongs to legislative enactments, each of which is cited punctiliously by number and date: “Circular No. 6, June 13, appoints sundry officers. Circular No. 7, June 13, directs the assistant commissioners to make estimates of the supplies needed.”<sup>12</sup> Circulars thus gave birth to the bureau, and the bureau, in turn, gives birth to more paperwork: elsewhere, the *Nation* describes for its readers the many forms that the bureau is expected to produce, cataloging their variety with obvious relish.<sup>13</sup> In this way, what had been an explicit ideological critique in the southern magazines is transformed by the northern magazines into a set of comic tropes, all the more effective for seeming to be nonideological. And so it is hardly surprising that these tropes, legalese and paperwork, continue to appear in attacks on the welfare state to this day.

The second objection is that the bureau will create a new kind of citizen, one who has been demoralized by aid and has thus become entirely dependent on the government. In the first years of Reconstruction, the northern magazines tended to imagine that this dependent citizen would be a Confederate; after all, the Confederates had already been demoralized by their reliance on slave labor. And northern reporters traveling through the southern states found many Confederates who preferred taking governmental rations to providing for themselves. One reporter describes the planter class as believing that they have a “sacred right to prey upon the

<sup>8</sup> “Free Labor,” *The Old Guard*, September 1865, 422.

<sup>9</sup> “The Freedman’s Bureau, What Is Thought of It in Tennessee,” *The National Freedman*, May 1866, 99.

<sup>10</sup> Geo. Fitzhugh, “Camp Lee and the Freedmen’s Bureau,” *De Bow’s Review*, October 1866, 348; “Atrocities of the Freedmen’s Bureau,” *De Bow’s Review*, July 1866, 92.

<sup>11</sup> “The National Freedmen’s Bureau,” *De Bow’s Review*, February 1866, 215.

<sup>12</sup> “The Week,” *The Nation*, September 21, 1865, 355.

<sup>13</sup> “The Week,” *The Nation*, July 27, 1865, 99.

government” that defeated them, and another describes planter families who refuse to accept gifts from their northern relatives because they would prefer to be an expense to the Union: “Every penny of cost to which they [the planters] put it [the federal government] was so much got back from the fortunes of which it had robbed them, by waging this wicked war for their subjugation!”<sup>14</sup> As for the poor whites, as described by these reporters, they are equally ready to take their share of rations, although they refuse to believe that the rations come from the U.S. government because they refuse to believe that the U.S. government has won the war.<sup>15</sup>

As Reconstruction goes on, however, and the radical phase gives way to reaction, the northern magazines begin to agree with the southern ones that the citizen truly dependent on government is not a Confederate but, rather, an African American. This claim appears more and more often throughout the 1870s, nowhere more viciously than in James S. Pike’s account of the South Carolina state legislature during Reconstruction, *The Prostrate State* (1874). Pike presents the dependent African American citizen as a legislator, now capable of stealing money from the government from which he would otherwise simply beg.<sup>16</sup> The trope of the dependent African American would also persist into the present, and we must acknowledge, along with its racism, the implicit presumption that governmental aid must necessarily create dependent citizens of some kind.

In contrast to the ambivalence with which the northern magazines defended the Freedmen’s Bureau, they were remarkably wholehearted in their praise for the freedmen’s schools (even the southern magazines ultimately retreat from condemning the schools and instead protest only the northernness of the schools’ teachers). In part, they valued the schools because they valued education. Indeed, educating the freed people offered a convenient fantasy of somehow resolving in the future the seemingly intractable problems of the present day. It might be difficult, for instance, for white northerners, much less white southerners, to accept the idea of the freed people voting, but an essay in the *North American Review* reassures them that education will transform “savages into self-governing men.”<sup>17</sup> And it might be difficult for the freed people to support themselves in a region where their former owners still own all the land, but the *Nation* essay that describes these difficulties in great detail nonetheless concludes with an unrelated and seemingly unmotivated appeal to the power of education: “The one thing before all others is, however, to educate, educate, educate!”<sup>18</sup>

But the northern magazines also valued the schools in their own right, as an institutional alternative to the Freedmen’s Bureau. And so alongside these general paeans to education, the northern magazines published many accounts of visits to various freedmen’s schools. Here is a typical school visit scene, which I quote at length because the passage touches on all the genre’s conventions:

(The teachers) are paid by some of the Northern charitable associations, and instruction is given gratuitously. Usually, after the children are dismissed, a few of the laborers on the

<sup>14</sup> John Trowbridge, *The Desolate South, 1865–1866: A Picture of the Battlefields of the Devastated Confederacy* (1866; reprint, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1956), 94; Whitelaw Reid, *After the War: A Tour of the Southern States, 1865–1866* (1866; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 73.

<sup>15</sup> Trowbridge, *Desolate South*, 79–80.

<sup>16</sup> James S. Pike, *The Prostrate State: South Carolina under Negro Government* (1873; reprint, New York: D. Appleton, 1874), 29.

<sup>17</sup> “Education of the Freedmen,” *North American Review*, October 1865, 529.

<sup>18</sup> “The Feelings of the Southern Negroes,” *The Nation*, September 28, 1863, 393.

plantation receive a lesson in reading, and at the regular school session I saw three or four adults present; but most of the scholars are between six and sixteen years old. Some of them were very neatly dressed and all were tolerably clean. Their behavior, as a rule, was quite orderly, and in all cases it was obedient and respectful. . . .

After looking at the copy-books, which were singularly clean and contained some very fair specimens of running hand, an opportunity was afforded me to judge of the proficiency of the most advanced class. . . . First they answered general questions on the map of North America. . . . Then came a reading lesson and the spelling of words which had occurred in it, some of them being of three or four syllables and each pupil defining the word he spelled. This was very well done. In written arithmetic the class were able to perform long sums in addition with great promptness.<sup>19</sup>

Most obviously, this passage and the many others like it demonstrate the freed people's capacity to learn—and, by implication, their capacity to work and even to participate in politics. Such demonstrations were the primary aim of the earliest freedmen's schoolteachers, who devoted themselves to gathering evidence to show, first, that the escaped slaves should be free and, later, that the freed people should be made citizens. For this reason, the teachers ran their schools as performances: they invited the whole community to attend annual exhibitions of what the students had learned, and they permitted visitors of all kinds, from radical northern reporters to conservative former Confederates, to inspect the schools at any time.

But if these school visit scenes demonstrate the freed people's abilities, they also make an argument about governmental aid. Passages like these emphasize that there is, on the one hand, not much need for aid. The neatly dressed and orderly children, the adults who find time for reading classes at the end of the working day—these are not persons in dire need. Moreover, the lessons that the freed people are learning look forward to an even more prosperous future in which the freed people will be able to read and sign the contracts and do the calculations that will enable them to support themselves as agricultural laborers. On the other hand, passages like these also suggest that whatever aid may be needed does not need to come from the government: a "charitable association" is paying the teacher's salary. Occasionally, school visit scenes do acknowledge governmental assistance, sometimes noting that the teacher's transportation south has been paid for by the Union army or that the Freedmen's Bureau has provided whatever building is being used as a school. But these passages place much more emphasis on the reformist efforts being made by the freedmen's aid societies and other "charitable associations" and also on the charitable actions of individuals, such as the free women of color who support the New Orleans schools, the injured Union soldiers who offered to spend their convalescence teaching the freed people in Virginia, or the freed people who had somehow learned to read and had taught those around them while waiting for a teacher to come from the North. The school visit scenes thus argue that there is no need for government to involve itself in aid when reformist groups and charitable individuals are already doing so much.

The magazines circulated by the freedmen's aid societies contain similar school visit scenes, often written by the teachers themselves, but alongside these are other passages, which focus not on the schools but on the teachers. In these passages, the teachers are celebrated as the self-sacrificing "Yankee schoolma'am." This figure can be found almost everywhere in the period, from the recruiting materials of the freedmen's aid societies to the sermons of Henry Ward

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<sup>19</sup> John Richard Dennett, *The South as It Is, 1865–1866* (1866; reprint, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 206–7.

Beecher, but one passage crystallizes the tropes of all the rest. It comes from an essay that W. E. B. Du Bois would write decades later about the Freedmen's Bureau:

The annals of this Ninth Crusade are yet to be written, the tale of a mission that seemed to our age far more quixotic than the quest of St. Louis seemed to his. Behind the mists of ruin and rapine waved the calico dresses of women who dared, and after the hoarse mouthings of the field guns rang the rhythm of the alphabet. Rich and poor they were, serious and curious. Bereaved now of a father, now of a brother, now of more than these, they came seeking a life work in planting New England schoolhouses among the white and black of the South. They did their work well. In that first year they taught 100,000 souls, and more.<sup>20</sup>

Most obviously, this passage seeks to oppose the female schoolroom to the male battlefield. It pairs the Yankee schoolteacher with the Union soldier, her calico dress conjuring up his uniform, the sound of his shooting countered by the sound of her students reciting the alphabet. The schoolteacher comes South to complete what the soldier has begun, and here we see why the former Confederates would resist the northern schoolteachers as a form of cultural imperialism.

The more important opposition, however, is implied. The Freedmen's Bureau is routinely depicted as a vast governmental bureaucracy, but the freedmen's schools are in these passages personified in a single figure, who significantly has no ties to government at all. The figure thus makes the same point as the school visit scenes, suggesting that there is no need for the government to aid the freed people, but it then pushes that point even further, suggesting that there is also no need for reform. A solitary woman motivated by personal loss, this figure stands apart from all the institutions, as well as the individuals, on which the real-life schoolteachers depended. It is surprising that such a figure would appear in the publications of the freedmen's aid societies, and even more surprising that she would be taken up by Du Bois, who elsewhere in the essay defends the bureau precisely for being a proto-welfare state, calling it "a full-fledged government of men" devoted to caring for its citizens.<sup>21</sup> The prevalence of this figure, even among reformers and early defenders of the welfare state, reminds us that it is very difficult to depict institutions as institutions, and it is much easier to focus instead on single figures, no matter how much of a distortion such a figure might be.

Taken together, the figure of the Yankee schoolteacher and the school visit scenes show that assisting the freed people was acceptable, even celebrated, so long as this assistance was in the mode of social reform—oriented toward self-help, concerned about demoralization, uninterested in government—or, at least, so long as this assistance seemed to be in that mode. After all, the freedmen's schools were as much a part of the welfare state as they were the product of reform, since the schools were increasingly supported by the government. And in many cases, the schools provided not only education but also more concrete forms of governmental aid. Some teachers took responsibility for securing and distributing rations, and a few became radical advocates for even more governmental intervention. These teachers were careful to hide what they were doing: when they wrote essays for the mainstream northern magazines, they presented their schools in a familiarly reformist way. But a different story emerges when we piece together their less public writings, the open letters they sent to their families and friends, the diaries they kept while they were teaching, and the memoirs that a few published decades later, at

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<sup>20</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Freedmen's Bureau," *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1901, 358.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

the ends of their lives. In these writings, we can see committed reformers confronting the limits of reformist ideology and beginning to recognize the need for something like a welfare state.

These teachers had come South thoroughly persuaded by reformist ideology, not only committed to teaching men and women in the North to sympathize with the freed people, but also committed to teaching the freed people what the teachers thought of as the northern values of discipline and self-reliance. Indeed, these teachers were so committed to the latter project that they were at first reluctant to give out even the small supplies of donated clothing they had brought from home, fearing that doing so would be demoralizing, and so they often sold the freed people this clothing rather than giving it to them. Soon, however, the teachers realized that the freed people's needs were much more varied and pressing than they had first understood. One teacher found herself in charge of distributing "clothing, medicine, garden seeds, and implements."<sup>22</sup> Another was asked, in a single day, to provide molasses, thread, painkillers, flannel for a rheumatic old woman, and swaddling for an illegitimate child.<sup>23</sup> In response to these needs, the teachers wrote open letters to the various freedmen's aid societies, asking for more donations. They also did what they could to augment those donations themselves. Many began to make clothing, among them a teacher who spent every night sewing so that she might have something to give each of her one hundred students on Christmas Day. Among these teachers at least, there was no more talk of selling the freed people what they so desperately needed.

In this way, these teachers began to abandon certain reformist values, and this sometimes brought them into conflict with those who generally supported their work. A reporter for the *North American Review* cautioned that the freed people were being demoralized by a "too abundant liberality" in the matter of clothing.<sup>24</sup> And a teacher acknowledged that her friends might find the distribution of clothing a "strange and suspicious operation," but she reassured them that, in these circumstances, such an "operation" is necessary.<sup>25</sup> These teachers were no longer concerned about demoralization in part because they had come to recognize that the freed people worked very hard indeed, but also because they were arriving at a different conception of need. The freed people were not in need because they were unable or unwilling to work, these teachers recognized, but rather because the planting had been disrupted or the harvest had been bad or pests had blighted the crop, because the markets had been glutted, because supplies were overpriced, because their employers would not pay them their wages, because they were kept from renting land. This is not quite a conception of need as the product of market forces, but it is a conception of need as caused by forces beyond an individual's control.

Recognizing this, these teachers began to argue that the government must do more. Even as the mainstream northern magazines were depicting the freedmen's schools as opposed to the Freedmen's Bureau, the teachers themselves were supporting the bureau's work. Indeed, at least two confide that they had taken over the tasks assigned to their local bureau agents, fearing that the agents would not perform the tasks zealously enough. And many of them complained that the bureau was refusing to acknowledge the very real suffering caused by failed harvests. One ob-

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<sup>22</sup> Margaret Newbold Thorpe, "Life in Virginia, by a 'Yankee Teacher,'" *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, April 1956, 183.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Hyde Botume, *First Days amongst the Contrabands* (1893; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1968), 123, 124.

<sup>24</sup> "The Freedmen at Port Royal," *North American Review*, July 1865, 16.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from William C. Gannet, May 3, 1862. Reprinted in Elizabeth Ware Pearson, ed., *Letters from Port Royal: Written at the Time of the Civil War* (1906; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1969), 33.

served that the bureau's decision to stop providing rations had brought "severe misfortune" to the disabled, the old, and orphaned children, and another pointed out that a failed harvest had shown the freed people that "the government on which they had depended is to them a broken reed, so far as bread is concerned."<sup>26</sup> Implied in these complaints is the presumption, typical of a welfare state, that the government has a responsibility to provide for its citizens and that citizens have a right to "depend" on their government. Some teachers became quite vocal proponents of this view, traveling to Washington to present the freed people's case for more governmental aid.

The schoolteachers' more private writings thus tell the story of how prosperous and privileged people can come to recognize the need for a welfare state. And putting these private writings alongside the more mainstream depictions of the freedmen's schools can help us to see how such a welfare state might be defended. For these radicalized schoolteachers recognized that schools, associated as they are with the virtues of self-help, could provide effective cover for governmental aid of all kinds—and schoolteachers could serve as effective advocates for persons in need.

### THE FREED PEOPLE'S VIEW OF WELFARE

While white Republicans and Democrats were debating government involvement in aiding the freed people, the freed people were developing a conception of governmental aid all their own. This conception has long been forgotten, and it can be recovered only in fragments, inferred from some of the freed people's political writings and from their actions as well. The freed people conceived of governmental aid rather differently than did the radical Republicans who were their advocates in Congress. The radical Republicans supported governmental aid largely as a way of forestalling calls for the redistribution of southern lands. For them, governmental aid was the least bad solution to a temporary problem. The freed people, by contrast, recognized that need would always be with us, that there would always be those who were unable to provide for themselves. And the freed people further believed that the government had an obligation to provide for the needy, mostly through poorhouses, hospitals, and other institutions of care. The freed people thus thought of governmental aid as something that citizens are entitled to—but also as something that citizens are obligated to provide. Unlike other defenders of the welfare state, then, the freed people emphasized the reciprocal nature of the obligations between government and its citizens.

We can see this conception of governmental aid at work in the actions of the recently freed slaves. Most freed people took it for granted that the federal government would provide for them. In the eyes of many northern observers, such an expectation looked like dependence. "The prevailing idea," one member of a freedmen's aid society dryly commented, "was that 'Uncle Sam' owned them [and that] 'Uncle Sam' would support them."<sup>27</sup> A few observers, however, were discerning enough to recognize that the freed people thought that they had obligations to "Uncle Sam" as well. One such observer recalls that when a young freedman was asked whether "the government had helped [him] any this year," he replied, with considerable pride, "*Government helped me? . . . No, I am helping government!*"<sup>28</sup>

The observer did not go on to ask what the freedman meant by helping government, but for most freed people, it meant paying taxes. From the beginning, the freed people understood quite clearly that there was a relation between the taxes they paid and the governmental services they

<sup>26</sup> Linda Warfel Slaughter, *The Freedmen of the South* (1869; reprint, New York: Kraus Reprint, 1969), 142, 143.

<sup>27</sup> "The Freedmen at Port Royal," 16.

<sup>28</sup> Trowbridge, *Desolate South*, 123.

received. We can see this most clearly in the Mississippi Valley, where the freed people were taxed to support the schools that the army had established for them. When the taxes were lifted and the schools shut down, they submitted a petition asking that the schools be reopened and the taxes reimposed. The freed people's willingness to pay taxes that benefited their community might seem to be an act of collective self-interest, but the Union army officer who was in charge of the freed people in the Union-occupied territories recognized tax-paying as something more than that. The freed people, he recalls, "freely acknowledged that they ought to assist in bearing the burden of the poor [by paying taxes to support] the needed hospitals, orphan asylums, schools and [by providing] clothing for the indigent." Such an acknowledgment was remarkable enough at the time, given the widespread ambivalence about governmental aid, but the freed people went even farther. Paying taxes, in their view, was not merely the unavoidable cost of supporting governmental institutions: it was also a defining act of citizenship. They saw the taxes they paid as the government's first "recognition" that they were citizens.<sup>29</sup>

We can also see the freed people's conception of governmental aid articulated in their own writings, particularly in the proceedings of the political conventions they organized in the years following the Civil War. For the most part, these proceedings express the freed people's gratitude for being freed from slavery and assert their readiness to become full citizens, with all the rights that citizenship entails. But these proceedings also refer to the plight of the old, the crippled, and the orphaned, and they call on the government to aid these people. Most expect that this aid will come through the Freedmen's Bureau: the 1865 Norfolk convention asks that rations be provided to those women and children who do not have men to provide for them, while the 1865 Nashville convention thanks the bureau for having given them "good bread and butter and good jackets."<sup>30</sup> Two years later, the 1867 Lexington convention calls for the bureau to be continued, and the 1869 National Convention of the Colored Men of America, convened after the bureau had been disbanded, calls for the government to go on aiding the hungry.<sup>31</sup> But these conventions also envision other institutions of aid, ones that are not tied to the aftermath of the Civil War. The 1866 Raleigh convention calls for the establishment of schools<sup>32</sup>, and the 1866 Augusta convention calls for "asylums for our lunatics, schools and colleges for our children, churches for our respective faiths."<sup>33</sup>

The principles articulated in the freedmen's conventions would later be enacted by some Reconstruction era state legislatures, legislatures that were in the hands of freed people as well as white Republicans. These legislatures are now notorious, associated in the national memory with corruption and incompetence. To be sure, there was some corruption, but the attacks made on these governments were motivated in large part by racism—and by a resistance to the welfare states that these governments were trying to create. It was these legislatures that established the first public school systems in the South, and they also created or improved institutions to care

<sup>29</sup> "Education of the Freedmen," 540, 544.

<sup>30</sup> "Address from the Colored Citizens of Norfolk, Va., to the People of the United States, June 5, 1865," reprinted in Philip S. Foner and George E. Walker, eds., *Proceedings of the Black National and State Conventions: 1865–1900* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 1:87; "Proceedings of the State Convention of the Colored Men of Tennessee, Nashville, August 7, 1865," in *Proceedings*, 1:126.

<sup>31</sup> "Proceedings of the State Convention of Colored Men, Held at Lexington, Kentucky, in the A.M.E. Church, November 26th, 27th, and 28th, 1867," in *Proceedings*, 1:313; "Proceedings of the National Convention of the Colored Men of America, Held in Washington, DC, January 13, 14, 15, and 16, 1869," in *Proceedings*, 1:372.

<sup>32</sup> *Minutes of the Freedmen's Convention, Held in the City of Raleigh, on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> of October, 1866* (Raleigh: Standard Book and Job Office, 1866).

<sup>33</sup> "State Convention of the Colored People of Georgia, Augusta, January 10, 1866," in *Proceedings*, 1:234.

for the poor, the disabled, and the old. Indeed, such provisions were elevated to the status of constitutional provisions. The state constitution of Florida insisted that the government should provide for those persons who, “by reason of age, infirmity, or misfortune, may have claims upon the aid and sympathy of society.” And North Carolina identified as “one of the first duties of a civilized and Christian State” the “beneficent provision of the poor, unfortunate, and orphans.”<sup>34</sup> Constitutions like these established, as the historian C. Vann Woodward would recognize, “a broad conception of the government’s responsibility for the people’s welfare.”<sup>35</sup>

Dismantled one by one as each southern state was reclaimed for white Democratic rule, the Reconstruction era state governments did not last long. But they deserve more attention than they have received because they offer us the best example of a U.S. welfare state in the nineteenth century. We should also pay more attention to the values that sustained these governments, in particular the freed people’s powerful conception of reciprocal obligations between government and its citizens.

## CONCLUSION

If Reconstruction helps explain the ways in which the U.S. welfare state would be attacked, it also offers suggestions for how it may be defended. The success of the freedmen’s schools reminds us that assistance for the poor is more popular when it is reformist, when it comes through voluntary associations and inculcates self-help. Thus far, it is the opponents of governmental aid who have made the best use of this historical fact, arguing for faith-based initiatives and conjuring up the threat of demoralization in their campaign to dismantle the welfare state. But the defenders of the welfare state might also make use of it, as the radical freedmen’s school-teachers once did. Even as these teachers argued for governmental aid, they retained their ties to the freedmen’s aid societies, and the existence of these societies reminds us that it is often easier for people to affiliate with voluntary associations than it is for them to identify with the far more abstract and remote federal government. With this in mind, it might make sense for the defenders of the welfare state to find ways to collaborate with voluntary associations, rather than seeing them as necessarily opposed to the government. Furthermore, these teachers recognized that their status as teachers, their close identification with self-help, made them the best possible advocates to lobby Washington for more governmental aid to the freed people. It also made their schools a good place for a wide array of governmental services to be provided: medical care for the sick, food for the hungry, as well as education for those who wanted to learn. With this in mind, we can understand why more and more aspects of the welfare state are today channeled through the public schools, from free breakfasts and lunches, through an array of psychological and social services, to assistance for the disabled of all kinds. The defenders of the welfare state might want to find ways to identify themselves even more closely with the public schools.

Finally, the freed people’s conception of reciprocal obligations between government and its citizens offers a defense against the familiar attacks on dependent citizens, which presumes that there is one class of citizens who receive aid and another class who pay taxes. The freed people understood that all of us sometimes provide assistance and sometimes receive it and that the government is what sustains our obligations and our entitlements alike. [A]

<sup>34</sup> John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction after the Civil War* (1961; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 114.

<sup>35</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (1951; reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 15.