My most memorable encounter with the Confederate myth of Reconstruction came during a discussion with seventeen first-year students at Tougaloo College, a predominantly black school in Mississippi, one afternoon in January 1970. I was about to launch into a unit on Reconstruction, and I needed to find out what the students already knew. “What was Reconstruction?” I asked. “What images come to your mind about that era?” The class consensus: Reconstruction was the time when African Americans took over the governing of the Southern states, including Mississippi. But they were too soon out of slavery, so they messed up and reigned corruptly, and whites had to take back control of the state governments.

I sat stunned. So many major misconceptions glared from that statement that it was hard to know where to begin a rebuttal. African Americans never took over the Southern states. All governors were white, and almost all legislatures had white majorities throughout Reconstruction. African Americans did not “mess up”; indeed, Mississippi enjoyed less corrupt government during Reconstruction than in the decades immediately afterward. “Whites” did not take back control of the state governments; rather, some white Democrats used force and fraud to wrest control from biracial Republican coalitions.

For young African Americans to believe such a hurtful myth about their past seemed tragic. It invited them to doubt their own capability, since their race had “messed up” in its one appearance on American history’s center stage. It also invited them to conclude that it is only right that whites be always in control. Yet my students had merely learned what their textbooks had taught them. Like almost all Americans who finished high school before the 1970s, they had encountered the Confederate myth of Reconstruction in their American history classes. I, too, learned it from my college history textbook. John F. Kennedy and his ghostwriter retold it in their portrait of L.Q.C. Lamar in Profiles in Courage, which won the Pulitzer Prize.

… Textbooks of the 1980s and early 1990s inadvertently still took a white supremacist viewpoint. Their rhetoric made African Americans rather than whites the “problem” and assumed that the major issue of Reconstruction was how to integrate African Americans into
the system, economically and politically. “Slavery was over,” said *The American Way*. “But the South was ruined and the Blacks had to be brought into a working society.” Blacks were already working, of course. One wonders what the author thinks they had been doing in slavery! Similarly, according to *Triumph of the American Nation*, Reconstruction “meant solving the problem of bringing black Americans into the mainstream of national life.” *Triumph* supplied an instructive example of the myth of lazy, helpless black folk: “When white planters abandoned their plantations on islands off the coast of South Carolina, black people there were left helpless and destitute.” In reality, these black people enlisted in Union armies, operated the plantations themselves, and made raids into the interior to free slaves on mainland plantations.