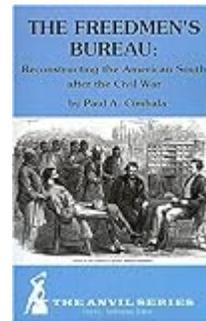


**Paul A. Cimbala.** *The Freedmen's Bureau: Reconstructing the American South after the Civil War.* Malabar: Krieger Publishing, 2005. 206 pp. \$23.75 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57524-094-7.



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## A Long Overdue New History of the Freedmen's Bureau

Not since George R. Bentley's 1955 publication of *A History of the Freedmen's Bureau* has a comprehensive survey of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands been undertaken. This is regrettable, as Paul A. Cimbala appropriately notes in his preface to *The Freedmen's Bureau*. Despite significant transformations in Reconstruction historiography since 1955 and historians' continued recognition of the bureau's central importance to Republican efforts to "translate Union victory and emancipation in war into a new order in peace," Bentley's dated interpretation continues to be the starting point for contemporary understandings of the federal agency (p. xi). Given the sweeping reassessment of Reconstruction, a new history of the bureau is long overdue.

Rejecting Bentley's assessment of the bureau as an agency that "tried to do too much" for African Americans by acting on behalf of radical Republicans "to exploit economically and politically the erstwhile Confederacy," Cimbala maintains that by serving as the "guardian" of former slaves, bureau agents and officers worked earnestly to secure the full promise of emancipation as they understood it (pp. x, 195). That the bureau ulti-

mately failed to do so, he insists, was not for lack of effort on the part of bureau men—that is, the leaders, officials, and field agents employed directly by the agency—or want on the part of former slaves who, "despite their disappointments," considered the agency a "useful ally" that "made a difference, even if a fleeting one, in how they defined their new status" (p. 196).

Organizing part 1 of the book chronologically as well as by bureau undertaking, Cimbala presents a fast-paced, detail-oriented institutional history of the Freedmen's Bureau. The early chapters focus on the establishment and organization of the bureau as well as the men it employed and the realities they encountered in the postwar South. The remaining five chapters turn to the myriad activities of the bureau—its distribution of relief, encouragement of black landownership (and the failure of its land policies), "nurturing" of a Southern free labor system, facilitation of education for former slaves, and efforts to provide justice to freedpeople. Ever present in each of these chapters are the men who shaped the bureau. Indeed, this is a history told from the vantage point of bureau men—all the way from the bureau commissioner,

Oliver Otis Howard, to the agent at the most local level. Readers will walk away from Cimbala's account with a clear understanding of the ideological parameters of the agency, its multifarious and complex undertakings, and the changing attitudes and expectations of the bureau men who worked on a daily basis to implement Reconstruction policies.

The supporting primary source documents that make up part 2 not only serve well Cimbala's purpose—to demonstrate that bureau men saw themselves as guardians of former slaves' newfound rights, that ex-Confederates proved the “real challenge to preserving the fruits of victory,” and that freedpeople recognized the bureau as an ally—but they also offer good geographical diversity in the process (p. 195). Depicting the harsh realities faced by Southerners and bureau men across the South, the documents selected provide firsthand accounts from North Carolina, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. The supporting documents also represent well the many levels of bureau bureaucracy. In addition to offering a “top-down” perspective—revealing Congress's intent as well as that of bureau leadership—Cimbala provides a “bottom-up” understanding of the bureau's many endeavors. Well-chosen documents from the bureau field office records, now available on microfilm from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), in particular, reveal the hopes of both former slaves and former masters as well as the constraints under which bureau men operated at the local level.[1] Certainly, these supporting documents underscore the objectives and operational bureaucracy of the bureau as well as the daily frustrations encountered by its agents.

Like other titles in the Anvil Series, *The Freedmen's Bureau* is suited well for the university or high school classroom. It offers a concise 108-page treatment of the bureau and its place in Reconstruction, and 29 documents that fill approximately 80 more pages. Moreover, Cimbala incorporates the most recent scholarship on the Freedmen's Bureau into his study in a way that will not overwhelm the novice reader in historiographical debate. He briefly introduces the bureau historiographically in the preface, and then points to important new considerations of the agency throughout the text and in the select bibliography. The recent scholarship highlighted in *The Freedmen's Bureau* directs readers foremost to work with similar interpretations—that is, to what Robert Harrison identifies as the “New Freedmen's Bureau his-

toriography,” which offers more nuanced appraisals of the agency but generally concludes that most bureau agents worked as useful partners to African Americans in an unforgiving environment that seriously limited their abilities.[2] Other scholarship, most notably Carol Faulkner's *Women's Radical Reconstruction: The Freedmen's Aid Movement* (2004), that offer interpretations more critical of the agency and a broader context for the political culture of Reconstruction perhaps deserve more mention and consideration. Certainly, the Reconstruction specialist will want more, but true to the purpose of this series, Cimbala offers a succinct history of the bureau that presents original analysis and draws heavily upon recent bureau scholarship.

*The Freedmen's Bureau* offers a focused history and assessment of the federal agency that, according to Cimbala, “stood as the principle expression of federal authority in the defeated South” (p. xi). It is fact filled and comprehensive in its purpose. It does not deviate from placing the bureau at the center of Reconstruction, and unlike older histories of the agency gets quickly beyond its failure to emphasize the bureau's usefulness to freedpeople and “positive influence on the course of Reconstruction” (p. 195). Historians today have uncovered a much more complex story of Reconstruction than that depicted by Bentley in 1955. Cimbala presents that complexity, and illustrates that even in the dramatically changing historiography of the era the bureau remains at center stage in the drama of Reconstruction.

#### Notes

[1]. Earlier this year, NARA completed a five-year project that preserved and microfilmed the field office records of the bureau. Resulting in almost one thousand reels of microfilm, the project makes more readily available one million plus documents from the bureau's local records. For additional information on these records and their considerable value, see the NARA's overview of the records at <http://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/freedmens-bureau/>; and Reginald Washington, “Spotlight on NARA: The Freedmen's Bureau Preservation Project,” *Prologue* 34 (2002): 144-148.

[2]. Robert Harrison, “New Representations of a 'Misrepresented Bureau': Reflections on Recent Scholarship on the Freedmen's Bureau,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 8, no. 2 (June 2007): 205-229.

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