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Reconstruction

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This text discusses Reconstruction, or the period of rebuilding following the Civil War. The Civil War lasted from 1861 to 1865 and was fought between the northern states, known as the Union, and rebellious southern states, known as the Confederacy. The Union won the war and had to decide how to bring the country back together again, leading to the controversial Reconstruction Era. As you read, identify the goals of the Radical Republicans, President Andrew Johnson, and Southern Democrats during the Reconstruction era.

- [1] After the Civil War ended in 1865, The United States needed to rebuild, particularly in the devastated¹ southern states. The period following the Civil War in which this rebuilding took place is referred to as Reconstruction. It lasted from 1865 to 1877. It was a time of great pain and endless questions. On what terms would the Confederacy of southern states be allowed back into the Union? Who would establish those terms: Congress or the President? How would freed blacks be treated in the South? Did the end of slavery mean that black men would now enjoy the same status as white men? What was to be done with the Confederate leaders, who were seen as traitors² by many in the North?



"A Visit from the Old Mistress" by Winslow Homer is in the public domain.

Founding the Reconstruction Era

The military conflict was over. But in many ways, Reconstruction was still a war. Many radical Northerners³ wanted to punish the South. Many Southerners were desperate to preserve⁴ their

1. **Devastate** (*verb*) to destroy
2. **Traitor** (*noun*) someone who betrays their country
3. The radical Northerners aimed to create extreme changes in American politics. They sought to promote racial equality and increase federal protection against states' rights to discriminate against African Americans. They formed the bulk of the "Radical Republicans."

way of life.

The way of life for African-Americans, though, was bound to change. Congress approved three amendments⁵ to the Constitution that changed African-American rights. The Thirteenth Amendment formally abolished⁶ slavery in all states and territories. The Fourteenth Amendment promised all men, including African-American men, equal protection under the law. And finally, the Fifteenth Amendment gave African-American men the right to vote. For a southern state to be readmitted to the Union, it had to ratify, or approve, these new amendments. Although they were positive steps towards racial equality, they proved difficult to enforce.

In the end, the president chose how to organize Reconstruction. After President Lincoln was assassinated,⁷ his successor⁸ President Andrew Johnson decided not to punish the South harshly. During the Civil War, Johnson remained loyal to the Union, even though his home state of Tennessee was one of the states that seceded from the Union. As president, Johnson provided pardons⁹ to most Confederate leaders, many of who returned to power. And while he outlined steps to create new state governments, he allowed each state to decide how it would treat its black citizens. Many southern states adopted Black Codes¹⁰ of law that sought to maintain white power. The North was furious. Recently freed African-Americans found the postwar South very similar to the prewar South.

- [5] President Johnson faced strong opposition in Congress. In the 1866 Congressional Elections, a group known as the Radical Republicans came to power. They wanted to punish the South and take power from the long-ruling white Southern Democrats. The Radical Republicans passed the Military Reconstruction Acts of 1867 to do so. They divided the South into five military districts with new governments. They also forced southern whites to allow blacks to vote, hold political office, and serve as judges or police chiefs. This power shift angered many Southerners.

President Johnson vetoed¹¹ all of the Radical Republican initiatives,¹² but Congress overrode

4. **Preserve** (*verb*) to keep (something) in its original state
5. **Amendment** (*noun*) an addition to a document
6. **Abolish** (*verb*) to put an end to
7. **Assassinate** (*verb*) to murder
8. **Successor** (*noun*) a person who has a job after someone else
9. **Pardon** (*noun*) an official act that forgives one for a crime and prevents their punishment
10. The Black Codes were a series of laws passed in 1865 and 1866 about former slaves that kept them from voting or being citizens. The Black Codes also tried to force blacks to work for low wages or in debt, similar to a slave-based system. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 abolished the Black Codes (although President Johnson vetoed the Act in 1865, Congress overrode him in 1866).
11. **Veto** (*verb*) to vote to not approve something
12. **Initiative** (*noun*) a plan or program intended to solve a problem

him each time.¹³ It was the Radical Republicans who impeached¹⁴ President Johnson in 1868.¹⁵ The Senate, by a single vote, failed to convict him,¹⁶ but his power to create radical reform was reduced.

The End of Reconstruction

Many Southern whites could not accept the idea that former slaves could not only vote, but also hold office. Their anger created the white supremacist¹⁷ Ku Klux Klan.¹⁸ The Klan targeted Republican leaders and blacks trying to exercise their new rights. The Klan would beat, lynch,¹⁹ or massacre their enemies. Targets of the attacks looked to the federal government for protection, with few results. Entire armed militias²⁰ of citizens formed in the South dedicated to fighting Republican intervention²¹ and suppressing²² black voters.

When Ulysses S. Grant became president in 1868, he failed as well to oversee lasting reform. Grant was a revered and decorated Union general during the Civil War, yet turned out to be less effective as a politician. From 1869 to 1876, the Republican President Grant faced multiple scandals and corruption that allowed Democrats to gain seats and power in Congress.

In the 1876 election, Democratic nominee Samuel J. Tilden won the popular vote²³ over Republican nominee Rutherford B. Hayes. However, Tilden was one vote short of the majority needed to win the Electoral College,²⁴ and 20 electoral votes were disputed. A special electoral

13. Congress can override a presidential veto if two thirds of both Houses vote to approve the law.
14. **Impeach (verb)** to charge with crime done while in office
15. Eight of the 11 articles of impeachment were focused on Johnson trying to dismiss Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, who was chosen by Lincoln and often supported Congress over Johnson, from office. In 1867, Congress enacted the Tenure of Office Act to protect Stanton and other Senate-approved officials from removal and in 1868 Johnson dismissed him from office specifically to challenge the new act.
16. The House of Representatives impeaches a president by charging him with crimes. The Senate votes whether to convict the president of those crimes or not.
17. White Supremacy is the racist belief that whites are superior to all other races and deserve more power as a result.
18. The Klu Klux Klan is a hate group that supports white power and acts through terrorism against those it opposes.
19. **Lynch (verb)** to kill illegally as punishment for a supposed offence by hanging without trial
20. **Militia (noun)** a body of citizen soldiers
21. **Intervention (noun)** involvement in the affairs of others
22. **Suppress (verb)** to prohibit or restrain
23. The popular vote is the final tally of how every citizen votes in an election.
24. The Electoral College is a small body of people who elect the president and vice president.

commission, or official group, established in 1877 decided in favor of Hayes, but Democrats resisted the decision. Finally, through informal meetings, Democrats and Republicans agreed to the Compromise of 1877. The compromise stated that if Hayes were elected, he would withdraw federal troops from the South, effectively ending Reconstruction. Democrats gave the election to Hayes, knowing that the end of Reconstruction governments would allow them to return to power in the South.

- [10] In 1877, Union Troops withdrew from the South. Without their support, Reconstruction state governments fell, Democrats retook positions in local governments, and southern whites renewed their efforts to strip African-Americans of their rights.²⁵ It would take another century before the Civil Rights Movement made meaningful racial change in the South.

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They usually pledge to vote in support of the popular vote of the people they represent. However, the complex process by which the Electoral College votes can result in elections that do not support the overall popular vote.

25. After Reconstruction, the South worked to block much of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendment. The South also created Jim Crow laws meant to keep blacks inferior to whites.