

## RECONSTRUCTION, 1863–1877

*Though slavery was abolished, the wrongs of my people were not ended. Though they were not slaves, they were not yet quite free. No man can be truly free whose liberty is dependent upon the thought, feeling, and action of others, and who has no means in his own hands for guarding, protecting, defending, and maintaining his liberty.*

Frederick Douglass, 1882

The silencing of the cannons of war left the victorious United States with immense challenges. How would the South rebuild its shattered society and economy after the damage inflicted by four years of war? What would be the place in that society of 4 million freed African Americans? To what extent, if any, was the federal government responsible for helping ex-slaves adjust to freedom? Should the former states of the Confederacy be treated as states that had never really left the Union (Lincoln's position) or as conquered territory subject to continued military occupation? Under what conditions would the Confederate states be fully accepted as coequal partners in the restored Union? Finally, who had the authority to decide these questions of Reconstruction: the president or the Congress?

The conflicts that existed before and during the Civil War—between regions, political parties, and economic interests—continued after the war. Republicans in the North wanted to continue the economic progress begun during the war. The Southern aristocracy still desired a cheap labor force to work its plantations. The freedmen and women hoped to achieve independence and equal rights. However, traditional beliefs limited the actions of the federal government. Constitutional concepts of limited government and states' rights discouraged national leaders from taking bold action. Little economic help was given to either whites or blacks in the South, because most Americans believed that free people in a free society had both an opportunity and a responsibility to provide for themselves. The physical rebuilding of the South was largely left up to the states and individuals, while the federal government concentrated on political issues.

## Reconstruction Plans of Lincoln and Johnson

Throughout his presidency, Abraham Lincoln held firmly to the belief that the Southern states could not constitutionally leave the Union and therefore never did leave. He viewed the Confederates as only a disloyal minority. After Lincoln's assassination, Andrew Johnson attempted to carry out Lincoln's plan for the political Reconstruction of the 11 former states of the Confederacy.

### *Lincoln's Policies*

Because Lincoln thought the Southern states had never left the Union, he hoped they could be reestablished by meeting a minimum test of political loyalty.

**Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction (1863)** As early as December 1863, Lincoln set up an apparently simple process for political reconstruction—that is, for reconstructing the state governments in the South so that Unionists were in charge rather than secessionists. The president's Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction provided for the following:

- Full presidential pardons would be granted to most Confederates who (1) took an oath of allegiance to the Union and the U.S. Constitution, and (2) accepted the emancipation of slaves.
- A state government could be reestablished and accepted as legitimate by the U.S. president as soon as at least 10 percent of the voters in that state took the loyalty oath.

In practice, Lincoln's proclamation meant that each Southern state would be required to rewrite its state constitution to eliminate the existence of slavery. Lincoln's seemingly lenient policy was designed both to shorten the war and to give added weight to his Emancipation Proclamation. (When Lincoln made this proposal in late 1863, he feared that if the Democrats won the 1864 election, they would overturn the proclamation.)

**Wade-Davis Bill (1864)** Many Republicans in Congress objected to Lincoln's 10 percent plan, arguing that it would allow a supposedly reconstructed state government to fall under the domination of disloyal secessionists. In 1864, Congress passed the Wade-Davis Bill, which proposed far more demanding and stringent terms for Reconstruction. The bill required 50 percent of the voters of a state to take a loyalty oath and permitted only non-Confederates to vote for a new state constitution. Lincoln refused to sign the bill, pocket-vetoing it after Congress adjourned. How serious was the conflict between President Lincoln and the Republican Congress over Reconstruction policy? Historians still debate this question. In any case, Congress was no doubt ready to reassert its powers in 1865, as Congresses traditionally do after a war.

**Freedmen's Bureau** In March 1865, Congress created an important new agency: the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, known simply as the Freedmen's Bureau. The bureau acted as an early welfare agency, providing food, shelter, and medical aid for those made destitute by

the war—both blacks (chiefly freed slaves) and homeless whites. At first, the Freedmen’s Bureau had authority to resettle freed blacks on confiscated farm-lands in the South. Its efforts at resettlement, however, were later frustrated when President Johnson pardoned Confederate owners of the confiscated lands, and courts then restored most of the lands to their original owners.

The bureau’s greatest success was in education. Under the able leadership of General Oliver O. Howard, it established nearly 3,000 schools for freed blacks, including several colleges. Before federal funding was stopped in 1870, the bureau’s schools taught an estimated 200,000 African Americans how to read.

**Lincoln’s Last Speech** In his last public address (April 11, 1865), Lincoln encouraged Northerners to accept Louisiana as a reconstructed state. (Louisiana had already drawn up a new constitution that abolished slavery in the state and provided for African Americans’ education.) The president also addressed the question—highly controversial at the time—of whether freedmen should be granted the right to vote. Lincoln said: “I myself prefer that it were *now* conferred on the very intelligent, and on those who serve our cause as soldiers.” Three days later, Lincoln’s evolving plans for Reconstruction were ended with his assassination. His last speech suggested that, had he lived, he probably would have moved closer to the position taken by the progressive, or Radical, Republicans. In any event, hope for lasting reform was dealt a devastating blow by the sudden removal of Lincoln’s skillful leadership.

### ***Johnson and Reconstruction***

Andrew Johnson’s origins were as humble as Lincoln’s. A self-taught tailor, he rose in Tennessee politics by championing the interests of poor whites in their economic conflict with rich planters. Johnson was the only senator from a Confederate state who remained loyal to the Union. After Tennessee was occupied by Union troops, he was appointed that state’s war governor. Johnson was a Southern Democrat, but Republicans picked him to be Lincoln’s running mate in 1864 in order to encourage pro-Union Democrats to vote for the Union (Republican) party. In one of the accidents of history, Johnson became the wrong man for the job. As a white supremacist, the new president was bound to clash with Republicans in Congress who believed that the war was fought not just to preserve the Union but also to liberate blacks from slavery.

**Johnson’s Reconstruction Policy** At first, many Republicans in Congress welcomed Johnson’s presidency because of his animosity for the Southern aristocrats who had led the Confederacy. In May 1865, Johnson issued his own Reconstruction proclamation that was very similar to Lincoln’s 10 percent plan. In addition to Lincoln’s terms, it provided for the disfranchisement (loss of the right to vote and hold office) of (1) all former leaders and officeholders of the Confederacy and (2) Confederates with more than \$20,000 in taxable property. However, the president retained the power to grant individual pardons to “disloyal” Southerners. This was an escape clause for the wealthy planters, and Johnson made frequent use of it. As a result of the president’s pardons, many former Confederate leaders were back in office by the fall of 1865.

**Southern Governments of 1865** Just eight months after Johnson took office, all 11 of the ex-Confederate states qualified under the president’s Reconstruction plan to become functioning parts of the Union. The Southern states drew up constitutions that repudiated secession, negated the debts of the Confederate government, and ratified the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery. On the other hand, none of the new constitutions extended voting rights to blacks. Furthermore, to the dismay of Republicans, former leaders of the Confederacy won seats in Congress. For example, Alexander Stephens, the former Confederate vice president, was elected U.S. senator from Georgia.

**Black Codes** The Republicans became further disillusioned with Johnson as Southern state legislatures adopted Black Codes that restricted the rights and movements of the former slaves. The codes (1) prohibited blacks from either renting land or borrowing money to buy land; (2) placed freedmen into a form of semibondage by forcing them, as “vagrants” and “apprentices,” to sign work contracts; and (3) prohibited blacks from testifying against whites in court. The contract-labor system, in which blacks worked cotton fields under white supervision for deferred wages, seemed little different from slavery.

Appalled by reports of developments in the South, Republicans began to ask, “Who won the war?” In early 1866, unhappiness with Johnson developed into an open rift when the Northern Republicans in Congress challenged the results of elections in the South. They refused to seat Alexander Stephens and other duly elected representatives and senators from ex-Confederate states.

**Johnson’s Vetoes** Johnson alienated even moderate Republicans in early 1866 when he vetoed a bill increasing the services and protection offered by the Freedmen’s Bureau and a civil rights bill that nullified the Black Codes and guaranteed full citizenship and equal rights to African Americans. The vetoes marked the end of the first round of Reconstruction. During this round, Presidents Lincoln and Johnson had restored the 11 ex-Confederate states to their former position in the Union, ex-Confederates had returned to high offices, and Southern states began passing Black Codes.

Presidential Vetoes, 1853 to 1880	
President	Vetoes
Franklin Pierce	9
James Buchanan	7
Abraham Lincoln	7
Andrew Johnson	29
Ulysses S. Grant	93
Rutherford B. Hayes	13

**Source:** “Summary of Bills Vetoed, 1789–Present.” United States Senate, [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov)

## Congressional Reconstruction

By the spring of 1866, the angry response of many members of Congress to Johnson's policies led to the second round of Reconstruction. This one was dominated by Congress and featured policies that were harsher on Southern whites and more protective of freed African Americans.

### *Radical Republicans*

Republicans had long been divided between (1) moderates, who were chiefly concerned with economic gains for the white middle class, and (2) radicals, who championed civil rights for blacks. Although most Republicans were moderates, several became more radical in 1866 partly out of fear that a reunified Democratic party might again become dominant. After all, now that the federal census counted all people equally (no longer applying the old three-fifths rule for enslaved persons), the South would have more representatives in Congress than before the war and more strength in the electoral college in future presidential elections.

The leading Radical Republican in the Senate was Charles Sumner of Massachusetts (who returned to the Senate three years after his caning by Brooks). In the House, Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania hoped to revolutionize Southern society through an extended period of military rule in which African Americans would be free to exercise their civil rights, would be educated in schools operated by the federal government, and would receive lands confiscated from the planter class. Many Radical Republicans, such as Benjamin Wade of Ohio, endorsed several liberal causes: women's suffrage, rights for labor unions, and civil rights for Northern African Americans. Although their program was never fully implemented, the Radical Republicans struggled to extend equal rights to all Americans.

**Civil Rights Act of 1866** Among the first actions in congressional Reconstruction were votes to override, with some modifications, Johnson's vetoes of both the Freedmen's Bureau Act and the first Civil Rights Act. The Civil Rights Act pronounced all African Americans to be U.S. citizens (thereby repudiating the decision in the Dred Scott case) and also attempted to provide a legal shield against the operation of the Southern states' Black Codes. Republicans feared, however, that the law could be repealed if the Democrats ever won control of Congress. They therefore looked for a more permanent solution in the form of a constitutional amendment.

**Fourteenth Amendment** In June 1866, Congress passed and sent to the states an amendment that, when ratified in 1868, had both immediate and long-term significance for American society. The 14th Amendment

- declared that all persons born or naturalized in the United States were citizens
- obligated the states to respect the rights of U.S. citizens and provide them with "equal protection of the laws" and "due process of law" (clauses full of meaning for future generations)

For the first time, the Constitution required *states* as well as the federal government to uphold the rights of citizens. The amendment's key clauses about citizenship and rights produced mixed results in 19th-century courtrooms. However, in the 1950s and later, the Supreme Court would make “equal protection of the laws” and the “due process” clause the keystone of civil rights for minorities, women, children, disabled persons, and those accused of crimes.

Other parts of the 14th Amendment applied specifically to Congress' plan of Reconstruction. These clauses

- disqualified former Confederate political leaders from holding either state or federal offices
- repudiated the debts of the defeated governments of the Confederacy
- penalized a state if it kept any eligible person from voting by reducing that state's proportional representation in Congress and the electoral college

**Report of the Joint Committee** In June 1866, a joint committee of the House and the Senate issued a report recommending that the reorganized former states of the Confederacy were not entitled to representation in Congress. Therefore, those elected from the South as senators and representatives should not be permitted to take their seats. The report further asserted that Congress, not the president, had the authority to determine the conditions for allowing reconstructed states to rejoin the Union. By this report, Congress officially rejected the presidential plan of Reconstruction and promised to substitute its own plan, part of which was embodied in the 14th Amendment.

**The Election of 1866** Unable to work with Congress, Johnson took to the road in the fall of 1866 in his infamous “swing around the circle” to attack his opponents. His speeches appealed to the racial prejudices of whites by arguing that equal rights for blacks would result in an “Africanized” society. Republicans counterattacked by accusing Johnson of being a drunkard and a traitor. They appealed to anti-Southern prejudices by employing a campaign tactic known as “waving the bloody shirt”—inflaming the anger of Northern voters by reminding them of the hardships of war. Republican propaganda emphasized that Southerners were Democrats and, by a gross jump in logic, branded the entire Democratic party as a party of rebellion and treason.

Election results gave the Republicans an overwhelming victory. After 1866, Johnson's political adversaries—both moderate and Radical Republicans—had more than a two-thirds majority in both the House and the Senate.

**Reconstruction Acts of 1867** Over Johnson's vetoes, Congress passed three Reconstruction acts in early 1867, which took the drastic step of placing the South under military occupation. The acts divided the former Confederate states into five military districts, each under the control of the Union army. In addition, the Reconstruction acts increased the requirements for gaining readmission to the Union. To win such readmission, an ex-Confederate state had to ratify the 14th Amendment and place guarantees in its constitution for granting the franchise (right to vote) to all adult males, regardless of race.

## ***Impeachment of Andrew Johnson***

Also in 1867, over Johnson's veto, Congress passed the Tenure of Office Act. This law, which may have been an unconstitutional violation of executive authority, prohibited the president from removing a federal official or military commander without the approval of the Senate. The purpose of the law was strictly political. Congress wanted to protect the Radical Republicans in Johnson's cabinet, such as Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, who was in charge of the military governments in the South.

Believing the new law to be unconstitutional, Johnson challenged it by dismissing Stanton on his own authority. The House responded by impeaching Johnson, charging him with 11 "high crimes and misdemeanors." Johnson thus became the first president to be impeached. (Bill Clinton was impeached in 1998.) In 1868, after a three-month trial in the Senate, Johnson's political enemies fell one vote short of the necessary two-thirds vote required to remove a president from office. Seven moderate Republicans joined the Democrats in voting against conviction because they thought it was a bad precedent to remove a president for political reasons.

## ***Reforms After Grant's Election***

The impeachment and trial of Andrew Johnson occurred in 1868, a presidential election year. At their convention, the Democrats nominated another candidate, Horatio Seymour, so that Johnson's presidency would have ended soon in any case, with or without impeachment by the Republicans.

**The Election of 1868** At their convention, the Republicans turned to a war hero, giving their presidential nomination to General Ulysses S. Grant, even though Grant had no political experience. Despite Grant's popularity in the North, he managed to win only 300,000 more popular votes than his Democratic opponent. The votes of 500,000 blacks gave the Republican ticket its margin of victory. Even the most moderate Republicans began to realize that the voting rights of the freedmen needed federal protection if their party hoped to keep control of the White House in future elections.

**Fifteenth Amendment** Republican majorities in Congress acted quickly in 1869 to secure the vote for African Americans. Adding one more Reconstruction amendment to those already adopted (the 13th Amendment in 1865 and the 14th Amendment in 1868), Congress passed the 15th Amendment, which prohibited any state from denying or abridging a citizen's right to vote "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." It was ratified in 1870.

**Civil Rights Act of 1875** The last civil rights reform enacted by Congress in Reconstruction was the Civil Rights Act of 1875. This law guaranteed equal accommodations in public places (hotels, railroads, and theaters) and prohibited courts from excluding African Americans from juries. However, the law was poorly enforced because moderate and conservative Republicans felt frustrated trying to reform an unwilling South—and feared losing white votes in the North. By 1877, Congress would abandon Reconstruction completely.

## Reconstruction in the South

During the second round of Reconstruction, dictated by Congress, the Republican party in the South dominated the governments of the ex-Confederate states. Beginning in 1867, each Republican-controlled government was under the military protection of the U.S. Army until such time as Congress was satisfied that a state had met its Reconstruction requirements. Then the troops were withdrawn. The period of Republican rule in a Southern state lasted from as little as one year (Tennessee) to as much as nine years (Florida), depending on how long it took conservative Democrats to regain control.

### ***Composition of the Reconstruction Governments***

In every Radical, or Republican, state government in the South except one, whites were in the majority in both houses of the legislature. The exception was South Carolina, where the freedmen controlled the lower house in 1873. Republican legislators included native-born white Southerners, freedmen, and recently arrived Northerners.

**“Scalawags” and “Carpetbaggers”** Democratic opponents gave nicknames to their hated Republican rivals. They called Southern Republicans “scalawags” and Northern newcomers “carpetbaggers.” Southern whites who supported the Republican governments were usually former Whigs who were interested in economic development for their state and peace between the sections. Northerners went South after the war for various reasons. Some were investors interested in setting up new businesses, while others were ministers and teachers with humanitarian goals. Some went simply to plunder.

**African American Legislators** Most of the African Americans who held elective office in the reconstructed state governments were educated property holders who took moderate positions on most issues. During the Reconstruction era, Republicans in the South sent two African Americans (Blanche K. Bruce and Hiram Revels) to the Senate and more than a dozen African Americans to the House of Representatives. Revels was elected in 1870 to take the Senate seat from Mississippi once held by Jefferson Davis. Seeing African Americans and former slaves in positions of power caused bitter resentment among disfranchised ex-Confederates.

### ***Evaluating the Republican Record***

Much controversy still surrounds the legislative record of the Republicans during their brief control of Southern state politics. Did they abuse their power for selfish ends (plunder and corruption), or did they govern responsibly in the public interest? They did some of each.

**Accomplishments** On the positive side, Republican legislators liberalized state constitutions in the South by providing for universal male suffrage, property rights for women, debt relief, and modern penal codes. They also promoted the building of roads, bridges, railroads, and other internal improvements. They established such needed state institutions as hospitals, asylums, and homes for the disabled. The reformers established state-supported public



school systems in the South, which benefited whites and African Americans alike. They paid for these improvements by overhauling the tax system and selling bonds.

**Failures** Long after Reconstruction ended, many Southerners and some Northern historians continued to depict Republican rule as utterly wasteful and corrupt. Some instances of graft and wasteful spending did occur, as Republican politicians took advantage of their power to take kickbacks and bribes from contractors who did business with the state. However, corruption occurred throughout the country, Northern states and cities as well. No geographic section, political party, or ethnic group was immune to the general decline in ethics in government that marked the postwar era.

### ***African Americans Adjusting to Freedom***

Undoubtedly, the Southerners who had the greatest adjustment to make during the Reconstruction era were the freedmen and freedwomen. Having been so recently emancipated from slavery, they were faced with the challenges of securing their economic survival as well as their political rights as citizens.

**Building Black Communities** Freedom meant many things to Southern blacks: reuniting families, learning to read and write, migrating to cities where “freedom was free-er.” Most of all, ex-slaves viewed emancipation as an opportunity for achieving independence from white control. This drive for autonomy was most evident in the founding of hundreds of independent African American churches after the war. By the hundreds of thousands, African Americans left white-dominated churches for the Negro Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal churches. During Reconstruction, black ministers emerged as leaders in the African American community.

Percentage of School Age Children Enrolled, 1850 to 1880		
Year	White	African American
1850	56	2
1860	60	2
1870	54	10
1880	62	34

**Source:** U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*

The desire for education induced large numbers of African Americans to use their scarce resources to establish independent schools for their children and to pay educated African Americans to become their teachers. Black colleges such as Howard, Atlanta, Fisk, and Morehouse were established during Reconstruction to prepare African American black ministers and teachers.

Another aspect of blacks' search for independence and self-sufficiency was the decision of many freedmen to migrate away from the South and establish new black communities in frontier states such as Kansas.

**Sharecropping** The South's agricultural economy was in turmoil after the war, in part because landowners had lost their compulsory labor force. At first, white landowners attempted to force freed African Americans into signing contracts to work the fields. These contracts set terms that nearly bound the signer to permanent and unrestricted labor—in effect, slavery by a different name. African Americans' insistence on autonomy, however, combined with changes in the postwar economy, led white landowners to adopt a system based on tenancy and sharecropping. Under sharecropping, the landlord provided the seed and other needed farm supplies in return for a share (usually half) of the harvest. While this system gave poor people of the rural South (whites as well as African Americans) the opportunity to work a piece of land for themselves, sharecroppers usually remained either dependent on the landowners or in debt to local merchants. By 1880, no more than 5 percent of Southern African Americans had become independent landowners. Sharecropping had evolved into a new form of servitude.

## The North During Reconstruction

The North's economy in the postwar years continued to be driven by the Industrial Revolution and the pro-business policies of the Republicans. As the South struggled to reorganize its labor system, Northerners focused on railroads, steel, labor problems, and money.

### *Greed and Corruption*

During the Grant administration, as the material interests of the age took center stage, the idealism of Lincoln's generation and the Radical Republicans' crusade for civil rights were pushed aside.

**Rise of the Spoilsmen** In the early 1870s, leadership of the Republican party passed from reformers (Thaddeus Stevens, Charles Sumner, and Benjamin Wade) to political manipulators such as Senators Roscoe Conkling of New York and James Blaine of Maine. These politicians were masters of the game of patronage—giving jobs and government favors (spoils) to their supporters.

**Corruption in Business and Government** The postwar years were notorious for the corrupt schemes devised by business bosses and political bosses to enrich themselves at the public's expense. For example, in 1869, Wall Street financiers Jay Gould and James Fisk obtained the help of President Grant's brother-in-law in a scheme to corner the gold market. The Treasury Department broke the scheme, but not before Gould had made a huge profit.

In the *Crédit Mobilier* affair, insiders gave stock to influential members of Congress to avoid investigation of the profits they were making—as high as 348 percent—from government subsidies for building the transcontinental railroad. In the case of the Whiskey Ring, federal revenue agents conspired with the liquor industry to defraud the government of millions in

taxes. While Grant himself did not personally profit from the corruption, his loyalty to dishonest men around him badly tarnished his presidency.

Local politics in the Grant years were equally scandalous. In New York City, William Tweed, the boss of the local Democratic party, master-minded dozens of schemes for helping himself and cronies to large chunks of graft. The Tweed Ring virtually stole about \$200 million from New York's taxpayers before *The New York Times* and the cartoonist Thomas Nast exposed "Boss" Tweed and brought about his arrest and imprisonment in 1871.

### CONGRESSIONAL RECONSTRUCTION 1865–1877



### ***The Election of 1872***

The scandals of the Grant administration drove reform-minded Republicans to break with the party in 1872 and select Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, as their presidential candidate. The Liberal Republicans advocated civil service reform, an end to railroad subsidies, withdrawal of troops from the South, reduced tariffs, and free trade. Surprisingly, the Democrats joined them and also nominated Greeley.

The regular Republicans countered by merely "waving the bloody shirt" again—and it worked. Grant was reelected in a landslide. Just days before the counting of the electoral vote, the luckless Horace Greeley died.

## ***The Panic of 1873***

Grant's second term began with an economic disaster that rendered thousands of Northern laborers both jobless and homeless. Overspeculation by financiers and overbuilding by industry and railroads led to widespread business failures and depression. Debtors on the farms and in the cities, suffering from the tight money policies, demanded the creation of greenback paper money that was not supported by gold. In 1874, Grant finally decided to side with the hard-money bankers and creditors who wanted a money supply backed by gold and vetoed a bill calling for the release of additional greenbacks.

## **The End of Reconstruction**

During Grant's second term, it was apparent that Reconstruction had entered another phase, which proved to be its third and final round. With Radical Republicanism on the wane, Southern conservatives—known as redeemers—took control of one state government after another. This process was completed by 1877. The redeemers had different social and economic backgrounds, but they agreed on their political program: states' rights, reduced taxes, reduced spending on social programs, and white supremacy.

### ***White Supremacy and the Ku Klux Klan***

During the period that Republicans controlled state governments in the South, groups of Southern whites organized secret societies to intimidate blacks and white reformers. The most prominent of these was the Ku Klux Klan, founded in 1867 by an ex-Confederate general, Nathaniel Bedford Forrest. The “invisible empire” burned black-owned buildings and flogged and murdered freedmen to keep them from exercising their voting rights. To give federal authorities the power to stop Ku Klux Klan violence and to protect the civil rights of citizens in the South, Congress passed the Force Acts of 1870 and 1871.

### ***The Amnesty Act of 1872***

Seven years after Lee's surrender at Appomattox, many Northerners were ready to put hatred of the Confederacy behind them. As a sign of the changing times, Congress in 1872 passed a general amnesty act that removed the last of the restrictions on ex-Confederates, except for the top leaders. The chief political consequence of the Amnesty Act was that it allowed Southern conservatives to vote for Democrats to retake control of state governments.

### ***The Election of 1876***

By 1876, federal troops had been withdrawn from all but three Southern states—South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana. The Democrats had returned to power in all ex-Confederate states except these. This fact was to play a critical role in the presidential election.

At their convention, the Republicans looked for someone untouched by the corruption of the Grant administration and nominated the governor of Ohio, Rutherford B. Hayes. The Democrats chose New York's reform governor,

Samuel J. Tilden, who had made a name for himself fighting the corrupt Tweed Ring. In the popular votes, the Democrats had won a clear majority and expected to put Tilden in the White House. However, in three Southern states, the returns were contested. To win the election, Tilden needed only one *electoral* vote from the contested returns of South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana.

A special electoral commission was created to determine who was entitled to the disputed votes of the three states. In a straight party vote of 8–7, the commission gave all the electoral votes to Hayes, the Republican. Outraged Democrats threatened to filibuster the results and send the election to the House of Representatives, which they controlled.

### ***The Compromise of 1877***

Leaders of the two parties worked out an informal deal. The Democrats would allow Hayes to become president. In return, he would (1) immediately end federal support for the Republicans in the South, and (2) support the building of a Southern transcontinental railroad. Shortly after his inauguration, President Hayes fulfilled his part in the Compromise of 1877 and promptly withdrew the last of the federal troops protecting African Americans and other Republicans.

The end of a federal military presence in the South was not the only thing that brought Reconstruction to an end. In a series of decisions in the 1880s and 1890s, the Supreme Court struck down one Reconstruction law after another that protected blacks from discrimination. Supporters of the New South promised a future of industrial development, but most Southern African Americans and whites in the decades after the Civil War remained poor farmers, and they fell further behind the rest of the nation.

#### **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: DID RECONSTRUCTION FAIL?**

Reconstruction may be the most controversial period in U.S. history. Generations of both northern and southern historians, starting with William Dunning in the early 1900s, portrayed Reconstruction as a failure. According to this traditional interpretation, illiterate African Americans and corrupt Northern carpetbaggers abused the rights of Southern whites and stole vast sums from the state governments. The Radical Republicans brought on these conditions when, in an effort to punish the South, they gave the former slaves too many rights too soon. The Dunning school of historical thought provided a rationale for the racial segregation in the early 20th century. It was given popular expression in a 1915 movie, D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, which pictured the Ku Klux Klanmen as the heroes coming to the rescue of Southern whites oppressed by vindictive Northern radicals and African Americans.

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African American historians such as W. E. B. Du Bois and John Hope Franklin countered this interpretation by highlighting the positive achievements of the Reconstruction governments and black leaders. Their view was supported and expanded upon in 1965 with the publication of Kenneth Stampp’s *Era of Reconstruction*. Other historians of the 1960s and 1970s followed Stampp’s lead in stressing the significance of the civil rights legislation passed by the Radical Republicans and pointing out the humanitarian work performed by Northern reformers.

By the 1980s, some historians criticized Congress’ approach to Reconstruction, not for being too radical, but for not being radical enough. They argued that the Radical Republicans neglected to provide land for African Americans, which would have enabled them to achieve economic independence. Furthermore, these historians argued, the military occupation of the South should have lasted longer to protect the freedmen’s political rights. Eric Foner’s comprehensive *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution* (1988) acknowledged the limitations of Reconstruction in achieving lasting reforms but also pointed out that, in the post-Civil War years, the freedmen established many of the institutions in the African American community upon which later progress depended. According to Foner, it took a “second Reconstruction” after World War II (the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s) to achieve the promise of the “first Reconstruction.”

### KEY NAMES, EVENTS, AND TERMS

<p><b>Equality (NAT, POL)</b> Civil Rights Act of 1866 14th Amendment equal protection of the laws due process of law 15th Amendment Civil Rights Act of 1875</p> <p><b>Corruption (WXT, POL)</b> Jay Gould Crédit Mobilier William (Boss) Tweed</p> <p><b>Politics (POL)</b> spoilsmen patronage Thomas Nast Liberal Republicans Horace Greeley</p>	<p>Panic of 1873 greenbacks redeemers Rutherford B. Hayes Samuel J. Tilden Compromise of 1877</p> <p><b>Reconstruction (POL, CUL)</b> presidential Reconstruction Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction (1863) Wade-Davis Bill (1864) Andrew Johnson Freedmen’s Bureau Black Codes Congressional Reconstruction</p>	<p>Radical Republicans Charles Sumner Thaddeus Stephens Benjamin Wade Reconstruction Acts (1867) Tenure of Office Act (1867) Edwin Stanton impeachment scalawags carpetbaggers Blanche K. Bruce Hiram Revels sharecropping Ku Klux Klan Force Acts (1870, 1871) Amnesty Act of 1872</p>
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