

**THURSDAY: COMMONLIT: RECONSTRUCTION****Reconstruction**By UShistory.org  
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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.*

After the Civil War ended in 1865, The United States needed to rebuild, particularly in the devastated<sup>1</sup> 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 traitors<sup>2</sup> by many in the North?

**Founding the Reconstruction Era**

The military conflict was over. But in many ways, Reconstruction was still a war. Many radical Northerners<sup>3</sup> wanted to punish the South. Many Southerners were desperate to preserve<sup>4</sup> their way of life. The way of life for African-Americans, though, was bound to change. Congress approved three amendments<sup>5</sup> to the Constitution that changed African-American rights. The Thirteenth Amendment formally abolished<sup>6</sup> 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<sup>7</sup>, his successor<sup>8</sup> 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 pardons<sup>9</sup> 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 Codes<sup>10</sup> 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.

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 vetoed<sup>11</sup> all of the Radical Republican initiatives,<sup>12</sup> but Congress overrode him each time<sup>13</sup>. It was the Radical Republicans who impeached<sup>14</sup> President Johnson in 1868 <sup>15</sup>. The Senate, by a single vote, failed to convict him<sup>16</sup>, 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 supremacist<sup>17</sup> Ku Klux Klan<sup>18</sup>. The Klan targeted Republican leaders and blacks trying to exercise their new rights. The Klan would beat, lynch<sup>19</sup>, or massacre their enemies. Targets of the attacks looked to the federal government for protection, with few results. Entire armed militias<sup>20</sup> of citizens formed in the South dedicated to fighting Republican intervention<sup>21</sup> and suppressing<sup>22</sup> 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 vote<sup>23</sup> over Republican nominee Rutherford B. Hayes. However, Tilden was one vote short of the majority needed to win the Electoral College<sup>24</sup>, and 20 electoral votes were disputed. A special electoral 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.

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<sup>25</sup>. It would take another century before the Civil Rights Movement made meaningful racial change in the South.

**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."  
**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 **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. 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.

1. What are the two central ideas of the text?

- A. Northerners and Southerners wanted to put the war quickly behind them and return to peace.
- B. President Johnson wanted to punish the South for its rebellion but Congress limited his power to do so.
- C. Many Northerners wanted to punish the Southerners for their treason and defiance.
- D. Reconstruction ended in a stalemate, with neither the Republicans nor Democrats wielding significant power in the South.
- E. President Johnson was impeached for continuously working against Congress by not only vetoing their approved laws, but defying new approved, legal legislation.
- F. It was fortunate that that President Johnson was not removed from office because it would have set a dangerous precedent for American politics.

2. What does each of the following guarantee?

13 <sup>th</sup> Amendment	14 <sup>th</sup> Amendment	15 <sup>th</sup> Amendment

3. Why might the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments be called the "Reconstruction Amendments"?

4. Why do you think Reconstruction failed to make lasting change towards racial equality in the South? How can we continue to fight against racial inequality today and towards a more equal society for all?