

Reconstruction Overview

A Confused Beginning

The real problem with Reconstruction was that everyone had different ideas how to do it. It pitted Congress against the President against the people. The difficulty began when Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. See, Lincoln had a plan for Reconstruction. He would even started it when the war was still raging. Then he died...and everything went downhill.

Lincoln's whole idea was leniency. To Lincoln, the absolute most important thing in the world was the union. Revenge didn't matter; punishment didn't matter. He wanted to make sure the South was gently brought back under the wing of the union and that, together, North and South would forge a future.

His Ten Percent Plan perfectly embodies this. All he needed was a measly ten percent of voters to swear an oath of allegiance to the Union and accept the 13th Amendment, and the South would be forgiven. The idea was that this ten percent was enough to create a pro-Union power group in the South, which would take the reins of government.

Congress was a lot more radical—and angrier. They thought the 10 percent plan was nonsense—what was to prevent the South from rising again? They tried to pass the Wade-Davis Bill to institute a military government in the South and require 50% to swear the oath. Lincoln handily vetoed

this.

Then, however, Lincoln died. Andrew Johnson became president, with his own ideas for Reconstruction. The thing to remember about Johnson is that he was a Southerner himself—but a Southerner with a lot of chips on his shoulder. He had never been a part of the southern slave-owning aristocracy, and he jealously detested them. For Johnson, Reconstruction became personal payback time...

Presidential Reconstruction

Johnson's Reconstruction Plan instituted military governments in the South. If a state wanted to be re-admitted to the union, all citizens had to swear a loyalty oath, and write constitutions ending slavery and promising not to secede again.

Here's the problem: Johnson didn't plan this very well. He didn't allow many of the southern elite (including Confederate officers) to swear the oath. He wanted personal revenge, so he made them come to him and do it face-to-face. This was humiliating, yes, but they did it—and he pardoned almost all of them.

This was a problem. Because now that they were pardoned, they went right back to the South and took the reins of power again. They definitely weren't going to allow the freed slaves any power in the new South at all. In response, Southerners passed the black codes that

kept all the restrictive laws that had been imposed on slaves, and put them on the freed-people.

Then, Congress convened. Some of them, the more conservative Republicans, agreed with Johnson's policies. On the other side was a large and powerful group, the Radical Republicans, who took one look and shrieked in anger and opposition. This would not do: the South had to be forced to give blacks their deserved rights, and it also had to be more drastically punished.

Radical Reconstruction

Johnson hated the Radical Republicans. He declared that his policies had finished Reconstruction, The End, and that they couldn't do anything else. He tried to veto everything they pushed through, but Congress proved a hardy lot.

For one thing, they had some hardcore radicals. Some even thought that land from the southern elite and Confederate officers should be confiscated and redistributed to freed slaves. This was called the "40 acres and a mule" policy—the idea being that this was enough to start a small family on a farm.

However, this was too much for many other Republicans. What they did do was pass the 14th Amendment, which granted slaves full citizenship and punished the Confederacy a little by preventing Confederate leaders from holding political

office.

Then, still in the mood for revenge, they passed the Military Reconstruction Act of 1867. The South was suddenly under martial law. Now it could be forced to do all the things it had balked at: giving blacks political positions, and writing constitutions that met with their radical ideas for new, racially integrated governments and societies.

Johnson, obviously, freaked out. He tried his hardest to block this, but Congress stymied him. Plus, they even tried to impeach him. It didn't work, but his last few months in office were powerless and pointless. Ulysses Grant then came to power, and the Radical Republicans forged ahead.

Successes and Failures

It's not entirely fair to say that Reconstruction was a total failure, since it did ultimately accomplish several great things.

First, it did result in blacks holding positions as policemen, postmasters, even political positions in southern governments. Secondly, the Freedman's Bureau did succeed in creating tons of new schools for blacks, and they flocked there in numbers that shocked and impressed everyone. Finally, the South did start on the slow road to recovery, and its agrarian economy began creaking slowly in the direction of

industrialization.

However, it also failed for a variety of complex reasons. For one thing, it was obviously seriously corrupt. Many Southerners jumped at the opportunity to work for the Republicans and gain political power. These were called "scalawags" by Southerners who thought they were traitors, and sure enough they proved naughty. Many sold political favors and put their favorite cronies in power.

Even the presidency was decaying at the edges. Remember how Grant had failed at everything before he succeeded as general? We're sad to say that he failed as president, too. He was by all accounts a nice, non-corrupt kind of person himself—but he didn't seem to be the best judge of character.

He kept appointing his buddies to important positions, and his buddies weren't the most savory kind of politician. Two of the most famous scandals that wracked his presidency were the Credit Mobilier and Whiskey Ring scandals, in which corrupt companies and federal officials stole federal profits and tax money.

When you're trying to effect a reconstruction of a place, and your whole spiel is that it will be better off if its government, economy, and society are recreated in your image—it doesn't exactly help your cause when your own systems are exposed as totally corrupt. The northern government and Radical Reconstructionists lost a lot of

credibility.

Plus, not that much was actually changing in the South. The Freedman's Bureau was woefully under-staffed—it didn't have enough numbers or force to help or protect blacks. Southerners were still viciously racist. Many, like the Ku Klux Klan, lynched blacks and whites who worked to help them. Plus, power in the South mostly stayed with the same, traditional, racist elites.

People began to lose interest in Reconstruction: they felt they had bigger fish to fry. Industrialization was kicking off, and troubles were brewing between employers and laborers, as well as with Native Americans and all the new immigrants. Government shifted its attention to big business, which was where the money was.

Government became so cozy with the industrial and banking "Fat Cats" that it even started to use the 14th Amendment to protect them. Instead of interpreting it to mean protection of black people's rights as citizens, the Supreme Court began in the Slaughterhouse Cases to rule that corporations had the same rights as citizens, and should be protected by government.

It also didn't help that the economy was caught in vicious boom and bust cycles. Suddenly, it was fantastic, giant new companies were forming, money was pouring out of every corner. Then, just as suddenly, it dried up, companies crashed, and banks failed. The Panic of 1873, the biggest until the Great Depression, made many

Northerners decide that they didn't care enough about the South or the blacks. The government, they decided, needed to help them in the increasingly crazed environments of the industrial cities.

The election of 1876 provided the opportunity. Again, there was a dispute about the presidency because of a tied electoral vote. Also again (like with the election of 1824), the vote was tossed to the House of Representatives. "Listen," Republicans and Democrats said to each other there, "This has all gotten out of control. We're going to end this with a deal right now."

From this emerged the Compromise of 1877. Rutherford B. Hayes, a Republican, would be given the presidency if he promised to end military reconstruction. As soon as it was done, Democrats jumped into the void left by the departed Radical Republican reconstructionists, and undid almost all they had worked so hard to do.

Suddenly, blacks were gone from political positions and the police force. Suddenly, Jim Crow laws began to be passed, restricting blacks' rights to such an extent that they weren't even allowed in the same rooms as whites in some places. The old "slaveocracy" was back in power—this time with no slaves, but with racism still running strong.

Life for Blacks

Blacks had enjoyed a few new rights during the period of

Radical Reconstruction, but lost them again as soon as the North had abandoned them. What came about afterward was a system that looked a lot like slavery.

Most blacks were locked into a system called sharecropping. They had a piece of land that they essentially rented from a white. In return for the land, they would give the owner a portion of the crop yield.

Sounds fair, right? Except for the fact that many landowners had been former slave-owners, and were determined to find equally cheap labor. They would force sharecroppers to give them huge percentages of the crop yields, and then when they couldn't give them, the landowners would count it as a debt. Soon enough, blacks had amassed so much debt to the landowners that they were kept in a constant state of poverty, chained to the land.

"Integration" became an echo of a dream. The Jim Crow laws were so rigidly and widely effected that they were actually legalized by the Supreme Court. In the notorious Plessy v. Ferguson case of 1896, the court ruled that "separate but equal" facilities were, in fact, constitutional.

But, of course, the reality was only half true: trains, waiting rooms, restaurants and schools sure were separate—but they were far from equal. You can bet that it was the "colored" cars, rooms, and institutions that were dirty, badly equipped, poor, and

unfunded.

Black leadership in the late 19th century saw all this happening, and argued about what to do. Men like Booker T. Washington argued that the only way that blacks would ever be considered equal was if they worked for it. He didn't want to raise southern whites' hackles, so he told blacks to be happy with "industrial schools" where they could learn to be an excellent menial workforce. If they combined this with leading good, virtuous lives, they would succeed in proving to whites how great they were, and whites would want to raise them to equal status.

Other leaders, like W.E.B. Du Bois, thought that was the stupidest thing they had ever heard—and dangerous. Dubois thought that this kind of accommodationist strategy would result in whites thinking that blacks belonged in inferior positions. The real thing to do was to push for equal education, equal rights, and equal treatment—only by fighting for equality could blacks win it.

However, it didn't help that black leadership was rent in two. It didn't help that Southern, racist whites had regained political power after the failure of Reconstruction. Then it , didn't help that loonies like Ku Klux Klansmen were terrorizing and murdering blacks who started to even look like they were becoming successful and

equal.

Blacks lost out because, after Reconstruction, the focus of the country shifted away from them to new problems: namely, immigrants and workers in the North. The South lost out too, because attention shifted to the northern powerhouse and the rapidly growing West.

The "Gilded Age"—the period after the Civil War when industrialization kicked off, and the gap between rich and poor widened into a massive, yawning chasm—was the coming-of-age for the North and West.

Sample Questions

1. Abraham Lincoln's plan for Reconstruction included

- A) a pardon for any Confederate leader who swore loyalty and affirmed the 13th Amendment
- B) a pardon for the South as long as a small percentage of voters signed an oath
- C) the redistribution of all Confederate-owned lands to blacks and those loyal to the union
- D) "40 acres and a mule" for each freedman
- E) the institution of military government in the South

The correct answer is (B).

You would think Abe would want to twist the knife a little, right? After all, there had been 4 years of bloody war. No—he just had a "10 per cent plan" that would

pardon the entire South as long as a measly 10 per cent of voters signed a loyalty oath and affirmed the 13th Amendment. Sure, this didn't include Confederate leaders, but it was still mighty lenient. Radical Republicans in Congress chomped at the bit.

2. The situation for blacks during Radical Reconstruction

A) remained almost entirely the same, with sharecropping substituting slavery

B) changed for the better, with many elected or appointed to public office

C) was always precarious because of threats from the powerful and numerous Ku Klux Klan

D) was restricted due to the passage of Jim Crow laws

E) improved rapidly, frightening southern whites and governments with strong competition

The correct answer is (B).

During Radical Reconstruction, the blacks actually made some significant gains. It was "radical" for a reason—because blacks were suddenly in schools, in the police force, on juries, even in courtrooms and political offices. They couldn't yet be called "strong" competition, but they certainly were making many racist Southerners wring their hands. It was when the radical phase ended that sharecropping, Jim Crow laws, and the Ku Klux Klan erased all the progress they had made.