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Reconstruction 1865-1877

What's achieved by battlefield victory? Union is preserved. Federal government is now definitely more powerful than the states. Slaves are freed. South devastated by war.

What needs to happen?

How could South be reintegrated into the Union?

Would South be treated like conquered territory?

Would there be some punishment or need to develop readmittance process?

Role of 3.5 million freed slaves?

What's the role of Congress and the President?

Reconstruction is one of the more confusing eras of US history because of the complexity of the issues.

To make things a little clearer, I divide the political process of Reconstruction into 3 stages.

Presidential Reconstruction.

President Lincoln began to consider some of these pressing issues as the war ended. He had a very lenient plan for restoring Southern states. Lincoln would have required a loyalty oath from 10% of the state's population and that the state accept the 13th amendment to the Constitution (ending slavery). After that the state could send representatives back to Congress.

Only Lincoln could propose such a lenient plan after 4 years of bloody war. Arkansas, Louisiana and Tennessee complied quickly, but Congress refused to accept them. Even some in Lincoln's party wanted harsher treatment and hoped to require 50% of the population swear a loyalty oath. This group was concerned with the growth in presidential power during the war and wanted to return the president to his "proper" place. Others hoped to tie Reconstruction to greater civil rights for the freedmen.

Of course, Lincoln's assassination means that we will never know how Lincoln would have proceeded. Would he have become harsher in dealing with the South over time?

Lincoln's vice president, Andrew Johnson, was a Democrat and the only Southerner in the Senate to remain loyal to the Union. Johnson irritated Congressional Republicans because he was a Democrat, not really an abolitionist and was stubborn in wanting to maintain presidential power.

Johnson decided to follow Lincoln's lenient policy and also believed that since secession was impossible, the rebelling states had really never left the Union. He

allowed all Southerners who rebelled to take a loyalty oath and then they could select delegates to form a new state constitution. He did this during a congressional recess and by the time Congress reconvened, 7 Southern states were planning to return to Congress. Among the Senators was ex-Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens!

Now Lincoln's lenient program looked like a sell-out and the winners were bowing to the losers. Additionally, Northern Republicans feared that the new Southern Congressmen would undo what they had passed during the war.

When they looked at the new southern state constitution they realized that they all included "Black Codes" which defined the status of the freed slaves. These codes virtually returned ex-slaves to slavery by forcing them to stay in agriculture by requiring them to sign contracts to work plantations. They could not vote either.

Congressional Reconstruction

Congressional Republicans, mainly moderates, were willing to work with Johnson to restore the South. To this group civil rights was only a small part of the Republican agenda. Mostly, they wanted a southern Republican Party to contest elections against Democrats in the South.

One way to do this was through building a black power base in the South.

Freedmen's Bureau – This was created to assist freed slaves in a variety of ways, including locating separated family members, providing education, legitimizing marriages and providing basic necessities. It also adjudicated the labor contracts imposed by the Black Codes and frequently amended or voided them.

Moderates also advocated Civil Rights guarantees in the 1866 Civil Rights Act.

However, Johnson vetoed this act and another that strengthened the Freedmen's Bureau. Moderates couldn't understand his increased opposition to their goals, especially since neither had anything to do with his lenient policies. In response, they amended the Federal Constitution with the 14th Amendment (similar to the Civil Rights Act he vetoed).

Johnson and Southerners fought the 14th Amendment and the moderate Republicans were driven to align with Radicals who wanted very harsh treatment for ex-Confederates, equal rights for blacks and an end to Johnson's presidency.

Radical Reconstruction

Reconstruction Acts of 1867

Invalidates the state governments formed in the South under Johnson's lenient policy

Divides South into 5 military districts run by Army generals

New State conventions, often including blacks, create new state governments allowing African-American suffrage- many blacks elected to political offices also.

States must ratify 14th Amendment

Allows for re-admission when 1-4 complete.

This seemed very radical, but some even wanted to go further and confiscate plantation land to redistribute it to freed slaves.

Impeachment of Johnson – Johnson refused to sign the Reconstruction Acts. They are passed over his veto and as Commander and Chief of the Military he could have meddled with the military occupation of the South.

Thus, Radical Republicans decide to remove him. In March 1867 Congress passed two laws 1) Tenure of Office Act which required Congressional OK for the President to remove his cabinet officers and 2) Act which barred Johnson from issuing orders to the military except through Commanding General U.S. Grant.

Johnson plays into Radicals' hands by trying to remove Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. At that point Congress impeached him but the Senate failed to remove him from office by one vote. Most people were relieved and it mattered less over time as it became apparent that within a few months U.S. Grant, a Republican, would become president.

Grant, however, won by a wide electoral vote and a small popular vote. Republicans realized that they did need black southern votes and so passed the 15th Amendment, which barred states from denying suffrage because of race. Many Northern states also had to change laws to allow black voting due to the 15th Amendment.

Redemption –

After Grant's election and the passage of the 15th Amendment Radical Reconstruction was challenged in the South. Groups like the Ku Klux Klan drove black voters from the polls and generally used terror to intimidate ex-slaves into not pursuing equal rights.

Grant used the Army to suppress the Klan, but of the thousands of indictments for using terror only 65 convicted Klansmen were sentenced to jail.

Military rule, especially after a depression in the early 1870s, was not popular in the North or South and between 1868 and the mid-1870s, most southern states were "redeemed" when Southern White Democrats took control of Southern states.

Election of 1876 & Compromise of 1877

Republican Rutherford Hayes ran against Democrat Sam Tilden. Tilden won the popular vote and Hayes seemed to win more electoral votes, though three southern states (yes, Florida was one!) had conflicting returns.

Hayes agreed to remove occupation troops from the South in exchange for the electoral votes of the Southern states. Democrats agreed and Reconstruction officially ended in 1877.

Since then Hayes has been known as Rutherfraud Hayes!

Impact on Slaves –

Mobility is one thing that many ex-slaves cherished after being freed. Many went off to search for relatives, others moved to cities and some migrated west. Most though, stayed in the local areas where they had been born and had lived. Most though left the slave quarters and built new shacks at the fringes of the plantations they continued to work.

Institutions like churches and schools were very important. Aside from the forced separation of families and the physical abuse some suffered, the denial of education was the most distressing part of slavery.

Many black men sought political office, though the successful usually were those who were free blacks before the war.

Economically, the freed slaves would suffer for the next 40-50 years and beyond. Over time many blacks and many whites too became sharecroppers whose pay was not cash but was a share of the harvest. Unfortunately, cotton prices declined drastically after the Civil War (England, for example develop cotton growing in Egypt and India during the war). Thus, the income earned from the harvest fell and sharecroppers borrowed money went into debt to pay bills.

Consequences of Reconstruction – consider three goals

Reconstruct and reincorporate rebelling states.

Transition slaves to freedom

Provide equality.

It seems that only #1 and a part of #2 were achieved. A racial caste system similar to slavery developed in the South and lasted for the next century.

The US was now clearly a strong nation. But would the tradition of an energetic, innovative, individualistic society mixed with industrialism, immigration and government intervention in the economy propel the US into a world power? And with

what results?

Take the next course to find out!



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