

The president hoped
that granting pardon
and political
recognition



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Tension between the President and Congress over how to reconstruct the Union began during the war. Occupied mainly with achieving victory, Lincoln never set forth a final and comprehensive plan for bringing the rebellious states back into fold.

But he did take some initiatives that indicated he favored a lenient and conciliatory policy toward Southerners who would give up the struggle and repudiate slavery. In December 1863 he issued a Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction; it offered a full pardon to all Southerners with the exception of certain classes, who would take an oath of allegiance to the Union and acknowledge the legality of emancipation. Once 10 percent or more of the voting population of any occupied state had taken the oath, they were authorized to set up a loyal government.

Efforts to establish such regimes were quickly undertaken in states that were wholly or partially occupied by Union troops; by 1864 Louisiana and Arkansas had fully functioning Unionist governments. Lincoln's policy was meant to shorten the war.

The President hoped that granting pardon and political recognition to oath-taking minorities would weaken the southern cause by making it easy for disillusioned or lukewarm Confederates to switch sides. He also hoped to further his emancipation policy by insisting that the new governments abolished slavery.

The Reconstruction policy that Johnson initiated on May 29, 1865, created some uneasiness among the Radicals, but most other Republicans, moderate and conservative, were willing to give it a chance. Johnson placed North

Carolina and eventually other states under appointed provisional governors chosen from among prominent southern politicians who had opposed the secession movement and had rendered no conspicuous service to the Confederacy.

The governors were responsible for calling constitutional conventions and ensuring that only loyal whites were permitted to vote for delegates. Participation required taking the oath of allegiance that Lincoln had prescribed earlier. Once again Confederate leaders and former officeholders who had participated in the rebellion were excluded.

To regain their political and property rights, those in the exempted categories had to apply for individual presidential pardons. Johnson made one significant addition to the list of the excluded and that was all those possessing taxable property exceeding twenty thousand in value. This way he sought to prevent his longtime adversaries, the planter class, from participating in the reconstruction of southern state governments.

The failure of each bred chaos, violence, and instability. Unsettled conditions meant that there were many opportunities for corruption, crime and terrorism. Its successes depended on massive sustained support from the federal government. To the extent that this was forthcoming, progressive reform could be achieved. When it faltered, the forces of reaction and white supremacy were unleashed.

The Republican effort to make equal rights for blacks the law of the land culminated in the Fifteenth Amendment. Passed by Congress in 1869 and ratified by the states in 1870, the amendment prohibited any state from

denying a citizen the right to vote because of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

A more radical version, requiring universal manhood suffrage was rejected because it departed too sharply from traditional views of federal-state relations. States could still limit the suffrage by imposing literacy tests, property qualification or poll taxes allegedly applying to all racial groups; such devices would eventually be used to strip southern blacks of the right to vote and undermine Republican reconstruction.

As an agent I can see that in order to help the black people there has to be a new type of labor system to replace slavery. Black folk in my area strongly want to be small independent farmers rather than plantation laborers and have faith the government will help.

I am informing the local black families that the Freedmen's Bureau is under the control of hundreds of thousands of land that has been abandoned or confiscated and they are eligible for forty-acre grants for a period of three years, then they can buy as an option at low prices.

But now some are telling me that President Johnson has pardoned many of the owners of this land and has regained possession making the black families occupying them slaves again with something called a contract labor system. I feel I must comply because most ex-slaves have no alternative except to return to the white-owned cotton fields.

Reference:

Baldwin, L. D., & Kelley, R. (1967). Survey of American history. New York: American Book Co.

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