

# Did reconstruction lead to radical changes in the south?

[Business](#)



As the Civil War drew to a close in 1865, a string of problems started to surface, including questions such as the following: How should the Confederate states re-integrate into the Union? What rights should be granted to African Americans after emancipation? As the Confederate states were defeated in the war, the north was still in a state of shock. How will the north recover from the post-war trauma? These issues stayed in midair and remained unsolved.

From here the country entered an era which lasted for over a decade — Reconstruction — with the Compromise of 1876 made by Rutherford B. Hayes marking the end of this era. The government had tried its best to repair the damages brought by the Civil War by reforming political structure and finance with limited success. Most importantly, due to prejudice and social factors, Reconstruction did not lead to radical changes in the South. The US government tried to make changes in the political field but didn't last long.

After the Republicans took over Reconstruction in the South, they passed the Fourteenth Amendment in 1866 that acknowledged citizenship of all people born in the United States, including that of blacks (Hine et al. 333). Then the Fifteenth Amendment, approved in 1869, guaranteed that “ a citizen's right to vote would not be denied on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude” (History. com Staff). However, despite the federal government's effort to make changes, many southern as well as northern states enforced laws in 1866 known as “ black codes” that restricted the freedom of former slaves and continued to recognize them as landless laborers (History. com Staff).

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These regulations were not much different from the rules under slavery. And in the same year, President Andrew Johnson vetoed the Freedmen's Bureau that provided extended protection for the rights of black people and the Civil Rights Bills that declared equality for all citizens born in the United States (History. com Staff), allowing African Americans to continue to suffer under "black codes". Meanwhile, the two Amendments were unacceptable to most white Southerners. They believed black people were inferior to them however worded — "The end of slavery and the enfranchisement of black men did not make black people their equals.

They did not accept the Fourteenth Amendment. They attacked Republican governments and their leaders unrelentingly" (Hine et al. 350). Even though laws were enacted to end slavery, the concept of African Americans being inferior to the white had been rigidified among the people. Regulations were made successfully on paper, but failed to work in white Southerners' hearts.

Like the ultimate failure of the government's political policies to create any concrete changes, the new economic policies during the Reconstruction, too, were just as unsuccessful. After the Civil War, problems emerged as nearly all freedmen lost their primary occupation. Even though a certain number of landowners agreed to employ the freed blacks, the relationship between employers and employees could be considered as a form of economic slavery. By paying the workers only a pittance and forcing them to work to their physical limits, the landowners managed to gain maximum benefit, but in the meantime caught most African Americans in a vicious circle—they had to depend totally and immediately on their low wages to survive.

Unfortunately, most freedmen had no choice but to do hard manual labor because of their lack of education.

In one contract, freedmen promised to “ bind ourselves to and with said Ross that we will do good work and labor ten hours a day on average, winter and summer...” (Facing History And Ourselves 105). No laws on the labor contracts were established during that time. Nor were measures for the former slaves to obtain economic freedom taken. Furthermore, although one may admit that those former slaves who were engaged in labor service did contribute to the overall economic growth, the majority of freedmen were out of work, and unemployment rate headed up. Preexisting social and educational barriers deterred prime-aged black men and women from entering the high-skill work force. Worse still, an economic depression known as the Panic of 1873 plunged much of the South into poverty.

Unemployment soared, and African Americans lost over a million dollars in a venture investment in the Freedmen’s Bank. Serious damages spread all over the South (Hine et al. 357). Also, while the Republicans made a huge leap forward during radical Reconstruction by reforming state public school systems, taxes were raised in war-stricken areas because of the extra expenses (Hine et al. 345).

This only added to the burden of all citizens. To sum up, the nation’s economic policies dealt a double blow to numerous African Americans and greatly traumatized other residents as well. The changes were not radical, and not much was altered after the war. Most importantly, the government

neglected the power of prejudice and supremacy. Black politicians were frequently ejected from public facilities (Hine et al. 346).

Segregation was still admissible even though African Americans became free, and social equality was still not promoted. Moreover, the strongest backlash to attempted changes during Reconstruction occurred in 1866, with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in Tennessee burning down all efforts to speak for equal rights within the past decade. The group aimed at destabilizing Republican and black leadership through perpetrating violence and assassinations. As a result, white supremacy gradually reasserted its hold on the South. Sadly, the organization drew its members from all classes of white society; lawyers, doctors, and even politicians all participated in the mob riots and “sympathized with the Klan” (Hine et al. 352).

The reason why this happened is explained and analyzed as follows: “Indeed, the Democratic Party’s constant vilification of carpetbaggers and scalawags as corrupt incompetents, their insistence that blacks were unfit for equal citizenship, and their public laments about the intractability of black labor created an atmosphere that made violence seem a legitimate response in the eyes of many white southerners” (Facing History And Ourselves 179). It is deplorable how violence was tacitly accepted by the white Southerners. No change was made. And no individual stood up to remonstrate in defiance. Klan members did so because of their long-held belief that the blacks were inferior.

They were not able to accept the fact that they could enjoy equal citizen rights. In 1871, the government made a final and futile attempt to retrieve <https://assignbuster.com/did-reconstruction-lead-to-radical-changes-in-the-south/>

the situation — they enacted the Ku Klux Klan Act to repress the white terrorists from federal level (Hine et al. 356). These were remedial measures, however, and the damages that had already been done were irredeemable. By comparing Reconstruction to antebellum period, it could be seen that little had changed.

When the war was over, most white Northerners still held the belief that they were superior to the black people, and regardless of how much effort the Republicans made to grant former slaves equal rights, the country still fell into the hands of the conservative white Democrats in the end. The Reconstruction period ultimately failed to bring radical changes to the South politically, economically, and socially. A genuine radical change should consist of fundamental changes in people's conceptions, equal treatment between races, and genuine freedom for the black people — not just freedom on paper. That being said, even though the federal government tried to make the effort, 10 years is too short a period of time to fundamentally change a conception deeply ingrained in people's hearts by social and cultural accumulation of over hundreds of years. To alter the beliefs of people is a big task, and the struggle would continue more than a century later in the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter Movement.

It is true one might still argue that during Reconstruction infrastructures were built, transportation network was expanded, public schools were established, but they should not be considered radical — these changes can be made during any fragment of history, because for a country to develop,

such investments are bound to be made. Therefore, Reconstruction did not lead to radical changes in the South.