

# The tragedy that was reconstruction



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

From 1865 to 1877, America faced the daunting task of reconstructing a union tattered by a Civil War. The south after the Civil War was in ruins with many of its major cities completely destroyed, its agriculture production at a halt, and the slave labor that economically drove the south freed. Moreover, millions of freedmen were wondering around the south, lost, without an education, money, place to live, or knowledge of how to care for themselves outside of their plantation. Furthermore, Abraham Lincoln, the moderate Republican president of the union and leader of the War in the north who brought America back together was assassinated April 14, 1865, only five days after Southern General, Robert E. Lee surrendered. With Lincoln gone, the Reconstruction period was left to be led by Lincoln's War Democrat vice president, Andrew Johnson who was virtually party-less after his democratic faction party joined with the Republicans during the election of 1864. With Democrat Johnson as president and Congress filled with moderate and radical republicans, there as a constant battle between the two over how Southern Reconstruction should be carried out. Although the federal government accomplished many of its goals for the Reconstruction period, ultimately because many of the reforms carried out during the era were not continued after its end and blacks faced discrimination and abuse by individuals and state governments during the period, Southern Reconstruction was a tragic era. During the Southern Reconstruction period from 1866 to 1877, the federal government was able to establish reforms to satisfy its economic, political, and social goals for the era. One of the major goal and motivation for the Republican north established during the Civil War was to emancipate southern black slaves. After the 13th Amendment (1865) which freed the blacks, the 14th Amendment (1868) that gave freemen an

<https://assignbuster.com/the-tragedy-that-was-reconstruction/>

American citizenship, and the 15th Amendment (1870) which protected freedmen's right to vote, the Republicans not only freed the former slaves but also leveled the national political status of black men to that equal with white men. The radical republicans also "envisioned an expanded role for the national government in protecting the fundamental rights of American citizens" (Doc C) which the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments also provided for, by ruling that states could not deny anyone freedom, citizenship to those born in America, and the right to vote to any citizen male. Moreover, the Republican north upheld the constitutional rule that Supreme Court justices rule for life by not removing from office the southern, democratic majority in the Supreme Court throughout Reconstruction. Congress also attempted to mend the American economy that was broken during the war but passing legislation such as "the Morrill Tariff, the Pacific Railroad Act, and the Homestead Act" (The American Pageant p. 488) which provided a for a economic boost in the north. Furthermore, President Andrew Johnson and Congress both provided plan's to reconstruct the south and integrate it back into the union. The Reconstruction Proclamation of 1865 which "disfranchised certain leading Confederates, including those with taxable property worth more than \$20, 000" (p. 486) and Lincoln's 10% Plan together, formed Johnson's efforts toward Reconstruction. Likewise, Congress in 1867 passed the Reconstruction Act which divided the south into five military districts "to ensure that blacks would be able to vote and enjoy their other rights as citizens" (Doc B) showing both the executive and legislative branches concern to assimilate the south into the union quickly and effectively. Similarly southern states wrote new, more modern constitutions guided by Republicans that created a "state-funded systems of

<https://assignbuster.com/the-tragedy-that-was-reconstruction/>

free public education [and] guaranteed civil and political rights for blacks" (Doc C) illustrating the north's efforts to rebuild and stabilize the south. Moreover, to protect freedmen and help integrate them into society, Congress created the Freedmen's Bureau on March 3, 1865 which was suppose to " provided emergency relief, set up Negro schools, prevented landowners from taking advantage of Negroes, and protected Negroes' civil rights" (Doc B) as well as the Civil Rights Bill in March of 1866 which was aimed to protect black's American citizenship from state laws in the south. Thus, the federal government made several economic, political, and social reforms to its own infrastructure as well and to those of state governments which were designed to solve the problems created by the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves, as well as meet the goals of the Reconstruction era. Throughout the Southern Reconstruction period from 1866 to 1877 as well as after Reconstruction ended in 1877, many of the reforms made by the federal government were not carried out or effective towards combating the issues presented by the Civil War and emancipation making Reconstruction a tragic era. The 14th Amendment which was suppose to give blacks full citizenship left room for the Southern government to deny blacks their right to vote. Thus the 15th Amendment had to be proposed and passed giving all male citizens the right to vote, but even so many whites still withheld the ballot from blacks with " various underhanded schemes [such as] literacy tests, unfairly administered by whites to the advantages of illiterate whites" (p. 496). Moreover, though the Supreme Court was left untouched during Reconstruction, when southern delegates were sent to take their seats in congress " on the first day of the congressional session, December 4, 1865, they banged shut Republicans banged shut the door in the face of the newly

<https://assignbuster.com/the-tragedy-that-was-reconstruction/>

elected Southern delegations" (p. 488) in fear of losing their advantage in congress. Thus, the democratic ideal of every fraction of American society being represented was broken as the south had no say in congress.

Furthermore, in the Northern Republican's attempt to expand the federal government to help the freedmen more effectively, " Republicans imposed national control on the Southern states, completely ignoring the constitutional concept of federalism in which the states should handle issues within their own boundaries" (Doc A) which in turn created tension and hard feelings between the north and south as well and whites and blacks.

Moreover, because many of Republicans and Democrats alike rejected the idea of taking land from wealthy, southern whites and giving it to freedmen, " a great deal of economic power [was left] in the hands of the plantation owners" (Doc C) further creating a lasting economic and social rift between blacks and whites in the south. Similarly, Johnson with his presidential power vetoed several bills proposed by congress to help southern blacks leaving " it easy for Confederate states to come back into the Union without guaranteeing equal rights to blacks" (Zinn p. 199). Because Johnson stood in the way of an effective Southern Reconstruction, the Republican congress created a " veto-proof Congress and virtually unlimited control of Reconstruction policy" (The American Pageant p. 490) by coming together to override Johnson's veto on the Civil Rights Bill in 1866. Thus Congress was now able to complete a harsher, more effective Reconstruction, but at the cost of throwing off the checks and balance system by putting too much power in the hands of Congress. Furthermore, the federal reforms done by the Reconstruction Act of 1867 on southern governments were undone for " by 1877 all the Southern states were " redeemed" from Republican control

[and] conservative white Democrats were again running Southern governments" (Doc C) destroying nearly all of the Republican reforms done. Consequently, many of the federal government's attempts to bring about reform and prosperity were unsuccessful making Reconstruction a tragic era. During the Southern Reconstruction era from 1866 to 1877, abuses of power and authority by individuals and non-governmental organizations made Reconstruction a tragic era. In many cases, corrupt Republican appointed carpetbaggers used their position to steal money or resources, often from black or black programs as in the case of a " carpetbag governor [who] was charged with stealing and selling the food of the Freedmen's Bureau intended for the relief of helpless and ragged ex-slaves" (Doc A). Because of incidents like this, many black began to distrust the Republican governments adding to the resentment southern whites already felt towards the party. Furthermore, many southerner's did not take the Union laws seriously and often " as Union armies marching in and out of various locations, many blacks found themselves emancipated and the re-enslaved" (The American Pageant p. 481) thus being subjected again to the harsh treatments given to slaves. Similarly, even after Southern Reconstruction programs were established and blacks were no longer re-enslaved, many blacks having no money turned to sharecropping where they " in effect became slaves to the soil and to their creditors" (The American Pageant p. 487). Moreover, as tensions grew between freedmen and whites in the south, violence occurred making the south a " warzone" of race riots. Almost immediately after the Civil War was over riots such as that in Memphis, Tennessee in the May of 1866 occurred where " whites on a rampage of murder killed forty-six Negroes...five negro women were raped...[and] ninety homes, twelve

<https://assignbuster.com/the-tragedy-that-was-reconstruction/>

schools, and four churches were burned" (Zinn p. 203). Likewise, southern violence progressed to organized crime and terror organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan founded in 1866 in Tennessee with the goal of terrorizing blacks and black supporters into submission through scare tactics, raids, lynchings, beatings, and burnings. In Louisiana, the Ku Klux Klan in 1868 carried out a raid where "whites in two days killed or wounded two hundred victims [leaving] a pile of twenty-five bodies [that] was found half-buried in the woods" (The American Pageant p. 486). Thus, individual's and non-governmental organization's abuses of power and discrimination towards blacks ultimately created a strong rift between southern blacks and whites, making Reconstruction a tragic era. For the duration of the Southern Reconstruction, from 1866 to 1877, discrimination and abuses made by the southern state government of people and power led to Reconstruction being a tragic era. After the end of the Civil War, the ex-confederate President Jefferson Davis and his followers were imprisoned for two years until "he and his fellow "conspirators" were finally released, partly because the odds were that no Virginia jury would convict them" (The American Pageant p. 479). The southern government's unwillingness to help reform themselves led to reconstruction becoming ineffective and resulted in many of the Confederate leaders becoming southern Union leaders after Reconstruction. Moreover, the state government "slaveocracy" set up taxes that were kept low for rich whites while "freedmen and poor whites paid a much higher portion of their income taxes [and] though both blacks and whites paid taxes, services (such as poor relief and education) were provided for whites which were not provided for blacks" (Doc C). Similarly, under Republican rule in the south, first year southern states gave generous aid for railroad construction and

<https://assignbuster.com/the-tragedy-that-was-reconstruction/>

restoration which would benefit the wealthy plantation owners whose trading routes were cut had been cut off by the lack of working transportation systems. But because of these donations to help the wealthy white, “ soon the extensive borrowing caused the credit for the state governments to collapse” (Doc C) leaving no money for relief programs for freedmen. Moreover, the Freedman’s Bureau, the department Congress created to aid recently freed blacks in 1865 became ineffective as “ local administrators often collaborated with planters in expelling blacks from towns and cajoling them into signing labor contracts to work for their former master” (The American Pageant p. 484). Likewise, to keep down freedmen black governments passed several laws that were dubbed “ Black Codes “ under which black were not allowed to marry whites, serve on juries, or testify against whites” (Doc B) which severely restricted black’s citizenship. The abuse of power and unjust actions made by southern state governments helped to make the Southern Reconstruction period a tragic one. During the Southern Reconstruction era from 1866 to 1877, blacks faced discrimination and abuses by individuals and state governments making Reconstruction a tragic era. Similarly, even so the federal government was able to accomplish many of its goals for the Reconstruction period; many of the reforms made by the federal government were not followed up after during and after its end. During Reconstruction the federal government set up many programs that in theory would solve the problems created before and during the Civil War such as the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, the Freedmen’s Bureau, the Civil Rights Bill, and Lincoln, Johnson, and Congress’s plan’s for Reconstruction. However many of the reforms made could not be carried out to their full potential due to the unwillingness of the people and corruption in

<https://assignbuster.com/the-tragedy-that-was-reconstruction/>



the south. Moreover, abuses made my individuals and non-governmental organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan's violence against blacks as well as discrimination made by southern state-governments such as " Black Codes" pushed the south away from completely Reconstruction and racial equality. The racism, economic racial inequality, and corruption in the government of the south created during the Southern Reconstruction period created a large gap between blacks and whites leaving many blacks to live inferior lives to whites for decades to come.