Reconstruction (1865–1877)

Robert E. Lee’s surrender to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia in 1865 brought an end to the Civil War, and the Reconstruction Era immediately followed. Reconstruction was the federal government’s plan to rebuild and re-establish the states of the former Confederacy. In short, Reconstruction was the period when the federal government tried to rebuild the South and restore the Union after the Civil War. The Civil War and Reconstruction resulted in Southern white resentment (bitterness) toward both Northerners and Southern African-Americans. Reconstruction ultimately led to the political, economic, and social control of the South by whites. Unfortunately, the economic and political gains of former slaves were temporary.

As a result of the North’s military victory, President Abraham Lincoln’s view that the United States was one nation indivisible had prevailed (won). Lincoln believed that since secession was illegal, Confederate governments in the Southern states were illegitimate (not legal governments) and the states had never really left the Union. As a result, Lincoln believed that Reconstruction in the Southern states was a matter of quickly restoring legitimate state governments that were loyal to the Union. Lincoln also believed that once the war was over, the federal government should not punish the South. Instead, it should reunify the nation as quickly as possible. In his second inaugural address President Lincoln outlined how he believed the United States government should act during Reconstruction. Lincoln said, “With malice towards none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan — to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

Just a few days after Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, John Wilkes Booth assassinated Abraham Lincoln at Ford’s Theatre in Washington, D.C. Vice President Andrew Johnson succeeded Lincoln as president. Lincoln’s assassination enabled Radical Republicans to gain control of Reconstruction. The Radical Republicans were members of the Republican Party, who wanted to punish the former Confederate states for causing the Civil War. First, the Radical Republicans refused to allow the Confederate states to reenter the Union until they had undergone a period of military occupation. In other words, the former Confederate states were under the rule of a general in the United States army, and American military troops remained stationed in the South. Second, the Radical Republicans also believed in aggressively guaranteeing voting and other civil rights to African-Americans. The Radical Republicans, who controlled Congress, repeatedly clashed with President Andrew Johnson over the issue of civil rights for freedmen (freed slaves). Johnson, who had succeeded Lincoln as president, was a native of Tennessee, racially prejudiced, and unwilling to extend citizenship rights to former slaves. The Radical Republicans became so frustrated with Johnson’s efforts to prevent their program on behalf of freedmen that the House of Representatives impeached him. However, the United States Senate failed by one vote to remove President Johnson from office. (Impeachment is the process of bringing an official to trial for misconduct in office. Under the Constitution the House of Representatives may impeach — bring formal charges against — a president for “treason, bribery, or other high crimes and misdemeanors.” The United States Senate then sits as the jury at the president’s impeachment trial. If two-thirds of the senators vote to convict the president, then he is removed from office.)

To carry out their program to help African-Americans the Radical Republicans added three amendments to the United States Constitution. These three amendments were a major political result of the Civil War and Reconstruction and are sometimes called the “Civil War Amendments.” The Thirteenth
Amendment permanently abolished (ended) African-American slavery in the United States. The Fourteenth Amendment granted American citizenship to all African-Americans and said no state could “deny...any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” In other words, the Fourteenth Amendment prohibited the states from denying any American equal rights under the law. Finally, the Fifteenth Amendment gave African-American males the right to vote by guaranteeing voting rights regardless of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude” (former slaves).

The Civil War and Reconstruction also had an important economic impact on the United States. First, the Southern states were left embittered and devastated by the Civil War. Farms, railroads, and factories had been destroyed throughout the South, and Confederate money was worthless. Many Southern towns and cities lay in ruins, including Richmond and Atlanta. The source of labor also changed greatly in the Southern states, because of the loss of life during the war and the end of slavery. As a result, the South would remain a backward, agriculture-based economy and the poorest section of the nation for many decades afterward. Second, the North and Midwest emerged from the war with strong and growing industrial economies. This development laid the foundation for the sweeping industrialization of the nation (other than the South) during the next half-century and the emergence of the United States as a global economic power by the beginning of the twentieth century. Finally, the completion of the nation’s first transcontinental (across the continent) railroad at Promontory, Utah soon after the war ended (1869) connected the Atlantic and the Pacific coasts. This transportation development intensified (increased) the westward movement of settlers into the states between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Ocean.

Many key leaders of the Civil War made important post-war contributions. After the Civil War, both Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant urged reconciliation (understanding) between the North and the South. Grant urged Radical Republicans not to be harsh with former Confederates. He was elected president in 1868 and served as president during most of Reconstruction. President Grant advocated (supported) rights for the freedmen and opposed retribution (payback) directed at the defeated South. At the end of the war, Robert E. Lee urged Southerners to reconcile (reunite) and rejoin the United States. Lee served as President of Washington College in Lexington, Virginia, which today is known as Washington & Lee University. As a college president, Lee emphasized the importance of education to the nation's future.

After the Civil War, Frederick Douglass became the leading spokesman for African-Americans in the nation. During Reconstruction, Douglass supported full equality for African-Americans and advocated (campaigned) for the passage of the 14th and 15th Amendments. He also encouraged federal government actions to protect the rights of the freedmen in the South. Later in his career, Douglass served as the American ambassador to Haiti and held other jobs in the federal civil service (government jobs).

The Reconstruction period ended following the extremely close presidential election of 1876. In return for support in the electoral vote from Southern Democrats, the Republicans agreed to end the military occupation of the South. (Under the Constitution, the Electoral College is the group of people who cast the official votes that elect the President and Vice President. A state’s number of electoral votes equals its total representation in Congress, which is its number of members in the House of Representatives plus two for its U.S. senators.) Known as the Compromise of 1877, this political deal enabled former Confederates who controlled the Democratic Party to regain power in the Southern states. It opened the door to the “Jim Crow Era,” the period in which Southern states required racial segregation (separation) of blacks and whites in public schools, transportation, and other public facilities. During the era of Jim Crow, African-Americans in the South lost most of the political gains they had made during Reconstruction, including the right to vote and sit on juries. In short, Reconstruction's end marked the beginning of a long period in which African-Americans in the South were denied the full rights of American citizenship. Although slavery had ended, African-Americans did not begin to achieve full equality during the next 100 years.