CHAPTER 22

The Ordeal of Reconstruction, 1865–1877

# Focus Questions

. How did blacks respond to freedom, and what black organizations flourished?

. How had Lincoln hoped to accomplish Reconstruction, and what modifications did Johnson make to Lincoln’s original plan?

. In what ways was Congressional Reconstruction different than Presidential Reconstruction?

. After gaining suffrage, how successful were blacks politically?

. What circumstances led to the impeachment and trial of President Johnson and what was the outcome?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** Johnson’s political blunders and Southern white recalcitrance led to the imposition of congressional military Reconstruction on the South. Reconstruction did address difficult issues of reform and racial justice in the South and achieved some successes, but was ultimately abandoned, leaving a deep legacy of racial and sectional bitterness.

**Theme:** During Reconstruction, the Constitution was strengthened with the Fourteenth (citizenship and equal protection of the laws) and Fifteenth (black voting rights) Amendments, but it was also tested with the conflicts between the president and Congress that culminated in an impeachment process.

**Theme:** Southern resistance to Reconstruction began immediately with the sending of ex-rebels to be seated in Congress and continued with the creation of violently oppressive groups like the Ku Klux Klan. Although forced to make some concessions, Southern Redeemers successfully outlasted the congressional Reconstruction efforts.

chapter summary

With the Civil War over, the nation faced the difficult problems of rebuilding the South, assisting the freed slaves, reintegrating the Southern states into the Union, and deciding who would direct the Reconstruction process.

The South was economically devastated and socially revolutionized by emancipation. As slave-owners reluctantly confronted the end of slave labor, blacks took their first steps in freedom. Black churches and freedmen’s schools helped the former slaves begin to shape their own destiny.

The new president, Andrew Johnson, was politically inept and personally contentious. His attempt to implement a moderate plan of Reconstruction, along the lines originally suggested by Lincoln, fell victim to Southern whites’ severe treatment of blacks and his own political blunders.

Republicans imposed harsh military Reconstruction on the South after their gains in the 1866 congressional elections. The Southern states reentered the Union with new radical governments, which rested partly on the newly enfranchised blacks, but also had support from some sectors of southern society. These regimes were sometimes corrupt but also implemented important reforms. The divisions between moderate and radical Republicans meant that Reconstruction’s aims were often limited and confused, despite the important Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

Embittered whites hated the radical governments and mobilized reactionary terrorist organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan, to restore white supremacy. Congress impeached Johnson but failed narrowly to convict him. In the end, the poorly conceived Reconstruction policy failed disastrously.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Analyze in more detail the condition of the South at the end of the Civil War, particularly, the economic and social revolution caused by the end of slavery. The focus might be on the great difficulty of working out a new system of racial relations, and on blacks’ efforts to make their own way under harsh conditions.

REFERENCE: Leon Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long* (1979).

* Compare the mild presidential Reconstruction plans of Lincoln and Johnson with the harsher congressional Reconstruction, perhaps emphasizing how Johnson’s blunders and severe treatment of blacks in the South handed the radical Republicans their chance.

REFERENCE: James McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (1982).

* Explain the actual impact of Reconstruction in the South. Particular consideration might be given to the limitations of the Republican governments and the Freedmen’s Bureau, especially in altering fundamental economic and social conditions.

REFERENCE: Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (1988).

* Examine the impeachment and acquittal of Johnson in relation to the overreaching of the radical Republicans and the declining support for military Reconstruction in the North.

REFERENCES: Michael Les Benedict, *Impeachment and Trial of Andrew Johnson* (1973); Hans Trefousse, *The Impeachment of a President* (1975).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Discuss the new circumstances and experiences of the ordinary freed African Americans. Consider such developments as the westward-migrating Exodusters and the newly powerful black churches. What obligation, if any, did the federal government have to the African Americans that it recently freed from slavery? (See boxed quotes on pages 467, 477, and 482 as well as section Examining the Evidence on page 468.)
* Look at the Ku Klux Klan in relation to its historical significance in the 1870s and its enduring presence as a symbol of white racism and illegal violence. (See two boxed quotes on page 480.)
* Focus on the character of Andrew Johnson, and particularly, his difficulty as a “poor Southern white” in the White House during Republican Reconstruction. Perhaps contrast him with his great enemy Thaddeus Stevens. (See boxed quote on page 471.)
* Compare the enormous gap between the still widely held popular image of Reconstruction and the more complicated historical reality described in the text. The D. W. Griffith film *Birth of a Nation* would be a good starting point, since it helped to fix the general image of the period more than any other work.
* Why were women’s rights ignored during the period of Reconstruction? What does the failure to include sex in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments suggest about the nation’s commitment to equality? (See boxed quote on page 478.)

# character sketches

## Andrew Johnson (1808–1875)

Even after Johnson’s wife taught him to read as an adult, he frequently misspelled words. He once said, “It is a man of small imagination that cannot spell his own name in more than one way.”

As a representative of poor mountain whites, he hated slaveholders, blacks, and abolitionists. Even though he hated slavery, he opposed emancipation because, he said: “What will you do with two million Negroes in our midst? Blood, rape, and rapine will be our portion.”

The attacks on Johnson during his “swing around the circle” were partly orchestrated by Republican newspapers, which played up his vulgar language and behavior. Once they discovered that Johnson would go out of control, radical hecklers baited him at every stop.

Johnson remained a political hero to the plain whites of Tennessee following his departure from the presidency. After several tries, he was reelected to the Senate in 1875 but attended only one session before he died.

**Quote:** (In reply to hecklers’ shouts of “Judas!”): “There was a Judas, and he was one of the twelve apostles.… If I have played Judas, who has been my Christ that I have played Judas with? Was it Thad Stevens? Was it Wendell Phillips? Was it Charles Sumner?” (Swing around the circle, 1866)

REFERENCE: Hans Trefousse, *Andrew Johnson: A Biography* (1989).

## Oliver O. Howard (1830–1909)

Howard was the Civil War general who became head of the Freedmen’s Bureau during Reconstruction.

In the Battle of Fair Oaks, Howard lost his right arm. His Civil War record was somewhat mixed: he bungled several operations and once refused to obey an order from General Hooker. Considered a “Christian officer,” he was shocked by the destruction inflicted on Georgia by Sherman’s army, even though he justified it as militarily necessary.

After leaving the Freedmen’s Bureau, he founded Howard University in Washington, D.C., and served as its president from 1869 to 1874. He caused a split in his church in Washington by demanding the admission of black members.

Howard later returned to active military duty and commanded the 1877 expedition against the Nez Percé Indians in the West. He wrote frequently for newspapers and magazines and was a popular lecturer.

**Quote:** “A brief experience showed us that the negro people were capable of education, with no limit that men could set on their capacity. What white men could learn or had learned, they, or some of them, could learn.” (Autobiography, 1907)

REFERENCE: William S. McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather: General O. O. Howard and the Freedmen* (1968).

## Hiram Revels (1822–1901)

Revels, a clergyman, became one of the two black senators from Mississippi during Reconstruction.

Born a free man in Kentucky, Revels was of black and Indian ancestry. He first worked as a barber but then attended Knox College in Illinois and became a minister of the African Methodist Church.

He organized two black regiments in Maryland during the Civil War and then traveled widely in the South promoting religion and education for blacks. He was first elected an alderman in Natchez, Mississippi, despite his concern about mixing religion and politics. Many whites, as well as blacks, liked him, and he was elected to take Jefferson Davis’s seat in the Senate. During his brief term, he supported the moderate Republicans and not the radicals.

He later came under white Democratic influence and joined in the overthrow of Republican Reconstruction in 1875. Quiet and mild-mannered, he disliked political conflict.

**Quote:** “The colored members, after consulting together on the subject, agreed to give their influence and votes for one of their own race, as it would in their judgment be a weakening blow against color line prejudice, and they unanimously elected me for their nominee.… Some of the Democracy favored it because they thought it would seriously damage the Republican party.” (1884)

REFERENCE: Julius Thompson, *Hiram R. Revels, 1827–1901: A Biography* (1973).

## Thaddeus Stevens (1792–1868)

Stevens was the Republican congressman who led radical Reconstruction and engineered the impeachment of Andrew Johnson.

Often sickly as a child, Stevens was partially physically disabled as an adult. He hated slavery from an early age and occasionally purchased fugitive slaves in order to give them their freedom.

In Congress, Stevens constantly attacked Southerners in scurrilous language, and some of his speeches nearly provoked riots on the floor of the House. As soon as the Civil War broke out, he advocated arming the slaves and encouraging a slave insurrection. His hatred of the South was increased when Confederate soldiers destroyed his ironworks during Lee’s invasion of Pennsylvania.

Stevens was well read and eloquent but relied heavily on vituperation and sarcasm and seemed in a constant state of barely suppressed rage. He died shortly after the Johnson trial, but only his nephew and his black housekeeper attended his funeral. He chose to be buried in a black cemetery.

**Quote:** “I repose in this quiet and secluded spot, not from any natural preference for solitude, but, finding other cemeteries limited by charter rules as to race, I have chosen this, that I might illustrate in my death the principle which I have advocated through a long life—Equality of Man before his Creator.” (Inscription on Stevens’s tombstone, written by himself, 1868)

REFERENCE: Hans Trefousse, *Thaddeus Stevens: Nineteenth-Century Egalitarian* (1997).

# questions for class discussion

. Could presidential Reconstruction have succeeded if politically skilled Abraham Lincoln, instead of politically inept Andrew Johnson, had been president?

. How truly radical was radical Reconstruction?

. How did both Southern and Northern racial attitudes shape Reconstruction, and what effect did Reconstruction have on race relations and the conditions of blacks? Did Reconstruction really address the problems of race? (See boxed quotes on page 469 and 472.)

. Was Reconstruction a noble experiment that failed, a vengeful Northern punishment of the South, a weak effort that did not go far enough, or the best that could have been expected under the circumstances? What has been the historical legacy of Reconstruction? Consider, particularly, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

**CONTENDING VOICES: THADDEUS STEPHENS VS. JAMES LAWRENCE ORR**

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. What sort of reconstruction program did Stephens advocate? Why?

2. As a member of the planter elite, how did Orr envision the future role of free black labor in the South?

# varying viewpoints

**Expanding the View**

* William A. Dunning, *Reconstruction: Political and Economic* (1907).

A view of Reconstruction as a national disgrace:

“Few episodes of recorded history more urgently invited thorough analysis than the struggle through which the southern whites, subjugated by adversaries of their own race, thwarted the scheme which threatened permanent subjection to another race.… The most rasping feature of the new situation to the old white element of the South was the large predominance of northerners and negroes in positions of political power.… The most cunning and malignant enemy of the United States could not have timed differently this period of national ill-repute; for it came with the centennial of American independence.…”

* Kenneth Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction* (1965).

A favorable view of Reconstruction:

“Finally, we come to the idealistic aim of the radicals to make southern society more democratic, especially to make the emancipation of Negroes something more than an empty gesture. In the short run this was their greatest failure.… Still, no one could quite forget that the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were now part of the federal Constitution.… Thus Negroes were no longer denied equality by the plain language of law, as they had been before radical reconstruction, but only by coercion, by subterfuge, by deceit, and by spurious legalisms.… The blunders of that era, tragic though they were, dwindle into insignificance. For if it was worth four years of civil war to save the Union, it was worth a few years of radical reconstruction to give the American Negro the ultimate promise of equal civil and political rights.”

# Questions for Class Discussion

. What does each of these historians see as the fundamental goals of Reconstruction? How well does each think it achieved those goals?

. According to each of these viewpoints, what were the roles of Northern whites, Southern whites, and blacks in Reconstruction?

. How would each of these historians interpret the overturning of Reconstruction and its continuing meaning for American society?