The period of Reconstruction after the Civil War was one of the most politically contentious and violent eras in American history. Reuniting the country, completing the transition from slavery to freedom, and rebuilding the economically devastated South were enormous challenges that continued long after the end of the period.

Although textbooks generally give the years 1865 to 1877 for Reconstruction, it helps to take a longer view. President Abraham Lincoln and Congress actually began the process of "reconstructing" the seceded states—or bringing them back into the United States—during the Civil War in Union-occupied areas of the Confederacy, such as Tennessee and Louisiana. Late in 1863, Lincoln proposed amnesty for most former Confederates who declared their loyalty to the Union and accepted the abolition of slavery, as well as a ten-percent plan for the former states of the Confederacy, which would admit the states back into the Union once ten percent of their voters who had been eligible in the 1860 presidential election had declared their loyalty to the United States. Lincoln had not come to a final decision about African American suffrage, but he indicated that he would favor voting rights for black veterans and those who were educated. Though his views were more lenient than those of Radical Republicans in Congress, Lincoln's ideas on Reconstruction were still evolving when he was assassinated in April 1865. It is impossible to know what would have happened had Lincoln lived.

We do know that Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson of Tennessee, did not have the political skills that Lincoln had possessed. Partly due to a stubborn streak and partly due to philosophical differences with the Republican-dominated Congress, Johnson never succeeded in working with legislative leaders to resolve the daunting trials facing the nation. Johnson viewed himself as the last Jacksonian Democrat and a defender of the Constitution, which he believed should be interpreted narrowly. At the same time, Radical Republicans in Congress wanted the federal government to ensure that former Confederates did not regain political power, and the Republicans also believed that federal authority should be used to protect the civil rights of former slaves. These legislators favored a much broader interpretation of the Constitution than did President Johnson.

Despite his strong wartime Unionism, Johnson pardoned many former Confederates, who went on to regain control over southern state governments. These legislatures began passing Black Codes, which were based on antebellum Slave Codes and severely limited African Americans' mobility and civil rights. In response, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1866 establishing black citizenship (a measure later incorporated into the 14th Amendment to the Constitution). Johnson vetoed the bill, but his veto was overridden by Congress (the first time in U.S. history that Congress overrode a presidential veto).
At about the same time, some white southerners turned to violence to try to keep former slaves from asserting their rights to be paid for their labor and treated as citizens. Riots in Memphis in May 1866 and New Orleans in July 1866 spurred Congress to further action. It sent the 14th Amendment to the states and, when all of the former Confederate states but Tennessee rejected the amendment, passed the Reconstruction Acts of 1867, which set up state governments under U.S. military oversight in most of the former Confederate states (except Tennessee, which had become the first former Confederate state readmitted to the Union when it ratified the 14th Amendment on July 7, 1866). African Americans, such as Sampson W. Keeble of Nashville, were elected to state legislatures for the first time in U.S. history. The resulting biracial governments succeeded in many ways, including the establishment of public school systems, but were denounced by many former Confederates whose right to vote had not been restored. Some of these resorted to violence through paramilitary organizations like the Ku Klux Klan (which had begun in Pulaski, Tennessee, in 1865 as a social club but soon evolved into a group dedicated to intimidation of its political opponents).

The conflict between President Johnson and Congress came to a head in 1868 when the House of Representatives impeached the president for defying the Tenure of Office Act, which Congress had passed in 1866 to limit Johnson's ability to remove federal appointees (including members of his Cabinet) without Congressional approval. The Senate came one vote short of the two-thirds required to convict the president, who is said to have wept when he learned the verdict. For the remainder of his term, Johnson had little political power, and he chose not to run for president in 1868.

Even as the nation's future course was being debated on Capitol Hill, within counties, towns, and cities across the nation people were trying to adapt their everyday lives to postwar realities. Families North and South grieved for years over the deaths of loved ones in the war, and many of these families never recovered their pre-war economic standing due to the loss of their primary or potential breadwinners. Despite the ongoing growth of cities and towns, especially in the Northeast, the United States remained a largely rural and agricultural nation in 1865. Many people's everyday lives thus revolved around family farms, and most Civil War veterans attempted to return to agricultural production. Wounded soldiers and those who had lost limbs struggled to work with their families and neighbors to rebuild their farms or start afresh. By the turn of the century, veterans' groups and women's relief organizations would successfully lobby Congress and state legislatures for government pensions to help wounded soldiers, soldiers' widows, and elderly army nurses make ends meet.
During Reconstruction, women North and South turned soldiers' aid societies into veterans' relief organizations and ladies' memorial associations. Middle-class and elite women became involved with these early memorialization efforts, which would continue into the twentieth century. Among the areas that women focused on were the correct identification of soldiers' remains and their proper burial. To commemorate the sacrifices of soldiers, women promoted the establishment of Memorial Day, and some women's groups were able to raise enough funds to erect monuments to the fallen. These early, Reconstruction-era Civil War monuments were often obelisks placed in cemeteries, rather than later monuments erected around the turn of the century, which featured statues of soldiers and were placed in civic spaces like public squares.

For the nation's former slaves, the transition from slavery to freedom was not for the fainthearted. At the time of Reconstruction, there was no government safety net. Congress's effort to create a limited one through the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (established in March 1865 and commonly known as the Freedmen's Bureau) was viewed as a temporary measure even by its supporters, and, except in the area of education, the Bureau's funding only lasted a few years. The Bureau undoubtedly had its greatest positive impact on former slaves through its promotion and oversight of schools, some of which developed into notable institutions of higher learning, such as Fisk University in Nashville. On the other hand, the Bureau encouraged former slaves to return to the land and sign labor contracts or apprenticeship agreements (for orphans) with former slave owners. Many of these contracts offered little pay and allowed for slavery-like working conditions.

Despite these formidable challenges, across the former slave states African Americans created new communities during the period of Reconstruction. With such evocative names as "Promise Land" and "Free Hill," these communities usually featured a school, one or more churches, a cemetery, and sometimes a benevolent or fraternal lodge. These building blocks of postwar African American life were fashioned by the first generation of freed men and women across the rural South. At the same time, many former slaves pursued new opportunities in towns and cities, where jobs and resources were more plentiful. Neighborhoods where free-bom African Americans had lived before the war expanded, and new neighborhoods developed, sometimes around wartime contraband camps.

In addition to creating new communities, postwar African Americans took to the streets to celebrate their freedom. Participating in Emancipation Day parades, July Fourth celebrations, and civil rights demonstrations, black southerners of both sexes developed a new level of public citizenship that continued into the twentieth century, despite violent reprisals. In Tennessee, African Americans' push for voting rights dovetailed with Radical Republican Governor William G. Brownlow's desire for reelection. Tennessee therefore became the first former Confederate state to allow black male suffrage, in February 1867, three years before ratification of the 15th Amendment to the Constitution in 1870. The Tennessee guber-
natorial election of 1867 was also the first in the nation in which large numbers of African Americans cast votes. The exclusion of women from these Reconstruction-era suffrage victories for black men fueled the woman's suffrage movement nationally and within individual states.

Economically, the South took many years to recover from the Civil War and remained predominately agricultural for decades. In the transition to a free labor system, sharecropping replaced slavery. Many African American and white families became sharecroppers or tenant farmers, raising crops on land owned by others. Tenant farmers rented the land, while sharecroppers cultivated the land and received a share of the crop in return. Often, these farmers purchased food and supplies from landowners as well, so that when the crops came in, they did not have much, if anything, left for themselves. Heavily dependent on Mother Nature, many became caught up in a cycle of debt.

Nationally, the postwar creation of a national infrastructure of railroads brought economic prosperity to many, particularly Northern investors in railroads and supporting industries, such as iron. Brought on in part by speculative investing in the railroads, the European-American financial crisis that began in 1873 resulted in several years of economic depression.

The nation's economic distress, ongoing violence in the South by opponents of African American suffrage and white Republican leadership, and increasing conservatism in the North affected politics. The Compromise of 1877 is usually viewed as the end of Reconstruction and a prelude to Jim Crow segregation across the South. With the compromise, national Republican leaders agreed to end military oversight of the former Confederate states, and Democrats agreed to award the closely contested presidential election of 1876 to Republican Rutherford B. Hayes.

Reconstruction remains a fascinating topic for students, teachers, and historians to explore. It was a time of great change and upheaval in the United States. For years, many historians and the general public held a negative view of Reconstruction as a time when the federal government went too far in trying to reunify the country; more recently, historians have argued that the government did not go far enough in protecting the rights of former slaves and Unionists in the South. The question of the role of the federal government in the republic that is the United States continues to be one of great relevance today.
SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- "Reconstruction." Tennessee4Me Web site, Tennessee State Museum. [http://www.tn4me.org/major_cat.cfm/major_id/6/era_id/5](http://www.tn4me.org/major_cat.cfm/major_id/6/era_id/5).
- TPS--MTSU. "Primary Source Set: Reconstruction." [http://library.mtsu.edu/tps/sets/Primary_Source_Set--Reconstruction.pdf](http://library.mtsu.edu/tps/sets/Primary_Source_Set--Reconstruction.pdf).