GLOSSARY OF RECONSTRUCTION TERMS

All information is drawn from the Encyclopedia of the Reconstruction Era (2006) if not otherwise noted.

Radical Republicans: The "Radical" members of the Republican Party wanted to punish Southern states for the Civil War and grant African Americans their citizenship and civil rights (Radical Republicans used the term “radical” to describe themselves, but the term was also used by their opponents and later historians to degrade them). President Andrew Johnson, a southerner and the last of the Jacksonian Democrats, refused to pass any Radical legislation. The Radicals’ feud with the obstinate Johnson gave the Radicals a reputation of being power-hungry. In 1866, the Radicals, with the support of moderate Republicans in Congress, passed the Tenure of Office Act (see definition below) and then impeached Johnson on the grounds that he violated the Act by removing federal appointees, sympathetic to the Radicals, without Congress’s approval. Although the impeachment attempt was unsuccessful, the event effectively limited Johnson’s power. With Johnson somewhat subdued, the Radicals were able to push for legislation that gave African Americans their civil rights (Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments) and sent federal troops to the South to monitor civil rights violations (the Military Reconstruction and Enforcement acts). These acts increased both Congressional and federal power, and they also created a generation of African American voters, senators, and representatives.

Carpetbaggers: A derogatory term for Northern Republicans who moved South during Reconstruction. According to white Southern Democrats, carpetbaggers had thrown all of their belongings into cheap carpetbags and moved south to prey on poor Southerners. In reality, the majority of carpetbaggers were white, educated, Union veterans who moved south to start businesses, farms, and a new way of life. A significant number of carpetbaggers had commanded African American units during the Civil War. After the beginnings of Congressional and military reconstruction, many carpetbaggers became politicians and advocated for public education, African American civil rights, prison reform, Southern infrastructure, and industrial expansion. Many left the South, or were forced out, after Reconstruction.

Scalawags: A derogatory term for Southern-born Republicans. The term is a reference to Scalloway, a Scottish island known for its poor breed of cattle. Although white Southern Democrats viewed this “poor breed” of Southerners as traitors to their region, scalawags advocated for more internal improvements in the South than did their Democratic counterparts. Many scalawags were white, educated, middle-class Unionists from the Upper South, such as Tennessee and North Carolina, where the plantation economy had never fully developed. Politically active African Americans were also referred to as scalawags. Scalawags advocated for public education, African American civil rights, prison reform, Southern infrastructure, and industrial expansion and are responsible for laying the foundations of the “New South.”
Ku Klux Klan (KKK): Several Confederate veterans formed the Ku Klux Klan in Pulaski, Tennessee in early 1866. Although the KKK was originally designed as a Confederate veterans’ association, it quickly took on the form of an antebellum slave patrol. During Reconstruction, the KKK served as the military arm of the Southern Democratic Party. While white Southern Democrats railed against African Americans, carpetbaggers, and scalawags in speeches, the KKK drove them from the polls, shot them in the streets, and threatened them in their homes. The growing militancy of the organization worried several of the organization’s famous leaders, including Tennessean and former Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, and in 1869, these leaders officially disbanded the organization. Renegade and revival groups, however, continued to harass African Americans and Republicans. Congress’s attempts to stop the organization, with the passage of the Enforcement Acts, were of no avail. The KKK continues to advocate for white supremacy and religious Protestantism to this day.

Exodusters: When President Rutherford B. Hayes ordered federal troops to leave the South after the “Compromise of 1877,” he destroyed African American hopes for a new life in the South. Without federal protection, white supremacists would deny African Americans the vote and restrict them to subsistence sharecropping. Many African Americans, such as Tennessean Benjamin “Pap” Singleton, started to look outside of the South for opportunities for economic and political freedom. Singleton moved west to Kansas, opened a realty business, and advertised cheap land to African Americans in the South. By 1880, more than 15,000 African Americans have moved west to Kansas on an “exodus” to a promised land of freedom. Source: http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/program/episodes/seven/theexodus.htm

Force Bill, or Enforcement Acts: White Southern Democrats refused to abide by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and give African Americans their civil rights. Worse still, the Ku Klux Klan terrorized African American communities without fear of punishment. In 1870 and 1871, Republicans in Congress secured the passage of a series of Enforcement Acts that reassigned troops (they had been sent south once before after the passage of the Military Reconstruction Acts of 1867 and 1868) to Southern states to protect African Americans’ civil rights, police violence instigated by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, and prosecute offenses and suspend violators’ rights as needed. Without the presence of federal troops, it is certain that a significant number of African Americans and white Southern Republicans would have been refused the right to vote and hold office.

Tenure of Office Act: The Tenure of Office Act emerged from a feud between radical Republicans and President Andrew Johnson. In 1866, Johnson began to remove Lincoln’s appointees and replace them with his own supporters. Lincoln’s appointees, most notably Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, had proved vital to the success of Congressional plans for Reconstruction. Although Johnson was well within his Constitutional rights, Congress balked at Johnson’s attempt to clean house and secured passage of the Tenure of Office Act. The Act forbade the president to remove federal appointees, and find replacements, without the approval of Congress. While the Act rendered Johnson helpless, the Supreme Court would not declare it unconstitutional until 1926.
Compromise of 1877: Congress appointed a special commission to decide the contested 1876 presidential election between Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel Tilden. When the commission announced Hayes as the victor, many claimed that the commission’s Republicans had persuaded Democrats to side for Hayes with promises to end Reconstruction. Indeed, political Reconstruction did end after “the Compromise of 1877.” Hayes removed federal troops from the South, the last symbol of Republican Reconstruction, and white Southern Democrats regained control of Southern politics. The end of federal intervention destroyed African Americans’ hopes that their civil and political rights would be protected. The federal government would not significantly intervene to support African American civil rights again until the 1960s.

The 1872 Election of Governor William P. Kellogg: Kellogg was a Republican politician in Louisiana who ran for the governorship of the state in 1872. White Southern Democrats were determined that Kellogg would not win the election and formed White Leagues (similar to the KKK) to intimidate and murder African American and white Republican voters. The election results were heavily contested, and the Republicans and Democrats eventually established two separate state governments. After President Ulysses S. Grant recognized Kellogg’s Republican government, the White Leagues stepped up their reign of terror. An attempt was made on Kellogg’s life, and street fighting broke out in New Orleans between city police, led by former Confederate General James Longstreet, and White League forces in September 1874. Needless to say, Kellogg did not run for governor in 1876.

Wade Hampton and the Red Shirts: Wade Hampton was a Confederate war hero and a leader of South Carolina’s Democratic Party. Although he advised moderation, he did little to stop his radical supporters, known as the Red Shirts (Hampton’s supporters wore red shirts to mock Republicans’ rhetorical use of the “bloody shirt”). When Hampton ran for the governorship of the state in 1876, the Red Shirts terrorized the African American community and intimidated white Republicans voters. At their height, the Red Shirts numbered at least 15,000, and federal troops were powerless to stop them. The Red Shirts succeeded in dividing South Carolina’s votes for the presidency and, along with contested returns in Florida and Louisiana, forced Congress to appoint a special commission to decide the victory of the Hayes-Tilden election. Following the “Compromise of 1877,” federal troops were withdrawn from South Carolina, the Red Shirts secured their hold on the state, and Hampton was made governor.

"Bloody Shirt" Campaigning: The “Bloody Shirt” was a rhetorical tool employed by Republicans to remind Americans about the human cost of the Civil War and use that public memory for political gain. Whenever Republicans faced a contested election, they would “pull out the bloody shirt” and remind voters that Democrats, many of whom were former Confederates, had started the war. To elect another Democrat, Republicans argued, was sure to spark a second war. To further capitalize on the bloody shirt, Republicans would nominate former Union generals for political office. Presidents Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, and James A. Garfield were all former Union officers.