Historical Background

The period of Reconstruction (1865-1877) 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.

President Abraham Lincoln had begun 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, including Tennessee. His ideas on Reconstruction were still evolving when he was assassinated in April 1865. His successor, Andrew Johnson of Tennessee, did not have the political skills to work with Congress to resolve the daunting trials facing the nation. Despite his strong wartime Unionism, Johnson allowed former Confederates to regain control over southern state governments and quickly became embroiled in a bitter struggle with Congressional Republicans, who did not want to lose the peace.

To try to protect African Americans’ rights in the face of efforts by southern states to curtail those rights through the passage of Black Codes, Congress passed a series of laws over Johnson’s veto, including the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Reconstruction Acts of 1867, which set up state governments under U.S. military oversight in most of the former Confederate states. The resulting biracial governments succeeded in many ways, including the establishment of public school systems, but were denounced by many former Confederates, who resorted to violence through the creation of organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. Congress also sent to the states for ratification the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution. These “Reconstruction amendments” are easily the most far-reaching achievements of the period.

Ongoing violence in the South, along with increasing conservatism in the North, resulted in the Compromise of 1877, usually viewed as the end of Reconstruction and a prelude to Jim Crow. Republican leaders agreed to end military oversight of the former Confederate states and Democrats agreed to give the closely contested presidential election of 1876 to Republican Rutherford B. Hayes.

Suggestions for Teachers

One of the challenges to understanding this period is the variety of experiences depending on the community or region you are studying. To help your students understand these differences and to build their critical thinking skills, try developing a compare/contrast activity. Begin by choosing two or three different communities. Have your students examine how events unfolded there and how local communities responded. To structure this type of activity, select a nationally significant event, such as the passage of the Reconstruction amendments or when the state was admitted back into the union. Have your students look at primary and secondary sources to understand the basics of your topic (historic newspapers are a great tool here). Then give them a couple of primary sources from your chosen communities, and have them chart the similarities and differences of experience there. Then discuss why these experiences were different.

Additional Links

- Library of Congress: Reconstruction and its Aftermath
- Tennessee4me: Civil War and Reconstruction
- Nashville Public Television: Reconstruction
- PBS: Reconstruction
- The History Channel: Reconstruction
- Digital History: Overview of Reconstruction
**Reconstruction (1865-1877)**

- Reconstruction of the South [1857]
- Radical members of the first legislature after the war, South Carolina [ca. 1876]
- Murder of Louisiana sacrificed on the altar of radicalism [1871]
- Reconstruction, manufactured of the best vuelta abajo tobacco [ca. 1868]
- The "Strong" government 1869-1877--The "weak" government 1877-1881 / J.A. Wales [1880]

Reconstruction / eng. by J.L. Giles, N.Y.; printed by F[ran]cis Ratellier, 171 Broadway, N.Y. [ca. 1867]
The reconstruction policy of Congress, as illustrated in California [1867]

Mending the family kettle [1866]

Mississippi Ku-Klux in the disguises in which they were captured [1872]

Shall we call home our troops? "We intend to beat the negro in the battle of life & defeat means one thing--EXTERMINATION" - Birmingham (Alabama) News [1875]
The national Republican., October 10, 1867, Image 1  [1867]

Swing low, sweet chariot by Fisk University Jubilee Quartet  [1909]

Grant's last outrage in Louisiana / J. Keppler.  [1875]

Jubilee Singers, Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn.  [ca. 1870-1880]
Joint Resolution Submitting 13th Amendment to the States; signed by Abraham Lincoln and Congress - Transcription [1865]. See the lesson plan for The Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment.

"This is a white man's government" "We regard the Reconstruction Acts (so called) of Congress as usurpations, and unconstitutional, revolutionary, and void" - Democratic Platform / [1868]

"Glory to God! The Constitutional Amendment Passed the House by a Vote of 119 to 56," Fremont Journal. (Fremont, OH), February 3, 1865. [1865]

"The first vote" / AW [monogram]; drawn by A.R. Waud. [1867]

"Glory to God! The Constitutional Amendment Passed the House by a Vote of 119 to 56," Fremont Journal. (Fremont, OH), February 3, 1865. [1865]

"This is a white man's government" "We regard the Reconstruction Acts (so called) of Congress as usurpations, and unconstitutional, revolutionary, and void" - Democratic Platform / [1868]
Scenes in Memphis, Tennessee, during the riot [1866]

Leaders of the Democratic Party [1868]

President Andrew Johnson pardoning Rebels at the White House [1865]

The Senate as a court of impeachment for the trial of Andrew Johnson [1868]

Presidential Andrew Johnson, Pres. U.S. [ca. 1866]

The Athens post., October 19, 1874, "Southern Troubles and the Prospects of Reconstruction." [1874]

Parson Brownlow [between 1860 and 1875].

Daily Ohio statesman., May 16, 1868, Image 1 [1868] (Impeachment Article)

Ohio Statesman. [1868]
The 1877 Presidential Election

The political farce of 1876  [ca. 1877]

Counting the electoral vote - David Dudley Field objects to the vote of Florida  [1877]

Roll along, roll along, shout the campaign battle song  [1876]

National Democratic chart, 1876--For president, Samuel J. Tilden, for vice president, Thomas A. Hendricks  [ca. 1876]

Rutherford B. Hayes  [ca. 1879]
CITATIONS: Reconstruction

Teachers: Providing these primary source replicas without source clues may enhance the inquiry experience for students. This list of citations is supplied for reference purposes to you and your students. We have followed the Chicago Manual of Style format, one of the formats recommended by the Library of Congress, for each entry below, minus the access date. The access date for each of these entries is 4/17/15.


Reconstruction (1865-1877)


“Mississippi Ku Klux in the disguises in which they were captured.” Engraving. 1872. From Library of Congress. Miscellaneous Items in High Demand. [http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2006687376/]


Nast, Thomas. “‘This is a white man's government’ ‘We regard the Reconstruction Acts (so called) of Congress as usurpations, and unconstitutional, revolutionary, and void’ - Democratic Platform /” Engraving. 1868. From Library of Congress. Miscellaneous Items in High Demand. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/98513794/

The 1877 Presidential Election


