

Chapter Six: Reconstruction

“With malice towards none, with charity for all. Let us bind the nation’s wounds”

Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, 1865

In 1865, the Civil War was over, but it had left 360,000 Union soldiers and 258,000 Confederate soldiers dead. A lot more were wounded. While the North had its factories, farms, and cities intact, much of the South was left in ruins. Plantation owners went bankrupt, banks and businesses failed.

Newly freed slaves found problems and were homeless. Many lived in camps established by the Union army, but it was difficult to provide them with sufficient food.

So the South had to be rebuilt. But how could this be done?

Rebuilding the Nation Through Reconstruction:

Northern leaders now took the responsibility to consider the rebuilding of the Union. A group of Radical Republicans had different views from Lincoln’s over what was called “Reconstruction”. This was a plan by which the Confederate States would be readmitted to the Union.

Radicals felt that the Confederate States had lost their statehood by seceding; they simply were “conquered provinces” without state governments under the control of Congress. However, for Lincoln it was different because he thought that the states had never left the Union since they did not have that right.

Reconstruction Plans:

1. Lincoln’s 10% Plan:

In December 1863, he presented his plan for reconstruction based on his constitutional authority to grant pardons.

Lincoln would pardon any Southerner, except high Confederate leaders, who took an oath of loyalty to the Constitution and the Union. As soon as 10% of people among those who had voted in 1860 in any state took the oath of loyalty and accepted emancipation, that state could set up a government and be welcomed back into the Union.

However, many Republicans, both Radicals and Moderates, disliked 10 % plan, considering it too lenient. They thought that a severe plan had to be applied. They rejected Lincoln’s plan that was carried out in the States of Tennessee, Arkansas and Louisiana.

In July 1864, Congress passed a harsher plan proposed by Congressmen Benjamin Wade and Henry W. Davis. The Wade-Davis Bill called for a majority of those who had voted in 1860 to declare loyalty to the Union before they could be readmitted. Those who had voluntarily borne arms against the U.S. could not participate in framing the new state constitutions. In addition, states should abolish slavery and bar Confederate officials from holding office.

However, Lincoln refused to sign the bill, especially because of the slavery question, which he thought should be ended by an amendment to the Constitution.

Six weeks after his second Inaugural Address in March 1864, Lincoln was assassinated. His Vice-president, Andrew Johnson, succeeded him as President. Though a Southern Democrat, Johnson had declared that “treason must be made infamous and traitors must be impoverished”, he ended by adopting Lincoln’s plan.

2. Andrew Johnson’s Plan:

In May 1865, Johnson recognised Louisiana, Tennessee, Arkansas and Virginia. The he organised temporary governments for the remaining seven states. They would be readmitted to the Union once they ratified the 13th amendment, rejected their acts of secession, and refused to acknowledge war debts. He also offered amnesty to former Confederates willing to pledge their loyalty to the Union.

Throughout the summer of the same year, Southern provisional governments met to consider Johnson’s terms:

- Mississippi would not ratify the 13th amendment.
- South Carolina and Mississippi would not cancel their war debts.

-A few States would not consider rejecting their acts of secession.

Notwithstanding, Johnson accepted those States as reconstructed whose new legislatures were meeting to pass laws defining the new status of the freedmen. The Black Codes granted blacks some minor rights but prevented them from their basic ones.

The Codes rallied Moderate Republicans behind the Radicals, giving them a congressional majority to oppose Johnson's plan. Congress refused to seat the newly elected Southern Congressmen and instead devoted itself to create its own reconstruction programme.

3. Radical Reconstruction:

In February 1866, Congress extended the life of the Freedmen's Bureau, established the previous year to care for the newly freed slaves. Then, to protect blacks against the Black Codes, it passed the Civil Rights Bill, granting blacks citizenship and outlawed discrimination based on race and colour. However, Johnson vetoed the bill because he declared that States not the federal Congress should manage the black issue.

In the mid-term congressional elections, Republicans gained a 2/3 majority in both Houses and were now in a strong position to override Johnson's veto and apply their reconstruction.

In March 1867, Congress passed the Reconstruction Act, consisting of the following points:

- it suspended the governments of the 10 unreconstructed States in the South.
- the South was divided into 5 military districts.
- in each district, a U.S. Army Commander would oversee the formation of new governments.
- blacks and loyal whites would be registered to vote. They would choose delegates to state conventions to write new constitutions, guaranteeing black suffrage.
- these new state governments would have to ratify the 14th amendment to be readmitted to the Union.

Some Southern states protested, declaring the Act unconstitutional, but the Supreme Court gave them no support. Over the next four years, the States were readmitted one after the other, applying the Radicals' plan.

4. Impeachment of Johnson:

However, Radicals feared that President Johnson, being the Commander-in-Chief, might still block their plan since it provided for military supervision. So, in 1867, Congress passed two important laws: the Command of the Army Act and the Tenure of the Office Act. The first restricted the President's control of the Army by making him issue all military orders through the General of the Army, and the second prevented him from dismissing any appointed official who had been approved by the Senate.

In February 1868, Johnson decided to test the Tenure of Office Act by dismissing this Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. The Radicals reacted quickly. The House voted to impeach Johnson because he had violated a federal law. Between March and May 1868, he was tried before the Senate but escaped impeachment by one vote. He would end his term with much limited powers.

Useful Definitions:

Tenant Famers: workers who farmed parcels of the owner's plantation with their own tools and seeds; rent was paid in cash or crop.

Sharecroppers: workers farmed the land and the owner provided food, supplies an even sometimes shelter. When the crop was sold, profits were shared.

Carpetbaggers: Northerners who came to the South with all their belongings in carpetbags (bags made from pieces of carpet), hoping to get economic opportunities.

Scalawags: Southern white Republican who had opposed secession; many were opportunists but there were also some distinguished figures who became convinced that the old South should change.