Robert Smalls and Black Politicians During Reconstruction

During the Reconstruction period immediately following the Civil War, African Americans struggled to become equal citizens of a democratic republic. They produced a number of remarkable leaders who showed that blacks were as capable as other Americans of voting, holding office, and legislating for a complex and rapidly changing society. Among these leaders was Robert Smalls of South Carolina. Although virtually forgotten by the time of his death in 1915, Smalls was perhaps the most famous and most widely respected southern black leader of the Civil War and Reconstruction era. His career reveals some of the main features of the African American experience during that crucial period.

Born a slave in 1839, Smalls had a white father whose identity has never been clearly established. But his white ancestry apparently gained him some advantages, and as a young man he was allowed to live and work independently, hiring his own time from a master who may have been his half-brother. Smalls worked as a sailor and trained himself to be a pilot in Charleston harbor. When the Union Navy blockaded Charleston in 1862, Smalls, who was then working on a Confederate steamship called the Planter, saw a chance to win his freedom in a particularly dramatic way. At three o’clock in the morning on May 13, 1862, when the white officers of the Planter were ashore, he took command of the vessel and its slave crew, sailed it out of the heavily fortified harbor, and surrendered it to the Union Navy. Smalls immediately became a hero to those antislavery Northerners who were seeking evidence that the slaves were willing and able to serve the Union. The Planter was turned into a Union transport, and Smalls was made its captain after being commissioned as an officer in the armed forces of the United States. During the remainder of the war, he rendered conspicuous and gallant service as captain and pilot of Union vessels off the coast of South Carolina.

Like a number of other African Americans who had fought valiantly for the Union, Smalls went on to a distinguished political career during Reconstruction, serving in the South Carolina constitutional convention, the state legislature, and several terms in the U.S. Congress. He was also a shrewd businessman and became the owner of extensive properties in Beaufort, South Carolina, and its vicinity. (His first purchase was the house of his former master, where he had spent his early years as a slave.) As the leading citizen of Beaufort during Reconstruction and for some years thereafter, he acted like many successful white Americans, acquiring both wealth and political power. The electoral organization he established resembled in some ways the well-oiled political machines being established in northern towns and cities. His was so effective that Smalls was able to control local government and get himself elected to Congress even after the election of 1876 had placed the state under the control of white conservatives bent on depriving blacks of political power. Organized mob violence defeated him in 1878, but he bounced back to win a
contested congressional election in 1880 by decision of Congress. He did not leave the House of Representatives for good until 1886, when he lost another contested election that had to be decided by Congress. It revealed the growing mood of the country that his white challenger was seated despite evidence of violence and intimidation against black voters.

In their efforts to defeat him, Smalls’ white opponents frequently charged that he had a hand in the corruption that was allegedly rampant in South Carolina during Reconstruction. But careful historical investigation shows that he was, by the standards of the time, an honest and responsible public servant. In the South Carolina convention of 1868 and later in the state legislature, he was a conspicuous champion of free and compulsory public education. In Congress, he fought for the enactment and enforcement of federal civil rights laws. Not especially radical on social questions, he sometimes bent over backward to accommodate what he regarded as the legitimate interests and sensibilities of South Carolina whites. Like other middle-class black political leaders in Reconstruction-era South Carolina, he can perhaps be faulted in hindsight for not doing more to help poor blacks gain access to land of their own. But in 1875, he sponsored congressional legislation that opened for purchase at low prices the land in his own district that had been confiscated by the federal government during the war. As a result, blacks were able to buy most of it, and they soon owned three-fourths of the land in Beaufort and its vicinity.

Smalls spent the later years of his life as U.S. collector of customs for the port of Beaufort, a beneficiary of the patronage that the Republican party continued to provide for a few loyal southern blacks. But the loss of real political clout for Smalls and men like him was one of the tragic consequences of the failure of Reconstruction.

For a brief period of years, politicians such as Robert Smalls exercised more power in the South than they would for another century. A series of political developments on the national and regional stage made Reconstruction “an unfinished revolution,” promising but not delivering true equality for newly freed African Americans. National party politics, shifting priorities among Northern Republicans, and white Southerners’ commitment to white supremacy, which was backed by legal restrictions as well as massive extra-legal violence against blacks, all combined to stifle the promise of Reconstruction. Yet the Reconstruction era also saw major transformations in American society in the wake of the Civil War—new ways of organizing labor and family life, new institutions within and outside of the government, and new ideologies regarding the role of institutions and government in social and economic life. Many of the changes begun during Reconstruction laid the groundwork for later revolutions in American life.

The President vs. Congress

The problem of how to reconstruct the Union was one of the most difficult challenges ever faced by American policymakers. The Constitution provided no firm guidelines, and once emancipation became a northern war aim, the problem was compounded by a new issue: How far should the federal government go to secure freedom and civil rights for four million former slaves?

The debate that evolved led to a major political crisis. Advocates of a minimal Reconstruction policy favored quick restoration of the Union with no protection for the freed slaves beyond the prohibition of slavery. Proponents of a more radical policy wanted readmission of the southern states to be dependent on guarantees that “loyal” men would replace the Confederate elite and that blacks would acquire some of the basic rights of American citizenship. The White House favored the minimal approach, while Congress came to endorse the more radical policy. The resulting struggle between Congress and the chief executive was the most serious clash between two branches of government in the nation’s history.

Wartime Reconstruction

Tension between the president and Congress over how to reconstruct the Union began during the war. Although Lincoln did not set forth a final and comprehensive plan, he did indicate that he favored a lenient and conciliatory policy toward Southerners who would give up the struggle and repudiate slavery. In December 1863, he offered a full pardon to all Southerners (with the exception of certain classes of Confederate leaders) who would take an oath of allegiance to the Union and acknowledge the legality of emancipation. This Ten Percent Plan provided that once 10 percent or more of the voting population of any occupied state had taken the oath, they were authorized to set up a loyal government. By 1864, Louisiana and Arkansas had established fully functioning Unionist governments.

Lincoln’s policy was meant to shorten the war by offering a moderate peace plan. It was also intended to further his emancipation policy by insisting that the new governments abolish slavery. When constitutional conventions operating under the 10 percent plan in Louisiana and Arkansas dutifully abolished slavery in 1864, emancipation came closer to being irreversible.
But Congress was unhappy with the president’s reconstruction experiments and in 1864 refused to seat the Unionists elected to the House and Senate from Louisiana and Arkansas. A minority of congressional Republicans—the fiercely antislavery Radical Republicans—favored strong protection for black civil rights and provision for their franchise as a precondition for the readmission of southern states. A larger group of moderates also opposed Lincoln’s plan, but they did so primarily because they did not trust the repentant Confederates.

Also disturbing Congress was a sense that the president was exceeding his authority by using executive powers to restore the Union. Lincoln operated on the theory that secession, being illegal, did not place the Confederate states outside the Union in a constitutional sense. Since individuals and not states had defied federal authority, the president could use his pardoning power to certify a loyal electorate, which could then function as the legitimate state government. The dominant view in Congress, however, was that the southern states had forfeited their place in the Union and that it was up to Congress to decide when and how they would be readmitted.

After refusing to recognize Lincoln’s 10 percent governments, Congress passed a Reconstruction bill of its own in July 1864. Known as the Wade-Davis Bill, the legislation required that 50 percent of the voters take an oath of future loyalty before the restoration process could begin. Once this had occurred, those who could swear that they had never willingly supported the Confederacy could vote in an election for delegates to a constitutional convention. Lincoln exercised a pocket veto by refusing to sign the bill before Congress adjourned, angering many congressmen.

Congress and the president remained stalemated on the Reconstruction issue for the rest of the war. During his last months in office, however, Lincoln showed a willingness to compromise. But he died without clarifying his intentions, leaving historians to speculate on whether his quarrel with Congress would have escalated or been resolved. Given Lincoln’s record of political flexibility, the best bet is that he would have come to terms with the majority of his party.

**Andrew Johnson at the Helm**

Andrew Johnson, the man suddenly made president by an assassin’s bullet, attempted to put the Union back together on his own authority in 1865. But his policies eventually put him at odds with Congress and the Republican party and provoked a serious crisis in the system of checks and balances among the branches of the federal government.

Johnson’s approach to Reconstruction was shaped by his background. Born in dire poverty in North Carolina, he migrated as a young man to eastern Tennessee, where he worked as a tailor. Although poorly educated (he did not learn to write until adulthood), Johnson was an effective stump speaker who railed against the planter aristocracy. Entering politics as a Jacksonian Democrat, he became the political spokesman for Tennessee’s nonslaveholding whites.

He advanced from state legislator to congressman to governor and in 1857 was elected to the U.S. Senate.

When Tennessee seceded in 1861, Johnson was the only senator from a Confederate state who remained loyal to the Union and continued to serve in Washington. However, he was neither antislavery nor friendly to blacks. He wished that “every head of family in the United States had one slave to take the drudgery and menial service off his family.”

During the war, while acting as military governor of Tennessee, Johnson implemented Lincoln’s emancipation policy as a means of destroying the power of the hated planter class rather than as a recognition of black humanity. He was chosen as Lincoln’s running mate in 1864 in order to strengthen the ticket. No one expected that this southern Democrat and fervent white supremacist would ever become president.

Some Radical Republicans initially welcomed Johnson’s ascent. Like the Radicals themselves, he was loyal to the Union and believed that ex-Confederates should be treated severely. He seemed more likely than Lincoln to punish southern “traitors” and prevent them from regaining political influence. Only gradually did Johnson and the Republican majority in Congress drift apart.

The Reconstruction policy that Johnson initiated on May 29, 1865, created some uneasiness among the Radicals, but most other Republicans were willing to give it a chance. Johnson placed North Carolina and eventually other states under appointed provisional governors mainly chosen from among prominent southern politicians who had opposed the secession movement and had rendered no conspicuous service to the Confederacy. They were then responsible for calling constitutional conventions to elect “loyal” officeholders. Johnson’s plan was specially designed to prevent his longtime adversaries, the planter class, from participating in the reconstruction of southern state governments.

Johnson urged the conventions to declare the ordinances of secession illegal, repudiate the Confederate debt, and ratify the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery. After governments had been reestablished under constitutions meeting these conditions, the president assumed that the process of Reconstruction would be complete and that the ex-Confederate states would regain their full rights under the Constitution.

Many congressional Republicans were troubled by the work of the southern conventions, which balked at fully implementing Johnson’s recommendations. Furthermore, in no state was even limited black suffrage approved. Johnson, however, seemed eager to give southern white majorities a free hand in determining the civil and political status of freed slaves.

Republican uneasiness turned to disillusionment and anger when the state legislatures elected under the new constitutions proceeded to pass Black Codes subjecting the former slaves to a variety of special regulations and restrictions on their freedom. (For more on the Black Codes, see
p. 216.) To Radicals, the Black Codes looked suspiciously like slavery under a new guise.

The growing rift between the president and Congress came into the open in December when the House and Senate refused to seat the recently elected southern delegation. Instead of endorsing Johnson’s work and recognizing the state governments he had called into being, Congress established a joint committee, chaired by William Pitt Fessenden of Maine, to review Reconstruction policy and set further conditions for readmission of the seceded states.

**Congress Takes the Initiative**

The struggle over how to reconstruct the Union ended with Congress doing the job all over again. The clash between Johnson and Congress was a matter of principle and could not be reconciled. Johnson’s stubborn and prideful nature did not help his political cause. But the root of the problem was that he disagreed with the majority of Congress on what Reconstruction was supposed to accomplish. An heir of the Democratic states’ rights tradition, he wanted to restore the prewar federal system as quickly as possible, except for the prohibition on slavery and secession.

Most Republicans wanted firm guarantees that the old southern ruling class would not regain regional power and national influence by devising new ways to subjugate blacks. They favored a Reconstruction policy that would give the federal government authority to limit the political role of ex-Confederates and provide some protection for black citizenship.

In this cartoon, President Andrew Johnson (left) and Thaddeus Stevens, the Radical Republican congressman from Pennsylvania, are depicted as train engineers in a deadlock on the tracks. Indeed, neither Johnson nor Stevens would give way on his plans for Reconstruction.
Except for a few extreme Radicals, Republican leaders were not convinced that blacks were inherently equal to whites. They were certain, however, that all citizens should have the same basic rights and opportunities. Principle coincided easily with political expediency; southern blacks were likely to be loyal to the Republican party that had emancipated them and thus increase that party’s political power in the South.

The disagreement between the president and Congress became irreconcilable in early 1866 when Johnson vetoed two Republican-supported bills. The first bill extended the life of the *Freedmen's Bureau*—a temporary agency charged with providing former slaves with relief, legal help, and educational and employment assistance. The second, a civil rights bill, was intended to nullify the detested Black Codes and guarantee “equal benefit of all laws.”

The vetoes shocked moderate Republicans, who had expected Johnson to accept the relatively modest measures. Congress promptly passed the Civil Rights Act over Johnson’s veto, signifying that the president was now hopelessly at odds with most of the congressmen from what was supposed to be his own party.

Johnson soon revealed that he intended to abandon the Republicans and place himself at the head of a new conservative party uniting the small minority of Republicans who supported him with a reviving Democratic party that was rallying behind his Reconstruction policy. As the elections of 1866 neared, Johnson stepped up his criticism of Congress.

Meanwhile, the Republican majority on Capitol Hill passed the *Fourteenth Amendment*. This, the most important of the constitutional amendments, gave the federal government responsibility for guaranteeing equal rights under the law to all Americans. The major section defined national citizenship for the first time as extending to “all persons born or naturalized in the United States.” The states were prohibited from abridging the rights of American citizens and could neither “deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person . . . equal protection of the laws.” The amendment was sent to the states with an implied understanding that Southerners would be readmitted to Congress only if their states ratified it.

The congressional elections of 1866 served as a referendum on the Fourteenth Amendment. With the support of Johnson, all the southern states except Tennessee rejected the amendment. But bloody race riots in Memphis and New Orleans and maltreatment of blacks throughout the South made it painfully clear that southern state governments were failing abysmally to protect the “life, liberty, or property” of the ex-slaves.

Johnson further weakened his cause by campaigning for candidates who supported his policies. His undignified speeches and his inflexibility enraged northern voters. The Republican majority in Congress increased to a solid two-thirds in both houses, and the radical wing of the party gained strength at the expense of moderates and conservatives.

### Congressional Reconstruction Plan Enacted

Congress was now in a position to implement its own plan for Reconstruction. In 1867 and 1868, it passed a series of acts that reorganized the South. Generally referred to as Radical Reconstruction, these measures actually represented a compromise between genuine Radicals and the more moderate Republicans.

Consistent radicals, such as Charles Sumner of Massachusetts and Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, wanted to reshape southern society before readmitting ex-Confederates to the Union. Their program required an extended period of military rule, confiscation and redistribution of large landholdings among freedmen, and federal aid for schools that would educate blacks for citizenship. But the majority of Republican congressmen found such a program unacceptable because it broke with American traditions of federalism and regard for property rights.

### Reconstruction Amendments, 1865–1870

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The First Reconstruction Act, passed over Johnson’s veto on March 2, 1867, placed the South under military rule—but only for a short period. The act opened the way for the readmission of any state that framed and ratified a new constitution providing for black suffrage. Since blacks (but not ex-Confederates) were allowed to participate in this process, Republicans thought they had found a way to ensure that “loyal men” would dominate the new governments.

Radical Reconstruction was based on the dubious assumption that once blacks had the vote, they would have the power to protect themselves against the efforts of white supremacists to deny them their rights. The Reconstruction Acts thus signaled a retreat from the true Radical position that a sustained use of federal authority was needed to complete the transition from slavery to freedom and prevent the resurgence of the South’s old ruling class.

Even so, congressional Reconstruction did have a radical aspect. It strongly endorsed black suffrage. The principle that even the poorest and most underprivileged should have access to the ballot box was bold and innovative. The problem was how to enforce it under conditions then existing in the postwar South.

President Johnson was unalterably opposed to the congressional Reconstruction program, and he did everything within his power to prevent its full implementation. Congress responded by passing laws designed to limit presidential authority over Reconstruction matters. One of the measures was the Tenure of Office Act, requiring Senate approval for the removal of cabinet officers and other officials whose appointment had needed the consent of the Senate. Another measure sought to limit Johnson’s authority to issue military orders.

Johnson objected vigorously to the restrictions on the grounds that they violated the constitutional doctrine of the separation of powers. Faced with Johnson’s opposition, some congressmen began to call for his impeachment. When Johnson tried to discharge Secretary of War Edwin Stanton—the only Radical in his cabinet—the impeachment forces grew.

In January 1868, Johnson ordered General Grant to take over Stanton’s job as head of the War Department. But Grant had his eye on the Republican presidential nomination and refused to defy Congress. Johnson then appointed General Lorenzo Thomas. Vexed by this apparent violation of the Tenure of Office Act, the House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly to impeach the president, and he was placed on trial before the Senate.

Johnson narrowly avoided conviction and removal from office when the impeachment effort fell one vote short of the necessary two-thirds. This outcome resulted in part from a skillful defense. Responding to the charge that Johnson had deliberately violated the Tenure of Office Act, the defense contended that the law did not apply to the removal of Stanton because he had been appointed by Lincoln.
The prosecution was more concerned that Johnson had abused the powers of his office in an effort to sabotage the congressional Reconstruction policy. Obstructing the will of the legislative branch, they claimed, was sufficient grounds for conviction. The Republicans who broke ranks to vote for acquittal feared that removal of a president for essentially political reasons would threaten the constitutional balance of powers and open the way to legislative supremacy over the executive. In addition, more conservative Republicans opposed the man who, as president pro tem of the Senate, would have succeeded Johnson, Ohio Senator Benjamin Wade.

The impeachment episode helped create an impression in the public mind that the Radicals were ready to turn the Constitution to their own use to gain their objectives. But on the whole the Radicals had a good case.

Their failure to remove Johnson from office embarrassed congressional Republicans, but the episode did ensure that Reconstruction in the South would proceed as the majority in Congress intended. During the trial, Johnson helped influence the verdict by pledging to enforce the Reconstruction Acts, and he held to this promise during his remaining months in office.

Reconstructing Southern Society

The Civil War left the South devastated, demoralized, and destitute. Slavery was dead, but what this meant for future relationships between whites and blacks was still in doubt. Most whites were determined to restrict the freedmen’s rights, and many blacks were just as set on achieving real independence. For blacks, the acquisition of land, education, and the vote seemed the best means of achieving their goal. The thousands of Northerners who went south after the war for economic or humanitarian reasons hoped to extend Yankee “civilization” to what they viewed as a barbarous region. For most of them, this reformation required the aid of the freedmen.

The struggle of these groups to achieve their conflicting goals bred chaos, violence, and instability. It was not the ideal setting for an experiment in interracial democracy. When federal support faltered, the forces of reaction and white supremacy were unleashed.

Reorganizing Land and Labor

The Civil War scarred the southern landscape and wrecked its economy. Many plantations were ruined, and several major cities, including Atlanta and Richmond, were gutted by fire. Most factories were dismantled or destroyed, and long stretches of railroad were torn up.

Nor was there adequate investment capital for rebuilding. The substantial wealth represented by Confederate currency and bonds had melted away, and emancipation of the slaves had divested the propertied classes of their most valuable and productive assets. According to some estimates, the South’s per capita wealth in 1865 was only about half what it had been in 1860.

Recovery could not even begin until a new labor system replaced slavery. The lack of capital hindered the rebuilding of plantations, and most Americans assumed that southern prosperity would depend on plantation-grown cotton. In addition, southern whites believed that blacks would work only under compulsion, and freedmen resisted labor conditions that recalled slavery.

Blacks strongly preferred to be small independent farmers rather than plantation laborers. For a time, they had reason to hope that the federal government would support their ambitions. Some 40-acre land grants were given by federal authorities to freedmen. By July 1865, forty thousand black farmers were at work on 300,000 acres of what they thought would be their own land.

But for most of them, the dream of “40 acres and a mule” was not to be realized. Neither President Johnson nor most congressmen favored a program of land confiscation and redistribution. Consequently, the vast majority of blacks in physical possession of small farms failed to acquire title and were left with little or no prospect of becoming landowners.

Despite their poverty and landlessness, ex-slaves were reluctant to settle down and commit themselves to wage labor for their former masters. As the end of 1865 drew nearer, many freedmen had still not signed up for the coming season; anxious planters feared that they were plotting to seize the land by force. Within a few weeks, however, most of the holdouts signed for the best terms they could get. The most common form of agricultural employment in 1866 was contract labor. Under this system, workers committed themselves for a year in return for fixed wages. Although blacks occasionally received help from the Freedmen’s Bureau, more often than not they were worked hard and paid little, and the contracts normally protected the employers more than the employees.

Growing up alongside the contract system and eventually displacing it was the alternative capital-labor relationship of sharecropping—the right to work a small piece of land independently in return for a fixed share of the crop produced on it, usually one-half. A shortage of labor gave the freedmen enough leverage to force this arrangement on planters who were unwilling, but many landowners found it advantageous because it did not require much capital and forced the tenant to share the risks of crop failure or a fall in cotton prices.

Blacks initially viewed sharecropping as a step up from wage labor in the direction of landownership. But during the 1870s, this form of tenancy evolved into a new kind of servitude. Croppers had to live on credit until their cotton was sold, and planters or merchants seized the chance to “provision” them at high prices and exorbitant rates of interest. Soon croppers discovered that debts multiplied faster than profits. Furthermore, various methods were eventually devised to bind indebted tenants to a
single landlord for extended periods, although some economic historians argue that considerable movement was still possible.

**Black Codes: A New Name for Slavery?**
Meanwhile, African Americans in towns and cities found themselves living in an increasingly segregated society. The Black Codes of 1865 attempted to require separation of the races in public places and facilities; when most of the codes were overturned by federal authorities as violations of the Civil Rights Act of 1866, the same end was often achieved through private initiative and community pressure. Blacks found it almost impossible to gain admittance to most hotels, restaurants, and other privately owned establishments catering to whites. Although separate black, or “Jim Crow,” cars were not yet the rule on railroads, African Americans were often denied first-class accommodations. After 1868, black-supported Republican governments passed civil rights acts requiring equal access to public facilities, but little effort was made to enforce the legislation.

The Black Codes had other onerous provisions meant to control African Americans and return them to quasi-slavery. Most codes even made black unemployment a crime, which meant blacks had to make long-term contracts with white employers or be arrested for vagrancy. Others limited the rights to own property or engage in occupations other than those of servant or laborer. The codes were set aside by the actions of Congress, the military, and the Freedmen’s Bureau, but vagrancy laws remained in force across the South.

Furthermore, private violence and discrimination against blacks continued on a massive scale unchecked by state authorities. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of blacks were murdered by whites in 1865–1866, and few of the perpetrators were brought to justice. The imposition of military rule in 1867 was designed in part to protect former slaves from such violence and intimidation, but the task was beyond the capacity of the few thousand troops stationed in the South. When new constitutions were approved and states readmitted to the Union under the congressional plan in 1868, the problem became more severe. White opponents of Radical Reconstruction adopted systematic terrorism and organized mob violence to keep blacks from voting.

The freed slaves tried to defend themselves by organizing their own militia groups for protection and to assert their political rights. However, the militia groups were not powerful enough to overcome the growing power of the anti-Republican forces. As the military presence was progressively reduced, the new Republican regimes were left to fight a losing battle against armed white supremacists.

**Republican Rule in the South**
Hastily organized in 1867, the southern Republican party dominated the constitution making of 1868 and the regimes that came out of it. The party was an attempted coalition of three social groups: businessmen seeking aid for economic development, poor white farmers, and blacks. Although all three groups had different goals, their opposition to the old planter ruling class appeared to give them a basis for unity.

To be sure, the coalition faced difficulties even within its own ranks. Small farmers of the yeoman class had a bred-in-the-bone resistance to black equality. Conservative businessmen questioned costly measures for the elevation or relief of the lower classes of either race. In some states, astute Democratic politicians exploited the divisions by appealing to disaffected white Republicans.

But during the relatively brief period when they were in power in the South, the
Republicans made some notable achievements. They established (on paper at least) the South’s first adequate system of public education, democratized state and local government, and appropriated funds for an enormous expansion of public services and welfare responsibilities.

Important though it was, social and political reform took second place to the major effort that Republicans made to foster economic development and restore southern prosperity by subsidizing the construction of railroads and other internal improvements. Although it addressed the region’s real economic needs and was initially very popular, the policy of aiding railroads turned out disastrously. Extravagance, corruption, and the determination of routes based on political rather than sound economic considerations meant an increasing burden of public debt and taxation; the policy did not produce the promised payoff of reliable, cheap transportation. Subsidized railroads frequently went bankrupt, leaving the taxpayers holding the bag. When the Panic of 1873 almost bankrupted many southern state governments and railroad building came to an end, it was clear that the Republicans’ “gospel of prosperity” through state aid to private enterprise had failed miserably. Their political opponents, most of whom had originally favored these policies, now saw an opportunity to make gains by charging that Republicans had ruined the southern economy.

These activities were often accompanied by inefficiency, waste, and corruption. State debts and tax burdens rose enormously, mainly because governments had undertaken heavy new responsibilities but partly as a result of waste and graft. In short, the Radical regimes brought needed reforms to the South, but they were not always model governments.

Southern corruption, however, was not exceptional, nor was it a special result of the extension of suffrage to uneducated blacks, as critics of Radical Reconstruction have claimed. It was part of a national pattern during an era when private interests considered buying government contracts. Furthermore, the Freedmen’s Bureau made the new legal system punish couples who deviated from the habits and comfort of a child. "Ex-slaves struggled to win their children back from what often amounted to reenslavement for arbitrary reasons. Freed people challenged the apprenticeship system in county courts, and through the Freedmen’s Bureau.

While many former slaves lined up eagerly to formalize their marriages, many also retained their own definitions of marriage. Perhaps as many as 50 percent of ex-slaves chose not to marry legally, and whites criticized them heavily for it. African American leaders worried about this refusal to recognize as husband and wife people who cared for and supported one another without benefit of legal sanction. The new legal system punished couples who deviated from the legal norm through laws against bastardy, adultery, and fornication. Furthermore, the Freedmen’s Bureau made the marriage of freedpeople a priority so that husbands, rather than the federal government, would be legally responsible for families’ support.

Some ex-slaves used the courts to assert rights against white people as well as other blacks, suing over domestic violence, child support, assault, and debt. Freedwomen sued their husbands for desertion and alimony, in order to enlist the Freedman’s Bureau to help them claim property from men.

Freed people immediately flocked to create institutions that had been denied to them under slavery: churches, fraternal and benevolent associations, political organizations,
On either side of Frederick Douglass on this poster are two African American heroes of the Reconstruction era. Senator Blanche K. Bruce of Mississippi, on the left, was the first African American to be elected to a full term in the U.S. Senate. Senator Hiram R. Revels, also representing Mississippi, was elected to the Senate in 1870 to fill the seat previously occupied by Confederate President Jefferson Davis.

and schools. Many joined all-black denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal church, which provided freedom from white dominance and a more congenial style of worship. Black women formed all-black chapters of organizations such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and their own women’s clubs to oppose lynching and work for “uplift” in the black community.

A top priority for most ex-slaves was the opportunity to educate their children; the first schools for freed people were all-black institutions established by the Freedmen’s Bureau and various northern missionary societies. At the time, having been denied all education during the antebellum period, most blacks viewed separate schooling as an opportunity rather than as a form of discrimination. However, these schools were precursors to the segregated public school systems first instituted by Republican governments. Only in city schools of New Orleans and at the University of South Carolina were there serious attempts during Reconstruction to bring white and black students together in the same classrooms.

In a variety of ways, African American men and women during Reconstruction claimed freedom in the “private” realm as well as the public sphere, by claiming rights to their own families and building their own institutions. They did so despite the vigorous efforts of their former masters as well as the new government agencies to control their private lives and shape their new identities as husbands, wives, and citizens.

Retreat from Reconstruction

The era of Reconstruction began coming to an end almost before it started. Although it was only a scant three years from the end of the Civil War, the impeachment crisis of 1868 represented the high point of popular interest in Reconstruction issues. That year, Ulysses S. Grant was elected president. Many historians blame Grant for the corruption of his administration and for the inconsistency and failure of his southern policy. He had neither the vision nor the sense of duty to tackle the difficult challenges the nation faced. From 1868 on, political issues other than southern Reconstruction moved to the forefront of national politics, and the plight of African Americans in the South receded in white consciousness.

Rise of the Money Question

In the years immediately following the Civil War, the question of how to manage the nation’s currency and, more specifically, what to do about “greenbacks”—paper money issued during the war—competed with Reconstruction and corruption issues for public attention. Defenders of “sound” money, mostly financial interests in the East, wanted the greenbacks withdrawn from circulation and Civil War debts redeemed in specie payments (silver and gold). Opponents of this hard-money policy and the resulting deflation of the currency were mainly credit-hungry
Westerners and expansionist-minded manufacturers, known as **greenbackers**, who wanted to keep greenbacks in circulation. Both political parties had hard- and easy-money factions, preventing the money question from becoming a heated presidential election issue in 1868 and 1872.

But the Panic of 1873, led to agitation to inflate the currency by issuing more paper money. Debt-ridden farmers, who would be the backbone of the greenback movement for years to come, now joined the easy-money clamor for the first time. Responding to the money and credit crunch, Congress moved in 1874 to authorize a modest issue of new greenbacks, but Grant vetoed the bill. In 1875, Congress enacted the Specie Resumption Act, which provided for a gradual reduction of greenbacks leading to full resumption of specie payment by 1879. The act was interpreted as deflationary, and farmers and workers, who were already suffering from deflation, reacted with dismay and anger.

The Democratic party could not capitalize adequately on these sentiments because of the influence of its own hard-money faction, and in 1876, an independent Greenback party entered the national political arena. Greenbackers kept the money issue alive through the next decade.

**Final Efforts of Reconstruction**

The Republican effort to make equal rights for blacks the law of the land culminated in the Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870, which prohibited any state from denying a male citizen the right to vote because of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. Much to the displeasure of advocates of women’s rights, however, the amendment made no provision for woman suffrage. And states could still limit male suffrage by imposing literacy tests, property qualifications, or poll taxes allegedly applying to all racial groups; such devices would eventually be used to strip southern blacks of the right to vote. But the makers of the amendment did not foresee this result.

The Grant administration was charged with enforcing the amendment and protecting black voting rights in the reconstructed states. Since survival of the Republican regimes depended on black support, political partisanship dictated federal action, even though the North’s emotional and ideological commitment to black citizenship was waning.

Between 1868 and 1872, the main threat to southern Republican regimes came from the Ku Klux Klan and other secret societies bent on restoring white supremacy by intimidating blacks who sought to exercise their political rights. A grassroots vigilante movement, the Klan thrived on local initiative and gained support from whites of all social classes. Its secrecy, decentralization, popular support, and utter ruthlessness made it very difficult to suppress. Blacks who voted ran the risk of being verbally intimidated, whipped, or even murdered.

The methods were first used effectively in the presidential election of 1868. Terrorism by white supremacists cost Grant the electoral votes of Louisiana and Georgia. In Louisiana, political violence claimed hundreds of lives, and in Arkansas, more than two hundred Republicans were assassinated. Thereafter, Klan terrorism was directed mainly at Republican state governments. Insurrections broke out in Arkansas, Tennessee, North Carolina, and parts of South Carolina. In Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia, Klan activities helped undermine Republican control, thus allowing the Democrats to come to power in all those states by 1870.

Faced with the violent overthrow of the southern Republican party, Congress and the Grant administration were forced to act. A series of laws passed in 1870 and 1871 sought to enforce the Fifteenth Amendment by providing federal protection for black suffrage and authorizing use of the army against the Klan. Although the Force Acts, also known as the Ku Klux Klan Acts, did not totally destroy the Klan, the enforcement effort was vigorous enough to put a damper on hooded terrorism and ensure relatively fair and peaceful elections in 1872.

A heavy black turnout in the elections enabled the Republicans to hold on to power in most states of the Deep South, despite efforts of the Democratic-Conservative opposition to woo Republicans by taking moderate positions on racial and economic issues. This setback prompted the Democratic-Conservatives to make a significant change in their strategy and ideology. No longer did they try to take votes away from the Republicans by proclaiming support for black suffrage and government aid to business. Instead, they began to appeal openly to white supremacy and to the traditional Democratic agrarian hostility to governmental promotion of economic development. Consequently, they were able to bring back to the polls a portion of the white electorate, mostly small farmers, who had not been turning out because they were alienated by the leadership’s apparent concessions to Yankee ideas.

The new and more effective electoral strategy dovetailed with a resurgence of violence meant to reduce Republican—especially black Republican—voting. The new reign of terror differed from the previous Klan episode; its agents no longer wore masks but acted quite openly. They were effective because the northern public was increasingly disenchanted with federal intervention on behalf of what were widely viewed as corrupt and tottering Republican regimes. Grant used force in the South for the last time in 1874. When an unofficial militia in Mississippi instigated a series of bloody race riots prior to the state elections in 1875, Grant refused the governor’s request for federal troops. As a result, intimidation kept black voters away from the polls.

By 1876, Republicans held on to only three southern states—South Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida. Partly because of Grant’s hesitant and inconsistent use of presidential power but mainly because the northern electorate would no longer tolerate military action to sustain
Republican governments and black voting rights, Radical Reconstruction was falling into total eclipse.

**Spoilsmen vs. Reformers**

One reason Grant found it increasingly difficult to take strong action was the charge by reformers that his administration was propping up bad governments in the South for personal and partisan advantage. In some cases, the charges held a measure of truth.

The Republican party in the Grant era was rapidly losing the idealism and high purpose associated with the crusade against slavery. By the beginning of the 1870s, men who had been the conscience of the party had been replaced by a new breed of Republicans, such as Senator Roscoe Conkling of New York, whom historians have dubbed “spoilsmen” or “politicos.” More often than not, Grant sided with the spoilsmen of his party.

During Grant’s first administration, an aura of scandal surrounded the White House but did not directly implicate the president. In 1869, the financial buccaneer Jay Gould enlisted the aid of a brother-in-law of Grant’s to further a fantastic scheme to corner the gold market.

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**A LOOK AT THE PAST**

**Cartoon “Worse Than Slavery”**

Political cartoonist Thomas Nast offered his commentary on and critique of contemporary events through his cartoons in *Harper’s Weekly*, a popular magazine that had a circulation of more than one hundred thousand readers. This Nast cartoon, “Worse Than Slavery,” appeared in the magazine on October 24, 1874. Carefully examine the individuals and items depicted in the cartoon. Note that the phrase near the top of the drawing, “This is a white man’s government,” is a quotation from the 1868 Democratic Party platform. According to the cartoon, what conditions or events are “worse than slavery”? What view of Reconstruction policy does the cartoonist appear to be expressing?
Gould failed in the attempt, but he did manage to come away with a huge profit.

Grant’s first-term vice president, Schuyler Colfax of Indiana, was directly involved in the notorious Crédit Mobilier scandal. Crédit Mobilier was a construction company that actually served as a fraudulent device for siphoning off profits that should have gone to the stockholders of the Union Pacific Railroad, which was the beneficiary of massive federal land grants. To forestall government inquiry into this arrangement, Crédit Mobilier stock was distributed to influential congressmen. The whole business came to light just before the campaign of 1872.

Republicans who could not tolerate such corruption or had other grievances against the administration broke with Grant in 1872 and formed a third party committed to “honest government” and “reconciliation” between the North and the South. The Liberal Republicans, led initially by such high-minded reformers as Senator Carl Schurz of Missouri, endorsed reform of the civil service to curb the corruption-breeding patronage system and advocated strict laissez-faire economic policies, which meant low tariffs, an end to government subsidies for railroads, and hard money.

The Liberal Republicans’ national convention nominated Horace Greeley, editor of the respected New York Tribune newspaper. This was a curious and divisive choice, seeing that Greeley was at odds with the founder of the movement on the tariff question and indifferent to civil service reform. The Democrats also endorsed Greeley, mainly because he vowed to end Radical Reconstruction. Greeley, however, did not attract support and was soundly defeated by Grant.

Grant’s second administration bore out the reformers’ worst suspicions about corruption. In 1875, the public learned that federal revenue officials had conspired with distillers to defraud the government of millions of dollars in liquor taxes. Grant’s private secretary, Orville E. Babcock, was indicted as a member of the “Whiskey Ring” and was saved from conviction only by the president’s personal intervention. The next year, Grant’s secretary of war, William W. Belknap, was impeached by the House after an investigation revealed that he had taken bribes for the sale of Indian trading posts. He avoided a Senate conviction by leaving office before the trial.

There is no evidence that Grant profited personally from any of the misdeeds of his subordinates. Yet he is not entirely without blame for the corruption of his administration. He failed to take action against the malefactors, and even after their guilt had been clearly established, he tried to shield them from justice. Ulysses S. Grant was the only president between Jackson and Wilson to serve two full and consecutive terms. But unlike other chief executives so favored by the electorate, Grant is commonly regarded as a failure. Although the problems he faced would have challenged any president, the shame of Grant’s administration was that he made loyalty to old friends a higher priority than civil rights or sound economic principles.

Reunion and the New South

The end of Radical Reconstruction in 1877 opened the way to a reconciliation of North and South. But the costs of reunion were high for less privileged groups in the South. The civil and political rights of blacks, left unprotected, were stripped away by white supremacist regimes. Lower-class whites saw their interests sacrificed to those of capitalists and landlards. Despite the rhetoric hailing a prosperous “New South,” the region remained poor and open to exploitation by northern business interests.

The Compromise of 1877

The election of 1876 pitted Rutherford B. Hayes of Ohio, an honest Republican governor, against Governor Samuel J. Tilden of New York, a Democratic reformer. Honest government was apparently the electorate’s highest priority. When the returns came in, Tilden had clearly won the popular vote and seemed likely to win a narrow victory in the electoral college. But the result was placed in doubt when the returns from the three southern states still controlled by the Republicans were contested. If Hayes were to be awarded these three states, plus one contested electoral vote in Oregon, Republican strategists realized, he would triumph in the electoral college by a single vote.

The outcome of the election remained undecided for months. To resolve the impasse, Congress appointed a special electoral commission of fifteen members to determine who would receive the votes of the disputed states. The commission split along party lines and voted 8 to 7 to award Hayes the disputed states. But this decision still had to be ratified, and in the House there was strong Democratic opposition.

To ensure Hayes’s election, Republican leaders negotiated secretly with conservative southern Democrats, some of whom seemed willing to abandon their opposition if the last troops were withdrawn and “home rule” was restored to the South. Vague pledges of federal support for southern railroads and internal improvements were made, and Hayes assured southern negotiators that he had every intention of ending Reconstruction. Eventually, an informal bargain, dubbed the Compromise of 1877, was struck. Precisely what was agreed to and by whom remains a matter of dispute, but one thing at least was understood by both sides: Hayes would be president, and southern Republicans would be abandoned to their fate.

With southern Democratic acquiescence, the main opposition was overcome, and Hayes took the oath of office. He immediately ordered the army not to resist a Democratic takeover in South Carolina and Louisiana. Thus fell the last of the Radical governments.
“Redeeming” a New South

The men who came to power after the ending of Radical Reconstruction in one southern state after another are usually referred to as the Redeemers. Some were members of the Old South’s ruling planter class who had warmly supported secession and now sought to reestablish the old order with as few changes as possible. Others, of middle-class origin or outlook, favored commercial and industrial interests over agrarian groups and called for a New South, committed to diversified economic development. A third group consisted of professional politicians bending with the prevailing winds.

Rather than supporters of any single ideology or program, these leaders can perhaps best be understood as power brokers mediating among the dominant interest groups of the South in ways that served their own political advantage. In many ways, the “rings” that they established on the state and county levels were analogous to the political machines developing at the same time in northern cities.

They did, however, agree on and endorse two basic principles: laissez-faire and white supremacy. Laissez-faire, the notion that government should be limited and neutral in its economic activities, could unite planters, frustrated at seeing direct state support going to businessmen, and capitalist promoters, who had come to realize that low taxes and freedom from government regulation were even more advantageous than state subsidies. It soon became clear that the Redeemers responded only to privileged and entrenched interest groups, and offered little or nothing to tenants, small farmers, and working people. As

Perhaps no event better expresses the cruel and barbaric nature of the racism and white supremacy that swept the South after Reconstruction than lynching. Although lynchings were not confined to the South, most occurred there, and African American men were the most frequent victims. Here, two men lean out of a barn window above a black man who is about to be hanged. Others below prepare to set on fire the pile of hay at the victim’s feet. Lynchings were often public events, drawing huge crowds to watch the victim’s agonizing death.
SUPREME COURT DECISIONS AFFECTING BLACK CIVIL RIGHTS, 1875–1900

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Effects of Court’s Decisions</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Hall v. DeCuir</em> (1878)</td>
<td>Struck down Louisiana law prohibiting racial discrimination by “common carriers” (railroads, steamboats, buses). Declared the law a “burden” on interstate commerce, over which states had no authority.</td>
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<td><em>United States v. Harris</em> (1882)</td>
<td>Declared federal laws to punish crimes such as murder and assault unconstitutional. Declared such crimes to be the sole concern of local government. Ignored the frequent racial motivation behind such crimes in the South.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Civil Rights Cases</em> (1883)</td>
<td>Struck down Civil Rights Act of 1875. Declared that Congress may not legislate on civil rights unless a state passes a discriminatory law. Declared the Fourteenth Amendment silent on racial discrimination by private citizens.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Plessy v. Ferguson</em> (1896)</td>
<td>Upheld Louisiana statute requiring “separate but equal” accommodations on railroads. Declared that segregation is not necessarily discrimination.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Williams v. Mississippi</em> (1898)</td>
<td>Upheld state law requiring a literacy test to qualify for voting. Refused to find any implication of racial discrimination in the law, although it permitted illiterate whites to vote if they “understood” the Constitution. Using such laws, southern states rapidly disfranchised blacks.</td>
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Industrialization grew in the 1880s, Democratic regimes became increasingly accommodating to manufacturing interests and hospitable to agents of northern capital who were gaining control of the South’s transportation system and its extractive industries.

White supremacy was the principal rallying cry that initially brought the Redeemers to power. Once in office, they found that they could stay there by charging that opponents of ruling Democratic cliques were trying to divide the “white man’s party” and open the way for a return to “black domination.” Appeals to racism could also deflect attention away from the economic grievances of groups without political clout.

The new governments were more economical than those of Reconstruction, mainly because they cut back drastically on appropriations for schools and other needed public services. But they were scarcely more honest. Embezzlement of public funds and bribery of public officials continued.

The Redeemer regimes of the late 1870s and 1880s badly neglected the interests of small white farmers. Whites and blacks, were suffering from the notorious crop lien system, which gave the local merchants who advanced credit at high rates of interest during the growing season the right to take possession of the harvested crop on terms that buried farmers deeper and deeper in debt. As a result, increasing numbers of whites lost title to their homesteads and were reduced to tenancy.

The Rise of Jim Crow

African Americans bore the greatest hardships imposed by the new order. From 1876 through the first decade of the twentieth century, Southern states imposed a series of restrictions on black civil rights known as Jim Crow laws. While segregation and disfranchisement began as informal arrangements, they culminated in a legal regime of separation and exclusion that took firm hold in the 1890s.

The rise of Jim Crow in the political arena was especially bitter for Southern blacks who realized that only political power could ensure other rights. The Redeemers had promised, as part of the understanding that led to the end of federal intervention in 1877, to respect the rights of blacks as set forth in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. But when blacks tried to vote Republican in the “redeemed” states, they encountered renewed violence and intimidation. Blacks who withstood the threat of losing their jobs or being evicted from tenant farms if they voted for Republicans were visited at night and literally whipped into line. The message was clear: Vote Democratic, or vote not at all.

Furthermore, white Democrats now controlled the electoral machinery and were able to manipulate the black vote by stuffing ballot boxes, discarding unwanted votes, or reporting fraudulent totals. Some states also imposed complicated new voting requirements to discourage black participation. Full-scale disfranchisement did not occur until literacy tests and other legalized obstacles to voting were imposed in the period from 1890 to 1910, but by that time, less formal and comprehensive methods had already made a mockery of the Fifteenth Amendment.

Nevertheless, blacks continued to vote freely in some localities until the 1890s; a few districts, like the one Robert Smalls represented, even elected black Republicans to Congress during the immediate post-Reconstruction period. The last of these, Representative George H. White of North Carolina, served until 1901.

The dark night of racism that fell on the South after Reconstruction seemed to unleash all the baser impulses of human nature. Between 1889 and 1899, an average of 187 blacks were lynched every year. Those convicted of petty crimes against property were often little better off; many
were condemned to be leased out to private contractors whose brutality rivaled that of the most sadistic slaveholders. The convict-lease system enabled entrepreneurs, such as mine owners and extractors of forest products, to rent prisoners from the state and treat them as they saw fit. Unlike slaveowners, they suffered no loss when a forced laborer died from overwork. Finally, the dignity of blacks was cruelly affronted by the wave of segregation laws passed around the turn of the century, to some extent a white reaction to the refusal of many blacks to submit to voluntary segregation of railroads, streetcars, and other public facilities.

The North and the federal government did little or nothing to stem the tide of racial oppression in the South. A series of Supreme Court decisions between 1878 and 1898 gutted the Reconstruction amendments and the legislation passed to enforce them, leaving blacks virtually defenseless against political and social discrimination.

**Conclusion: The “Unfinished Revolution”**

By the late 1880s, the wounds of the Civil War were healing, and white Americans were seized by the spirit of sectional reconciliation. “Reunion” was becoming a cultural as well as political reality. But whites could come back together only because Northerners had tacitly agreed to give Southerners a free hand in their efforts to reduce blacks to a new form of servitude. The “outraged, heart-broken, bruised, and bleeding” African Americans of the South paid the heaviest price for sectional reunion. Reconstruction remained, in the words of historian Eric Foner, an “unfinished revolution.” It would be another century before African Americans rose up once more to demand full civil and political rights.