

Name _____

Date _____



Reconstruction

For just over a decade following the American Civil War, political leaders attempted to redress the inequities of slavery and the actions of the former Confederate states. And while some significant gains were made, in 1877, the Reconstruction era came to an abrupt end.

After the Civil War ended, the US was left with some very serious questions. How would newly emancipated Black Americans be integrated into mainstream society? And how would the 11 states of the former Confederacy be readmitted to the Union? President Abraham Lincoln advocated for a restrained approach, supporting limited Black suffrage and offering full pardons to former Confederates who disavowed slavery. But after his assassination in 1865, the new president, Andrew Johnson, took an even more conservative stance.

Though loyal to the Union, Johnson, a Tennessee Democrat, was also sympathetic to the South. While former Confederate states were required to ratify the new 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery, Johnson ordered all seized land returned to its original owners, once again concentrating economic power in the hands of White citizens. He also allowed Southern states to form their own new state governments and elect legislators to send to Washington. Unsurprisingly, these new leaders bore a striking resemblance to those of the former Confederacy: exclusively White and intensely racist.

The radical Republicans who dominated Congress at the time were strongly opposed to Johnson's tepid approach. They believed the Civil War had been fought for equal rights, and the only way to guarantee those rights was to exert federal control over the former Confederate states. To that end, they passed the Civil Rights Bill, which affirmed that all people born in the US are citizens and entitled to equal protections under the law. Johnson immediately vetoed it, but Congress managed to overturn his veto with a two-thirds majority vote. Then, they went even further by adopting the 14th Amendment, which reiterates the principles outlined in the earlier bill. Adding to the Constitution is generally a long and difficult process, but this amendment passed easily, since the Republicans in Congress had thus far refused to even seat the new Southern legislators supported by Johnson. In order to be readmitted to the Union, the former Confederate

states, which had been divided into five military-controlled districts, would be required to ratify the 14th Amendment.

By the time the election of 1868 rolled around, Johnson was despised by just about everyone. Ulysses S. Grant, a Republican and celebrated Union general, won the presidency. Grant was a staunch supporter of civil rights for Black Americans and worked with Congressional Republicans to pass the 15th Amendment, which prohibited states from denying suffrage, the right to vote, based on race. Over the next several years, about 2,000 Black men would hold political office, easing discrimination in social services and the criminal justice system. Galvanized by these gains, Black Americans organized to demand further reforms—staging sit-ins to integrate public transit and agitating for better treatment by labor unions.

But the racism that had ignited the Civil War in the first place was far from subsiding. With the passage of the 15th Amendment, Southern states saw a clear loophole. They began tying voting rights to other requirements, like literacy and land ownership—both things that Black people had been systematically deprived of for centuries. Racist violence also surged during this time, with the formation of White supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. Black men, who consistently voted Republican, were forced out of the electoral process through these new discriminatory laws and voter intimidation campaigns, allowing White Democrats to seize control of Southern state governments once again. To make matters worse, the US entered an economic recession in 1873, and Northern legislators lost interest in fighting for Black civil rights.

But the final nail in the coffin for Reconstruction came in 1876 with the hotly contested presidential election between Rutherford B. Hayes and Samuel J. Tilden. With neither candidate winning a majority of electoral votes, a Congressional committee handed the presidency to Hayes, a Northern Republican. To appease the committee Democrats, however, Hayes agreed to withdraw all federal troops from the South. Former Confederate states were once again free to restrict the rights of Black Americans, which they did by passing Jim Crow laws, repealing suffrage, and allowing racist mobs to terrorize Black communities. This climate of institutional racism would not be legally overturned until the 1960s, when the civil rights movement abolished segregation and discrimination in public life.