The term **Reconstruction Era**, in the context of the history of the United States, has two senses: the first covers the complete history of the entire country from 1865 to 1877 following the American Civil War (1861 to 1865); the second sense focuses on the attempted transformation of the Southern United States from 1863 to 1877, as directed by Congress, with the reconstruction of state and society.

Three visions of Civil War memory appeared during Reconstruction: the reconciliationist vision, which was rooted in coping with the death and devastation the war had brought; the white supremacist vision, which included terror and violence; and the emancipationist vision, which sought full freedom, citizenship and Constitutional equality for African Americans.

The Union victory in the Civil War in 1865 may have given some 4 million slaves their freedom, but the process of rebuilding the South during the Reconstruction period (1865-1877) introduced a new set of significant challenges. Under the administration of President Andrew Johnson in 1865 and 1866, new southern state legislatures passed restrictive “black codes” to control the labor and behavior of former slaves and other African Americans. Outrage in the North over these codes eroded support for the approach known as Presidential Reconstruction and led to the triumph of the more radical wing of the Republican Party. During Radical Reconstruction, which began in 1867, newly enfranchised blacks gained a voice in government for the first time in American history, winning election to southern state legislatures and even to the U.S. Congress. In less than a decade, however, reactionary forces—including the Ku Klux Klan—would reverse the changes wrought by Radical Reconstruction in a violent backlash that restored white supremacy in the South.

The South had been badly damaged and close to collapsing in other ways as well. The North had been able to blockade Southern ports to prevent import of food and war materials from England. The blockade also made the South’s cotton almost worthless. By the time the war ended, Confederate banks were ruined, its factories destroyed, its people desolate, homeless, and starved, and its slaves freed. The South had fought to its last ounce of strength and collapsed in defeat.

The most serious price paid by the warring nation was the loss of human lives. The North suffered 110,000 battle deaths and another 250,000 killed from other causes. The South had lost a total of 250,000 men. Nearly one out of four soldiers who fought on either side was killed. Twice as many Americans died during the Civil War as died in World War II; and eleven times as many as died in Vietnam.

It is impossible to make a correct guess as to the cost of the Civil War in dollars. No one knows exactly how much production was lost in the four years of fighting, or how much furniture production was lost by the death and serious injury of 750,000 people. Nor can anybody add up the loss in property, homes, livestock, and factory production. The costs of the war to the taxpayers
was horrendous. That sum comes to 20 billion dollars at a time when the total national production for one year was only about 4.9 billion dollars. A comparative loss today would top $15 billion.

In 1865, the triumphant federal government faced the problem of restoring the eleven confederate states to the Union. The process is known as Reconstruction (1865-1877). But is reconstruction even possible? Reconstruction was not something that started in 1865: it was an issue from 1861 onwards; it was really what the war was all about.

**The Problem of Reconstruction**

- No precedents
- Fundamental disagreements about the basic issue of bringing the seceded states back into the Union
- Ironically, the ex-Confederate states now claimed they had never legally been out of it
- Equally ironic was the fact that many Republicans, who had insisted the Southern states could not secede, now claimed that they had in fact seceded and had thus reverted to the condition of territories and should be subject to Congress’s authority

There were other important matters to be resolved

- A feeling of loyalty to the Union had to be restored among white Southerners
- The war-torn economy of the South had to be rebuilt
- The newly freed slaves had to be given the opportunity to enjoy their freedom
- How to defeated Southerners live peacefully and respectfully alongside former slaves
- On what terms should the states be reunited to the Union?
- How should Southerners be treated?
- Should Congress or the president decide Reconstruction policy?

**1. Lincoln and Reconstruction**

- Lincoln saw Reconstruction as executive not a legislative function
- Strategic aim was to restore the Union as quickly as possible.
- Policy was to install military governors in those areas that had been partially reconquered
- Hoped that military government would only last until enough loyal citizens could form a new state government
- **The 10 per cent plan** - In 1863, Lincoln offered pardon to white Southerners who would take an oath of allegiance to the Union
- When 10 % had taken the oath a new state government could be established, provided the state then accepted the abolition of slavery
2. **Republican opposition**

Radical Republicans disagreed with Lincoln

- They wanted to impose a harsh settlement on the South, punishing the main rebels by confiscating their land
- Punishment of Confederate leaders
- They believed that ex-slaves should have the same rights as white Americans
- Radicals feared that Democratic Party would again become a major threat – there were two ways to prevent this
- Ensure that ex-slaves could vote
- Disenfranchise large numbers of rebels

**The Wade-Davis Bill**

- In April 1864, Louisiana had drawn up a constitution banning slavery, but not giving blacks the right to vote; over 10% voted in favor of the constitution and Lincoln immediately recognized the new Louisiana government, however Congress rejected and refused admission to its two senators
- Henry Davis and Benjamin Wade now introduced a bill requiring not 10% but 50% of the people
- In contrast to President Abraham Lincoln's more lenient Ten Percent Plan, the bill made re-admittance to the Union for former Confederate states contingent on a majority in each Southern state to take the Ironclad oath to the effect they had never in the past supported the Confederacy.

3. **Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction**

- Many people hoped the new president would take a tougher stance against the rebel leaders
- Johnson declared that ‘traitors must be punished and impoverished’
- However, for the USA to function normally as soon as possible, Johnson saw no alternative but to work with the ex-Confederates
- He favored leniency
- He was against black suffrage
- He issued a general amnesty to Southerners who were willing to swear an oath of allegiance and support emancipation
- Johnson granted thousands of pardons and ordered that confiscated land be returned to pardoned Southerners which led to the army having to evict thousands of freedmen across the South

**Southern Economy**

- Black expectations
- White attitudes

**Problems**

- Andrew Johnson

**Aims**

- Leniency to South
- States' rights
- Opposition to black suffrage
RECONSTRUCTION
Treason is a
CRIME AND MUST BE
MADE ODIOUS, AND TRAITORS
MUST BE PUNISHED.

ANDREW JOHNSON

DERRICK, DOGTHOU MOCK ME?
II.3.
WOULD YOU BEAR YOUR FORTUNES LIKE A MAN?

HOW IT WORKS.

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The Situation in the South

Southern Problems

- ¼ of all white Southern men of military age had died in the war, another ¼ had been seriously wounded
- The Southern economy was in tatters – Union armies had caused widespread devastation
- The Southern banking system was in chaos
- Large numbers of black and white Southerners were dependent on federal aid for subsistence
- The emancipation of the slaves meant that the South had lost over $2 billion of capital

4. Reconstruction Confederate Style
- State conventions acknowledged the end of slavery
- After their elections, the new Southern governments searched for means of keeping the freedmen under control
- No state enfranchised blacks
- All states introduced ‘Black Codes’, designed to ensure that blacks remained second-class citizens
- The aim of Reconstruction Confederate style was to resurrect as near as possible the old order

5. Congressional Reconstruction
- Northerners had a profound distrust in the South
- The fact that the ‘new’ Southern Congressmen included the former Confederate vice-president, four Confederate generals and 58 Confederate Congress members did not assure Northerners of the South’s good intent, nor did the Black Codes
- Unless the federal government took action, blacks would not have equal rights and opportunities
- Many were not enthusiastic about black suffrage but most thought that Confederate leaders should be barred from holding office and that the basic rights of ex-slaves should be protected
- Congress must actively help free blacks: ‘This Congress is bound to provide for them until they can take care of themselves. If we do not furnish them with homesteads, and hedge them around with protective laws; if we leave them to the legislation of their late masters, we had better have left them in bondage’
- Congress refused to admit the Southern Congressmen or to recognize the new regimes in the South
- The moderate Republican majority hoped to work out a compromise that would guarantee basic rights to freedmen and be acceptable to Johnson e.g. enlarge the powers of the Freedmen’s Bureau (e.g. providing basic welfare provision for ex-slaves) but Johnson vetoed everything and chose to side with the Democrats
- Johnson’s veto convinced many Republicans that they could no longer work with the president
a) *The Civil Rights Act*

- Moderate and radical Republicans joined forces to introduce a Civil Rights Act which aimed to guarantee minimal rights to blacks
- Defined all people born in the USA (except untaxed Native Americans) as national citizens
- Asserted the right of the federal government to intervene in state affairs where and when necessary to protect the rights of US citizens
- Johnson argued civil rights were a state matter, vetoed, but was overridden by Congress with 2/3 majority

b) *The Fourteenth Amendment*

- To ensure that civil rights could not be changed in the future Congress adopted the Fourteenth Amendment (which embodied the Civil Rights Act)
- Guaranteed all citizens equality before the law
- If individual states tried to abridge the rights of American citizens, the federal government could intervene
- It also banned from office Confederates who before the war had taken an oath of allegiance to the Union – this made virtually the entire political leadership of the South ineligible for office – failed to get the approval of 75% necessary to become a law

**Race riots, violence, intimidation and discrimination**

- Rise of paramilitary organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, which aimed to terrorize blacks and those whites who sympathized with them

**White Resistance**

- Republican rule sparked a vigorous backlash as Southern whites determined to recover political ascendancy

**The Ku Klux Klan**

- In 1866 paramilitary groups formed in most Southern states to fight for white rights e.g. the White League
- Ku Klux Klan was the most successful of these groups
- By 1870, the Klan claimed that were over 500,000 Klansmen in the South
- Clad in white robes and hoods, Klansmen sought to destroy Republican political organizations by intimidation and physical force
- Blacks who held public office were particular targets as well as black schools and churches
- Southern governments had difficulties dealing with Klan violence
- Laws were introduced which banned people from joining organizations that disturbed the peace
when Klan suspects were arrested, witnesses were usually reluctant to testify
- Often politicians and judges themselves were Klan members
- In 1870/71 President Grant passed three Force Acts authorizing him to use the army to break up the Klan
- Heavy penalties were imposed on those who used force, bribery or intimidation to hinder or prevent anyone from voting

**Congressional Reconstruction**

- Mid-term elections in 1866 were a disaster for Johnson and a triumph for Republicans, who won all but three states
- In the new Congress the Republicans would have a comfortable 2/3 majority in both Houses, ensuring that they could over-ride any presidential veto
- Military Reconstruction Act:
  - No legal-government existed in any ex-Confederate state except Tennessee
  - The ten Southern states were to be divided into 5 military districts, each placed under a federal commander
  - To get back into the Union, Southern states had to elect constitutional conventions which would accept black suffrage and ratify the Fourteenth Amendment
- Republicans of the House of Representatives were convinced that Johnson had broken the law and determined in 1868 to impeach him for high crimes and misdemeanors, after a two-month trial, they were one vote short of the 2/3 majority to impeach him
- In 1868 General Ulysses S. Grant is elected President

c) **The Fifteenth Amendment (1869/70)**

The 15th Amendment (1869): ‘The right to vote should not be denied... on account of race, color or previous conditions of servitude’

- For Southerners this was the crowning act of a Republican plot to promote black equality
- Some feminists were critical as it did not include any mention of women’s rights
- With civil and political equality seemingly assured, most Republicans believed that blacks no longer possessed a claim on the federal government. Their status in society would now depend upon themselves

6. **Reconstruction in the South**

- Following the Military Reconstruction Act all the ex-Confederate states, except for Tennessee were under military rule before being eventually readmitted to the Union
- From 1867 onwards, Southern Republicans produced the necessary constitutions and in every state, apart from Virginia, took over the first restored state governments
- Nevertheless, the Republicans faced fierce opposition from Democrats who sought to redeem their states
7. ‘Black Reconstruction’?

A professor in the early 20th century referred to the period of radical/Republican rule as ‘Black Reconstruction’

- New governments represented the worst elements in Southern society – illiterate blacks, self-seeking carpetbaggers (Northern whites who settled in the South) and renegade scalawags (Southern whites who supported the Republican Party) – given power by a vengeance-seeking Republican Congress
- Black Reconstruction perceived by Southerners as essentially undemocratic, with the Republicans ruling against the will of a disfranchised white majority
- However, term implies that blacks dominated the Reconstruction process

**Black Power?**

Black Southerners certainly wielded some political power. Having been given the vote, most blacks were determined to use it. In South Carolina and Mississippi, black voters constituted a real majority of the electorate. In three other states black voters outnumbered whites because so many rebels were disenfranchised. In 1873, South Carolina’s House of Representatives had 123 members. Only 23 of them were white.

_The Speaker is black, the clerk is black, the door-keepers are black, the little pages are black, the chairman of the Ways and Means is black, and the chaplain is coal black . . . the body is almost literally a Black Parliament, and it is the only one on the face of the earth which is the representative of a white constituency . . . Seven years ago these men were raising corn and cotton under the whip of the overseer. Today they are raising points of order and questions of privilege. They find they can raise one as well as the other. They prefer the latter. It is easier and better paid. Then, it is the evidence of an accomplished result. It means escape and defense from old oppressors. It means liberty._

*James Pike of Maine, one of the most famous political journalists of his day, writing of the South Carolina House of Representatives in 1873*

While this was a revolutionary break with the past, black political influence never reflected black numbers, few of the top positions in state governments went to blacks. Black leaders increasingly baulked at the fact that they were merely junior partners in white-dominated Republican coalitions.

**Why was black power limited?**

- Lack of black experience, education and organization, and divisions within the black community particularly between free-born blacks and ex-slaves
- Blacks were a minority in most states – if Republican governments were to be elected, the Republicans needed to win white support
**Carpetbaggers**

In the history of the United States, a carpetbagger was a Northerner who moved to the South after the American Civil War during the Reconstruction era (1863–1877). Many white Southerners denounced them, fearing they would loot and plunder the defeated South and be politically allied with the Radical Republicans.

... most carpetbaggers probably combine the desire for personal gain with a commitment to taking part in an effort "to substitute the civilization of freedom for that of slavery". ... Carpetbaggers generally supported measures aimed at democratizing and modernizing the South – civil rights legislation, aid to economic development, the establishment of public school systems.

"Carpetbagger" was used by Southerners as a pejorative term, referring to the carpet bags (a form of cheap luggage made from carpet fabric) which many of these newcomers carried. The term came to be associated with opportunism and exploitation by outsiders.

- In reality only few Northerners actually settled in the South
- Many were teachers, officers of the Freedmen Bureau or agents of the various benevolent societies engaged in aiding ex-slaves
Scalawags

- Without winning some support from Southern-born whites, few Republican governments would have been elected
- The scalawags are difficult to categorize - diverse backgrounds and voted Republican for a variety of reasons
- Some were rich planters, merchants and industrialists, others were self-sufficient farmers who had opposed the Confederacy
- Most scalawags did not support full racial equality – the alliance with blacks was a marriage of convenience

Southern Republican governments had little option but to raise and spend large sums of money

- Inherited empty treasuries
- Much of the Southern transportation system had been destroyed during the war
- Public buildings needed to be repaired
- Schools, hospitals, orphanages and asylums had to be built for blacks as well as whites
- Freedmen Bureau provided poor blacks and poor whites with basic health care and education

Economic Reconstruction

- Initially the South benefited from general prosperity and from high cotton prices
- Railroads were rebuilt and there was an increase in textile and other manufacturing
- It still did not keep pace with industrial progress elsewhere
- The South remained an essentially agricultural region, heavily dependent on cotton – a one-crop economy
- In the early 1870s, a worldwide glut of cotton led to a disastrous fall in prices - perpetual state of indebtedness – chain reaction
- The only way for farmers to make ends meet was to try and produce even more
- Result was that the South became the poorest region in the USA

End of Reconstruction

- 1876 presidential election – Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel Tilden, Southern states threaten to fight another Civil War for Tilden to win
- The 1877 Compromise ended the crisis – Democrats would accept Hayes as president, Hayes in return would withdraw all troops from the South, recognize Democratic governments in the disputed states, appoint a Southerner to his cabinet and look kindly on Southern railroad interests
- By 1877 all the ex-Confederate states had returned to white rule
- Hayes pursued a policy of conciliation
- His presidency is usually seen as marking the end of Reconstruction
Reconstruction Summary

Reconstruction was not something which started at the end of the war in 1865. In a sense the process began with the start of the war in 1861. However, apart from the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment, little had been set in stone by 1865. Lincoln’s assassination did not help matters. His successor, Andrew Johnson, soon fell out with Congress, which proceeded to introduce its own Reconstruction program. From 1865 to the withdrawal of US army troops from former Confederate states in 1877, the federal government succeeded in bringing back the seceded states into the Union and attempted to restructure Southern political institutions and society to various degrees. Few Americans in the South approved of the Reconstruction process. White Southerners believed that they had been deprived of their democratic rights and placed under the thumb of corrupt, inefficient and illegitimate Republican governments, which were ultimately dependent on military force. Black Southerners’ hopes and expectations in 1865 had not been realized. Moreover, by 1877 white Democratic administrations controlled all the former Confederate states. Debates about the success or failure of Reconstruction still go on today.