Chapter 17: Reconstruction: 1863–1877

Chapter Review

1. AMERICAN COMMUNITIES Hale County, Alabama

Violent political encounters were common between black people and white people in Southern communities immediately following the Civil War. Communities throughout the South struggled over the meaning of freedom in ways that reflected their particular circumstances. More than anything, freed people wanted more autonomy. Overseers grudgingly allowed them to work the land in familial groups and letting them choose their own supervisors. The result was a shift from gang labor to the sharecropping system where African American families worked the land in exchange for a small share of the crop. The majority of African Americans had to settle for sharecropping, as only about 15 percent could afford to purchase land to farm. Some managed to rent land from owners to become tenant farmers rather than sharecroppers. Local African Americans began to organize politically and in 1866, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act and sent the Fourteenth Amendment to the states for ratification. Both measures promised full citizenship rights to the former slaves. These economic and political gains by African Americans soon drew white protest and violence. In the spring of 1868, a secret organization devoted to terrorizing African Americans, known as the Ku Klux Klan, came to Hale County, Alabama. Although the passage of the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871 led to a federal crackdown on the Klan, the destruction of slavery made it apparent that whites and African Americans would have to renegotiate their respective roles. In the end, Reconstruction was only partly successful.

1. THE POLITICS OF RECONSTRUCTION

Although Abraham Lincoln had characterized the Civil War as a struggle to preserve the Union, by 1863 the Civil War was also very much about the struggle for African American freedom and the end of slavery. The Civil War settled the issue of slavery permanently. It also resolved the Constitutional crisis provoked by the secession of the Confederacy. The old notion of the United States as a voluntary union of sovereign states was replaced by the new reality of a single nation where the federal government took precedence over the individual states.

a. The Defeated South

The South paid a high price for its secession and eventual defeat. Much of the best agricultural land lay in waste, many towns and cities laid in ruins, and by 1865, the South’s most precious commodities, cotton and slaves, no longer were measures of wealth. It would take the South’s economy a generation to overcome the severe blows dealt by the war. In 1860, the South held approximately 25 percent of the nation’s wealth. In 1870, that number had shrunk to only 12 percent. Emancipation proved the most loathed effect of the war and white people responded, more than ever, by regarding African Americans as inferior to themselves. Emancipation forced white Southerners to redefine their world. The fear of African American political power and social equality became a driving force in the South’s obsession with racial order during the Reconstruction years.

b. Abraham Lincoln’s Plan

By late 1863, buoyed by important Union victories, Lincoln began fashioning a plan to bring the seceded states back into the Union as quickly as possible and to begin the reconstruction of the South. The president issued a Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction in 1863 which allowed full pardon and the restoration of property, except slaves, to white Southerners willing to swear an oath of allegiance to the United States and its laws. The president also proposed allowing Confederate states to establish a state government to be recognized as legitimate when 10 percent of the population that voted in the 1860 election took the oath of allegiance to the United States. Lincoln’s amnesty proclamation angered Radical Republicans who advocated equal rights for the freedmen and a much tougher stance toward the white South. The Wade-Davis bill, introduced by Radical Republicans, required 50 percent of a seceding state’s white male citizens to take a loyalty oath before the state’s government could be re-established. Lincoln vetoed the Wade-Davis bill. In March 1865 Congress established the Freedmen’s Bureau to provide clothing, food, and fuel to destitute former slaves. The Bureau was also charged with supervising and managing all matters relating to freedmen and refugees. At the time of his assassination, Lincoln’s reconstruction policy remained unsettled and incomplete. Generally, his plans seemed to favor a speedy restoration of the Southern states to the Union and a minimum of federal intervention into their affairs.

c. Andrew Johnson and Presidential Reconstruction

Lincoln’s successor was vice president Andrew Johnson, a Democrat and former slaveholder. Johnson was the only Southern member of the U.S. Senate to remain loyal to the Union and he held the planter elite responsible for the South’s secession and defeat. Republicans had nominated Johnson during the 1864 presidential election in an attempt to appeal to Northern and border state “War Democrats,” although many Radical Republicans distrusted him. As president, Johnson defined reconstruction as the responsibility of the executive branch, not the legislative branch. He blamed the planter elite for the war and hoped to restore the Union as soon as possible, thus he outlined mild terms for reentry into the Union. In the spring of 1865, while Congress was not in session, Johnson granted amnesty and pardon, including restoration of property rights except slaves, to all Confederates who pledged loyalty to the Union and support for emancipation. Fourteen classes of Southerners, mostly planter elite and Confederate officials, were excluded from this offer. By the fall of 1865, ten of eleven Confederate states claimed to have met Johnson’s requirements to reenter the Union. However, a major division within the federal government was taking shape and Congress was determined not to allow Johnson to determine the conditions of Southern readmission. Adding further to the political tension was Johnson’s opposition of political rights for the freedmen. This stance put him in direct opposition with the Radical Republicans.

d. Free Labor and the Radical Republican Vision

Most Radicals were men whose political careers had been shaped by the slavery controversy. Radicals looked to reconstruct Southern society along the lines of a society based of free labor where individuals competed in the labor market and enjoyed equal political rights and backed by the federal government. In the Radicals’ view, the federal government would be central to the remaking of Southern society and in guaranteeing civil rights and suffrage for freedmen. Northern Republicans were especially disturbed by the strict “black codes” enacted in many southern states designed to restrict the freedom of black labor and to keep freed people as close to their former slave status as possible. These codes also highlighted the unwillingness of white Southerners to accept the full meaning of freedom for African Americans. In the spring 1866, Congress passed two important bills designed to aid African Americans, the Civil Rights bill which bestowed full citizenship on African Americans, and a bill to enlarge the scope of the Freedmen’s Bureau. President Johnson vetoed both of these bills but Radical Republicans in Congress were able to secure the required votes to override the veto. In June 1866, Congress passed the Fourteenth Amendment, which defined citizenship to include former slaves.

e. Congressional Reconstruction and the Impeachment Crisis

United against Johnson, Radical and moderate Republicans took control of Reconstruction in early 1867. In March, Congress passed the First Reconstruction Act over Johnson’s veto. The act divided the South into five military districts subject to martial law and required Southern states to call new constitutional conventions prior to their readmission to the Union. The states were also required to guarantee African American voting rights and ratify the Fourteenth Amendment before they could qualify for readmission. Congress also passed laws aimed at limiting Johnson’s power. On February 24, 1868, Republicans in the House of Representatives voted to impeach the president. The articles of impeachment focused on Johnson’s violations of the Tenure of Office Act but in reality the Republicans wanted the president removed from office because of his political views and his opposition to the Reconstruction Acts. During his Senate trial, Johnson agreed to abide by the Reconstruction Acts. The Senate failed to convict Johnson by one vote.

f. The Election of 1868

By the summer of 1868, Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee had earned readmission to the Union. The presidential election of 1868 offered hope that sectional hatred and the Civil War’s legacy would be eased. Republicans nominated Ulysses S. Grant, the North’s most celebrated war hero, as their candidate for the 1868 election. The Democrats, determined to reverse Congressional Reconstruction, nominated Horatio Seymour, the former governor of New York and a supporter of states rights. In the South, the Klan threatened and murdered black and white Republicans to prevent them from voting. In the end, Grant won an electoral majority but received less than 53 percent of the popular vote. In February 1869, Congress passed the Fifteenth Amendment, guaranteeing the vote for freedmen. It required the remaining Confederate states to ratify both the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments prior to readmission. They did so, and in February 1870, the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified and the remaining Confederate states were readmitted to the Union.

g. Woman Suffrage and Reconstruction

Many women’s rights advocates had been active in the abolition movement and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments both inspired and frustrated them. Many activists argued that African American voting rights and women’s voting rights were linked. In 1866, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Lucy Stone founded the American Equal Rights Association. By 1869 woman suffragists had split into two competing organizations: the moderate American Woman Suffrage Association and the more radical all-female National Woman Suffrage Association. Although women did not win the vote in this period, they did establish an independent suffrage movement that eventually drew millions of women into political life. The failure of woman suffrage after the Civil War was a result of the defeat of Radical Reconstruction and the idea of expanded citizenship.

1. THE MEANING OF FREEDOM

The meaning of “freedom” would be contested for many years to come after the Civil War and Reconstruction. Newly freed slaves deeply desired independence from white control while most white Southerners sought to restrict the boundaries of that independence. Former slaves struggled to establish economic, political, and cultural autonomy. To do so, they built on the twin pillars of slave culture—the family and the church—to lay the foundation of the African American community.

a. Moving About

Many emancipated slaves immediately tested their freedom by leaving home. Yet many who left their old neighborhoods returned soon afterward to seek work in the same general area, sometimes even on their former plantations. Others moved away altogether, seeking jobs in nearby towns and cities, which attracted African Americans because of the schools, churches, and fraternal societies available to them. Many freed people rejected the old subservience that was part of the slave system. Moving around freely was a tangible demonstration of this rejection.

b. The African American Family

Emancipation allowed freed people to strengthen family ties and the opportunity to reunite with long-lost family members. Thousands of family reunions took place after the war and thousands of African American couples who had lived together under the slave system demanded to be legally married. Emancipation also brought changes in gender roles to the African American family. Black men could now serve on juries, vote, and hold office. Black women could not and this effectively undermined the gender equality that had existed under the system of slavery. African American males further asserted their authority by insisting that their wives work at home rather than in the field. African American families, not white masters, now decided when and where women and children worked.

c. African American Churches and Schools

The creation of separate African American churches proved the most lasting and important element of the institution building in the post-emancipation years. In communities around the South, African Americans pooled their resources to buy land and build their own churches. These churches became the center of religious life and the center of community life that defined the African American community. The church became the first social institution fully controlled by African Americans and by 1877, the great majority of black Southerners had withdrawn from white-dominated churches. Access to education also became a central part of the meaning of freedom and the rapid spread of schools reflected African Americans’ desire for self-improvement.

d. Land and Labor after Slavery

While most freedmen aspired to leave the plantation altogether, doing so was not a simple task. White planters tried to retain African Americans as permanent agricultural laborers by restricting employment opportunities through the infamous black codes. The majority of African Americans hoped to become self-sufficient farmers. But when the federal government failed to redistribute abandoned southern lands, sharecropping and tenant farming emerged as the dominant forms of working the land. African Americans preferred sharecropping to gang labor because it allowed families to set their own hours and tasks while offering freedom from white supervision and control. Owning land outright and tenant farming were both more desirable options. Although black sharecroppers had more autonomy than they did under slavery, the vast majority never achieved economic independence or land ownership.

e. The Origins of African American Politics

Inclusion, rather than separation, was the objective of early African American political activity. Hundreds of African American delegates, selected by local meetings or churches, attended statewide political conventions throughout the South in 1865 and 1866. Convention debates sometimes reflected the tensions within African American communities, such as the friction between poorer former slaves and better-off free black people, or between lighter- and darker-skinned African Americans. However, most of these gatherings concentrated on passing resolutions on issues that united all African Americans: suffrage and equality before the law. Newly enfranchised freedmen voted Republican and formed the core of the Republican Party in the South. It was soon evident that politics was the only arena where black and white Southerners could engage each other on an equal basis.

1. SOUTHERN POLITICS AND SOCIETY

By the summer of 1868, when the South had returned to the Union, the majority of Republicans believed the task of Reconstruction was finished. They believed that a healthy two-party system would solve many of the remaining problems in the South. Yet over the next decade, the political structure created in the Southern states proved too restricted and fragile to sustain itself. To most Southern whites, the active participation of African Americans in politics seemed extremely dangerous. Southern Republicanism proved to be an unstable coalition that was unable to sustain power for very long. By 1877, Democrats had regained political control of all the former Confederate states.

a. Southern Republicans

Three major groups composed the Republican coalition in the postwar South. African American voters made up the majority of Southern Republicans and white Northerners, called “carpetbaggers,” made up a second group of the party. Carpetbaggers tended to be well educated and from the middle class. They played a disproportionately large role in Southern politics and they won a large share of Reconstruction offices. The third major group of Southern Republicans were native whites pejoratively termed “scalawags.” Some of these people were prominent prewar Whigs who saw the Republican Party as their best chance to regain political influence. Others viewed the party as an agent of modernization and economic expansion.

b. Reconstructing the States: A Mixed Record

Republicans managed to dominate the Southern constitutional conventions from 1867 to 1869. The new constitutions created at these conventions guaranteed the political and civil rights of African Americans and they abolished property qualifications for office holding and jury service. They also created the first state-funded systems of education in the South. By 1869, new constitutions had been ratified in all of the former Confederate states. Republican governments in the South faced a continual crisis of legitimacy that limited their ability to legislate change, and segregation became the norm in public school systems. African American leaders often accepted segregation because they feared that insistence on integrated education would undermine the new school system and jeopardize its funding. In economic matters, Republican governments failed to fulfill African Americans’ hopes of acquiring land.

c. White Resistance and “Redemption”

The opponents of Reconstruction, the Democrats, refused to acknowledge Republicans’ right to participate in Southern political life and they viewed the party as a partisan instrument of the Northern Congress. The Ku Klux Klan carried out an ongoing terrorist campaign against Reconstruction governments and local leaders and acted as a kind of guerrilla military in the service of the Democratic Party and those who sought the restoration of white supremacy. In 1870 and 1871, Congress passed three Enforcement Acts designed to counter racial terrorism and declared interference with voting rights a federal offense. By the election of 1872, the federal government’s intervention had helped break the Klan. As wartime idealism faded, Northern Republicans became less inclined toward direct intervention in Southern affairs, and in 1874, the Democrats gained a majority in the House of Representatives. Northern Republicans slowly abandoned the freedmen and their white allies in the South. A series of Supreme Court decisions curtailed federal protection of black civil rights, and in 1883, the Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional. These decisions marked the end of federal attempts to protect African American rights until well into the next century.

1. KING COTTON: SHARECROPPERS, TENANTS, AND THE SOUTHERN ENVIRONMENT

The South declined into the country’s poorest agricultural region in the years after the Civil War. A chronic shortage of capital and banking institutions made local merchants and planters the sole source of credit and many Southern communities found themselves entirely dependent on one crop, cotton. The spread of the “crop lien” system as the South’s main form of agricultural credit had forced more farmers into cotton growing. The railroads, commercial fertilizer, and opening of new lands for cultivation all played a role in the South’s transformation to a market-oriented farming society. The expanding production of cotton, in turn, depressed prices for cotton. As competition from new cotton centers in the world market, like Egypt and India, increased, the downward economic spiral worsened and the per capita wealth in the South fell steadily. Large parts of the South would remain entangled in the debt-ridden crop lien system well into the twentieth century.

1. RECONSTRUCTING THE NORTH

The triumph of the North in the Civil War brought with it fundamental changes in the economy, in labor relations, and in politics. The spread of the factory system and the growth of large corporations hastened the development of a large unskilled workforce. More and more workers found themselves permanently confined to wage labor. The grim reality of class conflict showed that Northern society, like Southern society, was more hierarchical than equal. In 1877, the last federal troops withdrew from the South, officially ending the Reconstruction Era.

a. The Age of Capital

The North’s economy continued the boom begun during the Civil War and by 1873, the number of nonagricultural workers in the North has surpassed the number of farmers. Only Great Britain boasted a larger manufacturing economy than the United States. The railroad business both symbolized and advanced this new industrial order. Private companies took on the huge and expensive job of constructing the railroads, but the federal government funded the project and provided the largest subsidy in American history. In 1868, the Senate ratified the Burlingame Treaty, which allowed Chinese to emigrate to the United States, in order to meet the labor needs of the railroads. After the transcontinental railroad was completed, thousands of unemployed Chinese flooded the California labor market and the open door immigration pledge of the Burlingame Treaty was replaced by anti-Chinese agitation and the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. Railroad corporations became America’s first big business, but other industries boomed in this period as well. Railroad growth stimulated expansion in the production of coal, iron, stone, and lumber.

b. Liberal Republicans and the Election of 1872

With the rapid growth of large-scale, capital-intensive enterprises, Republicans increasingly identified with the interests of business rather than the rights of freedmen and the ideology of “free labor.” Routine corruption plagued American political life and by the end of President Grant’s first term, a large number of disaffected Republicans sought an alternative. The Liberal Republicans called for a return to limited government and stressed the principles of supply and demand, free trade, and individualism. In the spring of 1872, the Liberal Republicans nominated Horace Greeley to run for president. Grant easily defeated Greeley but the election accelerated the trend toward federal abandonment of African American citizenship rights.

c. The Depression of 1873

In the fall of 1873, the postwar boom came to an abrupt halt and a severe financial panic triggered a deep economic depression. The collapse was the result of commercial overexpansion. The depression lasted sixty-five months, making it the nation’s longest economic depression up to that time. The unemployment rate soared to about 15 percent and mass meetings of workers issued calls to government officials to create jobs through public works. These appeals were rejected because political leaders saw the depression as a natural part of the business cycle.

d. The Electoral Crisis of 1876

The depression and new scandals in the Grant administration weakened the Republican Party. Democrats nominated Governor Samuel J. Tilden of New York for the 1876 presidential election. In their platform, the Democrats linked corruption with an attack on Reconstruction policies and blamed the Republicans for institutionalizing a “corrupt centralism.” Republicans nominated Rutherford B. Hayes. On an election day marred by widespread vote fraud and violent intimidation, Tilden received more popular votes than Hayes. Republicans refused to concede victory and challenged the vote totals in the electoral college. In 1877, Congress moved to settle the Electoral deadlock. Democrats and Republicans struck a compromise in February. Shortly after assuming office, Hayes ordered the removal of the remaining federal troops in Louisiana and South Carolina. “Home rule” in the South meant Republican abandonment of freed people, Radicals, carpetbaggers, and scalawags. It also effectively nullified the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and the Civil Rights Act of 1866.

***Answer the following questions from Out of Many Chapter 17:***

1. **The Defeated South:** What price did the white South pay for secession, war and defeat?

2. **Abraham Lincoln’s Plan:** What was Lincoln’s plan for Reconstruction? What opposition did he meet and what alternative plan did they offer? As exemplified by the Wade-Davis bill, how did Radical Republicans see Reconstruction? What was the issue of land distribution and why did it not materialize? What things did Lincoln and the Radicals agree on?

3. **Andrew Johnson and Presidential Reconstruction:** What were Johnson’s views of Reconstruction and how did this conflict with the Congress? What was Johnson’s plan for Reconstruction and what goal did he have in mind? How did he hope this would translate politically? Why did his views place him on a collision course with the Radicals?

4. **The Radical Republican Vision:** What was the Radical view of Reconstruction and how did George W. Julian and Thaddeus Stevens typify it? What were “Black Codes” and what effect did they have on northern Republicans? How did these codes affect public support for the Radicals? What bills did the Radicals attempt to pass? What did Johnson do to the bills and how did he unite opposition to him? What happened in the 1866 congressional elections?

5. **Congressional Reconstruction and the Impeachment Crisis:** What was the congressional Reconstruction plan and how did Johnson react? What was the basis of the impeachment charges? What was significant about Johnson’s narrow acquittal?

6. **The Election of 1868:** What were the overall results of the election of 1868?

7. **Woman Suffrage and Reconstruction:** How was this era a turning point for woman suffrage? What was the issue with the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments?

8. **Labor and Land after Slavery:** What type of laboring and farming system replaced the old plantation system? What did many African Americans try to do and how were they thwarted? What was the sharecropping system? How widespread did sharecropping become?

9. **Southern Republicans:** What groups made up the coalition of Republican support in the postwar South? Which states did they have the most influence in?

10. **White Resistance and “Redemption”:** What was the extent of white resistance and how did they gain “redemption?” Why was there no real two party system in the South during Reconstruction? What violence developed and what did the federal government do about it? Why did this intervention eventually fade away? How did Supreme Court rulings curtail federal attempts to protect African American rights?

11. **Liberal Republicans and the Election of 1872:** Who were the liberal Republicans and what did they believe? What was their view of Reconstruction? What did the Election of 1872 illustrate? What eventually happened to the Liberal Republicans?

12. **The Depression of 1873:** What was the extent of the panic of 1873? What caused it and how significant was it? As stated by E.L. Godkin, what was the attitude of many toward any government role in alleviating hardships, from the panic? What effect did the panic have on the old free-labor ideology?

13. **The Electoral Crisis of 1876:** What happened in the 1876 election to precipitate a crisis? Who was Samuel J. Tilden and what platform did he run on? Who was Rutherford B. Hayes and what was his platform? What did Congress do to try to settle the electoral deadlock? What did the electoral commission do and how was the crisis solved? What was the “Compromise of 1877?”