

Reconstruction Period: Goals, Success and Failures

Reconstruction of the South following the American Civil War lasted from 1865 - 1877 under three presidents. It wasn't welcomed by Southerners, and there were many problems throughout this process. But, was it successful?

Evaluating Reconstruction

As the Civil War was drawing to a close in 1865, President Lincoln began making plans for the physical, economic, social and political rehabilitation of a region marked by four years of war and 200 years of racism. Republicans in the federal government felt responsible for restoring public infrastructure, private property, food production, medical care and housing - all while the workforce and economy were in shambles. Furthermore, they wanted to change many characteristics of Southern society and politics.

Even though most of the programs were aimed at helping the South, many white Southerners resented the suggestion that their world needed to be reconstructed at all and fought against any changes imposed on them by Republicans, Northerners or anyone in the federal government. This struggle to rebuild Southern government, society, infrastructure and economy was called **Reconstruction**, and it dominated political debate for 12 years under three different presidents. But, was it successful?

The Successes of Reconstruction

President Lincoln's original goal in the Civil War was to hold the nation together. And in this, the war and Reconstruction were a success. The Confederacy was destroyed for good, and every state that had seceded was readmitted to the Union. In fact, the Civil War went a step further in terms of public thought. American historian Shelby Foote noted, 'Before the war it was said 'the United States are.' Grammatically, it was spoken that way and thought of as a collection of independent states. And after the war it was always 'the United States is,' as we say today without being self-conscious at all. And that sums up what the war accomplished. It made us an 'is.'

The federal government outlawed slavery with the 13th Amendment, defined citizenship and protected all Americans under the law with the 14th Amendment and extended suffrage to all men in the 15th Amendment. Federal legislation, like the Freedman's Bureau and the Civil Rights Act, worked to get African Americans back on their feet and participating equally in the government, society and economy. Black men were elected to every level of government, including governors and senators.



Some of the important successes of Reconstruction

All of the Southern states drafted new constitutions and ratified the Reconstruction Amendments. Many African Americans participated in new state and local governments, which worked for equal rights and to rebuild or create services like schools, railroads, hospitals, housing, roads and asylums. Charitable organizations and individuals - especially Northerners - worked to improve literacy and education for African Americans. Businessmen opened new industries, like steel, cotton and lumber mills to revitalize the economy. New cultural venues opened. Black institutions and churches gained autonomy.

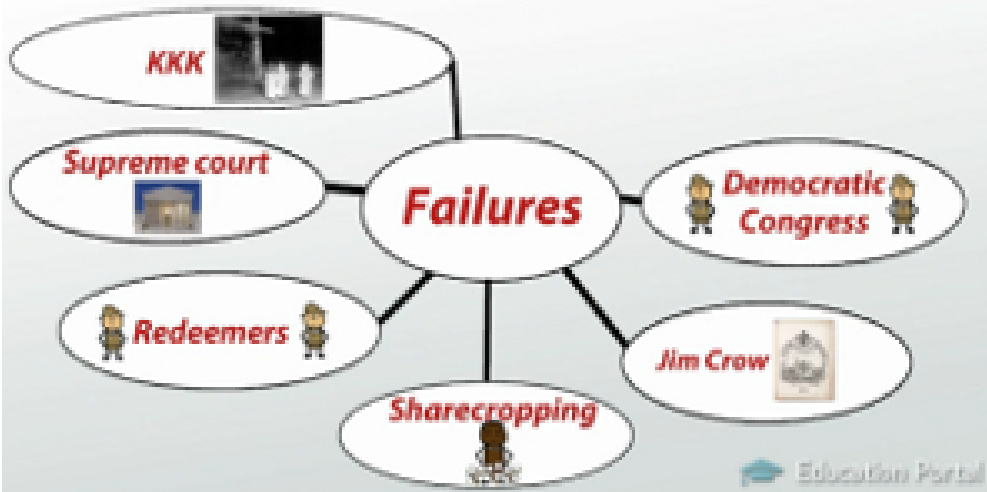
The Failures of Reconstruction

Despite these many achievements, Reconstruction faced tremendous challenges, many of them (but not all of them) because of white resistance.

In the early years of Reconstruction, the new state governments had many competent but inexperienced leaders. A few were carpetbaggers motivated by greed and corruption. Southern whites were often uncooperative with new legislation passed by blacks or Yankees. The vigilante groups, like the Ku Klux Klan, emerged to maintain white supremacy and intimidate black voters or any whites who supported them. And although there was some industrialization, the region remained committed to an agricultural economy and used sharecropping as a legal means to ensure that blacks would still work the land that whites still owned.

As soon as former Confederates had their right to vote restored, so-called 'Redeemers' won public office and began to systematically undo most of the social and economic reforms. These were white, Southern Democrats who vowed to undo Reconstruction and restore the Old South. They passed voting restrictions and 'Black Codes' to suppress the rights and opportunities of African Americans at the state and local levels. Jim Crow laws made segregation legal. The Supreme Court supported these actions, generally saying that the 14th and 15th Amendments only applied at the federal level. And though the Radical Republicans had worked for nearly a decade to secure equal rights, the House of Representatives changed hands in 1874. Under Democratic leadership, government spending was cut and many Reconstruction programs were hurt or eliminated.

THE FAILURES OF RECONSTRUCTION



Major failures of Reconstruction