

While the Reconstruction era of the post-Civil War was designed to restore peace to the United States, its policies were actually more detrimental to the country and its people than they were beneficial.

Logan Spitzley

Discussion Day: Tuesdays 2:00-2:50pm 10/11/16

At the conclusion of the Civil War, the South was left in a state of destruction and poverty. Since the majority of the war was fought in the southern states, most of the damage was done in the South. Towns and plantation houses were burned, infrastructure was demolished, and the economy suffered from the loss of 3.06 billion dollars since the South could no longer profit from the free labor of slaves. Sidney Andrews summed up the state of South Carolina perfectly in his 1865 report of *The South Since the War* when he said “a city of ruins, of desolation, of vacant houses, of widowed women, of rotting wharves, of deserted warehouses, of weed-wild gardens, of miles of grass-grown streets, of acres of pitiful and voiceful barrenness, - that is Charleston”. Not only did the southern states face an overwhelming amount of physical damage due to the Civil War, but many southerners were bitter from losing to the North and would begin to feel suppressed by northerners in the coming years. It was in this kind of atmosphere where Reconstruction took place, so it’s no wonder that the process of restoring the South and reestablishing the Union turned out to be a lengthy one with devastating results (Sidney Andrews, *Canvas*, p. 274-276).

One reason why Reconstruction had unintended, negative consequences was due to the different plans outlined by Congress and Andrew Johnson’s presidency. Instead of sticking to one predetermined method, there were two strategies put into place that were vastly different from one another. The period of Presidential Reconstruction under Andrew Johnson’s control lasted a short two years from the end of the war in 1865 to 1866. The second and longer Congressional Reconstruction dragged on from 1867 to 1877. This made the era of Reconstruction last twice as long and neither plan was fully effective at accomplishing what it set out to achieve.

Johnson's Reconstruction favored the elite plantation owners of the South. He granted amnesty to many Confederate military officials and wealthy southern citizens. In order for the southern states to return to the Union, all they had to do was approve the thirteenth amendment, which abolished slavery, and reject their secession. Northerners were furious that Johnson's plan didn't involve a stricter set of terms for the South's reentry into the Union. Many blamed the southern states for starting the war and wanted them to endure tougher consequences. Under Johnson's leniency, the southern states were also able to reappoint Confederacy representatives to serve in Congress, including the former vice president Alexander Stephens. This further outraged Radical Republicans because the same people who led the South's secession from the Union, were allowed to hold office once again. A divide emerged between Johnson and members of Congress due to the way his policies favored the South and white supremacy. This divide led to the takeover of Reconstruction by Congress in the years surrounding President Johnson's impeachment (American Horizons, p. 512-513).

The Congressional Reconstruction led by Radical Republicans featured a very different plan than Andrew Johnson's. They focused on securing the rights and freedoms of all African Americans, especially those who were freed by the Emancipation Proclamation. Under the leadership of Thaddeus Stevens, Congress designed a new set of criteria for the southern states to meet in order to return to the Union. First, each state had to approve the fourteenth amendment, which granted full citizenship to previous slaves. Second, they had to amend their state constitutions to give African American men the right to vote. These changes created an even further divide as white southerners refused to comply. By 1868, only seven states had been readmitted into the Union. A

policy that was meant to create peace and equality in the United States ended up causing a great deal of resentment between Radical Republicans and white southern Democrats (American Horizons, p. 518-519).

Many southerners felt oppressed by the Radical Reconstruction that took place from 1867-1877. According to Howell Cobb's *A White Southern Perspective on Reconstruction*, the South was "disarmed and reduced to poverty, powerless to protect themselves against wrong and injustice". They felt as if the North was preventing them from entering back into the Union by "conquering" the South and making them "impoverished". Cobb also argued that the North was creating a state of "Negro Supremacy" by allowing former slaves to vote and hold office. This Reconstruction led to a growing tension between various white southerners and African Americans, which ultimately resulted in the suppression of African American rights and freedoms (Howell Cobb, Canvas, p. 281-283).

Ex-slaves who lived in the South had an extremely different view on post-war Reconstruction. Many felt like their situation was worse off during Reconstruction because the only thing they had was their freedom. A majority of the previous slaves no longer had food, housing, jobs, and they still had no right to vote or own property. Contrary to the beliefs of numerous white southerners, African Americans welcomed Union military control in the South. They thought that Union troops offered the assistance and protection they needed to secure their new freedom, as well as pave the way to quality. Without the military present, they believed that the South would turn back to its old ways of enslaving African Americans through unjust laws and policies. In fact, during a convention held by black southerners in August of 1865, they proclaimed

“we know these men – and we assure you that, with the majority of them, loyalty is only lip deep”. This statement demonstrates that most ex-slaves assumed that the white southerners were only pretending to be loyal, law abiding citizens so that they could “restore their former relation with the Federal Government” and continue their “unfriendly legislation” as soon as Union troops returned to the North. For this reason, many African Americans felt unsafe during the period of Reconstruction and urged the Federal Government to either provide more protection in the form of military aid, or amend the Constitution to prohibit any discrimination based on race (African Americans Seek Protection, Canvas, p. 277-278).

The act of sharecropping during Reconstruction was another practice that caused more harm than it did good. Once the Civil War came to an end, farmers could no longer use slave labor to grow their crops and make a profit. Southerners solved this problem with the practice of sharecropping. Former slave holders created contracts with their ex-slaves so they would have someone to work their land for them. As a result, the ex-slaves would get to keep a share of the crop for themselves. While this was a good idea in theory, it ended up being the only form of work that many African Americans could find and sharecropping became the new form of slavery. In order to keep the sharecroppers from stealing more than their portion of the crop, the only plant produced during this time was cotton. An abundance of cotton was grown in an effort to improve the economy of the South and replace the billions of dollars that were lost after the war. What actually happened was that the global market for cotton dropped during the Reconstruction years and it sent the South into another cycle of debt and poverty, one that it wouldn't recover from for years to come (American Horizons p. 524-526).

Reconstruction was supposed to be a time of reconciliation between the Confederate and Union States, a time of rehabilitation for the southern territories and economy, and a time of increased civil rights for African Americans. In reality, the bitter tensions between white southerners and ex-slaves resulted in decades of racial discrimination in the form of black codes, Jim Crow laws, and the Ku Klux Klan. The period of Reconstruction also brought about tensions between the mostly Democratic South and the Radical Republicans of the North. The southern economy continued to suffer and the different Reconstruction plans issued by Congress and Andrew Johnson resulted in more resentment and bitterness than they did unity. While the states eventually did reenter into the Union, it took much longer than what was originally planned. In addition, the civil rights movement was hindered by southern efforts to keep African Americans from voting and earning the same rights and freedoms as every other natural born citizen. While the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments were ratified during this time, it would be years before the country recovered from the destructive results of Reconstruction.