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RECONSTRUCTING AMERICA

Even before the Civil War ended, President Abraham Lincoln had begun to consider how the Confederate states should be received back into the Union. Conceived in 1863, his Reconstruction plan was remarkably lenient.

Lincoln decided that if ten percent of the voters in a Confederate state signed an oath of loyalty to the United States, that state would be readmitted to the Union. But, Lincoln's plans were met with some resistance. A group of congressmen, known as the Radical Republicans, wanted to punish the states that had seceded. Lincoln disagreed with the Radical Republicans' agenda and opposed their legislation. Then, in 1865, Lincoln was assassinated. His vice president, Andrew Johnson, became head of the country. The Radical Republicans thought the new president would be on their side.

But, Johnson had his own ideas about Reconstruction. His Reconstruction plan would grant a pardon to Southerners who signed a loyalty oath. Southern states then would be allowed to form new governments and petition for readmission to the Union.

When Congress convened in the fall of 1865, however, the Radical Republicans prevented former Confederate congressmen from taking their seats. So, the Southerners vowed to come up with their own Reconstruction plan. While politicians fought it out in Washington, D.C., Southern whites and African Americans faced more immediate problems.

During the Civil War, Southern cities had been destroyed and rural areas turned into what one journalist described as "a broad black streak of ruin and desolation." Besides the physical destruction, the war and its aftermath also took a psychological toll on the Southern white population. First, the South was humiliated by its defeat. Then, Northerners started to travel south to enforce Reconstruction. In addition, African Americans began to take part in Southern legislatures. Black churches flourished, providing a sense of community for the newly emancipated African Americans. In

December 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, officially ending slavery.

Although African Americans were legally free, Southern whites did not automatically welcome them as full citizens. To control the new freedmen, the Southern states passed legislation called Black Codes. These laws gave African Americans some freedom, such as the right to own property, but restricted them in many more ways. Free black people could not own firearms or assemble in groups. They could not serve on juries. Under the codes, African Americans without jobs could be arrested for vagrancy. Often, they were forced to sign long contracts with employers for little pay. Many black people were restricted to doing fieldwork or household labor.

Congress soon realized that only by adding to the Constitution could black people be assured of their rights. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were ratified in 1868 and 1870, respectively. These gave African Americans equal protection under the law and prohibited discrimination in voting due to race. (Voting discrimination due to sex was still encountered, however: Women would not gain the right to vote until 1920.) But, despite some constitutional equality, African Americans still faced unfair treatment that often threatened their lives.

In 1866, riots between African Americans and whites broke out in Memphis, Tennessee, and New Orleans, Louisiana, leaving nearly one hundred black people dead or injured. Beginning in 1865, night horsemen wearing white robes and hoods could be seen throughout the South. Called the Ku Klux Klan, this secret organization's main goal was to prevent black people from voting. It accomplished this by terrorizing African Americans with threats and physical violence. Lynchings, beatings, and shootings of black people and their white sympathizers became frequent occurrences in the South during the Reconstruction era.

When Reconstruction ended in 1877, any strides black citizens had made ended with it. The 1880s and 1890s saw the enactment of "Jim Crow" laws, which further discriminated against African Americans. Named for a minstrel show character, these laws fostered the separation of the races in trains, streetcars, restaurants, parks, schools, and other public places. In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the legality of "separate but equal" facilities, even though those for black people usually were inferior.

African Americans no longer were slaves, but were they truly free? A revealing answer came from future president James Garfield. "What is freedom?" Garfield asked in 1865. "Is it the bare privilege of not being chained? If this is all, then freedom is a bitter mockery, a cruel delusion." Only through the work of activists such as Ida B. Wells would this delusion eventually begin to give way to real freedom.

Reconstruction is the period from 1865 to 1877 when the Confederate states were controlled by the federal government before being readmitted to the Union.

Lenient means merciful or not harsh.

Legislation is proposed laws.

Vagrancy is a state of being without a permanent home or Job.

A minstrel show is where a group of actors made up in black-face present Jokes, songs, dances, and skits.

PHOTO (COLOR): Toward the end of the Civil War, cities such as Atlanta and Savannah in Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina (ABOVE), became victims of the total war that the Union army waged against the South.

PHOTO (COLOR): Eight years after Ida B. Wells was born, Congress passed the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which stated that the right to vote "shall not be denied or abridged.., on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

PHOTO (COLOR): Andrew Johnson (LEFT) became the 17th president after the assassination of Abraham, Lincoln (RIGHT) in 1865. Johnson inherited in the delicate problem of reconstructing the Union after the Civil War.

PHOTO (COLOR): In this editorial cartoon by Thomas Nast, Justice, in the form of a woman, tries to defend an African American who is being attacked by characters representing Southern white supremacy groups that want to prevent him from voting.

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