Generally dating from 1865 to 1877, Reconstruction is the term describing the period of readjustment following the American Civil War. The term is instructive on many levels. Physically, the destruction wrought in the South by the invading Union forces was enormous and there was little local financing for rebuilding. Socially, chaos reigned in the South: the old social and economic order founded on slavery had collapsed completely, with nothing to replace it. Nationally, the eleven Confederate states somehow had to be restored to their positions in the Union, provided with loyal governments, but without allowing Northerners to feel that the war had been for nothing. Finally, the role of the emancipated slaves in Southern society had to be defined. In sum, a region, but also a nation, demanded reconstruction in 1865.

Even before the war ended, President Abraham Lincoln had begun the task. Motivated by a desire to build a strong Republican Party in the South and to end the bitterness engendered by war, he issued a proclamation of amnesty and a pledge of reconstruction for those areas of the Confederacy occupied by Union armies in 1863. It offered pardon, with certain exceptions, to any Confederate who would swear to support the Constitution and the Union. Once a group in any conquered state, equal in number to one-tenth of that state's total vote in the presidential election of 1860, took the prescribed oath and organized a government that abolished slavery, he would grant that government executive recognition.

Interestingly, Lincoln's plan aroused the sharp opposition of Republicans in Congress. The protests of this group, which became known as the "Radical Republicans," grew out of their belief that Lincoln's plan would simply restore to power the old planter upper class, who saw themselves as aristocracy. Debate continued as Robert E. Lee's forces surrendered at Appomattox in April 1865. Less than a week later John Wilkes Booth assassinated Lincoln at Washington's Ford's Theater. At the time Lincoln left little additional information concerning his plan for Reconstruction. The task would be left to his embattled and unfortunate successor.

Andrew Johnson initially pleased the radicals by publicly attacking the planter aristocracy and insisting that the rebellion must be punished. His amnesty proclamation in May 1865 was more severe than Lincoln's. The obvious intent was to shift political control in the South from the old planter elite to the small farmers and artisans. It promised to accomplish a revolution in Southern society. By the end of 1865 every former Confederate state except Texas had reestablished civil government. Under provisional governors of Johnson's choosing, the Southern states held conventions that repealed their ordinances of secession and abolished slavery (the Thirteenth Amendment).

Johnson's tenor seemed to change as the South rapidly found new ways to continue the subjugation of freed slaves. State legislatures enacted statutes severely limiting the freedom and rights of the blacks. Known as black codes, these ordinances restricted the ability of blacks to own land, to work as free laborers, or to carry out most of the civil and political rights enjoyed by whites. Additionally, many of the elections were won by disenfranchised Confederate leaders. Rather than order new elections, Johnson
granted pardons on a large scale.

Led by the Radical Republicans in Congress, many Northerners grew outraged and embittered about the economic, physical, and emotional cost of a war that now seemed to have accomplished little genuine change. When Congress convened in December 1865, it refused to seat the Southern representatives. Johnson responded by publicly attacking Republican leaders and vetoing their Reconstruction measures. His tactics drove the moderates into the radical camp and provided a political base that rapidly shifted the nation's power away from the executive office. The Reconstruction Acts (particularly the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments) passed over Johnson's veto. The newly created Joint Committee on Reconstruction reported in April 1866 that the former Confederate states were in a state of civil disorder and hence had not held valid elections. The report stated that Reconstruction was a congressional, not an executive, function.

Johnson's continued refusal to entertain the radicals' measures drove Congress to bring him up for an impeachment vote. The actual explanation for the vote, however, concerned his insistence on removing the radical Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, in defiance of the Tenure of Office Act. The Senate fell one vote short of convicting him, but by this time Johnson had lost all control over the process of Reconstruction.

In sum, the radical Republican governments in the South attempted to deal constructively with the problems left by the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. Led by so-called carpetbaggers (Northerners who settled in the South), scalawags (Southern whites in the Republican party), and freedmen, they began to rebuild the Southern economy and society. Agricultural production was restored, roads rebuilt, a more equitable tax system adopted, and schooling extended to blacks and poor whites. The freedmen's civil and political rights were legally guaranteed.

Of course, the bitterness engendered by the Civil War had not dissipated among most Southern whites. They objected strongly to the former slaves' new role in society—"the bottom rail on top," as many deemed it. Their response was vigilantism, separate from organized government: organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan arose to perform acts of violence intended to keep African Americans and white Republicans from voting. Jim Crow laws would soon follow the model of black codes to enforce formally (on a local level) and informally the social stratification of segregation, better known as the color line.

Reconstruction officially ended with the disputed election of 1876. The Republican presidential candidate that year, Rutherford B. Hayes, promised to alleviate conditions in the South, but the feeling there had already led to the formation of the "solid South" in support of his Democratic opponent, Samuel J. Tilden. In those three states the presidential contest was the occasion for a determined effort to throw off Republican rule, and on their electoral votes (and on one disputed electoral vote in Oregon) hung the fate of the election of 1876. Historians believe political deal-making brought the presidency to Hayes as a quid pro quo for discontinuing Reconstruction.

Reconstruction officially ended as all federal troops were withdrawn from the South. White rule was restored, and black people were, over time, deprived of many civil and political rights. Their economic position remained depressed. The radicals' hopes for a basic reordering of the social and economic structure of the South, beyond the abolition of slavery, died. The results, instead, were the one-party "solid South" and increased racial bitterness. Most Reconstruction acts were not federally enforced until new legislation grew out of the civil rights movement in the early 1960s.

The Freedman's Bureau! An agency to keep the Negro in idleness at the expense of the white man. Twice vetoed by the President, and made a law by Congress. Support Congress & you support the Negro. Sustain the President & you protect the white man. 1866. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

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The man with the (carpet) bags [Caricature of Carl Schurz carrying bags labeled, “carpet bag” and “carpet bagger South”] 1872. Thomas Nast, artist. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

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The Third-term Panic. "An ass, having put on the lion's skin, turned about in the forest, and amused himself by frightening all the foolish animals he met in his wanderings" - Shakespeare or Bacon. 1874. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

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“This is a white man's government” “We regard the Reconstruction Acts (so called) of Congress as usurpations, and unconstitutional, revolutionary, and void” - Democratic Platform. 1868. Thomas Nast, artist. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.


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