

# Reconstruction

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**Grade Level:** Middle School

**Time Estimated:** 9-10 days

## Overview:

This is a unit of study about Reconstruction, the time period from 1865-1877 when the United States was rebuilding and reuniting after the Civil War. This unit will be taught after students have gained a solid understanding of the causes and major developments of the Civil War. Students will understand the events and tensions that fractured the country, and will also know the course of the war and how it came to an end. The Reconstruction unit will begin with the end of the war and its immediate aftermath, including President Lincoln's plan for Reconstruction and his assassination. Students will then examine President Johnson's plan and how his policies were implemented in the South. Students will also consider the changes in the South brought about by the 13th Amendment and the work of the Freedmen's Bureau. Another major topic will be the policies enacted by the Radical Republicans during Congressional Reconstruction. Students will also learn about the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, and examine their impact on freedom and equality for African Americans. After these social and political changes have been considered, the unit will move onto how Reconstruction came to a close in 1877, and much of the period's progress was reversed in the following years. To culminate the unit, students will evaluate the successes and failures of the Reconstruction period by considering its enduring legacy.

This unit is designed for heterogeneously-mixed, multicultural classes. I have a variety of abilities in my classes, including special education students, ESL students, and Talented & Gifted students.

## Historical Background

Reconstruction is one of the most critical and complex periods in United States history. In 1865, four years of brutal destruction in the Civil War came to an end. 600,000 American soldiers lost their lives, far more than in any other war in American history. Four million enslaved African Americans were emancipated. The South was laid to waste; railroads, factories, farms, and cities were destroyed. Soldiers' graves and smoldering ruins were the tangible signs of the rift that went far deeper. Anger, bitterness, grief, and fear overwhelmed the nation. The United States faced innumerable challenges: how would the nation rebuild? How would the Confederate states be reunited with the Union? What did freedom for slaves really mean? How would the emancipated become part of society? How would the nation heal the wounds made by four years of bitter war?

As the nation cautiously started to celebrate the end of the war in April of 1865, a shocking tragedy quickly cast Americans into further despair. President Abraham Lincoln, who had fought so passionately to maintain the Union, was shot and killed. Lincoln had given hope to millions with his second inaugural address, in which he stated: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations." Lincoln envisioned a forgiving nation that would quickly bind its wounds and move forward. His death, however, increased Northern resentment and vengeance toward the South. It added a layer of grief to an already struggling nation. It also left the country in the hands of a leader who was not well prepared to govern.

Vice President Andrew Johnson assumed the presidency after Lincoln was assassinated. Johnson was a southerner and, like Lincoln, a self-educated man who climbed up the ladder from humble origins. He was also a Democrat who had been placed on the Lincoln ticket in 1864 to project a Union party image and keep the votes of the border states. Lincoln's Republican cabinet distrusted Johnson, and he was excluded from most conversations and decisions. He took over the presidency after only a few months as vice president and very little time spent with Lincoln. He was ill-prepared to handle the problems facing the nation at the time, and in conflict with Congress and the Radical Republicans in Congress during this period. Johnson's Reconstruction plan was lenient toward the former Confederate states. Amnesty and pardon were available to former Confederates who pledged loyalty to the Union and support for emancipation. Major Confederate leaders and extremely wealthy planters, however, had to apply individually for Presidential pardons. Johnson was determined to overthrow the slaveocracy that ruled the South. He was not, however, interested in increasing equality and providing suffrage rights to African Americans. He stated that this decision should be left to the states, but he was aware that no state, northern or southern, had been willing to expand the political rights of African Americans.

The Presidential Reconstruction period proved troublesome. After Confederate states had been admitted back into the Union, and Confederates pardoned, members of the pre-war political ruling class were soon re-elected as state legislators, governors, Congressmen, and Senators. These leaders had no intention of extending political equality and the right to vote to the freedmen. Black Codes were soon passed by all southern state legislatures. These laws restricted the freedoms of African Americans and limited the economic options of the freedmen. By enforcing labor contracts and anti-vagrancy laws, the strict Black Codes kept many freedmen tied to the plantation. Additionally, this period was characterized by violence and vengeance against African Americans. The justice system of the South provided no recourse; the all-white police force frequently terrorized African Americans, and judges and other officials seldom prosecuted crimes against Blacks. News of Black Codes and violence against freedmen spread to the North, creating indignation. Even citizens who were not committed to full political rights for African

Americans recognized that the basic freedoms and economic opportunities must be provided, or the idea of emancipation would be a farce.

Leading the complaints against Presidential Reconstruction were the Radical Republicans of Congress. Radical leaders viewed Reconstruction as an opportunity for sweeping changes and a building of a new, restructured South. The old social and political order would be overturned, and the national government would ensure equal rights for all. By 1867, Republicans had a majority in both houses of Congress and could overrule a presidential veto. In 1867, Congress passed a new Reconstruction Act. It threw out the state governments of states that had refused to ratify the 14th Amendment. It also divided up the South into five military districts, with military governors who were given power to enforce Reconstruction. In order to rejoin the Union, states had to write new state constitutions, ratify the 14th Amendment, and allow African Americans to vote. Under these new constitutions, many former Confederates were not allowed to vote. With military protection, freedmen were. Under these conditions, Republicans were able to gain control of southern state governments. The 15th Amendment was ratified in 1870, providing a constitutional guarantee of voting rights for African American males.

With new political forces in the South, including white southern Republicans, northerners who moved to the South, and African Americans, many changes were made. During Reconstruction, African Americans made significant political gains. They voted in large numbers and were also elected to political office. African Americans were elected as sheriffs, mayors, legislators, Congressmen, and Senators. Though their participation was significant, it was exaggerated by white southerners angry at the "Black Republican" governments. Reconstruction governments built public schools for both black and white children. They also rebuilt and added more railroads, telegraph lines, bridges, and railroads. These costly efforts led to tax increases that further angered southern whites. Anger and resentment of white southerners led to the rise of secret societies like the Ku Klux Klan, who used threats and violence to intimidate African Americans and prevent them from voting.

By the mid-1870's, enthusiasm for Reconstruction waned. Republicans were losing power, and Northerners were tired of trying to reform the South. In 1872, Congress passed the Amnesty Act, which reinstated voting rights to nearly all white southerners. At the same time, the efforts of the KKK and other violent organizations resulted in fewer African Americans at the polls. By 1876, almost all southern states were back under the control of Democrats. The end of Reconstruction came with the election of 1876. Neither Democrat Samuel Tilden nor Republican Rutherford B. Hayes was able to win a clear victory in the electoral college, so a Congressional commission was set up to decide the election. In a compromise, Republican candidate Hayes was declared the winner, in exchange for a promise to end Reconstruction. Upon taking office in 1877, Hayes removed the remaining federal troops from the South. With no one left to enforce the Reconstruction reforms, Reconstruction was over.

White conservative Democrats remained in control of southern governments, and

systematically reversed the steps taken toward political and social equality during Reconstruction. Southern states denied African Americans' voting rights through voting restrictions such as the poll tax, grandfather clause, and literacy test. Jim Crow laws separated blacks and whites in restaurants, schools, theaters, railroads, hospitals, and all other public spaces. This segregation was endorsed by the Supreme Court in the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* case in 1896. African Americans continued to be victims of violence, intimidation, and lynching. It would not be until the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's that the full protection of the 14th and 15th amendments would be granted to African Americans.

The period of Reconstruction was one of great promise for the United States and for African Americans. During this period, African Americans continued their struggle for freedom and worked to improve their communities. Institutions of the African American community, such as churches and schools, were strengthened. Though there were long-term consequences of Reconstruction's failures, the Reconstruction era provided a Constitutional basis for later attempts to end discrimination.

## Major Understanding

Reconstruction was one the most critical time periods in American history. The Civil War changed the nation greatly; most importantly by bringing an end to slavery. Reconstruction was a period of great promise, hope, and progress for African Americans, and a period of resentment and resistance for many white southerners. The end of Reconstruction ushered in the Jim Crow era and a hundred-year period of segregation and disenfranchisement, setting the stage for the Civil Rights movement.

## Objectives:

### Skills

Students will:

- interpret and analyze primary source documents
- sequence events in history and analyze cause and effect
- demonstrate ability to write from a historical perspective
- persuasively argue a position on an issue, both orally and in writing

### Content

Students will:

- compare and contrast the different plans for Reconstruction, including the plans of Lincoln, Johnson, and Congress
- identify the provisions of the Reconstruction Amendments and consider their effects

- describe the work of the Freedmen's Bureau and the impact it had on African-Americans in the South
- analyze the social and political changes brought about by the emancipation of slaves and Reconstruction policies
- describe the events that led to the end of Reconstruction and the removal of African American rights after Reconstruction ended

## **Standards of Learning: United States History to 1877**

### Skills

US I.1: The student will develop skills for geographical and historical analysis, including the ability to:

- identify and interpret primary and secondary source documents
- make connections between past and present
- sequence events in United States history
- interpret ideas and events from different historical perspectives
- evaluate and discuss issues orally and in writing

### Content

U.S. I.10: The student will demonstrate knowledge of the effects of Reconstruction on American life by:

a) identifying the provisions of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution of the United States of America and their impact on the expansion of freedom in America

b) describing the impact of Reconstruction policies on the South