CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: RECONSTRUCTION, 1863–1877

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CONCLUSION

KEY TOPICS
  * Competing political plans for reconstructing the defeated Confederacy
  * Difficult transition from slavery to freedom for African Americans
  * The political and social legacy of Reconstruction in the southern states
  * Post-Civil War transformations in the economic and political life of the North

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: HALE COUNTY, ALABAMA: FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM IN A BLACK BELT COMMUNITY
  In Hale County, former slaves showed an increased sense of autonomy, expressing it through politics and through their new work patterns. One planter described how freedpeople refused to do “their former accustomed work.” Former slaveholders had to reorganize their plantations and allow slaves to work the land as sharecroppers, rather than hired hands. Freedpeople organized themselves and elected two of their number to the state legislature. These acts of autonomy led to a white backlash, including nighttime attacks by Ku Klux Klansmen intent on terrorizing freed blacks and maintaining white social and political supremacy. The vignette shows the difficult transition from slavery to freedom.

THE POLITICS OF RECONSTRUCTION
  The Civil War had ended the debate over
states' rights in favor of federal government supremacy. The South had also been thoroughly defeated and its economy lay in ruins. White Southerners resented their conquered status. But the most bitter pill was the changed status of African Americans whose freedom seemed an affront to white supremacy. During his life, Lincoln had promoted a plan that authorized amnesty for those swearing an oath of allegiance. Once 10 percent of a Confederate state’s voters registered their oaths they could establish a state government. Arkansas and Louisiana met this criterion, but Congressional radicals pushed for a harsher stance. They pushed through a bill that would fundamentally transform southern society, though Lincoln killed it with a pocket veto. Redistribution of land posed another thorny issue. Many former slaves had worked on abandoned plantations, leased to northern investors. General Sherman had settled others on 40-acre plots. Congress had created the Freedman’s Bureau to help with the transition to freedom and had passed the Thirteenth Amendment to abolish slavery. But an assassin’s bullet ended Lincoln’s role in Reconstruction.

Andrew Johnson, the new president, was a War Democrat from Tennessee. He had used harsh language to describe southern “traitors” but blamed individuals rather than the entire South for secession. While Congress was not in session he granted amnesty to most Confederates. Initially, wealthy landholders and members of the political elite had been excluded, but Johnson pardoned most of them. Johnson appointed provisional governors who organized new governments. By December, Johnson claimed that “restoration” was virtually complete. A lifelong Democrat, Johnson sympathized with his fellow white southerners and was committed to white supremacy.

Radicals sought to use federal power to remake the South in the North’s image. They advocated land redistribution to make former slaves independent landowners. Stringent “Black Codes” that defined a permanent second-class citizenship for the ex-slaves outraged many Northerners. When Congress came back into session in December 1865, it excluded the southern representatives and set up a special committee to hear testimony on the southern situation. Congress passed a Civil Rights bill to bestow full citizenship upon African Americans and a bill to enlarge the scope of the Freedman’s Bureau. President Johnson vetoed both bills. Congress overrode the vetoes, forging a much more unified Republican Party. Fearful that courts might declare the Civil Rights Act unconstitutional, Congress drafted the Fourteenth Amendment. The Congressional elections of 1866 became a showdown between Congress and Johnson over the issue of Reconstruction and the amendment. Republicans won an overwhelming victory and set about gaining control over Reconstruction.

The First Reconstruction Act of 1867 enfranchised blacks and divided the South into five military districts. A crisis developed over whether Johnson could replace Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. In violation of the Tenure of Office Act, Johnson fired Stanton. The House impeached Johnson, though the vote in the Senate fell one vote short of conviction. By 1868 eight of the eleven ex-Confederate states were back in the Union. Republicans nominated Ulysses Grant for president. The Republicans attacked Democrats’ loyalties. Democrats exploited racism to gather votes and used terror in the South to keep Republicans from voting. Republicans won with less than 53 percent of the
vote. The remaining unreconstructed states had to ratify both the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to be admitted to the Union. Women’s rights activists were outraged that the new laws enfranchised African Americans but not women. The movement split over whether to support a linkage between the rights of women and African Americans.

THE MEANING OF FREEDOM Freed people built upon the strengths they had created as slaves—family and church—as they tried to define the meaning of freedom for themselves. For many, the first impulse to define freedom was to move about. Many who left soon returned to seek work in their neighborhoods. But others sought new lives in predominantly black areas, even cities. Former slaves enjoyed the freedom of no longer having to show deference to whites. Freedom often meant the chance to reunite with lost family members. The end of slavery meant that African Americans could more closely fulfill what they saw as appropriate gender roles. Males took on more authority in the family, but women continued to work outside the home. Emancipation allowed ex-slaves to practice religion without white interference. Black communities pooled their resources to establish churches and create the first social institution that they fully controlled. Education was another symbol of freedom. By 1869 over 3,000 Freedman’s Bureau schools taught over 150,000 students.

Most former slaves hoped to become self-sufficient farmers, but with no land redistribution this dream was not fulfilled. The Freedman’s Bureau was forced to evict tens of thousands of blacks that had been settled on confiscated lands. At war’s end most planters expected blacks to work for wages in gangs. This system, reminiscent of slavery, was unacceptable to many ex-slaves. Sharecropping represented a compromise between planter and former slave. Sharecroppers set their own hours and tasks. Families labored together on adjoining parcels of land.

Former slaves organized politically to protect their interests and promote their own participation. Five states had black electoral majorities. The Union League, with chapters throughout the South, became the political voice of former slaves. New leaders, drawn from the ranks of teachers and ministers, emerged to give direction to the black community as it fought for equal rights.

SOUTHERN POLITICS AND SOCIETY Most northerners did not favor a policy that required far reaching changes in the South and were satisfied with a reconstruction that brought the South back into the Union with a viable Republican Party. But this required active Federal support to protect the black voters upon which it depended. In addition to African Americans, Republicans drew strength from white, northern, middle-class emigrants called carpetbaggers. Larger in numbers were native southern white Republicans called scalawags. Some were businessmen. But many were Unionists with old scores to settle. The result was an uneasy alliance, with each group pushing an agenda that was incompatible with the plans devised by its allies.

Throughout the South, state conventions drafted constitutions. These conventions often had a significant black presence and instituted political and humanitarian reforms. Though the new governments insisted on equal rights, they did accept separate schools.
The Republican governments did little to assist African Americans in acquiring land though they did help protect the rights of black laborers to bargain freely. Republican leaders envisioned promoting northern-style prosperity and gave heavy subsidies for railroad development. These plans frequently opened the doors to corruption and and eroded public confidence in the Republican ability to govern.

Many white southerners believed that the Republicans were not a legitimate political group. Paramilitary groups like the Ku Klux Klan used terror to destroy the Reconstruction governments and intimidate their supporters. Congress passed several laws to crack down on the Klan and several hundred Klan members were prosecuted. The Civil Rights Act of 1875 outlawed racial discrimination in public places.

But as wartime idealism faded and Democrats gained strength in the North, northern Republicans abandoned the freed people and their white allies. Conservative Democrats (Redeemers) won control of southern states, frequently after violent clashes. Between 1873 and 1883, the Supreme Court weakened enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and overturned convictions of Klan members.

The Republicans’ vision of a modernized South never came to pass. The South grew more heavily dependent on cotton. The crop lien system provided loans in exchange for a lien on the crop, but as cotton prices spiraled downward cotton growers fell more deeply into debt. The South emerged as an impoverished region.

**RECONSTRUCTING THE NORTH** Republicans like Lincoln believed that their society was bound by a harmony of interests without class conflict that allowed for social mobility. A violent railroad strike in 1877 suggested that the North had undergone its own reconstruction, shattering that harmony. Fueled by railroad construction, the postwar years saw a continued industrial boom that concentrated industries into the hands of a few big businesses. Railroad tycoons drove smaller companies out of business. Several Republican politicians maintained close connections with railroad interests resulting in the Credit Mobilier scandal. Other industries also experienced boons, including mining and processing natural resources.

The Republican Party underwent dramatic changes. The old radicals were dying or losing influence as party leaders concentrated on holding on to federal patronage. A growing number of Republicans were appalled by the corruption of the party and sought an alternative. They also voiced suspicions about universal suffrage. The Liberal Republicans called for a return to limited government, though they were suspicious of expanding democracy. They proposed civil service reform to insure elites would have government posts. Although many had supported abolition and equal rights, they opposed continued federal involvement in Reconstruction. In 1872, Horace Greeley challenged Ulysses Grant for the presidency. Grant easily won but the Liberal Republican agenda continued to gain influence.

In 1873, a financial panic triggered the longest depression in American history. Prices fell, unemployment rose, and many people sank deeply in debt. Government officials
rejected appeals for relief. Clashes between labor and capital led many to question whether their society was one with a harmony of interests. As the election of 1876 approached, new scandals in the Grant administration hurt the Republicans. The Democrats nominated Samuel J. Tilden of New York, a former prosecutor. Democrats combined attacks on Reconstruction with attacks on corruption. The Republican nominee, Rutherford B. Hayes of Ohio, accused Democrats of treason and promised to clean up corruption. Tilden won more votes than Hayes, but both sides claimed victory. In three southern states two sets of electoral votes were returned. An electoral commission awarded the disputed votes to Hayes. Hayes struck a deal that promised money for southern internal improvements and noninterference in southern affairs. The remaining federal troops were removed from the South and the remaining Republican governments in the South lost power.

CONCLUSION Reconstruction was over. It had successfully reunited the nation, but had not brought full freedom to former slaves. It left a government committed to protecting the interests of business and that allowed white domination in the South.

Lecture Suggestions

1. One effective way of getting a handle on the politics of Reconstruction is to emphasize that the policy evolved over time. No group had a clear sense of exactly what it wanted. The policy evolved as individuals and groups responded to what others were doing. Congress responded to Johnson’s program by excluding the southern representatives and passing the civil rights act. Johnson responded by vetoing the act. Congress responded by overriding the veto and passing the 14th Amendment. And so on. Impress on the students that policies develop out of the conflicts between different groups.

2. Students are frequently familiar with the traditional view of Reconstruction—you might start out by asking how many of them have seen “Gone With the Wind.” It’s amazing how many have seen it! You can discuss the view of Reconstruction governments that is portrayed in that film. The traditional critique emphasized that the Reconstruction governments failed because they were corrupt and inefficient and that they promoted black equality. Use these critiques to explore more fully what the Radical Regimes were trying to accomplish and the successes and failures they had.

3. The text looks at the black Reconstruction experience in terms of defining the meaning of freedom. This is a very fruitful way to look at the problem. Make the connection with the material in Chapter Eleven. The text emphasizes how the slaves survived slavery by building strong family connections and used religion to promote group solidarity. Examine how these strengths were present during Reconstruction. Examine the material that defined the slaves’ experiences. Show how the freedpeople made a conscious choice to distance themselves from that experience.
Discussion Questions

1. What was Lincoln’s plan and how did it differ from the Wade-Davis plan? Which would have produced better results?

2. Where would you put the burden of responsibility for the battle between Johnson and Congress?

3. What did the ex-slaves want from Reconstruction? To what extent were their aspirations fulfilled?

4. The text suggests that to some degree African Americans accepted segregation. Why was this so?