Chapter 16: Reconstructing a Nation, 1865-1877

Overview
Reconstructing the Union and the nation’s political economy presented many questions and few answers. There was no plan in place at the end of the war, many options were tried. President Johnson was committed to limited government and resisted Republican plans to use federal power to help freed people. His reconstruction plans failed miserably. Congressional Reconstruction prevailed and this time an even more radical Congress took power. Reconstruction politics affected Northerners in ways that were not predicted.

Key Topics
• Wartime approaches to Reconstruction
• The failure of President Johnson’s plan for Reconstruction
• The transformation of the southern labor system
• The nature of Congressional Reconstruction
• Declining national interest in Reconstruction

Review Questions
✓ Why was the “Banks Plan” in Louisiana so controversial?
✓ What was the fate of the various efforts to redistribute southern land among freed people?
✓ What was so “radical” about Radical Reconstruction?
✓ Why was Andrew Johnson impeached?
✓ How did Reconstruction affect the North? What were the major causes for the decline of Radical Reconstruction?

Annotated chapter outline
John Richard Dennett Visits a Freedmen's Bureau Court: John Dennett, a reporter for The Nation, toured parts of the South following the Civil War. In Liberty, Virginia, he spent the day with an agent of the Freedmen’s Bureau as he tried to mediate labor disputes between white land owners and newly freed black men. His observations that day illustrated the obstacles the nation faced as it tried to reconstruct itself.

War Time Reconstruction: Reconstructing the Union and the nation’s political economy presented many questions and few answers. What labor system would replace slavery? How would states be readmitted to the Union? What civil and political rights would freed men and women have? Because there was no plan in place at the end of the war, many options were tried.
• The Banks Plan was replicated over much of the lower South. It preserved much of the prewar labor system.
• President Lincoln’s Ten Percent Plan was very lenient and made a state’s readmission contingent on recognizing the abolition of slavery but not guaranteeing blacks the right to vote. Republicans in Congress and across the South denounced the Ten Percent Plan. They favored plans for redistributing land as well as a federal guarantee of civil rights to freed slaves. The Radical Republicans, as they were known, won over moderate Republicans and when Congress took control of Reconstruction in 1866, the process became known as Radical Reconstruction. By the spring of 1865, Lincoln had moved to the radicals’ position and he, too, called for some limited voting rights for former slaves. What all factions came to understand, was that any plan that did not consider the wishes of southern blacks was doomed to failure.
• Freedom meant many things to those who had never enjoyed it. Three areas emerged as the most precious: churches, schools, and the ownership of land. Of the three, land was by far the most important.
Presidential Reconstruction, 1865-1867: With Lincoln’s assassination, Vice President Andrew Johnson became president. A man who possessed neither flexibility nor good humor, Johnson was committed to limited government and resisted Republican plans to use federal power to help freed people. He also had no sympathy for African Americans. His reconstruction plans failed miserably.

- President Johnson’s reconstruction plan offered amnesty and the restoration of property to southerners who swore an oath of loyalty to the Union. States were readmitted under equally lenient terms which included ratifying the Thirteenth Amendment. State legislatures enacted “black codes” which regulated the behavior of freed men and women and owners forced blacks to sign labor contracts which basically enslaved them once again.
- News of widespread white intimidation and violence against blacks confirmed a belief that white southerners were replicating a pre-emancipation way of life.
- Congress challenged the presidential plan. It voted to extend the life of the Freedman’s Bureau and empowered it to establish its own courts which would supersede local jurisdictions. Johnson vetoed the bill but Congress could not get enough votes to override the veto. Johnson publicly attacked the Congress and questioned the legitimacy of the Committee.
- Congress passed a landmark Civil Rights bill in March 1866. Johnson vetoed the bill. Johnson and the Congress were in permanent opposition to one another.

Congressional Reconstruction: The result of the election of 1866 marked the end of Presidential Reconstruction. Congressional Reconstruction prevailed and this time an even more radical Congress had taken power.

- Along with Radical Republicans and black leaders, moderate Republicans came to believe that southern blacks should have the right to vote. They believed political power in the hands of all male freedmen was the only way to avoid a lengthy military occupation.
- Southern state constitutions were completely rewritten, thousands of black men began to vote, and hundreds assumed office. State delegations in the South drew up some of the most progressive state constitutions in America.
- Southern Republicans failed to work out a program around which both black and white voters could gather. In the end, however, the shaky coalition fell apart.
- Congressional Reconstruction made it easier for former slaves to negotiate the terms of their labor contracts in part because many southern states had abolished the Black Codes and also because there was a shortage of agricultural workers in the South. Plantations were broken up into family-sized farms and, instead of gang laborers, families worked the land. Share cropping also tied the South’s economy to agriculture, especially cotton, and that impeded the South’s overall economic development.

The Retreat from Republican Radicalism: The Republicans backed away from Radical Reconstruction in part because voters seemed to be tiring of Radical Reconstruction. The Republicans portrayed themselves as the party of moderation especially when compared to the Democrats who, according to the Republicans, represented extremism and continued disruption.

- By 1867, President Johnson and the Congress were at an impasse. Johnson had waged a relentless campaign against the Congress and the two sides fought their final battles over who would control the military in the South. When Johnson fired Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, who was sympathetic to the Republicans, the die was cast and Congress voted nearly a dozen articles of impeachment against the president of the United States.
- While Johnson was on trial, state elections told the Republicans what they already knew: American voters were backing away from the Radical Republican issues.
- The Grant administration and the Republican Congress reinforced their image of moderation by attempting to restore law and order in the South, by enforcing the Fifteenth Amendment, and suppressing Klan violence. The administration also shifted to an aggressive foreign policy.
Reconstruction in the North: Reconstruction politics affected Northerners in ways that were not predicted. White feminists asked why they were denied the right to vote when male freed slaves were guaranteed the same right. The alliance between abolitionists and feminists in the North was disrupted. Northern workers also protested. But the elections of 1868 gave the Republicans the numbers needed to ratify the Fifteenth Amendment. It provided for nationwide black male suffrage. Congress also required ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment of those as yet unreconstructed states.

- National Labor Union was inspired by the radicalism of the Civil War and Reconstruction. It was the first significant postwar effort to organize “working people” in America. It sought to unify those whose labors and skills produced wealth and it included women’s rights advocates and wage earners, but did not really address the concerns of unskilled workers, blacks, rural workers, or working women.

The End of Reconstruction: Reconstruction came to an end because voters reacted to political corruption in both regions of the country. Equally influential, however, was an economic depression and a new round of electoral violence. The Republicans rallied around a political bargain instead of around a determination to enforce Reconstruction.

- Influence peddling, accepting bribes and kickbacks were all common forms of corruption. Corruption at all levels in the North and particularly in the South weakened public support for Reconstruction policies.

- Reconstruction, corruption, and the demands of women, blacks, and workers caused a group of Republicans to separate from the main body of the party. Known as “Liberal Republicans,” they reacted to developments within the party that they believed had taken the Republican party away from its roots. Grant was re-elected but the Democrats in the North were becoming powerful once again. Freed men, however, were fast becoming unimportant to the Republicans and although the Republicans passed the Civil Rights Act of 1875, they had lost their enthusiasm for and dedication to political equality for black Americans.

- Democrats in the South succeeded in drawing white Republicans to their side with an appeal to restore white supremacy. The nation turned its attention to labor unrest and economic depression.

- The election of 1876 was marked by electoral fraud on the state level. The disputed election was determined by an electoral commission made up of Republicans, who gave the election to the Republican candidate, Rutherford B. Hayes. Immediately after his inauguration, Hayes ended the military occupation of the South and with it the symbolic end of Reconstruction was at hand.

Conclusion: The Civil War and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments abolished slavery, defined citizenship, and gave black men the right to vote. For many who were born slaves but died free, the war and Reconstruction were nearly miraculous. For generations that followed, the road to equality had just begun. For other Americans, the post-Civil War world of industrialization and urbanization was just beginning.

Analytical reading These questions refer to the passage “The Political Economy of Sharecropping” on pages 384-386.

1. Define sharecropping.
2. How did it change the political economy of the South?
3. In what ways did it effect nonlandowning whites; poor white farmers?
4. Why would black farmers participate in such an arrangement?

Lecture Strategies

After decades of conflict and years of bloodshed and regional distrust and hatred -- not to mention vicious racism -- the nation faces the almost impossible task of putting itself back together. If you
considered the notion of "revolution" when you discussed the war for independence, you may want to bring that topic back again and consider whether or not the Civil War was a revolutionary war. If your students have been progressing throughout the course, they should have developed some thoughts on this question. Reconstruction plans were politically divisive. The nation's economic reconstruction was especially challenging. But above all of the problems was the problem of what the nation was going to do with recently freed men and women that they have their own individual problems to be considered. How Americans manage any of this is confusing and challenging.

**Supplements:** Prentice Hall has developed a number of supplements that can enhance your lectures as well as your students’ comprehension and performance.

**American Stories: Biographies in United States History** by Katheryn A. Abbott and Patricia Hagler Minter. See Chapter 15, Reconstruction, 1863-1877, for biographical sketches of Tunis Campbell and Nathan Bedford Forrest.

**Documents Collection** see Part Sixteen: Reconstruction

- *Address from the Colored Citizens of Norfolk, Virginia, to the People of the United States*” 1865
- *Carl Schurz, Report on the Condition of the South* 1865
- *Clinton B. Fisk, Plain Counsels for Freedmen* 1865
- *Mississippi Black Code* 1865
- *James C. Beecher, Report on Land Reform in the South Carolina Islands* 1865, 1866
- *The Memphis Riot* 1866
- *The Fourteenth Amendment* 1868
- * Albion W. Tourgee, Letter on Ku Klux Klan Activities* 1870
- *The Nation, “The State of the South”* 1872
- *Susan B. Anthony and the “New Departure” for Women* 1873
- *James T. Rapier, Testimony Before U.S. Senate Regarding the Agricultural Labor Force in the South* 1880
- *A Sharecrop Contract* 1882

The documents of particular relevance to this chapter are identified with an asterisk.