

AP United States History

Unit 5: The Nation Divided and Reunited

Topic- Reconstruction- Part 2 of 3

Reconstruction

Lesson Objective-2: Explain how and why Reconstruction resulted in continuity and change in regional and national understandings of what it meant to be American.

Content Objective: Southern plantation owners continued to own the majority of the region's land even after Reconstruction. Formerly enslaved persons sought land ownership but generally fell short of self-sufficiency, as an exploitative and soil-intensive sharecropping system limited blacks' and poor whites' access to land in the South.

How did the dynamics of the South change because of Reconstruction?

When slavery as an institution came to an end 4 million African-Americans instantly became free in 1865. But, what did freedom come to mean for them at that moment? There needed to be educational opportunities and the ability to find a way to make a living. The former slaves— newly freed— tried first to reunite their families. We have to remember that prior to the war, a slave may have had a first name, but no slave had a surname. Many slaves simply took the name of a prominent political figure, while a few took the last name of their former master. Family reunification proved to be a difficult and oftentimes, painful task. With the introduction of the Freedmen's Bureau, a public school system was developed in the southern states for the very first time on an integrated basis. But, with no land and no capital to invest, most of the freedman and their families entered into a system of sharecropping, or tenant farming. Sharecropping was a way of life for many African-American families in the South until the 1960s.

Essentially, the system worked like this— a prominent landowner (quite often a former plantation owner) would rent land to an African-American family to farm, and would provide them with tools and in some cases, seed for planting crops. In return, the African-American family would owe both rent to the landowner and a portion of the harvested crop. To put it quite simply, sharecropping was a system that made African-American families dependent upon wealthy white landowners and as such, created a cycle of poverty. Though an education was available during Reconstruction to some African-American children due to the work of the Freedmen's Bureau, when the ex-Confederates came back into political power, the nation was in the grips of a major financial meltdown, known to history as the Panic of 1873. One by one, as the public school systems began to come under the control of southern state governments, the school systems became segregated by race and saw their budgets slashed. These developments had a negative effect on the African-American populations in the ex-Confederate states, but it also negatively impacted the poor white populations in those states, as well.

Prior to the Civil War, the vast majority of white southerners were not major landholders. After the war, as the system of sharecropping grew, wealthy landowners became even more powerful and thus, were able to expand their landholdings at the expense of small farmers. Some poor white families moved into the cities of the New South, which after Reconstruction began to slowly industrialize, others moved into the West, but many, like their African-American brethren, remained as small farmers and struggled to make a living from the land. The nature of growing soil-intensive crops such as cotton took a toll on the land and its productivity, as well. But, those who could make the move into the small towns, or even into the growing cities of the South would encounter another stark reality— the reality of segregation.

For the most part, when we think of segregation, we think of the racial separation that began with the Supreme Court case of *Plessy vs. Ferguson* which in 1896 declared that all public facilities could be segregated by race based on the doctrine of separate but equal. Segregation, as a practice, began as soon as the war came to an end. It was written into the Black Codes— by law— in the ex-Confederate states as early as 1866, some thirty years before the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision was to be handed down by the Supreme Court.

Content Objective: Segregation, violence, Supreme Court decisions, and local political tactics progressively stripped away African American rights, but the 14th and 15th amendments eventually became the basis for court decisions upholding civil rights in the 20th century.

Groups such as the Ku Klux Klan used violence— domestic terrorism, as a tool for enforcing what would become the system of segregation in the South. The constant intimidation of public officials who were Republicans that were sympathetic to the process of Reconstruction, or who were persons of color took a major toll and had a negative impact. Large-scale race riots, such as those in Memphis and New Orleans in the summer of 1866, set a tone of violent intimidation against both African-American voters and office-seekers which only became much more virulent with the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and it continued despite the presence of federal troops in the ex-Confederate states throughout the 1870s and into the 20th century. But, court cases, such as the *Slaughterhouse Cases* in Louisiana limited the scope of the 13th and 14th Amendments to issues regarding race-based discrimination and slavery and stated that the amendments did not apply to state citizenship rights. Therefore, according to the *Slaughterhouse Cases*, the prosecution of state crimes was a state, or even a local matter— even those related to civil rights— and not a federal issue.

During the contested governor's race in Louisiana in 1872, between a Republican and a moderate Democrat (a conservative willing to make some reforms regarding Reconstruction), a white mob attacked and overpowered a group of African-Americans and black troops which were protecting them who were members of the state militia. The Colfax Massacre left more than 150 African-Americans dead, most of them, were killed after they had surrendered. The Supreme Court case, *Cruickshank vs. US* (1876), was born out of the Colfax Massacre. In the case, the Supreme Court decided that prosecuting the crime was a local, or state matter, not one which could be under the jurisdiction of the federal government.

These court cases hollowed out the ability of the federal government to handle issues relating to civil rights. In effect, it placed the enforcement of issues, or crimes relating to civil rights in the hands of ex-Confederate officials, who had taken over the state governments throughout the South. As segregation took hold, lynching became more pervasive, and with it, the continued growth of the political power of ex-Confederate officials throughout the South. In essence, a system of apartheid (a society based on racial separation) grew throughout the American South as the segregation of public schools, public transportation, and public facilities became the law of the land, and with it, the power of African-Americans to even be able to vote due to such state policies as poll taxes, literacy tests, and the infamous Grandfather Clause (which stated that only if your grandfather had been a free American citizen before 1867, would an African-American man be eligible to vote) became almost non-existent by 1900. The final blow came from the Supreme Court in 1883, when it decided in the *Civil Rights Cases* ruling that the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was unconstitutional because it required state action and so therefore, it could not apply to private businesses. The *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision, which was handed down by the Supreme Court in 1896, just formalized segregation as a practice— most of the people living in the South by that time had already long acknowledged it as a reality.

It would not be until the end of World War II that the barriers of segregation began to fall due in large-part to actions by the federal government (such as desegregating the armed forces after the end of the Second World War), Supreme Court cases (such as *Sweatt vs. Painter* and *Brown vs. Board of Education*), and through the heroic efforts of civil rights activists in the 1950s and 1960s. It was during the Civil Rights Era that the cornerstones for the protections offered in the constitution by the 14th and 15th Amendments would finally become enforced by the federal government and would eventually lead to the end of segregation and to the

expansion of voting rights— both at the federal level, by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

What was the failure of Reconstruction?

The failure of Reconstruction was that the people who crafted the policies of the process failed to understand the enormity of the task that it would set out to resolve at the end of the Civil War. It was a process that, by definition, took almost a century and in some respects, continues to this day and will beyond it. In 1860, the population of the United States was about 31 million and 4 million of that number were African-Americans who were held in slavery. While Reconstruction ended slavery, gave African-Americans the rights of citizenship, and extended the right to vote to African-American men, most of these protections became diluted until the end of the Second World War in 1945, and only then, were those protections just beginning to be realized by the power of the Civil Rights Movement into the 1960s and 1970s. And while the Freedman's Bureau created public school systems, provided medical care, and extended labor protections to newly freed African-Americans, it was a temporary agency, that never had the funding nor the backing politically to reach its full potential, as its effectiveness was quite often limited by the people running the organization on the one hand, and by the conditions on the ground (domestic terrorism often had a paralyzing influence) in the ex-Confederate states.

By the end of Reconstruction, the public school system (a noble experiment from the beginning), had been reduced by state governments which sought to defund it, the promise of medical care for the poor and indigent would not exist until the creation of Medicaid in the mid-1960s (in 1965, at the height of the Civil Rights Era), and labor protections would not exist for most Americans, including those in the South until the early 20th century (for African-Americans, these did not exist either until the Civil Rights Era). Reconstruction did see a number of African-American politicians become mayors, congressmen, Senators, and even a governor. But until the 1960s, African-Americans would largely be shut-out of political office.

However, Reconstruction perhaps had another sinister dark side. During this period from 1865-1910, as the continents of Africa and Asia were carved-up by the European powers of the day in a second era of empire building, the United States introduced its first major immigration restrictions (though prejudice against groups of immigrants was a not a new facet in American life), and began, once again, subduing the Native Americans on the Western frontier and the process of Americanizing them. By 1915, with the release of the blockbuster silent film, *Birth of Nation*, Hollywood would also get in on the act. This film— and other highly popular feature films such as *Gone With the Wind* (1939), would extol the virtues of the domestic terrorist groups in the South such as the Ku Klux Klan and along with the Lost Cause narrative (a narrative developed by Southerners which found its way into the public school system throughout the South for generations that painted Confederate soldiers and military leaders as American heroes), would help to paint Reconstruction as a failure in the minds of many Americans for generations to come. For a number of historians, even the language used by Hitler in the years leading up to the Second World War and others came as an outgrowth of the eugenics movement— one which was born during the period in which immigration restrictions were becoming increasingly restrictive and a system of racial apartheid in the South— (born out of Reconstruction) were in the process of taking shape. Other historians conclude that it was much easier for European nations to increasingly subjugate the peoples of Africa and Asia throughout the period from 1865-1910, due to the perceived failures of the process of Reconstruction in the United States.

Whether or not these conclusions become the dominant mainstream ideology of historical thought has yet to be determined. But, one thing is for certain, the goals of Reconstruction, were, more or less, more realized during the Civil Rights Era from 1945-1980— which, saw its greatest victories come almost exactly 100 years after the introduction of the process of Reconstruction and the end of the Civil War, itself. In some respects, Reconstruction is a process that is perhaps, still in motion.