End of Reconstruction

**Main Idea**

As white Southerners regained power, Reconstruction ended, as did black advances toward equality.

**Why It Matters Now**

Reforms made during Reconstruction made later civil rights gains possible.

**One American’s Story**

Robert B. Elliott was a U.S. congressman from South Carolina during Reconstruction. In 1874, he made a stirring speech supporting a civil rights bill that would outlaw racial discrimination in public services. (See Interact with History, page 515.)

**A Voice from the Past**

The passage of this bill will determine the civil status, not only of the negro but of any other class of citizens who may feel themselves discriminated against. It will form the capstone of that temple of liberty begun on this continent.

Robert B. Elliott, quoted in *The Glorious Failure*

Elliott was elected South Carolina's attorney general in 1876. He began his term in 1877, just as Reconstruction was ending. That year, federal troops left the South. White Southerners took back control of the region. Quickly, they forced African Americans, including Elliott, out of office.

In this section, you will learn about the events that ended Reconstruction. You will also see how Reconstruction’s end meant setbacks in the fight for civil rights and equality.

**The Election of Grant**

The Republican Party seemed stronger than ever in 1868. That year, its candidate, General Ulysses S. Grant, won the presidency. During the campaign, the Democrats attacked the Republicans' Reconstruction policies. They blamed the party for granting rights to African Americans.

On Election Day, however, the Republicans won. Grant received 214 electoral votes. His Democratic opponent received only 80. The popular count was much closer. Grant had a majority of only 306,000 votes.

Grant would not have had such a majority without the freedmen’s vote. Despite attacks by the Ku Klux Klan, about 500,000 African Americans voted in the South. Most cast their ballots for Grant.
The Fifteenth Amendment

After Grant’s victory, Radical Republicans worried that the Southern states might try to keep African Americans from voting in future elections. To prevent this, Radical leaders proposed a new constitutional amendment.

The Fifteenth Amendment stated that citizens could not be stopped from voting “on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” (This amendment, like the Fourteenth Amendment, did not apply to Native Americans on tribal lands.) The amendment was ratified in 1870.

The Fifteenth Amendment was not aimed only at the South. African-American men could not vote in 16 states. “We have no moral right to impose an obligation on one part of the land which the rest will not accept,” one Radical wrote. With the Fifteenth Amendment, the nation again turned toward democracy.

The Fifteenth Amendment did not apply to women. This made many white women angry. Why couldn’t they vote when black men—former slaves—could? Suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton protested the idea of uneducated immigrants and freedmen “who never read the Declaration of Independence” making laws for educated white women. Most African-American women were not as angry. To Frances E. W. Harper, a black suffragist and writer, it was important for African Americans to gain voting rights, even if that meant only men at first.

Grant Fights the Klan

Despite gaining the vote, African Americans in the South continued to be terrorized by the Ku Klux Klan. In 1871, to stop the terror, President Grant asked Congress to pass a tough law against the Klan. Joseph Rainey, a black congressman from South Carolina, had received death threats from the Klan. He urged his fellow lawmakers to support the bill.

Congress approved the anti-Klan bill. Federal marshals then arrested thousands of Klansmen. Klan attacks on African-American voters declined. As a result, the 1872 presidential election was both fair and peaceful in the South. Grant won a second term.
Scandal and Panic Weaken Republicans

Under the Grant administration, support for the Republicans and Reconstruction weakened. Scandals hurt the administration and caused divisions in the Republican Party. A financial panic further hurt the Republicans and turned the country’s attention away from Reconstruction.

President Grant did not choose his advisers well. He put his former army friends and his wife’s relatives in government positions. Many of these people were unqualified. Some Grant appointees took bribes. Grant’s private secretary, for instance, took money from whiskey distillers who wanted to avoid paying taxes. Grant’s secretary of war, General William Belknap, left office after people accused him of taking bribes.

Such scandals deeply outraged many Republicans. In 1872, some Republican officials broke away and formed the new Liberal Republican Party. The Republicans, no longer unified, became less willing to impose tough Reconstruction policies on the South.

In 1873, political corruption and Republican quarreling gave way to a more serious problem. When several powerful Eastern banks ran out of money after making bad loans, a financial panic swept the country. In the Panic of 1873, banks across the land closed. The stock market temporarily collapsed. The panic caused an economic depression, a time of low business activity and high unemployment. The railroad industry, which relied on banks for loans, suffered. Within a year, 89 of the country’s 364 railroads went broke. Railroad failures left Midwestern farmers with no way to move their crops, and many farmers were ruined.

The depression, which lasted about five years, touched nearly all parts of the economy. By 1875, more than 18,000 companies had folded. Hundreds of workers had lost their jobs. Many Americans blamed the crisis on the Republicans—the party in power. As a result, Democrats won victories in the 1874 congressional and state elections. In the middle of the depression, Americans grew tired of hearing about the South’s problems. The nation was losing interest in Reconstruction.
Supreme Court Reversals

To make matters worse for the Republicans, the Supreme Court began to undo some of the changes that had been made in the South. In an 1876 case, *U.S. v. Cruikshank*, the Court ruled that the federal government could not punish individuals who violated the civil rights of African Americans. Only the states had that power, the Court declared. Southern state officials often would not punish those who attacked African Americans. As a result, violence against them increased.

In the 1876 case *U.S. v. Reese*, the Court ruled in favor of white Southerners who barred African Americans from voting. The Court stated that the Fifteenth Amendment did not give everyone the right to vote—it merely listed the grounds on which states could not deny the vote. In other words, states could prevent African Americans from voting for other reasons. States later imposed poll taxes and literacy tests to restrict the vote. These Court decisions weakened Reconstruction and blocked African-American efforts to gain full equality.

Reconstruction Ends

The final blow to Reconstruction came with the 1876 presidential election. The Democrats nominated Samuel J. Tilden, governor of New York. The Republicans chose Rutherford B. Hayes, governor of Ohio. The race was very close. Victory depended on the electoral votes of South Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida. The votes in those states were so close that both the Democrats and the Republicans claimed victory. A special commission of eight Republicans and seven Democrats made a deal. Under the **Compromise of 1877**, Hayes became president. In return, the Republicans compromised with the Southern Democrats on several issues.

1. The government would remove federal troops from the South.
2. The government would provide land grants and loans for the construction of railroads linking the South to the West Coast.
3. Southern officials would receive federal funds for construction and improvement projects.
4. Hayes would appoint a Democrat to his cabinet.
5. The Democrats promised to respect African Americans’ civil and political rights.

Abolitionist Wendell Phillips was against the compromise. He doubted that the South would respect black rights. “The whole soil of the South is hidden by successive layers of broken promises,” he said. “To trust a Southern promise would be fair evidence of insanity.”

After the 1876 presidential election, the Reconstruction governments in the South collapsed. The Democrats returned to power, believing that they were the redeemers, or rescuers, of the South.
**Reconstruction: Civil Rights Amendments and Laws**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amendment/Law</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civil Rights Act of 1866</td>
<td>• Granted citizenship and equal rights to all persons born in the United States (except Native Americans)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourteenth Amendment (1868)</td>
<td>• Granted citizenship and equal protection of the laws to all persons born in the United States (except Native Americans)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fifteenth Amendment (1870)</td>
<td>• Protected the voting rights of African Americans</td>
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<tr>
<td>Civil Rights Act of 1875</td>
<td>• Outlawed racial segregation in public services • Ensured the right of African Americans to serve as jurors</td>
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**SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Charts**

1. Which amendment and law are most similar?
2. Which amendment specifically protects voting rights?

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**The Legacy of Reconstruction**

Historians still argue about the success of Reconstruction. The nation did rebuild and reunite. However, Reconstruction did not achieve equality for African Americans.

After Reconstruction, most African Americans still lived in poverty. Legally, they could vote and hold public office. But few took part in politics. They continued to face widespread violence and prejudice.

During this period, however, African Americans did make lasting gains. Protection of civil rights became part of the U.S. Constitution. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments would provide a legal basis for civil rights laws of the 20th century. Black schools and churches begun during Reconstruction also endured. Reconstruction changed society, putting African Americans on the path toward full equality. In the next unit, you will learn about other changes in American society after the Civil War.

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**Activity Options**

**LANGUAGE ARTS**

Research Ku Klux Klan activities barring African Americans from voting. Then write a protest letter to the editor or propose a law to protect voting rights.

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**CIVICS**

Research Ku Klux Klan activities barring African Americans from voting. Then write a protest letter to the editor or propose a law to protect voting rights.