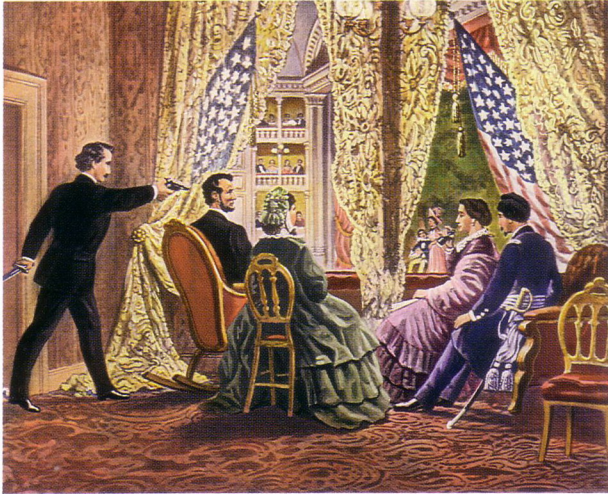


# RECONSTRUCTION



*The assassination of President Lincoln.*

On the night of April 13, 1865, crowds of people moved through the brightly lit streets of Washington to celebrate Lee's surrender at Appomattox. A man who was there wrote in his diary: "Guns are firing, bells ringing, flags flying, men laughing, children cheering, all, all are jubilant."

The next day was Good Friday. In the evening President Lincoln and his wife went to Ford's Theater in Washington to see a play called "Our American Cousin." The theater was full and the audience cheered the President as he took his seat in a box beside the stage. Once Lincoln was safely in his seat, his bodyguards moved away to watch the play themselves from seats in the gallery.

At exactly 10:13, when the play was part way through, a pistol shot rang through the darkened theater. As the President slumped forward in his seat, a man in a black felt hat and high boots jumped from the box on to the stage. He waved a gun in the air and shouted "Sic semper tyrannis" [Thus always to tyrants] and then ran out of the theater. It was discovered later that the gunman was an actor named John Wilkes Booth. He was captured a few days later, hiding in a barn in the Virginia countryside.

Lincoln was carried across the street to the house of a tailor. He died there in a downstairs bedroom the

next morning. Men and women wept in the streets when they heard the news. The poet James Russell Lowell wrote: "Never before that startled April morning did such multitudes of men shed tears for the death of one they had never seen, as if with him a friendly presence had been taken from their lives."

Lincoln was succeeded as President by his Vice President, Andrew Johnson. The biggest problem the new President faced was how to deal with the defeated South. Lincoln had made no secret of his own ideas about this. Only a few weeks before his death he had begun his second term of office as President. In his inaugural address he had asked the American people to help him to "bind up the nation's wounds" and rebuild their war-battered homeland.

Lincoln blamed individual southern leaders for the war, rather than the people of the seceding states as a whole. He intended to punish only those guilty individuals and to let the rest of the South's people play a full part in the nation's life again.

Johnson had similar ideas. He began to introduce plans to reunite the South with the rest of the nation. He said that as soon as the citizens of the seceded states promised to be loyal to the government of the United States they could elect new state assemblies to run their affairs. When a state voted to accept the 13th Amendment to the Constitution (the one that completely abolished slavery) Johnson intended that it should be accepted back into the Union as a full and equal member.

But white southerners were determined to resist any changes that threatened their power to control the life of the South. They were especially horrified at the idea of giving equal rights to their former black slaves. The assembly of the state of Mississippi expressed the way it felt in these blunt words:

"Under the pressure of federal bayonets the people of Mississippi have abolished the institution of slavery. The negro is free whether we like it or not. To be free, however, does not make him a citizen or entitle him to social or political equality with the white man."



## O Captain! my Captain!

Walt Whitman is perhaps the most famous American poet of the nineteenth century. During the Civil War he worked in military hospitals, helping to take care of wounded soldiers. Whitman was a great admirer of Lincoln and in 1865 he expressed

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,  
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,  
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,  
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;  
But O heart! heart! heart!  
O the bleeding drops of red,  
Where on the deck my Captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;  
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,  
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,

his grief at the death of the President by writing this poem. The “fearful trip” in the opening line is the Civil War, the “Captain” is Abraham Lincoln, the “ship” is the United States and the “prize” is peace and national unity.

For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;  
Here Captain! dear father!  
This arm beneath your head!  
It is some dream that on the deck,  
You've fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,  
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,  
The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,  
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;  
Exult O shores, and ring O bells!  
But I with mournful tread,  
Walk the deck my Captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead.

Walt Whitman

The other former Confederate states shared this attitude. All their assemblies passed laws to keep blacks in an inferior position. Such laws were called “Black Codes.” “Federal bayonets” might have made the blacks free, but the ruling whites intended them to remain unskilled, uneducated and landless, with no legal protection or rights of their own.

Black Codes refused blacks the vote, said that they could not serve on juries, forbade them to give evidence in court against a white man. In Mississippi blacks were not allowed to buy or to rent farm land. In Louisiana they had to agree to work for one employer for a whole year and could be imprisoned and made to do forced labor if they refused. With no land, no money and no protection from the law, it was almost as if blacks were still slaves.

In 1865 the *Chicago Tribune* newspaper warned southerners of the growing anger in the North about the Black Codes:

“We tell the white men of Mississippi that the men of the North will convert the State of Mississippi into a frog pond before they will allow such laws to disgrace one foot of soil in which the bones of our soldiers sleep and over which the flag of freedom waves.”

The feelings of the *Chicago Tribune* were shared by many members of the United States Congress. A group there called Radical Republicans believed that the most important reason for fighting the Civil War had been to free the blacks. Having won the war, they were determined that neither they nor the blacks were now going to be cheated. They said that President Johnson was treating the defeated white southerners too kindly and that the southerners were

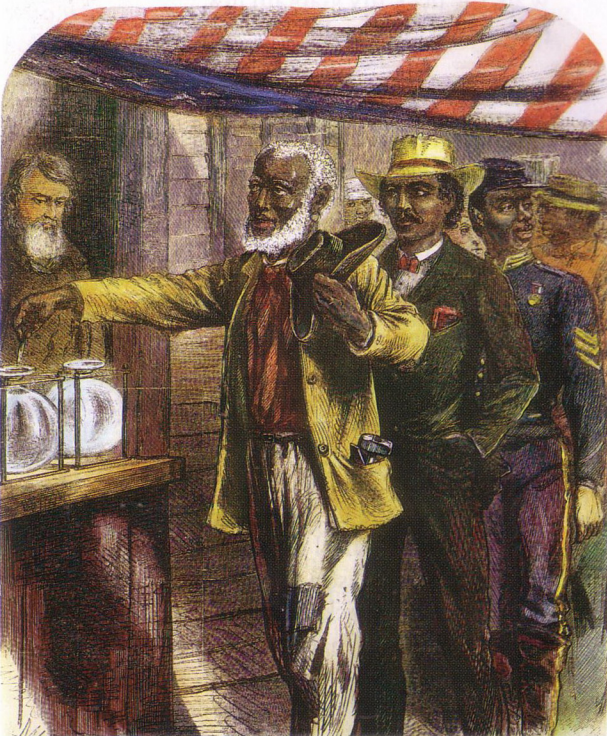


taking advantage of this. "They have not been punished as they deserve," said one Radical Republican.

In July 1866, despite opposition from the President, Congress passed a Civil Rights Act. It also set up an organization called the Freedmen's Bureau. Both these measures were intended to ensure that blacks in the South were not cheated of their rights. Congress then introduced the 14th Amendment to the Constitution. The 14th Amendment gave blacks full rights of citizenship, including the right to vote.

All the former Confederate states except Tennessee refused to accept the 14th Amendment. In March 1867, Congress replied by passing the Reconstruction Act. This dismissed the white governments of the southern states and placed them under military rule. They were told that they could again have elected governments when they accepted the 14th Amendment and gave all black men the vote.

By 1870 all the southern states had new "Reconstruction" governments. Most were made up of blacks, a few white southerners who were willing to work with them and white men from the North.



*Blacks voting for the first time after the 14th Amendment.*

The newly arrived northerners were referred to by southerners who opposed them as "carpetbaggers." The name came from the large, cheap bags made of carpeting material in which some of the northerners carried their belongings. Any white southerners who cooperated with the carpetbaggers were referred to with contempt as "scalawags." The word "scalawag" still means scoundrel, or rogue, in the English language today.

Most white southerners supported the Democratic political party. These southern Democrats claimed that the Reconstruction governments were incompetent and dishonest. There was some truth in this claim. Many of the new black members of the state assemblies were inexperienced and poorly educated. Some carpetbaggers were thieves. In Louisiana, for example, one carpetbagger official was accused of stealing 100,000 dollars from state funds in his first year of office.

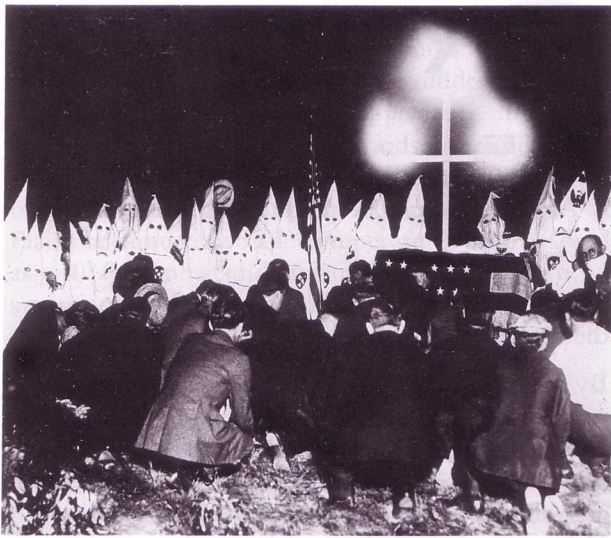
But Reconstruction governments also contained honest men who tried to improve the South. They passed laws to provide care for orphans and the blind, to encourage new industries and the building of railroads, and to build schools for both white and black children.

None of these improvements stopped southern whites from hating Reconstruction. This was not because of the incompetence or dishonesty of its governments. It was because Reconstruction aimed to give blacks the same rights that whites had. Southern whites were determined to prevent this. They organized terrorist groups to make white men the masters once more. The main aim of these groups was to threaten and frighten black people and prevent them from claiming their rights.

The largest and most feared terrorist group was a secret society called the Ku Klux Klan. Its members dressed themselves in white sheets and wore hoods to hide their faces. They rode by night through the southern countryside, beating and killing any blacks who tried to improve their position. Their sign was a burning wooden cross, which they placed outside the homes of their intended victims.

This use of violence and fear helped white racists to win back control of state governments all over the South. By 1876 Republican supporters of Reconstruction held power in only three southern





*The Ku Klux Klan in 1915.*

states. When Congress withdrew federal troops from the South in 1877, white Democrats won control of these, too. Reconstruction was over.

From this time onwards southern blacks were treated more and more as “second class citizens”—that is, they were not given equal treatment under the law. Most serious of all, they were robbed of their right to vote.

Some southern states prevented blacks from voting by saying that only people who paid a tax on voters—a poll tax—could do so. They then made the tax so high that most blacks could not afford to pay it. If blacks did try to pay, the tax collectors often refused to take their money. “Grandfather clauses” were also widely used to prevent blacks from voting. These clauses, or rules, allowed the vote only to people whose grandfathers had been qualified to vote in 1865. Most blacks had only obtained the vote in 1866 so the grandfather clauses automatically took away their voting rights.

The effects of grandfather clauses could be seen in the state of Louisiana. Before 1898 it had 164,088 white voters and 130,344 black voters. After Louisiana introduced a grandfather clause it still had 125,437 white voters, but only 5,320 black ones.

Once blacks lost the vote, taking away their other rights became easy. All the southern states passed laws to enforce strict racial separation, or “segregation.” Segregation was enforced on trains,

in parks, in schools, in restaurants, in theaters and swimming pools—even in cemeteries! Any black who dared to break these segregation laws was likely to end up either in prison or dead. In the 1890s an average of 150 blacks a year were killed illegally—“lynched”—by white mobs. It seemed that the improvements the Civil War and Reconstruction had brought black people were lost for ever.

But Reconstruction had not been for nothing. It had been the boldest attempt so far to achieve racial justice in the United States. The 14th Amendment was especially important. It was the foundation of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and made it possible for Martin Luther King to cry out eventually on behalf of all black Americans:

“Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”

### ***Plessy v. Ferguson***

In 1896 the Supreme Court announced its decision in a case called *Plessy v. Ferguson*. It ruled that the Constitution allowed separate facilities and services to be provided for black and white people, so long as the facilities and services were of equal quality. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision made racial segregation a legal part of the American way of life for more than half a century.

Southern states immediately began making separate but *unequal* provision for blacks. They passed laws to enforce segregation in every possible aspect of life—public transportation, theaters, hotels, eating places, parks, schools.

The “separate but equal” decision reached in *Plessy v. Ferguson* was at last overturned by another Supreme Court decision in 1954. In the case of *Brown v. Topeka*, the Supreme Court ruled that it was impossible for black children to receive an equal education in segregated schools. It ordered that all public schools in the United States should be opened to children of all races.

This 1954 decision to abandon *Plessy v. Ferguson* was a landmark in the black Civil Rights movement of the 1950s. It marked the beginning of a campaign to end all forms of legally enforced segregation in American life.