Debating Reconstruction:
Was it a Failure or a Success?

Reconstruction Was A Failure

Politically, economically, and socially Reconstruction was an almost total failure. More than merely falling well short of its stated goals and objectives, the era was actually counterproductive—creating in many ways a worse situation for African Americans, and the nation generally, than had existed prior to the coming of the Civil War.

Those arguing that the Reconstruction Era was successful point to the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments as lasting evidence of the era’s political progress, but the effects of these so-called “momentous achievements” were limited at best. Slavery ended with the 13th Amendment, but only in name. The effects of nearly three hundred years of forced servitude in America remained largely in tact in the decades following the Civil War. Likewise, the rights supposedly secured by the 14th and 15th Amendments were largely circumvented by those who supported the goals and objectives of the Confederacy—so much so, in fact, that it would take a second civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s to correct the obvious shortcomings of Reconstruction.

Reconstruction also muddied important questions of political authority. Rather than clarifying longstanding debates about the supremacy of federal authority versus the rights of individual states, Reconstruction only confused the issue more. The authority of the federal government was regularly called into question by defeated Southern states who consciously challenged, manipulated, side-stepped and violently resisted not only the nation’s capital, but ultimately the Constitution itself.

Moreover, the Reconstruction era fostered political confusion and infighting. Self-serving carpetbaggers and scalawags reaped the spoils of corrupt office holding and often cooperated with new governments for personal gain. Inexperienced and poorly educated freedmen were seldom capable of properly exercising the political power that had been thrust upon them. After much needless suffering, ex-confederates banded together to overthrow these “black” governments and re-impose a home rule based on Democratic Party rule, segregation, and white supremacy.
Meanwhile, at the highest levels of government, Reconstruction triggered a heated power struggle between the President and Congress. Because Lincoln did not outline a coherent plan for rebuilding the union prior to his assassination, confusion and political bickering were the order of the day. Complicating matters was the fact that Radical Republican leaders were ideological extremists whereas Andrew Johnson was an inexperienced, stubborn, and racist politician who lacked the ability to compromise. Both sides spouted half-truths and propaganda, dug in their heels, and became obstructionists. This unproductive tension led to the attempted impeachment of Andrew Johnson—a politically motivated, illegitimate power struggle that sowed the seeds of further political discord and ultimately amounted to little more than a colossal waste of time at a critical moment in American history.

Economically, Reconstruction was a disaster. The federal government did little to rebuild the devastated Southern infrastructure in the decades after the Civil War, and the adverse economic effects of the conflict are still witnessed in parts of the South today. After Reconstruction, the South remained almost exclusively wedded to a traditional agricultural economy that was anything but progressive. Planters succeeded in stabilizing the plantation system, but only by blocking the growth of alternative enterprises, like factories, that might draw off black laborers, thus locking the region into a pattern of economic backwardness.

Reconstruction also failed to bring any meaningful land reform to the South, leaving African Americans in an inherently unequal state with virtually no opportunities to meet their basic needs, let alone get ahead in life. Most northerners concluded that, so long as the unfettered operations of the marketplace afforded blacks the opportunity to advance through diligent labor, federal efforts to assist them in acquiring land were unnecessary. And, since land was not distributed to the former slaves, they remained economically dependent upon their former owners. The sharecropping system—essentially a legal form of slavery that kept blacks tied to land owned by rich white farmers—became widespread during Reconstruction and remained commonplace in the South for more than a century. In other words, the planter class survived both the war and Reconstruction with its property (apart from slaves) and prestige more or less intact.
Most significantly, Reconstruction failed socially. The Southern reaction to stringent civil rights requirements imposed by the North was extreme. If anything Southern racism only intensified after the Civil War. Despite its best intentions, Radical Republican legislation did virtually nothing to protect former slaves from white persecution and violence. Moreover, it failed to engender fundamental changes to the social fabric of the South. When President Rutherford B. Hayes removed federal troops from the South in 1877, former Confederate officials and slave owners almost immediately returned to power. With the support of a conservative Supreme Court, these newly empowered ex-Confederates passed black codes, voter qualifications, and other anti-progressive legislation that nullified or reversed the rights that blacks had gained during Radical Reconstruction.

Reconstruction ended as suddenly as it began, with virtually all of its stated goals left unaccomplished. Many northerners concluded that the granting of black suffrage was an alternative to a long-term federal responsibility for protecting the rights of the former slaves. So, without warning, the North pulled the plug on the idea of reforming the South, leaving African Americans in a thoroughly hostile environment without meaningful political or economic power. The shortcomings of Reconstruction were so pronounced that many were left wondering why the Civil War had been fought in the first place. The tragic loss of 620,000 lives hardly seemed worth it.

In the end, then, neither the abolition of slavery nor Reconstruction succeeded in resolving the debate over the meaning of freedom in American life. Twenty years before the American Civil War, writing about the prospect of abolition in France’s colonies, Alexis de Tocqueville had written, “If the Negroes have the right to become free, the [planters] have the incontestable right not to be ruined by the Negroes’ freedom.” And in the United States, as in nearly every plantation society that experienced the end of slavery, a rigid social and political dichotomy between former master and former slave, an ideology of racism, and a dependent labor force with limited economic opportunities all survived abolition. Unless one means by freedom the simple fact of not being a slave, emancipation thrust blacks into a kind of no-man’s land, a partial freedom that made a mockery of the American ideal of equal citizenship.
Reconstruction Was A Success

When pondering the successes and failures of Reconstruction it is critical to consider the short and long-range effects of the period 1863–1877. In both cases, Reconstruction can and should be considered a successful period in American history in which genuine progress was obtained, both for African Americans and the nation generally.

The immediate impacts of Reconstruction are numerous and consequential. Most obviously, Reconstruction successfully reunited and restored the United States after the Civil War. By 1877, the South had drafted new state constitutions, rejoining the North, and the states’ rights vs. strong federal government debate that had so long occupied the nation’s attention was, for all practical purposes, resolved. The Union that Lincoln so revered was, ultimately, preserved.

Most historians today assert that Reconstruction was a time of extraordinary political, social, and economic progress for blacks. The establishment of public school systems, the granting of equal citizenship to blacks, the effort to restore the devastated Southern economy, the attempt to construct an interracial political democracy from the ashes of slavery, all these were commendable achievements of the Reconstruction era.

Most of the progress made during the era resulted from a concerted effort made by northern abolitionists, religious societies, the Freedman’s Bureau, and—most importantly—former slaves themselves, many of whom had advocated for their rights through eloquent appeals for civil and political rights even before the Civil War had officially ended. Most carpetbaggers were former Union soldiers seeking economic opportunity in the postwar South, not unscrupulous adventurers. Their motives, a typically American amalgam of humanitarianism and the pursuit of profit, were no more insidious than those of Western pioneers. Scalawags, previously seen as traitors to the white race, were typically “Old Line” Whig Unionists who had opposed secession in the first place, or poor whites who had long resented planters’ domination of Southern life and who saw in Reconstruction a chance to recast Southern society along more democratic lines. The constructive partnership of these seemingly disparate groups—even in the face of widespread campaigns of violence promoted by the KU Klux Klan and kindred groups—is an inspiring testament to the courageous abilities of Americans to overlook selfish interests in the cause of progressive,
democratic reform. Reconstruction stands, in a comparative perspective, as a remarkable experiment—the only effort of a society experiencing abolition to bring the former slaves within the umbrella of equal citizenship.

With black suffrage and office holding, Reconstruction represents a stunning departure from the past. Former slaves, most fewer than two years removed from bondage, debated the fundamental questions of the polity: What is a republican form of government? Should the state provide equal education for all? How could political equality be reconciled with a society in which property was so unequally distributed? There was something inspiring in the way such men met the challenge of Reconstruction. “I knew nothing more than to obey my master,” James K. Greene, an Alabama black politician later recalled. “But the alarm of freedom sounded and knocked at the door and we walked out like free men and we met the exigencies as they grew up, and shouldered the responsibilities.”

Reconstruction granted African Americans a freedom and autonomy like they had never experienced under “the peculiar institution.” In slavery, most blacks had lived in nuclear family units, although they faced the constant threat of separation from loved ones by sale. Reconstruction provided the opportunity for blacks to solidify their preexisting family ties. Conflicts over whether black women should work in the cotton fields (planters said yes, many black families said no) and over white attempts to “apprentice” black children revealed that the autonomy of family life was a major preoccupation of the freedmen. Indeed, whether manifested in their withdrawal from churches controlled by whites, in the blossoming of black fraternal, benevolent, and self-improvement organizations, or in the demise of the slave quarters and their replacement by small tenant farms occupied by individual families, the quest for independence from white authority and control over their own day-to-day lives was far more pronounced once slavery had ended.

More than merely positively impacting the daily lives of former slaves, Reconstruction also significantly redefined the role of government for all citizens—a development that has had lasting implications for modern Americans. For the first time, Americans considered the federal government to be a protector of its citizenry. Radical Republicans leaders like Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens were idealistic reformers who had work to advance the rights of African Americans long before any
conceivable political advantage flowed from such a commitment. Their Reconstruction policies were based on humanitarian principles, not petty political advantage. They and their fellow politicians in Washington D.C. not only defined and interpreted rights of all Americans, but took consequential actions to guarantee that these right would be recognized and enjoyed by everyone. Public welfare emerged as a primary obligation of federal government for the first time, and through groundbreaking agencies like the Freedman’s Bureau, educational services and care for the disadvantaged became central to the mission of government in the United States.

Most important, Reconstruction resulted in the passage of three extremely consequential amendments to the U. S. Constitution, the sum total of which greatly advanced democracy and permanently transformed the character of the nation. With the passage of the thirteenth Amendment in 1865, the institution of slavery—which had existed uninterrupted in America since 1607—was forever destroyed. African Americans were no longer legally property to be bought and sold. Their place in society was elevated from that of mere objects to that of individuals, and in the process their humanity was officially recognized, as it never had been before. The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified just three years later, not only granted citizenship to all persons born in the United States, but also guaranteed that the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness could not taken from U.S. citizen without due process of law. Lastly, the Fifteenth Amendment gave a political voice to African Americans, broadening the political franchise for the first time since universal white male suffrage became customary during the early nineteenth century. Over time, these momentous accomplishments have opened the door for women and other minorities to gain increasing levels of freedom and equality as well.

Alone among the societies that abolished slavery in the nineteenth century, the United States, for a moment, offered the freedmen a measure of political control over their own destinies. However brief its sway, Reconstruction allowed scope for a remarkable political and social mobilization of the black community. It opened doors of opportunity that could never be completely closed. Reconstruction transformed the lives of Southern blacks in ways unmeasurable by statistics and unreachable by law. It raised their expectations and aspirations, redefined their status in relation to the larger society, and allowed space for the creation of institutions that enabled them to survive the repression that followed. And
it established constitutional principles of civil and political equality that, while flagrantly violated after 1877, planted the seeds of future struggle.

Ultimately, therefore, Reconstruction was a success because it brought the United States far closer to the ideals embodied in Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence—that “all men are created equal” and are “endowed with certain inalienable rights” including “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Without Reconstruction, these uniquely American ideals would have remained significantly limited, circumscribed by ignorance and unjust traditions, and thus unable to live up to their full and ongoing potential.