

# The Collapse of the Reconstruction

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

Black political participation in the South had the potential to transform American society. However, the attempt to remake and readmit the former Confederacy through Congressional Reconstruction generated violent reactions from White southerners and lukewarm responses from many White northerners. By the late 1870s, the South had been readmitted to the Union, but the larger goals of Reconstruction—interracial democracy and equal protection for all citizens—had not been accomplished.

This tutorial examines the collapse of Reconstruction in the South in four parts:

## 1. Black Political Participation and Communities

Along with the assistance provided by the U.S. Army, Black voter registration and political participation in Reconstruction governments during the late 1860s and early 1870s was encouraged by **Union Leagues**.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Union Leagues

Fraternal groups loyal to the Union and the Republican Party that became political and civic centers for African Americans who lived in the South.

In addition to registering Black voters, Union Leagues disseminated political information and acted as mediators between the Black community and the White establishment. They also helped to build essential community institutions such as schools and churches.

Along with the Union Leagues, other organizations and individuals provided opportunities for Black leadership in politics and communities, including the following:

- The Freedmen's Bureau helped to coordinate the construction of schools and supported the education of thousands of former enslaved people.
- The U.S. Army provided leadership experience to a number of African-American men.
- Free Black people from the North, with assistance from missionary and education societies, migrated to the South and played important roles in Reconstruction politics.



### DID YOU KNOW

Francis L. Cardozo, who was active in South Carolina state politics from 1868 to 1877, was born free in the North. After the war ended in 1865, he founded a school in South Carolina with assistance from the American Missionary Association. The association subsequently supported Cardozo's campaign for political office.

- Southern Black churches organized openly following emancipation. Like their northern counterparts, they provided an important setting for Black political activism.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Over 100 African-American ministers were elected to legislative seats in southern states during Reconstruction.

Together, these institutions provided a springboard into politics for African Americans throughout the South. Thousands of Black men served in government at local and state levels during Reconstruction. Several were elected to Congress. By 1875, 14 African Americans had been elected to the House of Representatives. Two African-American Senators, Hiram Revels (elected in 1870) and Blanche K. Bruce (elected in 1875), represented Mississippi.

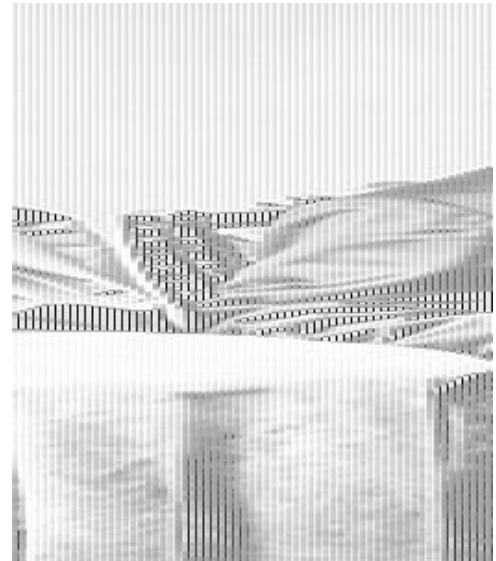


#### DID YOU KNOW

After Reconstruction, nearly one hundred years would pass before another African American was elected to the Senate. In addition to politics, African Americans in the South embraced other rights and opportunities previously denied to them. These included the establishment of marriage and family bonds. Following the Civil War, couples no longer under slavery quickly legalized their marriages, often with assistance from the Freedmen's Bureau.

The first act of freedom for many Black men and women was to locate long-lost spouses and children. A journalist reported having interviewed a freedman who traveled over 600 miles on foot, searching for the family that was taken from him while in bondage.

Former enslaved men and women who had no families often moved to southern towns and cities to be part of a Black community, where churches and mutual aid societies offered help and camaraderie.



Hiram Revels was born in the North and served as a chaplain in the Union Army before settling in Mississippi in 1866. He was elected by the Mississippi state legislature in 1870 as the first African-American senator in American history.

## 2. The Ku Klux Klan

White supremacist paramilitary organizations like the **Ku Klux Klan** sought to prevent African Americans and their allies from forming stable political communities. In doing so, these groups hoped to undermine Congressional Reconstruction.



#### TERM TO KNOW

**Ku Klux Klan**

A white vigilante organization that engaged in terroristic violence to intimidate African Americans and end Reconstruction.

Klan units in the South operated autonomously and with a variety of motives. It was not the only racist vigilante organization: other groups, including the Knights of the White Camelia, the White League, and the Red Shirts, also tended to work autonomously.

The goals of these organizations were identical: to destroy the Union Leagues and other vehicles of Black political organization; reestablish control over African-American labor; and restore White supremacy in the South.

When it came to intimidating White Republicans in the South, the Klan focused on two groups: **carpetbaggers** and **scalawags**.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Carpetbaggers**

A term used for northerners working in the South during Reconstruction; it implied that they were opportunists who came to the South for economic or political gain.

##### **Scalawags**

A derogatory term applied to Whites in the South who supported Reconstruction and the Republican Party.

The term “carpetbagger” indicated the disdain of white southerners toward northerners who, sensing a great opportunity, packed up all their worldly possessions in carpetbags (a popular type of luggage) and made their way to the South. The label implied that they were shiftless wanderers motivated only by their desire for quick money, though that was not always the case.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Many “carpetbaggers” were northern investors in southern land or railroads as well as teachers, army officers, missionaries, and any Northerners who traveled south to assist formerly enslaved people.

The term “scalawag,” was reserved for White southerners who supported the Republican Party. The label applied to a number of poor White farmers (who did not own slaves), who might have supported the Union during the war or opposed the return of the planters to political power during Reconstruction.

African Americans bore the brunt of violence from the Klan and similar organizations. Klan tactics included riding to victims’ homes, masked and armed, and firing into the houses or burning them down. To prevent the education of Black people, the Klan burned public schools and intimidated teachers. To stop Black people from voting, the Klan threatened, whipped, and murdered Black people and their White supporters.



The Ku Klux Klan posted circulars such as this 1867 West Virginia broadside to warn Black people and White sympathizers of the power and ubiquity of the Klan.



This illustration by Frank Bellew, captioned “Visit of the Ku-Klux,” appeared in Harper’s Weekly in 1872. A hooded Klansman points a rifle at an unaware Black family in their home.



#### DID YOU KNOW

The Klan's activities during Reconstruction included assassination. They killed a U.S. congressman from Arkansas and three state congressmen from South Carolina.

Klan tactics were designed to create a situation in the South that resembled life during slavery. Klansmen used intimidation and violence to destroy Black economic and political independence, reclaim dominance over Black women’s bodies, challenge Black manhood, and return Black communities to economic, political, and social subservience.

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## 3. Northern Response

Among the most significant consequences of Klan violence in the South was that it challenged the legitimacy of the state governments established by Congressional Reconstruction.

Unable to end the violence on their own, southern state governments called upon the federal government for assistance against the Klan and other paramilitary organizations. Congress responded in 1870 and 1871 by enacting the **Enforcement Acts**, which did the following:

- Empowered the president to impose martial law in areas controlled by the Klan

- Individuals suspected of engaging in Klan activity could be jailed indefinitely.
- Empowered the federal government to prosecute crimes against formerly enslaved people in federal, rather than state, courts.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Enforcement Acts

A series of laws enacted to prevent intimidation and violence against former slaves by the Ku Klux Klan.

Hundreds of accused Klansmen were arrested under the Enforcement Acts, and the Ku Klux Klan ceased to be a viable organization by 1872. Sporadic violence against former slaves persisted into the mid-1870s. However, the southern state governments appeared unable to defend themselves without continued assistance from the army and the federal government.

At the height of Klan violence in 1870, Congress ratified the **Fifteenth Amendment**.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Fifteenth Amendment

Prohibits the federal and state governments from denying any citizen the right to vote because of race.

Although the Fourteenth Amendment addressed citizenship rights and equal protection, it did not prohibit states from withholding the right to vote based on race. The Fifteenth Amendment specifically addressed this by guaranteeing Black men the right to vote.

In order to ensure support for the Fifteenth Amendment, its framers did not include prohibitions of literacy tests and poll taxes. By the end of the 19th century, both were commonly used to disenfranchise African Americans in southern—and northern—states.

Despite this weakness, the Fifteenth Amendment created universal manhood suffrage—the right of all men to vote—and identified Black men, including those who had been enslaved, as having the right to vote. Many White northerners interpreted the Amendment as the culmination of Reconstruction. From their perspective, the federal government had ended slavery, granted African Americans citizenship, and given them the right to vote. They believed that African Americans and southern state governments should now rely on their own resources, and not continue to depend on Congress for support.

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## 4. The Collapse of Reconstruction

As African-American voters and their political leaders at the state level were being intimidated by the Klan, and weariness toward Reconstruction grew among northern voters, the South experienced a resurgent Democratic Party.

Leaders of this resurgence, who called themselves **redeemers**, were committed to rolling back Congressional Reconstruction, discrediting the Republican Party in the South, and reestablishing southern state governments under the Democratic Party.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Redeemers

Democrats opposed to Congressional Reconstruction; the label expressed their desire to “redeem” the southern states from Republican control and to restore a pre-Civil War social order.

By the mid-1870s, the redeemers made significant gains in wresting control from Republican-dominated state governments. They did so despite the Enforcement Acts, and federal efforts to curb political violence.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In 1873, following a contested gubernatorial election in Louisiana, armed members of the Democratic Party attacked the town of Colfax, killing as many as 150 former enslaved people loyal to the Republican Party. The Colfax Massacre was the deadliest episode to occur during Reconstruction.

By 1876, a presidential election year, the Democrats had regained control of a majority of southern states. Only a few Republican-led states — South Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida—remained.



In South Carolina, Democrats nominated a former Confederate general, Wade Hampton, for governor in 1876. Party members formed rifle clubs, known as Hampton’s “Red Shirts”, to intimidate Republican voters.

The presidential election pitted Republican **Rutherford B. Hayes**, a three-time Governor of Ohio, against Democrat Samuel J. Tilden, Governor of New York. The election was very close and appeared to result in a Democratic victory. Tilden had carried the South and large northern states such as New York. He had a 300,000-vote advantage in the popular vote. However, the Republicans contested the returns from South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Rutherford B. Hayes

Republican presidential candidate who ran against Democrat Samuel Tilden in the contested election of 1876; an electoral commission awarded the presidency to Hayes in the Compromise of 1877, in exchange for concessions to the South.



#### DID YOU KNOW

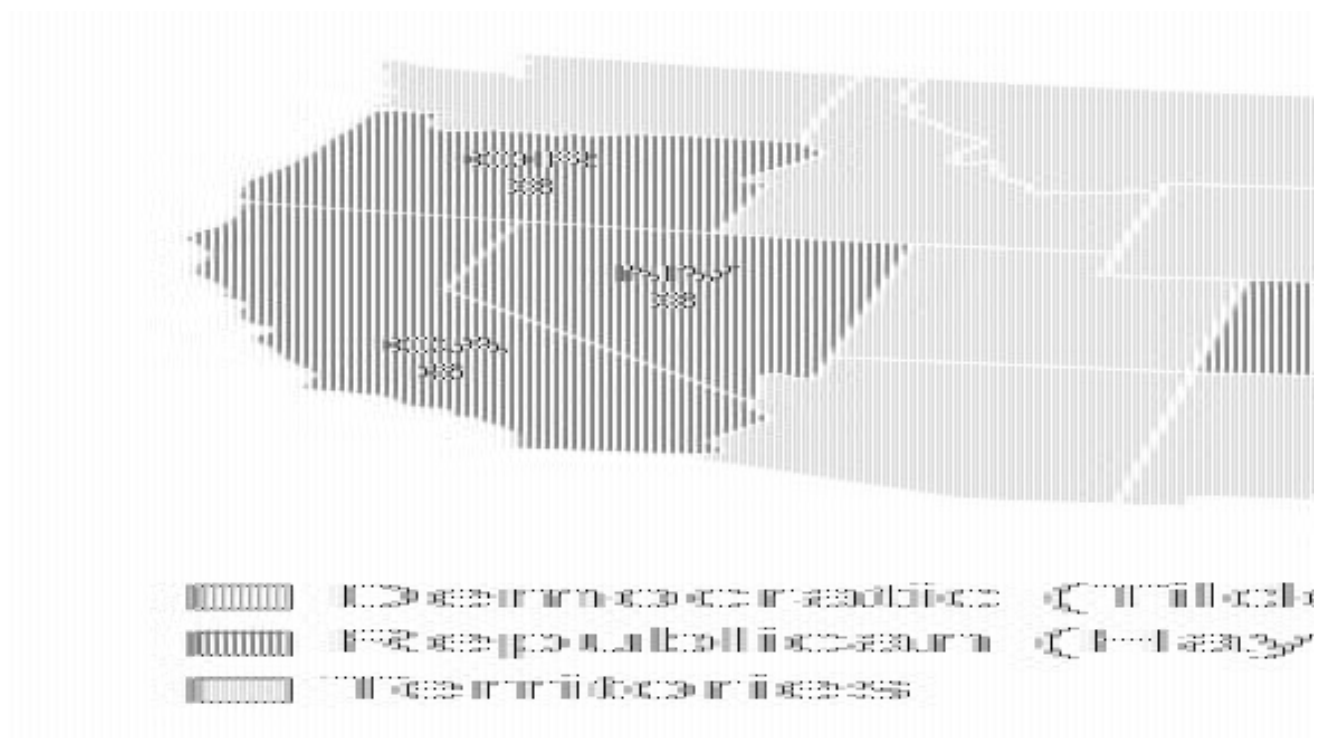
In South Carolina, Hampton’s “Red Shirts” prevented African Americans from reaching the polls, which enabled Wade Hampton to win a narrow victory. Republicans accused the Democrats of voter fraud, and the incumbent Republican Governor used federal troops to barricade the state house.

To avoid another Civil War, Congress attempted to break the deadlock by appointing a special electoral commission in January 1877. The commission consisted of 15 individuals: ten Congressmen, divided equally

between the parties, and five Supreme Court Justices. One of the Justices, David Davis, resigned when the Illinois legislature elected him to the Senate. President Ulysses S. Grant selected a Republican to take Davis's place on the commission, which tipped the scales in Hayes's favor. Voting along party lines (8 to 7), the commission awarded the contested electoral votes and, therefore, the presidency, to Hayes.

The Democrats threatened to challenge the commission's decision in court. To avoid this, party leadership on both sides worked out the **Compromise of 1877**. In exchange for Hayes' victory, Democrats received the following:

- One Southern Democrat would be appointed to the new President's cabinet.
- Democrats would control federal patronage (the awarding of government jobs) in their areas in the South,
- Most important: In exchange for the electoral votes, the Republican Party would acknowledge Wade Hampton's victory in South Carolina, and Democratic victories in Louisiana, and Florida, even though they had been won under questionable circumstances.



This map illustrates the results of the presidential election of 1876. Tilden, the Democratic candidate, swept the South, with the exception of the contested states of Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Compromise of 1877

An agreement between Republicans and Democrats after the contested election of 1876, in which Rutherford B. Hayes was awarded the Presidency in exchange for recognition of Democratic rule throughout the South



#### THINK ABOUT IT

Would the Compromise of 1877 be better understood as the Bargain of 1877? Why or why not?

The Compromise of 1877 ended Reconstruction as a distinct period of American history. Contrary to popular

belief, President Hayes did not order the withdrawal of all federal troops from the South. Rather, he ordered the federal troops guarding the South Carolina State House to return to their barracks.

This was significant because it accepted what had been accomplished by Democratic redeemers, who gained political control of the South a little over a decade after the Civil War. Hayes's order also signified that the federal government would no longer play a role in the South's political affairs, including protection of the rights of African Americans, and of all citizens.



## SUMMARY

Congressional Reconstruction was pivotal in enabling African Americans to participate in the political processes associated with Reconstruction. It also provoked a massive backlash in the South, including the notorious activities of the Ku Klux Klan. As violence increased and Republican-led state governments proved unable to protect themselves, support for Reconstruction waned among northern voters. As a result, the Democratic Party was able to end Reconstruction in the South. During the contested election of 1876, they gained federal recognition of southern Democratic state governments in exchange for Rutherford B. Hayes's election as president.

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### **Enforcement Acts**

A series of acts enacted to prevent intimidation and violence against former enslaved persons by the Ku Klux Klan.

### **Fifteenth Amendment**

Prohibits the federal and state governments from denying any citizen the right to vote because of race

### **Ku Klux Klan**

A white vigilante organization that engaged in terroristic violence with the aim of intimidating African Americans and ending Reconstruction.

### **Scalawags**

A derogatory term used to describe whites in the south who supported Reconstruction and the Republican Party.

### **Union Leagues**

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## DATES TO KNOW

### **1870**

The Ku Klux Klan reaches the height of its power; The Fifteenth Amendment is ratified.

### **1871–1872**

Congress passes the Enforcement Acts.

### **1873–1877**

Redeemers make significant gains in southern politics.

### **1876**

Republican Rutherford B. Hayes runs for president against Democrat Samuel J. Tilden.

### **1877**

Rutherford B. Hayes is awarded the presidency in the Compromise of 1877; The Reconstruction ends.