

Presidential Reconstruction

In the spring of 1865, the Civil War came to an end, leaving over 620,000 dead and a devastating path of destruction throughout the south. The North now faced the task of reconstructing the ravaged and indignant Confederate states. There were many important questions that needed to be answered as the nation faced the challenges of peace:

- Who would direct the process of Reconstruction? The South itself, Congress, or the President?
- Should the Confederate leaders be tried for treason?
- How would the south, both physically and economically devastated, be rebuilt? And at whose expense?
- How would the south be readmitted and reintegrated into the Union?
- What should be done with over four million freed slaves? Were they to be given land, social equality, education, and voting rights?

On April 11, 1865, two days after Confederate General Robert E. Lee's surrender, President Abraham Lincoln delivered his last public address, during which he described a generous Reconstruction policy and urged compassion and open-mindedness throughout the process. He pronounced that the Confederate states had never left the Union, which was in direct opposition to the views of Radical Republican Congressmen who felt the Confederate states had seceded from the Union and should be treated like "conquered provinces."

On April 14, Lincoln held a Cabinet meeting to discuss post-war rebuilding in detail. President Lincoln wanted to get southern state governments in operation before Congress met in December in order to avoid the persecution of the vindictive Radical Republicans. That same night, while Lincoln was watching a play at Ford's Theatre, a fanatical Southern actor, John Wilkes Booth, crept up behind Lincoln and shot him in the head. Lincoln died the following day, leaving the South with little hope for a non-vindictive Reconstruction.

The absence of any provisions in the Constitution that could be applied to Reconstruction led to a disagreement over who held the authority to direct Reconstruction and how it would take place. Lincoln felt the president had authority based on the constitutional obligation of the federal government to guarantee each state a republican government.

Even before the war had ended, Lincoln issued the Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction in 1863, his compassionate policy for dealing with the South. The Proclamation stated that all Southerners could be pardoned and reinstated as U.S. citizens if they took an oath of allegiance to the Constitution and the Union and pledged to abide by emancipation. High Confederate officials, Army and Navy officers, and U.S. judges and congressmen who left their posts to aid the southern rebellion were excluded from this pardon. Lincoln's Proclamation was called the "10 percent plan": Once 10 percent of the voting population in any state had taken the oath, a state government could be put in place and the state could be reintegrated into the Union.

Two congressional factions formed over the subject of Reconstruction. A majority group of moderate Republicans in Congress supported Lincoln's position that the Confederate states should be reintegrated as quickly as possible. A minority group of Radical Republicans--led by Thaddeus Stevens in the House and Ben Wade and Charles Sumner in the Senate--sharply rejected Lincoln's plan, claiming it would result in restoration of the southern aristocracy and re-enslavement of blacks. They wanted to effect sweeping changes in the south and grant the freed slaves full citizenship before the states were restored. The influential group of Radicals also felt that Congress, not the president, should direct Reconstruction.

In July 1864, the Radical Republicans passed the Wade-Davis Bill in response to Lincoln's 10 percent plan. This bill required that more than 50 percent of white males take an "ironclad" oath of allegiance before the state could call a constitutional convention. The bill also required that the state constitutional conventions abolish slavery. Confederate officials or anyone who had "voluntarily borne arms against the United States" were banned from serving at the conventions. Lincoln pocket-vetoed, or refused to sign, the proposal, keeping the Wade-Davis bill from becoming law. This is where the issue of Reconstruction stood on the night of Lincoln's assassination, when Andrew Johnson became president.

In the 1864 election, Lincoln chose Andrew Johnson as his vice presidential running mate as a gesture of unity. Johnson was a War Democrat from Tennessee, a state on the border of the north-south division in the United States. Johnson was a good political choice as a running mate because he helped garner votes from the War Democrats and other pro-Southern groups.

Johnson was born to impoverished parents in North Carolina, orphaned at an early age, and moved to Tennessee. Self-educated, he rose through the political ranks to be a congressman, a governor of Tennessee, and a United States senator. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Johnson was the only senator from a seceding state who remained loyal to the Union. Johnson's political career was built on his defense of small farmers and poor white southerners against the aristocratic classes. He was heard saying during the war, "Damn the Negroes, I am fighting those traitorous aristocrats, their masters."

Unfortunately, Johnson was unprepared for the presidency thrust upon him with Lincoln's assassination. The Radical Republicans believed at first that Johnson, unlike Lincoln, wanted to punish the South for seceding. However, on May 29, 1865, Johnson issued his own reconstruction proclamation that was largely in agreement with Lincoln's plan. Johnson, like Lincoln, held that the southern states had never legally left the Union, and he retained most of Lincoln's 10 percent plan.

Johnson's plan went further than Lincoln's and excluded those Confederates who owned taxable property in excess of \$20,000 from the pardon. These wealthy Southerners were the ones Johnson believed led the South into secession. However, these Confederates were allowed to petition him for personal pardons. Before the year was over, Johnson, who seemed to savor power over the aristocrats who begged for his favor, had issued some 13,000 such pardons. These pardons allowed many of the planter aristocrats the power to exercise control over Reconstruction of their states. The Radical Republicans were outraged that the planter elite once again controlled many areas of the south.

Johnson also called for special state conventions to repeal the ordinances of secession, abolish slavery, repudiate all debts incurred to aid the Confederacy, and ratify the Thirteenth Amendment. Suggestions of black suffrage were scarcely raised at these state conventions and promptly quashed when they were. By the time Congress convened in December 1865, the southern state conventions for the most part had met Johnson's requirements.

On December 6, 1865, Johnson announced that the southern states had met his conditions for Reconstruction and that in his opinion the Union was now restored. As it became clear that the design of the new southern state governments was remarkably like the old governments, both moderate Republicans and the Radical Republicans grew increasingly angry.