

22.3 Congressional Reconstruction

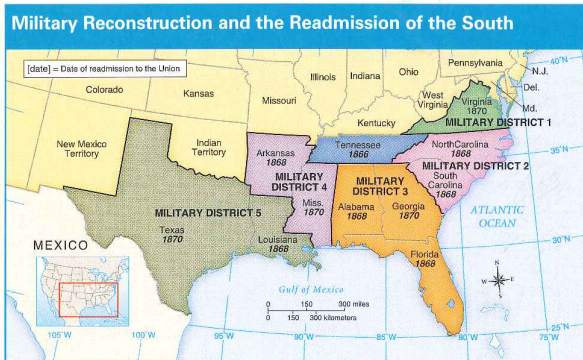
As 1865 came to a close, President Johnson announced that Reconstruction was over. The southern states were ready to rejoin the Union. Republican leaders in Congress did not agree. These lawmakers believed that the South would not be reconstructed until freedmen were granted full rights of citizenship.

The following year, Congress enacted two bills designed to help freedmen. The first extended the life of the Freedmen's Bureau. The second was the **Civil Rights Act** of 1866. It struck at the black codes by declaring freedmen to be full citizens with the same rights as whites. Johnson declared both bills unconstitutional and vetoed them. An angry Congress overrode his vetoes.

The Fourteenth Amendment To further protect the rights of African Americans, Congress approved the Fourteenth Amendment. This amendment declared former slaves to be citizens with full civil rights. "No state," it said, "shall...deny to any person...the equal protection of the laws." This meant that state governments could not treat some citizens as less equal than others.

President Johnson opposed the Fourteenth Amendment and called on voters to throw Republican lawmakers out of office. Instead, Republican candidates won a two-thirds majority in both houses of Congress in the 1866 election. From that point on, Congress controlled Reconstruction.

civil rights: the rights that the Constitution entitles all people to as citizens, especially equal treatment under the law



Radical Republicans in Congress reorganized the South into the five military districts shown on this map.

Southerners who had supported the Confederacy were denied the right to vote.

Lawmakers also passed two acts designed to reduce Johnson's power to interfere with Congressional Reconstruction. The Command of the Army Act limited his power over the army. The Tenure of Office Act barred him from firing certain federal officials without the Senate's consent. President Johnson blasted both laws as unconstitutional. Then, to prove his point, he fired one of the officials protected under the Tenure of Office Act.

Military Reconstruction Act Early in 1867, the new Congress passed its own Military Reconstruction Act. Once again, it did so over Johnson's veto. This plan divided the South into five military districts, each governed by a general who was backed by federal troops. The state governments set up under Johnson's Reconstruction plan were declared illegal. New governments were to be formed by southerners loyal to the United States—both black and white.

The Impeachment of Johnson The House of Representatives responded to Johnson's challenge by voting to impeach the president. Besides violating the Tenure of Office Act, Johnson was charged with bringing "the high office of the President of the United States into contempt, ridicule, and disgrace, to the scandal of all good citizens."

During his trial in the Senate, the president's lawyers argued that Johnson's only "crime" had been to oppose Congress. If he were removed from office for that reason, they warned, "no future President will be safe who happens to differ with a majority of the House and Senate."

Two thirds of the Senate had to find the president guilty in order to remove him from office. Despite very heavy pressure to convict him, 7 Republicans and 12 Democrats voted "not guilty." Johnson escaped removal from office by one vote, but his power was broken.

Sharecropping While Congress and the president battled over Reconstruction, African Americans in the South struggled to build new lives. Most former slaves desperately wanted land to farm but had no money to buy it. Meanwhile, their former owners desperately needed workers to farm their land but had no money to pay them. Out of the needs of both groups came a farming system called *sharecropping*.

Planters who turned to sharecropping divided their land into small plots. They rented these plots to individual tenant farmers (farmers who pay rent for the land they work). A few tenants paid the rent for their plots in cash. But most paid their rent by giving the landowner a share—usually a third or a half—of the crops they raised on their plots.

Sharecropping looked promising to freedmen at first. They liked being independent farmers who worked for themselves. In time, they hoped to earn enough money to buy a farm of their own.

However, most sharecroppers had to borrow money from planters to buy the food, seeds, tools, and supplies they needed to survive until harvest-time. Few ever earned enough from their crops to pay back what they owed. Rather than leading to independence, sharecropping usually led to a lifetime of poverty and debt.



Sharecroppers, such as these shown growing cotton, rented their land from plantation owners. In exchange, most paid one third to one half of their crops back to the landowners.