

**The Reconstruction Era: What Went Wrong and The Consequences That Paved the
Formidable Future For Black Americans**

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The Chains Have Been Broken

After a grueling 250 years in bondage, African Americans were finally freed after the Civil War. However, even after the 13th Amendment was established, the reactions throughout the nation were in a sense, bittersweet. Not only did many slaves not live to see a day of freedom, but families had since been separated and essentially torn apart by the demands of white slave owners. This did not stop black families from making it their sole purpose to be reunited. “For years and even decades after the end of slavery, advertisements in black newspapers appealed for information about missing kinfolk,” (Hine, Hine, and Harrold 2011, 315).

Also following the downfall of slavery, some African Americans, especially older generations, were so accustomed to the abuse, that they had no idea how to process their freedom. Others finally had the courage to tell their former owners how they truly felt about them. However, there was one common emotion that the black community felt following the end of slavery: Uncertainty. Ex-slaves were uneducated, impoverished, and without a doubt ignorant of how the world functioned now that they were independent. To suddenly be thrust into a world as “free” individuals, many wondered what their next move would be as far as trying to live a somewhat normal life. Add the fear and frustration of southern plantation owners thrust into financial struggle without slaves to man their crops, and the nationwide grief after over 700,000 lives were lost during the war, and we are left with a country that was in a sense barely holding on by a thread. The challenges were certainly there, and political leaders knew that it would take quite some time for things to pick back up. Congress established programs such as the Freedman’s Bureau in order to assist African Americans and promised they would not be alone in figuring out their way as free men and women. However, as history tells it, Reconstruction is one of America’s colossal failures. Some have blamed the premature death of

Abraham Lincoln, others feel more inclined to suggest the push back from the south, and the faltering appeal of Northerners who soon discovered their financial troubles ahead of the war as well.

Lincoln's Short-Lived Plans and Johnson's Biased Reign

Following the end of the Civil War, Lincoln knew what was expected of him as America slowly adjusted to post-war living conditions. Although President Lincoln “was more concerned with restoring the seceded states to the Union than in opening political doors for black people,” (Hine, Hine, and Harrold 2011, 329), there is constant speculation about what the Reconstruction Era would have been like if he had not been assassinated. His 10 Percent Plan from what we have, had many people thinking of Lincoln’s actions as “the work of a moderate and lenient statesman who intended to make few demands of the defeated South as long as the Union was re-established,” (Striner). Lincoln died before he could fully express his ideas concerning the welfare of black Americans. It is also noted that Lincoln’s view about black American’s was continuing to evolve, but the unity of the nation just seemed to be more important to him. Following his death, President Johnson a “Jacksonian Democrat,” (Credo Reference), was left to continue Lincoln’s Reconstruction plan. It would quickly be discovered that Johnson not only didn’t have much of an interest for the rights of black people but would be considered one of the major road blocks for Reconstruction even though he “told black people, ‘I will be your Moses, and lead you through the Red Sea of War and Bondage to a fairer future of Liberty and Peace,’”(Hine, Hine, and Harrold 2011, 329). Johnson would go as far as instituting his own Reconstruction plan without the influence of Congress and “appointed new governors and ordered them to oversee new drafts of the states' constitutions,” (Credo Reference). The longer

he was in office the more he made decisions that actually appealed to those who succeeded from the United States and owned slaves instead of former slaves.

The South: Sore Losers or Stuck in Their Ways?

Unfortunately, the South benefited from having a president willing to go to great lengths to pardon former Confederate leaders and make the transition into a normal life slow for black Americans. The South found ease in passing “constitutional conventions that excluded black people from the political system and denied them equal rights,” (Hine, Hine, and Harrold 2011, 330). Black Codes and Jim Crow laws were in a sense, the last form of control that southern whites felt like they had over black people. These codes did things like preventing blacks from traveling freely, suing in a court of law, and especially voting along with running for political offices. The racist ideologies surrounding the place that black Americans had in the country according to southerners. The South would be the worst location for black Americans to find their footing in this new, soon-to-be-improved nation, due to a combination of being stuck in the old ways and refusing to accept a future in which black and white Americans lived as equal beings.

The inescapable truth is that government policy at state and local levels violated federal laws and mandating equal protections with the purpose of establishing a pernicious racial caste system. Put differently, laws that whites would have to obey were anathema to them. It would be another eight decades before the states yielded to interracial cooperation. Hence, blacks came to recognize that while slavery had been abolished, their newly secured freedom was at risk

(Holloway, 14).

These stipulations when it came to the freedom of black Americans weren't just for white southerners to maintain "superiority" over them but was also used as a tactic to keep them working their crop fields. An example of this would include South Carolina implementing one of their many black codes that involved the need for black people to pay up to \$100 dollars to be eligible to establish their own business. Most freed slaves did not have the funds for such implications, leaving them no choice but to sign labor contracts with white landowners and falling prisoner to sharecropping tactics that forever made them dependent on their former masters.

The Indifference of the North

White northerners were absolutely appalled by President Johnson's willingness in supporting white southerners and their racist beliefs and black codes that "virtually made freedmen slaves again," (Hine, Hine, and Harrold 2011, 337). It was Republicans who hoped that Reconstruction would give black people the resources and the confidence to stand up for themselves in the south as well as grow the Republican party. Although it was encouraging to see black men and women form groups, hold conventions, and achieve political roles as delegates in southern states, there were also many risks associated with black people striving to make a difference for their future generations. The KKK took pleasure in violently killing black Americans to intimidate them from political involvement. In turn, the drive to aid freed blacks soon dwindled as northerners began to focus on the wavering economy and their presence nationwide. In other words, the North, over time, abandoned blacks fighting for equal rights because of the sudden realization of their seemingly futile attempts in obtaining just what the blacks sought after themselves.

Many Republicans began to question the necessity for more moral, military, and political support for African Americans. They were convinced that African Americans had demanded too much for too long from the national government. Former slaves had become citizens and had the right to vote and hold political office. Therefore, they did not need additional help or legislation from the federal government. Equality for black people would come from their labor as free men, which would produce wealth and acceptance by white people. (Hine, Hine, and Harrold 2011, 337).

Some northerners lost their passion in helping black Americans because they started considering some of the claims about the likelihood of black Americans obtaining the independence necessary to govern themselves. The Panic of 1873 also had a contribution in the sudden change of heart of northerners as businesses shut down left and right leaving many unemployed and displaced. The failure of the Freedmen's Savings Bank in 1874 is a significant example of the aftermath of the Panic of 1873 because of the bank's inability to cope with the country's significant economic challenges. Between organizations led by churches and other programs to support the civil rights agendas, deposits totaling around 3 million dollars vanished when the Freedman's Savings Bank went bankrupt. All of those resources meant to help black families disappeared without much of a trace, making it one of the most disgraceful occurrences in the last days of the Reconstruction Era. The money would never be recovered, setting back the movement even further.

Conclusion

The Reconstruction Era will forever be a huge "What If?" What if Lincoln hadn't been assassinated? Would he have had a change of heart in his feelings about the many black Americans that were freed by his actions? If Andrew Johnson impeachment were successful,

would Reconstruction had a shot at doing a complete turnaround? If Confederates hadn't been welcomed back to the Union with open arms, would we have an entirely different country altogether? Would organizations like the Freedman's Bureau had access to more funds to help black Americans of all ages have access to education, food, and jobs if northerners and blacks financially capable held fast to their efforts in aiding black Americans in need from the South?

Moving on, Democrats demanded white control over politics over any other. With someone as politically powerful as the president on their side, white southerners had the confidence that black Americans wished they had when it came to speaking up for themselves. Those who did speak out were often ridiculed and targeted by hateful white supremacists and skeptical Republican northerners who betrayed their initial thoughts about the matter. Lynchings swept the south, instilling fear and discouraging black people from even hoping they had a decent change in a slavery free America. The initial positivity that freed black Americans had been long gone as they became aware of the mistakes that were made during Reconstruction. Reconstruction may have been called "a mistake" and failed in more ways than one, but when evaluating the contributing elements to its failure, there cannot be just one definitive factor. What is certain, is the prolonged advancement of black Americans in a country where they were free from bondage but still enslaved by the insecurities of white men and women who were too afraid of change.

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