



# RECONSTRUCTION: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

ALLEN GUELZO

The American Civil War ended in 1865. And a new conflict immediately began.

The North won the first war. The South won the second. To truly understand American history, one needs to understand how this happened, and why.

The years immediately following the end of the Civil War—1865 to 1877—are known in American history as “Reconstruction.” What should have been a glorious chapter in America’s story—the full integration of 3.9 million freed slaves—instead became a shameful one.

It began with the assassination of Republican president Abraham Lincoln. One week after the Civil War effectively ended, the one man with the political savvy and shrewdness to have guided Reconstruction was gone.

His successor was Vice-President Andrew Johnson, a Tennessee Democrat. Johnson was the rare Southern politician who stayed loyal to the Union during the Civil War. Lincoln added him to his reelection ticket in 1864 as a gesture of wartime bi-partisanship. But Johnson was wholly unprepared for the task.

Under his Reconstruction plan, the defeated rebels would be allowed to return to power, almost as if they had never left. The only requirement to rejoin the Union was that they agree to ratify the 13th Amendment that abolished slavery.

This was fine with the old Southern Democratic ruling class. By agreeing to abolish slavery, they would actually *increase* their political power. Whereas the Constitution’s old 3/5ths clause limited slave states to counting only 3/5ths of their slaves for the purpose of determining representation in Congress, *after* the Civil War, the Southern states were able to count 100% of the freed slaves.

This would ensure the return to Congress of Southern Democrats, and *in even greater* numbers than before the rebellion, allowing them—with the help of their Democratic Party allies in the North—to fight Republican efforts to secure the citizenship rights of the former slaves.

Johnson’s plan set off three years of bitter political warfare. The Republicans in Congress created their own Congressional Reconstruction plan. Still in the overall majority there, they reorganized ten of the Southern states into military occupation zones, requiring them to write new state constitutions that recognized black civil rights before they could be readmitted to the Union.

Over fierce Democratic opposition, the Republicans also managed to pass two new amendments to the Constitution—the 14th and 15th Amendments—guaranteeing due process in law and voting rights in elections. Those rights enabled the former slaves to help elect new state governments, to hold office, and even to send the first black representatives and senators to Congress—all Republicans.

Most important, in 1869, with the help of 500,000 votes from newly-enfranchised blacks, a new Republican president, Ulysses S. Grant, took office. Grant was solidly behind the Congressional Reconstruction plan.

But a new problem arose: Disgruntled Southern whites organized themselves into *ad hoc* militias to terrorize Southern blacks and their white Republican supporters into silence. The largest and most famous of these militias went by a still-familiar name: the Ku Klux Klan.

President Grant fought the Klan and other like-minded terror groups. But the fight required an extended military intervention to keep the peace, and that cost time and money. Grant also had to deal with Northern Democrats, who were sympathetic to Southern racism. With each new election—1868, 1870 and 1872—they gained more congressional seats and more power.

And then, in 1873, a major financial depression began. Economically desperate, anxious to put the remnants of the Civil War behind them, voters gave control of the House of Representatives back to the Democrats in the 1874 midterm elections.

Grant left office in 1877. Soon after, the last Republican state governments in the South were overthrown. Black voters were disenfranchised, “Jim Crow” racial segregation became the order, and the South returned to social and economic backwardness.

What could we have done better?

First, we should have imposed a *real* occupation on the defeated Confederacy, until a new political generation grew up in the South which learned a newer lesson about race and rights than white supremacy.

Second, we should have gotten landownership into the hands of the freed slaves and brought the South into the same world of free markets, economic mobility, small-scale manufacturing and industry that Lincoln’s Republicans advocated.

But the truth is that the North had won the war. But the South had won the peace. That’s the real story of Reconstruction.

I’m Allen Guelzo, professor of American history at Gettysburg College, for Prager University.