

DAVID WILCOX



*Making the Most of*

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# THE AMERICAN PROMISE

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A HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES FROM 1865

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*A Study Guide*

VOLUME II

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# MAKING THE MOST OF *THE AMERICAN PROMISE*

*A Study Guide*  
*Volume II*

DAVID WILCOX  
*Houston Community College*

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## RECONSTRUCTION

1863–1877

## 16

## STUDY RESOURCES

*Chapter Outline and Summary*

**Introduction** This chapter opens with an account of General Carl Schurz's fact-finding mission to evaluate conditions in the ex-Confederate South. What he found was that victory over the South might have destroyed slavery but it had not erased proslavery ideas. Over time, white Southerners would attempt to reconstitute as much as possible the antebellum social order, thus reducing emancipated African Americans to a level of economic subservience that virtually reenslaved them. Yet, at least temporarily, a program of radical reconstruction of the southern states would provide African Americans with the benefits and challenges of political and civil rights. The nation had embarked on a tumultuous and conflicted era—Reconstruction.

**Wartime Reconstruction** Lincoln's primary objective was to restore the Union through a program of speedy, forgiving political reconciliation. Many Republicans, however, opposed the president's agenda, fearing that such leniency would allow the southern antebellum elite to regain their power. Radicals wanted assurances of white loyalty and greater guarantees of black rights. Rival plans thus emerged during the war, but Lincoln and Congress managed to compromise on their respective courses.

*"To Bind Up the Nation's Wounds"* In December 1863, even before the war ended, Lincoln formulated a Reconstruction plan—the "10 percent plan" that offered a general amnesty to all white Southerners, with the temporary exception of Confederate high civil and military officials. As soon as 10 percent of the number of 1860 voters in any state took a loyalty oath, they could set up a state government. At this juncture, Lincoln was interested primarily in restoring the Union as soon as possible and was willing to postpone questions about race relations. Concerned about the mildness of this program, in July of



1864, Republicans pushed through Congress the stronger Wade-Davis bill, which required the majority of voters in each conquered state to take the oath of allegiance before Reconstruction could begin and forbade ex-Confederates from participating in the drafting of new state constitutions. Lincoln refused to sign the bill. What further course he might have taken on Reconstruction will never be known: On the night of April 14, 1865, the president was shot; fatally wounded, he died the following day.

*Land and Labor* As Yankee armies seized Confederate property, thousands of slaves became free workers, and what to do with this land and how to organize labor on it became critical issues. A number of wartime labor experiments were attempted, but it was along the Mississippi Valley that a labor system developed that would most resemble postwar southern labor relations. Here, Union commanders enacted a labor code requiring planters to sign contracts with ex-slaves, to pay them wages, and to provide food, housing, and medical care. Though liberating slaves from formal bondage, the code forced black laborers to enter into contracts, work hard, and remain subservient to their white employers. In short, the army sought to restore plantation agriculture with wage labor, not to incite a social or economic revolution. Not only planters protested this new order; so did many African Americans who recognized it as merely a different manifestation of their previous bondage. A more promising development was the establishment of the Freedmen's Bureau in March of 1865, which provided food and clothing to former slaves and was authorized to rent forty-acre plots of confiscated land to freedmen.

*The African American Quest for Autonomy* Having lived for years in close daily contact with whites who controlled their destiny, emancipated slaves faced an uncertain future with a vaguely defined freedom. They experimented with their newfound freedom in a variety of ways, from the symbolic act of simply leaving the plantation (though many at first chose to remain in or close to the familiar fields and kitchens) to a whole range of other experiences that had been off-limits before emancipation. Among these were worshipping in their own churches, learning to read and write, and traveling in search of family members from whom they'd been separated under slavery. There were also more subtle though no less significant changes in demeanor and behavior, such as dressing in whatever manner they pleased or no longer acting deferential toward whites.

**Presidential Reconstruction** The task of pursuing Reconstruction fell to Lincoln's successor, Andrew Johnson of Tennessee, who was not suited, either by circumstance or personality, for such a demanding role. A Democrat until he joined the Union ticket with Lincoln in 1864, Johnson became president at a time of increasing partisan passions. His plan for Reconstruction would fall far short of the expectations of Republicans who sought a complete overhaul of southern society.

*Johnson's Program of Reconciliation* Johnson revealed his Reconstruction plan soon after assuming office. Like Lincoln, he offered some form of amnesty to Southerners who would take an oath of allegiance. However, in other areas, his plan was more akin to the Wade-Davis bill. Wealthy rebels (those worth more than \$20,000) would have to apply directly to the president for pardons. In order to win readmission to the Union, a former

Confederate state's citizens had to revoke their secession ordinance, abolish slavery and ratify the Thirteenth Amendment, and repudiate Confederate war debts—essentially fulfilling the same terms as in Wade-Davis. Johnson envisioned a quick and easy reconciliation between North and South and demonstrated no concern for freedmen.

*Southern Resistance and Black Codes* Events in the South drove northern public opinion in more radical directions, as delegates to southern state constitutional conventions were reluctant to abolish slavery, renounce secession, and grant suffrage to freedmen. Many states even elected prominent ex-Confederates to represent them in Congress. Most egregious to many northern whites was the passing of laws in the South known as the black codes. These were designed to give whites almost complete control over former slaves. The codes authorized local white officials to apprehend unemployed blacks, fine them for vagrancy, and hire them out to private employers to satisfy the fine. The codes also forbade blacks to own or lease farms or to take any jobs other than as plantation workers or domestic servants. To many Northerners and to most African Americans, the black codes represented a return to slavery in all but name.

*Expansion of Black Rights and Federal Authority* Congress responded to the black codes by passing an act extending the life of the Freedmen's Bureau and widening its powers. The bureau could now establish special courts which could abrogate black code-imposed work agreements. In April 1866, Congress passed the first Civil Rights Act, declaring blacks citizens of the United States and granting the federal government the power to intervene in state affairs to protect the rights of citizens. Johnson vetoed both measures, but Congress overrode him. To the majority of Republicans, regardless of their persuasion, Johnson's vetoes were considered a blatant declaration of war on the freedmen and the Republican party.

**Congressional Reconstruction** In the summer of 1866, the stage was set for a serious showdown between President Andrew Johnson and Congress. Johnson's refusal to compromise on constitutional questions and Reconstruction policy had alienated even the most moderate congressional Republicans and persuaded them that more federal intervention in the South was necessary.

*The Fourteenth Amendment and Escalating Violence* In April 1866, Congress proposed the Fourteenth Amendment, which offered the first constitutional definition of American citizenship. Anyone born in the United States, or naturalized, was automatically a citizen entitled to all the "privileges and immunities" guaranteed by the Constitution, including equal protection of the laws by both state and national governments. The amendment penalized states by reducing their representation in Congress if they denied suffrage to any adult male inhabitants. It also prohibited former members of Congress or other former federal officials who had aided the Confederacy from holding any state or federal office unless two-thirds of Congress voted to pardon them. Congressional Radicals offered readmission to the Union for any state whose legislature ratified the Fourteenth Amendment. Only Tennessee did so. In the meantime, violence engulfed southern cities, with freedmen as the principal victims. The 1866 congressional elections served as a refer-

endum on the Fourteenth Amendment, which Johnson opposed on the grounds that it created too powerful and imposing a central government. Atrocities committed on African Americans made it clear that existing southern state governments were failing abysmally to protect freedmen and their legal rights. Angered by southern arrogance and President Johnson's intransigence, northern voters repudiated the administration, returning Republican majorities to both houses of Congress. More important for the future of Reconstruction, the radical wing of the party gained ascendancy.

*Radical Reconstruction and Military Rule* Congress was now in a position to implement its own Reconstruction plan. In 1867 it passed a series of measures nullifying the president's initiatives and reorganizing the South on a new basis. These new policies initiated "radical Reconstruction." The Military Reconstruction Act, passed in March 1867, divided the South into five military districts and placed the region under army rule. Military rule was to last only briefly, until the southern states framed and ratified constitutions providing for black suffrage. Ex-Confederates were disqualified from voting for constitutional convention delegates and from voting in the elections to ratify the new charters. Since freedmen were allowed to participate in this process, Republicans believed they had found a way to ensure that loyal men would dominate the new governments. The confiscation of land for redistribution among freedmen, however, was not implemented, disappointing both Radicals like Thaddeus Stevens and black Southerners. The majority of Republicans opposed such a program because it broke too sharply with the American traditions of federalism and regard for property rights. With the passage of the 1867 Reconstruction Acts, congressional Reconstruction was virtually complete. The measures had left whites in possession of most of the South's land, but blacks had been given the ballot.

*Impeaching a President* Johnson's continuing efforts to block implementation of congressional Reconstruction in the South convinced Radicals that the only way effectively to stop the president's interference was to impeach him. Under the Constitution, Congress could only impeach a president for "high crimes and misdemeanors." Johnson's dismissal of Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, who supported congressional policies, was in violation of the Tenure of Office Act, which forbade the president from removing civil officials, including cabinet members, without the consent of the Senate. With this dismissal as a pretext, the Radicals were able to begin impeachment proceedings. In May 1868, however, after almost two months of testimony, moderate Republicans who were losing faith in the Radical program joined with Democrats to support Johnson's acquittal. Though the Radicals had to drop the impeachment campaign, Johnson called a truce and, for the remainder of his term, Reconstruction proceeded unimpaired by presidential interference.

*The Fifteenth Amendment and Women's Demands* The Republican effort to make equal rights for blacks the law of the land culminated in the Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870. The amendment prohibited any state from denying citizens the right to vote because of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. A secondary aim of the amendment's sponsors was to enfranchise African Americans in those northern states that still denied them voting rights. Some who supported women's rights were bitterly disap-

pointed that the amendment did not extend women the vote. Suffragists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, angered by the amendment's gender discrimination, campaigned against its ratification. However, Republicans did not want to endorse anything that might harm black gains, while more moderate suffragists argued that women could afford to wait for the vote. It was, as Frederick Douglass put it, "the Negro's hour."

**The Struggle in the South** Implementing the Reconstruction Acts and constitutional amendments in the South constituted a formidable challenge. Traditional southern politics might have been destroyed, but many southern whites still had strong opinions about the social and economic disposition of the post–Civil War South. The young Republican governments and the blacks within them who sought to exercise their lately won legal and political rights had their work cut out for them.

*Freedmen, Yankees, and Yeomen* Conservative southern whites used the derogatory terms *scalawags* and *carpetbaggers* for those who supported the Radical Republican regimes. Many of the "scalawags" were poor yeoman farmers living in remote areas who had never owned slaves; they had never felt comfortable in the Democratic party and hoped the party's program of internal improvements would help end their economic isolation. The "carpetbaggers" were mostly white Northerners—planters, businessmen, and professionals—many of them Union army veterans, who looked to the South as a new frontier of opportunity, more promising than the West. The most numerous southern Republicans were the freedmen, most of whom had no previous political experience and tried, therefore, to build institutions through which they could learn to exercise their power. It was upon this three-part coalition of freedmen, Yankees, and yeomen that the Republican Party based its hope to become the majority party in the South.

*Democratic Equality and the General Welfare* The Reconstruction constitutions produced major changes in southern life, including universal male suffrage and expanded state responsibility for the general welfare. Still, they fell short of some Republican expectations, with no constitution calling for the confiscation and redistribution of lands or the outlawing of all forms of racial segregation. Nevertheless, southern Democrats viewed the Republican program with horror and complained of "Negro rule" brought on by Reconstruction. While African Americans played a significant role in Reconstruction politics—serving as delegates to state constitutional conventions, as members of the House of Representatives, and in state legislatures—claims of "Negro domination" had no basis in fact. In the South as a whole, the percentage of black officeholders was almost negligible when compared with the percentage of blacks in the population.

The new Republican state governments confronted the daunting task of rebuilding the postwar South with activity in three main areas. They focused on building public education, attacking racial discrimination and protecting civil rights, and promoting economic development, especially through chartering banks and companies and extensive railroad-building. While its ambitious agenda produced mixed results, the Republican Party had made progress in its early efforts to rid the South of aristocratic privilege and racist oppression.



*White Landlords, Black Sharecroppers* The most ambitious goal of the Freedmen's Bureau, and of some congressional Republican Radicals, was to reform southern landownership. Despite various efforts by different agencies and groups, in the end, most blacks and an increasing number of whites did not own their own land. Instead, they worked for others in one form or another. Many black agricultural laborers simply worked for wages. Most, however, became tenants of white landowners—that is, they worked their own plots and paid their landlords either a fixed rent or a share of their crop—hence the term *sharecroppers*.

**Reconstruction Collapses** After dealing with issues of war and reconstruction for a decade, Northerners by 1870 wanted to return to other pressing affairs such as the economy and foreign policy. As northern commitment to Reconstruction declined, southern opposition to the changes that Reconstruction had wrought escalated. One by one, the Republican state governments were toppled.

*The Grant Regime: Cronies, Corruption, and Economic Collapse* Exhausted by the political turmoil of the Johnson administration, voters in 1868 hoped that General Ulysses S. Grant, war hero and revered national idol, would be a good choice to lead them through the tumultuous Reconstruction years. Grant's tenure was troubled, however, marked by scandal, corruption, and ineptitude. He relied heavily on party machinery and patronage, which caused many reformers to agitate for a civil service system based on merit rather than the spoils system. By the end of Grant's first term, Republicans displeased with his administration left to form a third party of Liberal Republicans. Grant's popularity was such that, despite the problems of his first term, he was reelected. Compounding Grant's and the nation's problems during his second term was the financial crisis known as the panic of 1873, precipitated by the failure of a leading investment banking firm, Jay Cooke and Company. There had been panics before, but this was the worst one yet, plunging the nation into a depression that would last several years. The Johnson and Grant administrations achieved their greatest successes in foreign affairs through the efforts of their respective secretaries of state. William Seward was responsible for the purchase of Alaska from Russia and for thwarting French efforts to set up a puppet regime in Mexico. Hamilton Fish proved an effective diplomat in his handling of negotiations with England over wartime damages caused by British-built Confederate ships.

*Northern Resolve Withers* Though the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871 and the Civil Rights Act of 1875 helped stem Klan violence and outlawed discrimination, several factors hastened the retreat from Reconstruction that had begun during the Grant administration. A shifting political climate, economic hard times, increasing preoccupation with other issues, and deep-rooted racism all contributed to the northern retreat from Reconstruction. In addition, Thaddeus Stevens and other prominent Radical Republicans had died and two significant Supreme Court decisions hindered the federal government's capacity to protect black Southerners' rights. In 1874, the Democrats gained control of the House of Representatives for the first time in eighteen years.

*White Supremacy Triumphs* The northern retreat from Reconstruction enabled southern Democrats to take full advantage of white hostility toward Republican governments. Southern Democratic "Redeemers," as they styled themselves, determined to unseat Re-

construction regimes, championed “home rule,” and proclaimed their mission to save southern civilization from African “barbarism” and “Negro rule.” By polarizing the Republican Party along racial lines and terrorizing Republican voters, black and white, the Democrats managed to regain eight of the former Confederate states by 1875. Only South Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida had Republican state governments by 1876.

*An Election and a Compromise* The 1876 presidential election between Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel J. Tilden was one of the most bitterly contested in U.S. history. While the election produced an apparent Democratic victory, disputed electoral returns from Louisiana, South Carolina, and Florida threw the outcome into doubt. Tilden had undisputed claim to 184 electoral votes, only one short of the majority, but Hayes could still win if he managed to receive all 20 disputed votes. To resolve the impasse, in January of 1877 Congress created a special electoral commission with equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans to make a decision about the disputed votes. The last-minute replacement of a Democratic commissioner with a Republican meant that the vote went in favor of Hayes. Democrats accepted the decision but only after an informal understanding among party leaders, known as the Compromise of 1877, in which Hayes promised not to use federal troops to uphold the few remaining Republican governments in the South. The South was also promised substantial federal subsidies for internal improvements. The Compromise of 1877 marked a return to the antebellum tradition of sectional compromise. As in the past, whites found a way to resolve their differences and maintain the peace, while blacks paid the price. When Reconstruction ended, black Southerners were not yet completely subordinated to whites, but their status in the New South looked grim.

**Conclusion: “A Revolution but Half-Accomplished”** Though black Southerners achieved a degree of dignity and equality as a result of Reconstruction, the setbacks suffered from the backlash of the Redeemer counterrevolution led some to conclude that the North had won the war but the South had won the peace. The Civil War remained only a “half-accomplished” revolution, as General Schurz put it. The nation had failed to fulfill most of the promises held out to former slaves. Still, given the odds confronting them, African Americans had reason for considerable pride in the gains they were able to make during Reconstruction. And future generations could be grateful for the crucial Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments which, although widely ignored at the time, would one day serve as the basis for a “Second Reconstruction”—one that would renew the drive to bring freedom to all Americans.

### *Chronology of Events*

- 1863 Lincoln issues Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction.
- 1864 Congress offers Wade-Davis bill.
- 1865 Lincoln begins second presidential term.  
Freedmen’s Bureau established.  
**April 14.** Lincoln shot, dies the following day; Andrew Johnson becomes president.

	Southern legislatures enact black codes.
	Thirteenth Amendment becomes part of U.S. Constitution.
1866	Congress approves Fourteenth Amendment.
	Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton found Equal Rights Association.
	Congress overrides President Johnson's vetoes, passing Civil Rights Act and extending Freedmen's Bureau.
	Ku Klux Klan founded.
1867	Congress passes Military Reconstruction Act.
1868	Senate impeachment trial of Andrew Johnson results in acquittal.
	Ulysses S. Grant elected president.
1870	Congress ratifies Fifteenth Amendment.
1872	President Grant reelected.
1873	Financial panic followed by economic depression lasting remainder of decade.
1877	Special congressional committee awards disputed electoral votes to Republican Rutherford B. Hayes, making him president; Hayes agrees to pull military out of South.

### *Key Terms*

1. **vagrant**—A person who wanders from place to place without a permanent home or a means of livelihood (p. 616).
2. **impeach**—To accuse a public official before a court or tribunal of misconduct in office (p. 623).
3. **graft**—The acquiring of gain or advantage by unfair or dishonest means through the abuse of power or influence by one in politics or business (p. 633).

***Learning Objectives*** After studying this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. Define the major problems facing the South and the nation after the Civil War.
2. Describe the freedmen's conditions and explain the initial efforts made to help them adjust to their new status.
3. Analyze the differences between presidential and congressional Reconstruction policies.
4. Describe the Radicals' agenda and its impact on the South.
5. Explain how militant white opposition gradually undermined the Republicans' attempt to empower the freedmen and to establish a Southern Republican party.
6. Explain why Reconstruction failed and why it left such a bitter legacy.

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## SELF-TESTING SECTION

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**Short Answer** Identify and give the historical significance of each of the following terms, events, and people in a paragraph or two.

1. Wade-Davis bill

2. Andrew Johnson

3. Fourteenth Amendment

4. Edwin Stanton

5. black codes



6. Tenure of Office Act

7. Liberal Republicans

8. “Redeemers”

9. 1867 Reconstruction Acts

10. Panic of 1873