

U.S. History Readers: Conflicts and Resolutions

Reconstruction

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Reconstruction Teacher Introduction

This unit is about a problem as old as the slave trade and as current as the latest round of SAT scores. The unit is based on the premise that the period of Reconstruction after the Civil War marked the first time that Americans made a serious attempt to deal with the legacy of slavery and racism. The victorious North faced two intractable problems that seemed to call for contradictory solutions: how to, as President Lincoln intoned, “achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves” while at the same time, in Thaddeus Stevens’s words, to do “justice to all God’s creatures, without distinction of race or color.” This unit engages students on the horns of this dilemma by starting with a description of the South after the Civil War. It asks them to compare the suffering and behavior of whites and blacks, and to appreciate and assess the severity of the laws known as the Black Codes.

The second chapter describes the two major plans for Reconstruction. First was Lincoln’s plan for “presidential reconstruction,” which aimed to quickly restore the Union and offered only the 13th Amendment as a “carrot” for emancipated blacks. Second was “radical reconstruction,” proposed by Republicans in Congress, which was based on assuring justice to the freedmen. Radical Reconstruction eventually produced the 14th Amendment and required Southern states to form governments that, with the support of federal troops, included emancipated slaves. By being challenged to choose between these two plans, students are asked to decide between working to reunite the nation or striving to obtain some form of racial justice. Chapter 3 provides students with the opportunity to discuss or debate the issues involved in the impeachment trial of President Andrew Johnson. A subsequent chapter provides primary source documents for students to use while analyzing the success of the much-maligned “carpetbag” governments. Another chapter tells the sad tale of the disputed election of 1876 that led to the withdrawal of federal troops. The unit points out that without support from the federal government, African Americans were left to the tender mercies of those who once held them as slaves. Blacks made the best deal they could and became sharecroppers. Finally they had to endure the status of a “separate” but definitely not “equal” existence under an avalanche of Jim Crow laws designed to meet the Supreme Court’s verdict in the *Plessy* case. The last chapter of the unit uses the words of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois to present differing views about which paths African Americans needed to follow in order to achieve equality. Washington wanted African Americans to demonstrate that they deserved their rights; Du Bois urged them to demand their rights. Another title in this series, *Unit IX The Civil Rights Movement*, takes the story of the struggle for equality into the 1960s and beyond.

This series of chapters is not to be confused with a traditional text. Instead of striving for complete coverage of Reconstruction, it highlights points of conflict and encourages students to see both sides of the controversies that took place during this period. Students are encouraged to develop their own ideas of the relative merits of both sides of the issue—Union or racial justice. A series of questions are asked about

the Black Codes, the two plans of Reconstruction, the value of carpetbag governments, the wisdom of withdrawing federal troops from the South, the question of providing freedmen with farms of their own, the arguments for and against *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and finally, the debate over two different paths to equality. In the process, student learning is enhanced by the use of graphic organizers, vocabulary lists and I (Inquiry)-charts. Each chapter also provides a “For Further Consideration” section designed for advanced learners, which requires them to do more writing and to use their extra knowledge to enrich class discussion. Finally, each lesson includes vocabulary words and key terms in flash card format; these can be used either for review or reference.

Chapter 1. The Problem of Reconstruction Teacher Page

Overview

This chapter on Reconstruction describes the war-torn South and, with the use of primary source narratives, describes the suffering and behavior of both white and black Southerners. Examples of the infamous Black Codes are provided along with statements from historians who hold opposing views of these laws. The Graphic Organizer asks students to answer questions about the destruction of the South, the suffering and behavior of members of both races, and the Black Codes from the perspective of a white Southerner, a freedman, or a neutral observer. The “For Further Consideration” section requires students to read and take notes on a review of a book on General Sherman and his infamous march through Georgia.

Objectives:

Students will

- realize the Civil War caused extensive destruction in the South;
- understand that social disorder was one of the problems both races faced, but that freedmen were left destitute, jobless, and victimized;
- understand that whites rationalized the Black Codes as necessary for establishing order in society, but actually kept African Americans subservient to whites and totally without legal, political, or social rights; and
- explore the question of whether land should have been given to ex-slaves so that they could become self-sufficient farmers.

Strategies:

Before class: Point out the purpose of this unit as described in the Teacher Introduction. Assign the chapter either up to or including the “For Further Consideration” section and inform students they will be expected to write their answers to all the Student Activities questions covering the assigned section(s).

In class: Ask students whether deliberately damaging civilian property during war can be justified. Have them apply what they said to Sherman’s march through Georgia. Note that Confederate troops burned Richmond to the ground during the waning days of the Civil War. Change the topic to the perspective-taking exercise on the Student Activities page, which uses a graphic organizer to get students to compare the perceptions of whites and African Americans. Note that white Southerners thought of the Black Codes as an attempt to maintain social order, while freedmen saw them as an attempt to “keep them in slavery in every way but name.” Ask which codes supported the freedmen’s perceptions and which could be rationalized as necessary for “keeping the peace.” End by floating the idea that any statute that applies only to one race is a violation of that race’s right to equality before the law.

Chapter 1. The Problem of Reconstruction I-Chart

	What problems did Southerners face right after the Civil War?	How did slaves respond to being free and how were they treated?	What laws were passed in the South to define the new status of the freed slaves? Were these laws too harsh?
What I already knew			
What I learned from Chapter 1, Part I			
What I learned from Chapter 1, Part II			
What I still want to know			

Vocabulary for Chapter 1—The Problem of Reconstruction

prosperous

homespun

accompanied

squads

destitute

intellectual level

systematic

gainful

vicious

Vocabulary for Chapter 1—The Problem of Reconstruction

Went with someone or something	Handmade material; spun or woven at home	State of being financially well off
Refers to an amount of intelligence or an ability to think or learn	Left without anything	Small groups of organized people with a purpose, usually military in nature
Having the purpose of hurting others	Something that leaves you with a profit	Done with a careful plan

Chapter 1

The Problem of Reconstruction

Introduction

It was April 9, 1865, and the guns that had been firing for four years were almost silent. At the Appomattox Court House in Virginia, General Robert E. Lee was surrendering to General Ulysses S. Grant. The terms of surrender were fair: Southern soldiers were allowed to keep their swords and pistols, and they could take their horses and their mules home with them to help with the farm work. After a little more than two weeks, when the last Confederate army finally surrendered, the long war that had divided the country was over at last.



Lee (seated on right) and Grant (on the left) at Appomattox

As Southern soldiers made their way home, they saw a far different country from the one they had left. Signs of the long struggle could be seen everywhere. Virginia, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Georgia looked like one huge battlefield. Where busy towns once stood, there were mostly burned ruins; where beautiful plantations and prosperous farms had once flourished, there were broken-down houses and torn-up fences; and where slaves had once worked, thousands of African Americans were out testing the meaning of their new freedom.

Six months earlier, Union General William T. Sherman had marched his army through Georgia from Atlanta to Savannah. His soldiers set fire to houses, barns, and fields along their path. He sent special squads out in all directions to destroy the countryside—and with it, the South's ability to continue fighting. Sherman's soldiers demolished bridges,



Sherman's Troops in Georgia

burned barns, and slaughtered cows, horses, and pigs. Soldiers pulled up train tracks, held them over a fire, and twisted them around trees. It was said that a bird flying over the 60-mile-wide path of destruction brought about by Sherman would have to carry its own food. After arriving in Savannah for Christmas, Sherman's army marched northward

through South Carolina and into North Carolina destroying, looting, and burning. Southern armies were unable to stop them.

The destruction in Virginia was not as systematic as it was in Georgia, but almost as bad. Virginia had been in the middle of the war for the better part of four years. Richmond, the Southern capital which lay only 90 miles from Washington D.C., was set afire by fleeing Confederate troops during the last weeks of the war. Only burned-out buildings remained for the hated Yankees to capture.

The South was badly damaged and close to collapsing in other ways as well. The North had blockaded Southern ports to prevent importation of food and war materials from England. The blockade also made the South's cotton all but worthless. By the time the war ended, the South's currency was hardly worth more than the paper on which it was printed; its factories were destroyed, its people were homeless and starving, and its slaves were free. The South had fought to its last ounce of strength and collapsed in defeat.

The most serious price paid by either side was the loss of human life. More than 110,000 soldiers from the North were killed in battle and another 250,000 died from other causes. The South lost a total of 250,000 men. About one out of four soldiers who fought had died by the end of the war. Few families were spared the loss of a father, son, husband, friend, or neighbor.

It is impossible to guess how much money the Civil War cost. Nor can anybody add up the losses in property, homes, livestock, and factory production. What can be determined, however, are the costs of the war to the taxpayers. That sum comes to 20 billion dollars at a time when the total national production for one year was only 4.8 billion dollars. A comparative loss today would be more than \$40 trillion.

The Condition of the South in White and Black

Toward the war's end, a Southern teenager wrote in her diary:

We have no reason to complain. So many families are worse off. Many have not tasted meat for months, and we, too, having a cow, are able to have butter. My underclothing is of coarse unbleached homespun, such as we gave the Negroes formerly. My shoes are one hundred and fifty dollars a pair. In two or three months these prices will be doubled.

We live tolerably poorly. Two meals a day. Two plates of bread for breakfast. Dinner consists of a very small piece of meat, a few potatoes and a dish of hominy and a pone of corn bread.

A Southern belle, however, complained that now she would have to do the housework. She declared that she would not mind except that the “lazy Negroes” could no longer be put to work. In fact, this daughter of a Georgian planter was quite upset by the behavior of the freedmen:

Things are coming to such a pass that it is unsafe for ladies to walk on the street. The town is becoming more crowded with “freedmen” every day and their [rudeness] increases with their numbers. Every available house is running over with them, and there are some quarters of the village where white people can hardly pass without being insulted. The Negroes are nearly all idle, and most of them live by stealing.

Between the time Abraham Lincoln had issued his Emancipation Proclamation and the day Lee surrendered, some four million slaves had tasted freedom. Never before had so many people experienced such a striking change in their lives. Under the best of conditions, the change from slavery to freedom would have been difficult, but coming at the end of a terrible war, the new freedom was bewildering to both the freedmen and their former masters. One African American described the experience as his mother told it to him:

When freedom come, my mama said Old Master called all of ‘em to his house, and said “You all free, we ain’t got nothing to do with you no more. Go on away. We don’t whup you no more, go on your way.” My mama said they go on off, then they come back and stand around just looking at him and old Mistress. They give ‘em something to eat and he say: “Go on away, you don’t belong to us no more, you been freed.”

Another African American heard a very similar story:

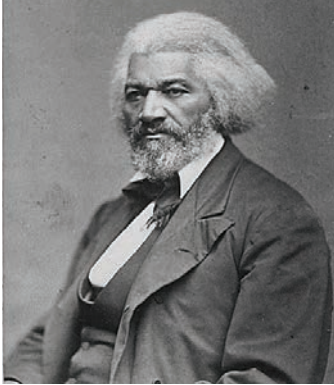
They (the slaves) didn’t have no place to go and nothing to wear. From what she said they had a terrible time. She said it was bad times. Some took sick and had no [attention] and died. Seemed like it was four or five years before they got to places they could live. They all got scattered.

Another freed slave saw the problem in terms of the whites’ refusal to accept the fact that black Americans were free:

It seem like the white people can’t git over us being free, and they do everything to hold us down all the time. ... We have to just keep bowing and scraping when we are around white folks like we did when we was slaves. They had us down and they kept us down.

Another freedman spoke of the lack of work:

Some stayed at their cabins glad to have one to live in and farmed on. Some running around begging, some hunting work for money, and nobody had no money 'cepting the Yankees, and they had no homes or land and mighty little work for you to do. No work to live on. Some going every day to the city. That winter I heard 'bout them starving and freezing by the wagon loads.



Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass, the spokesman for black Americans for over a half-century, summed up the situation when he said that the black man was:

...free from the individual master but a slave of society. He had neither money, property, nor friends. He was free from the old plantation, but he had nothing but the dusty road under his feet. He was free from the old quarter that once gave him shelter, but a slave to the rains of summer and the frosts of winter. He was turned loose, naked, hungry, and destitute to the open sky."

An African American folk song from that period made the same point:

Slavery and freedom;
They's mostly the same;
No difference hardly
'Cept in name

The Black Codes

Southern whites believed it was necessary to write laws recognizing the changed standing of black people. As soon as new state legislatures met after the war, they drew up codes defining the rights and responsibilities of former slaves. Some examples follow:

- Negroes must find gainful employment.
- Negro orphans should be put to work immediately.
- Negro adults without jobs would be arrested, fined, or jailed.
- These fines should be no more than \$50.00.
- Negroes who could not pay the fine may be hired out to work by adults who pay the fine
- Negroes may sue and be sued by other Negroes.

- Negroes may intermarry with each other.
- Negroes may not ride in first class railroad cars unless accompanied by their master or mistress.
- Negroes may not keep or carry firearms.
- Negroes must be off the street by sundown.
- Negroes could not sue whites in court or testify against whites.
- Negroes could not vote.

Southerners defended these “Black Codes” as necessary to keep order in the South and to help the former slaves make the difficult adjustment to freedom. Northerners attacked the laws as signs that the South wished to keep blacks as slaves under a different name. Even into the 20th century, the debate over these codes continued, as the following excerpts show:

**William Dunning:
White Southern Historian**

The black codes were an honest attempt to restore order in the South. They clearly recognized the fact that former slaves could not be on the same moral, social or intellectual level as whites. The laws understood the childlike level of the Negro and did not give him the right to vote, carry firearms, testify against whites or break labor contracts. It is true that some of the codes went too far. But they were right in their main emphasis of protecting Negroes and society from the results of the Negroes’ own laziness and ignorance.

**W.E.B. Du Bois:
African American Historian**

The black codes were the South’s way of avoiding the most important consequence of the Civil War. They attempted to keep black Americans slaves in everything but name. Almost every independent work or movement by blacks was made a crime for which the guilty party could be fined and then hired out to work without wage for whites who paid the fine. The codes denied almost every basic right belonging to free men, and would make it impossible for black people to rise above the poverty and humiliation they suffered as slaves.

Student Activities

A. Student Exercises

1. Do you think black and white Southerners suffered equally during the period following the Civil War? Explain.
2. Do you think the vast damage done to the South means that the North fought the war too viciously? Explain.
3. Define the term “Black Codes” and give five examples.
4. Whose interpretation of the “Black Codes”—Douglass’s or Dunning’s—do you think was correct? Give reasons for your answer.