

American History

"Rebuilding the Nation"

By 1866, most states in the South had ratified the Thirteenth Amendment, which banned slavery. However, most white southerners did not want to give African Americans "real freedom". Southern legislatures passed **black codes**, which were laws that severely limited the rights of freedmen.

Black codes forbade African Americans to vote, own guns, and serve on juries. African Americans were permitted to work only as servants or farm laborers.

Black codes were clearly meant to keep freedmen from gaining political or economic power.

The black codes, however, gave African Americans some rights they did not have prior to the Civil War. African Americans could legally marry and own some kind of property.

Republicans were angered by the black codes and the election of former Confederate leaders to congress. The Republicans sent President Johnson a report condemning southern practices - President Johnson ignored it! At that point, members of Congress vowed to take Reconstruction out of the President's hands!

Those who led opposition to President Johnson were called **Radical Republicans**, or simply **Radicals**. The Radicals had two main goals:

- 1) to break the power of the planters who had ruled the South for years, and
- 2) to make sure sure that freedmen received the right to vote.

The conflict between President Johnson and Congress came to a head in 1866. In April, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, which gave citizenship to African Americans. President Johnson vetoed the bill - but Congress overrode the veto.

Republicans worried that the Supreme Court might declare the Civil rights Act unconstitutional - so they proposed the **Fourteenth Amendment** to the Constitution. The **Fourteenth Amendment** granted citizenship to all persons born in the United States (this included African Americans).

The Fourteenth Amendment also guaranteed all citizens "equal protection of the laws" and declared that no state could "deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law". This made it illegal for states to discriminate against an individual on "unreasonable grounds" such as the color of a person's skin.

President Johnson violently opposed the Fourteenth Amendment and urged the former Confederate states to reject it. In time, all states did so, except Tennessee.

President Johnson decided to make the Fourteenth Amendment an issue in the November 1866 Congressional elections.

The election results were a disaster for Johnson - as the Republicans won majorities in both houses of Congress.

With overwhelming majorities in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, Congress could override President Johnson's vetoes.

Radical Reconstruction

The period that followed the Congressional election of 1866 is often called **Radical Reconstruction**.

Congress passed the first **Reconstruction Act** over President Johnson's veto in March 1867. This Act:

- 1) threw out the southern state governments that had refused to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment (all of the former Confederate states, except Tennessee),
- 2) divided the South into five "military districts". Each district was commanded by an army general,
- 3) required the former Confederate states to write new constitutions,
- 4) required the new state governments to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment before rejoining the Union,
- 5) (and **most importantly**) stated that African Americans must be allowed to vote in all southern states.

In the elections that followed, freedmen proudly turned out to exercise their new right to vote. As a result, Republicans gained control of the southern state governments!

Congress passed several more Reconstruction Acts - each time over President Johnson's veto. It was President Johnson's duty to enforce these new laws, however, many Republicans feared he would not do so. Republicans in Congress decided to remove President Johnson from office!

On February 24, 1868, the House of Representatives voted to impeach President Johnson.

According to the Constitution, the House can impeach the President only for "high crimes and misdemeanors". The case is tried in the Senate. The President is removed from office only if found guilty by two-thirds of the senators.

In the end, the Senate vote was 35 - 19 - this was just one vote short of the two-thirds majority needed to Remove Johnson from office!

In 1868, the Republicans nominated General Ulysses S. Grant as their candidate for President. Grant would go on to easily win the election.

In 1869, Republicans in Congress proposed another Amendment to the Constitution. The **Fifteenth Amendment** forbade any state from denying African Americans the right to vote because of their race. The Fifteenth Amendment was ratified in 1870 - at last, African American men over age 21 had the right to vote!