Was reconstruction a success or failure?

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Immediately after the American Civil war ended in 1865, radical reconstruction began. The reconstruction era is the period between 1865 and 1877. Reconstruction originated almost a year after President Abraham Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862. He told the first comprehensively laid out program for reconstruction, The Ten Percent Plan. Instead of weakening the confederacy as Lincoln planned, it majorly served to convince the republicans that equal rights for formerly enslaved people were to go hand in hand with the South’s readmission to the Union. Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, and when Andrew Johnson took over, he inaugurated the presidential reconstruction (1865-1867). He began by pardoning the Southern Whites and outlined the creation of the new state governments, allowing them to run their affairs freely. This resulted in a new problem; they created laws restricting formerly enslaved persons’ economic freedom (Urton, 2001). The African Americans resisted the implementation of these restrictive measures; it caused the undermining of the Northern Support for Johnson’s policies. In 1866, congressional reconstruction began and ended in 1877. Therefore, although the reconstruction successfully facilitated the reunification of the United States, it failed in so many other ways. It could not protect the formerly enslaved people and while the North grew economically, the South lagged.

The United States arose as a unified nation after the civil war, with the confederacy joining the Union. According to Goldfield and Berlin (2013), the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments were quickly passed, which guaranteed the freedom of the enslaved people and the extension of voting rights to African Americans. The Confederate States pledged their loyalty t the United States government and acknowledged the constitutional amendments. Finally, the debate about state rights versus federalism had finally been settled since its rise in the 1790s. These reconstruction steps fired up the civil rights movement years later, in the mid-1900s, which saw the desegregation of schools achieved. However, in the short term, things did not go as planned.

The Radical Republican legislation soon failed to protect the former slaves. The Whites in the South took advantage of the new freedom of President Andrew Johnson in the running of State affairs. They came up with measures that they justified as “worker’s discipline.” The measures restricted the economic gains of formerly enslaved persons. They passed Black codes, voter qualifications, and similar anti-progressive laws to reverse the voting and freedom rights the Blacks had newly acquired. (Urton, 2001) They extremely limited the rights of African Americans to the level of slavery. The decisions by the Supreme Court further facilitated the anti-progression, such as the Slaughterhouse cases and the Civil Rights cases. Eventually, it repealed the 14th and 15th Amendments.

While the Northern States’ economic state continued to grow, the Southern faced an economic slump. The division between the North and the South began to widen. According to Urton (2001), during the war, the South had used up its reserves, and without investments from the North, it was difficult to recover. The Business opportunities that the Northerners took advantage of in the South were barely beneficial, as there were inadequate reinvestments. According to Goldfield and Berlin, “Americans, northerners in particular, had no time for caring about government policies toward the South – a region forgotten, if not gone. Leave to the South its peculiar race relations, its evangelical culture, and its backward economy.” In other words, the Northerners focused on technological and scientific advancements that favored economic growth, while the Southerners’ immediate goal was reforming policies and racial inequalities.

Eventually, in 1876, the worst thing that could have happened to the reconstruction policies took place. The North abandoned the cause, and it signaled that it had completely lost interest in enforcing the reconstruction laws. According to Urton (2001), Some historians like Perman blame the failure of the reconstruction on the North. He explains that if congress focused a little bit more on punishing the white southerners and compelled them to act fairly and equitably towards the freedmen, then reconstruction would have worked. Unfortunately, the North’s focus was solely on political and economic milestones. As a result, he notes that “the freedman came out of reconstruction as they went in; landless, poverty stricken and trapped into increasingly unfavorable arrangements of sharecropping that often amounted to debt peonage.” Unfortunately, they were back where they started, if not worse.

The immediate effects of the reconstruction pronounce its failure. It was supposed to provide healing after the disastrous war but only offered false hope, especially for the South and African Americans. It gave rise to new forms of economic oppression of the freedmen. The North, on the other hand, grew its economy as it embraced technological advancements and commerce. The South lagged as discrimination based on race became their main focus. The gap between the North and the South widened, especially regarding the economy.

References

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