**Positives of Reconstruction**

**President Johnson’s Reconstruction Plan**

As the Civil War ended, people in the United States had sharply different views about how to rebuild the Southern states and bring them back into the Union. This period of time came to be called Reconstruction. For President Andrew Johnson, a Southerner from Tennessee, Reconstruction had two major aims. First, Southern states had to create new governments that were loyal to the Union and that respected federal authority. Second, slavery had to be abolished once and for all

In May 1865, President Johnson announced his Reconstruction plan. A former Confederate state could rejoin the Union once it had written a new state constitution, elected a new state government, repealed its act of secession, and canceled its war debts. There was a final requirement as well. Every Southern state had to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery throughout the United States. By the fall of 1865, every Southern state had met the president’s requirements. The Thirteenth Amendment became part of the Constitution. Presidential Reconstruction had begun.

**The Freedmen’s Bureau**

To assist former slaves, Congress established the Freedmen’s Bureau in March 1865. Over the next four years, the bureau provided food and medical care to both blacks and whites in the South. It helped freedmen arrange for wages and good working conditions. It also distributed some land in 40-acre plots to “loyal refugees and freedmen.”

The most lasting benefit of the Freedmen’s Bureau was in education. Thousands of former slaves, both young and old, flocked to free schools built by the bureau. Long after the bureau was gone, such institutions as Howard University in Washington, D.C., continued to provide educational opportunities for African Americans.

**Military Reconstruction Act**

As 1865 came to a close, President Johnson announced that Reconstruction was over. The Southern states were ready to rejoin the Union. Radical Republicans wanted the federal government to take a more active role in Reconstruction—a role that would involve tougher requirements for restoring Southern governments.

Early in 1866, Radical Republicans joined with more moderate lawmakers to enact two bills designed to help freedmen. The first extended the life of the Freedmen’s Bureau. The second was the Civil Rights Act of 1866. It struck at the black codes by declaring freedmen to be full citizens with the same civil rights as whites. Johnson declared both bills unconstitutional and vetoed them. An angry Congress overrode his vetoes.

Early in 1867, Congress passed the Military Reconstruction Act. Once again, it did so over Johnson’s veto. This plan divided the South into five military districts, each governed by a general supported by federal troops. The state governments set up under Johnson’s Reconstruction plan were declared illegal. New governments were to be formed by Southerners loyal to the United States—both black and white. Southerners who had supported the Confederacy were denied the right to vote.

**Carpetbaggers and Scalawags**

In general, the term “carpetbagger” refers to a traveler who arrives in a new region with only a satchel (or carpetbag) of possessions, and who attempts to profit from his new surroundings. In reality, most Reconstruction-era carpetbaggers were well-educated members of the middle class; they worked as teachers, merchants, journalists or other types of businessmen, or at the Freedman’s Bureau, an organization created by Congress to provide aid for newly liberated black Americans. Many were former Union soldiers. In addition to economic motives, a good number of carpetbaggers saw themselves as reformers and wanted to shape the postwar South in the image of the North, which they considered to be a more advanced society.

White southern Republicans, known to their enemies as “scalawags,” made up the biggest group of delegates to the Radical Reconstruction-era legislatures. The majority of the scalawags were non-slaveholding small farmers as well as merchants, artisans and other professionals who had remained loyal to the Union during the Civil War. Many lived in the northern states of the region, and a number had either served in the Union Army or been imprisoned for Union sympathies. Though they differed in their views on race—many had strong anti-black attitudes—these men wanted to keep the hated “rebels” from regaining power in the postwar South; they also sought to develop the region’s economy and ensure the survival of its debt-ridden small farms. For opponents of Reconstruction, scalawags were even lower on the scale of humanity than carpetbaggers, as they were viewed as traitors to the South.

**The Fourteenth Amendment** **and Fifteenth Amendment**

In 1868, to further protect the rights of African Americans, Congress approved the Fourteenth Amendment despite President Johnson’s objections. This amendment granted citizenship to “all people born or naturalized in the United States.” It also guaranteed all citizens “the equal protection of the laws.” This meant that state governments could not treat some citizens as less equal than others.

 In 1869, at President Grant’s urging, Congress passed the Fifteenth Amendment. This amendment said that a citizen’s right to vote “shall not be denied. . . on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” It guaranteed every male citizen the right to vote, regardless of race. The American Anti-Slavery Society declared the Fifteenth Amendment to be “the capstone and completion of our movement; the fulfillment of our pledge to the Negro race; since it secures to them equal political rights with the white race.”

**African Americans in Office**

About a fifth of the South’s new officeholders were African Americans. Blacks served in every Southern legislature and held high offices in three states. Twenty-two African Americans represented their states in Congress—20 in the House and 2 in the Senate. After watching these representatives, many of whom had been born slaves, Pennsylvania Congressman James G. Blaine said, “The colored men who took their seats in both the Senate andHouse did not appear ignorant or helpless.They were as a rulestudious, earnest, ambitious men, whose public conduct. . . would be honorable to any race.”

**Negatives of Reconstruction**

**Black Codes**

As new state governments took power in the South, many Republicans in Congress were alarmed to see that they were headed by the same people who had led the South before the war—wealthy white planters. Once in office, these leaders began passing laws known as black codes to control their former slaves.

The black codes served three purposes. The first was to limit the rights of freedmen. Generally, former slaves received the rights to marry, to own property, to work for wages, and to sue in court. But they did not have other rights of citizenship. Blacks, for example, could not vote or serve on juries in the South. The second purpose of the black codes was to help planters find workers to replace their slaves. The codes required freedmen to work. Those without jobs could be arrested and hired out to planters. The codes also limited freedmen to farming or jobs requiring few skills. African Americans could not enter most trades or start businesses. The third purpose of the black codes was to keep freedmen at the bottom of the social order in the South. Most codes called for the segregation of blacks and whites in public places.

**Sharecropping and Debt Peonage**

With the end of slavery and the widespread destruction of the Civil War, one of the major tasks of Reconstruction was to repair the economy of the South. Without slave labor, the old plantation system could not be restored. For the most part, plantation owners entered into sharecropping arrangements with their former slaves, who had no resources and little job availability of their own. The landowner provided a cabin, a mule, tools, and a plot of land to a sharecropper. The sharecropper would then give a large share of his crop to the landowner. If a sharecropper owed any money at all to the landowner for cash loans or the use of tools, he or she could not leave the land until the debt was paid, tying the freedman into a system that became known as debt peonage.

**Violence against African Americans**

Most whites in the South bitterly resented the Southern Reconstruction governments. They hated the fact that these governments had been “forced” on them by Yankees. What bothered many Southerners most about their Reconstruction governments was seeing former slaves voting and holding public office. Across the South, Democrats vowed to regain power and return their states to “white man’s rule.”

Throughout the South, whites formed secret societies to drive African Americans out of political life. The most infamous of these groups was the Ku Klux Klan. Dressed in long, hooded robes and armed with guns and swords, Klansmen did their work at night. They started by threatening black voters and officeholders. African Americans who did not heed their threats were beaten, tarred and feathered, and even murdered.

**Losing Voting Rights**

Southern Democrats also reversed political gains made by freedmen after the war. Many Southern states passed laws requiring citizens who wanted to vote to pay a poll tax. The tax was set high enough that voting, like education, became a luxury that many black Southerners could not afford.

Some Southern states also required citizens to pass a literacy test to show they could read before allowing them to vote. These tests were designed so that any African American, regardless of his education, would fail.

In theory, these laws applied equally to blacks and whites and, for that reason, did not violate the Fifteenth Amendment. In practice, however, whites were excused from paying poll taxes or taking literacy tests by a so-called “grandfather clause” in the laws. This clause said the taxes and tests did not apply to any man whose father or grandfather could vote on January 1, 1867. Since no blacks could vote on that date, the grandfather clause applied only to whites.

**Drawing a “Color Line”**

During Reconstruction, most Southern states had outlawed segregation in public places. When Democrats returned to power, they reversed these laws and drew a “color line” between blacks and whites in public life. Whites called the new segregation acts Jim Crow laws.

Not all white Southerners supported segregation. When a Jim Crow law was proposed in South Carolina, a *Charleston News and Courier* editorial tried to show how unjust it was by taking segregation to ridiculous extremes: “*If there must be Jim Crow cars on railroads, there should be Jim Crow cars on the street railways. Also on all passenger boats. . . There should be Jim Crow waiting saloons [waiting rooms]  
at all stations, and Jim Crow eating houses . . . There should be Jim Crow sections of the jury box, and a separate Jim Crow . . .witness stand in every court—and a Jim Crow Bible for colored witnesses to kiss.*” Instead of being a joke, as intended, most of these ridiculous suggestions soon became laws.

***Plessy v. Ferguson***

African Americans argued that segregation laws violated the Fourteenth Amendment’s guarantee of equal protection of the laws. Homer Plessy, who was arrested for refusing to obey a Jim Crow law, took his protest all the way to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court decided his case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, in 1896. The majority of the Supreme Court justices found that segregation laws did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment as long as the facilities available to both races were roughly equal. Justice John Marshall Harlan, a former slaveholder, disagreed. In his dissenting opinion, he wrote, “Our Constitution is color blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens.”

After the Supreme Court’s decision in *Plessy*, states passed additional Jim Crow laws. Blacks and whites attended separate schools, played in separate parks, and sat in separate sections in theaters. Despite the Court’s decision that these separate facilities must be equal, those set aside for African Americans were almost always inferior to facilities labeled “whites only.”