Reconstruction

After the Civil War was over, African Americans in the Southern United States were not truly free. Despite Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, where he wrote, “...all persons held as slaves... shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free...” African Americans suffered violence, intimidation, and death at the hands of Whites who refused to honor their freedom. Many Southern Whites wanted to live their lives and continue slavery as if the Civil War had never occurred. Lincoln intended for African Americans to experience freedom and opportunity after the Civil War, but this did not happen. Lincoln’s assassination was one reason for this, and the other was the refusal on the part of Whites to recognize former slaves as free American Citizens.

The ten year period immediately following the Civil War is commonly known as Reconstruction. It was a violent time when white racist vigilantes or terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan re-enslaved, injured, or killed thousands of African Americans throughout the Southern States. They did this because they wanted to maintain control of the land and the way of life they had lived before the war. It was like a second Civil War. Many White landowners forced African Americans to work their land for little or no pay. Southern Whites fought against Reconstruction and the ideas of Lincoln. Lincoln was assassinated just a few days after the Civil War ended and his proposal for
Reconstruction was offered. White people in the South remained angry about the result of the Civil War where they lost property and slavery and the lives of over 250,000 men who fought for the South in the war. Homelessness and extreme poverty affected Blacks and Whites alike during Reconstruction. The economic system of the South was completely destroyed. Banks had no money and there was little legitimate business taking place.

Radical Republicans were people who were Abolitionists trying to protect the rights of African Americans in the South. They wanted swift change granting full rights to freed African Americans. The Radical Republicans were targets of the white racist vigilantes. The Radical Republicans created the Freedman's Bureau, designed to help freed blacks own property and improve their lives, but it was largely ineffective because it was underfunded, and the new president, Andrew Johnson, who had been Lincoln’s vice president, did not want it to succeed. Johnson was not in favor of granting rights to freed Blacks. He did not see Blacks and Whites as equals. Johnson had no sympathy for the situation Blacks in the South were in, with no land of their own, no money, and little opportunity for education. Johnson did not want racial equality for Blacks. Whites suffered no punishments for the war and were welcomed back into the Union with little or no penalties. Some leaders of the Confederacy became government leaders again in Southern States soon after the war was over.
Once former slave owning whites were forgiven, they returned to their racist ways and began creating and enforcing laws designed to hurt African Americans and keep them down. The severe unjust laws that whites enacted were called Black Codes. According to these Black Codes, Blacks could not own guns. Without guns, Blacks could not use guns to hunt animals for food. Blacks could not start their own business. Essentially, black codes prevented blacks from having any opportunities and forced many of them to essentially become slaves, working on a White landowner’s farm, once again. Some historians compare this situation to what Apartheid was like in South Africa, where there was abject poverty and segregation in nearly all aspects of society. Some southern states legalized the beating of African Americans for not ‘bowing down’ to Whites. Some African Americans, with the assistance of the Radical Republicans, tried to gain the right to vote for Blacks in New Orleans, Louisiana. But this effort failed because the racist Whites prevented them from attending a convention where their right to vote would be debated. More than 50 black demonstrators were killed by racist Whites trying to deny them the right to vote in the bloody event, now known as the *New Orleans Massacre*. Violence on Blacks, similar to what happened in New Orleans, was happening all over the South. Things were still really miserable for Black people. Andrew Johnson was a terrible politician and leader. He was not doing anything to help black people. He was drunk a lot and he made public comments that showed he
was not sensitive to their situation. In 1866, the Radical Republicans won a majority in Congress and began taking power away from Andrew Johnson. They voted to enact a stronger form of Reconstruction.

Parson “Bloody” Bill Brownlow was an Abolitionist minister and newspaper man who wrote scathing editorials about how bad racist White people were to Blacks in the South. He was appointed governor of Tennessee. He was very aggressive in working toward helping Blacks access the freedom and equality they were promised under Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.

To ensure that the 14th Amendment, which granted citizenship to “all persons born or naturalized in the United States,” would pass in his state, he threatened to execute racist legislators who tried to prevent the vote from occurring.

Tennessee then became the first state to let Black people vote. Racist White people in the South, however, continued to be ‘offended’ about changes in their lifestyles with the rights afforded to Blacks.

Upon returning to their home state after their defeat in the Civil War, six former Confederate soldiers in Tennessee formed the Ku Klux Klan with the intention of scaring, beating, burning, or killing freed African Americans, and Whites would helped them in any way. Membership in the KKK increased rapidly among racist White people. Governor Brownlow tried to stop the KKK from attacking Blacks, but he got little support, even from his own law enforcement departments. Nathan Bedford Forrest was the first Grand Wizard

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of the KKK. The KKK’s first major effort was to scare Blacks away from
voting in the 1868 election. While the KKK had as many as 40,000 members at
this time, they were never able to fully join together as a unified military force.
On a small scale, however, they performed awful atrocities against thousands of
Blacks throughout the state of Tennessee, and other southern states.

Despite the misconception that the end of the Civil War started a new life
of freedom and equality for Blacks in the South, life was actually worse in
many ways for them. Equal rights were something that Blacks would not realize
for a long time. Some rights, in fact, were not realized for more than one
hundred years after the Civil War. African Americans were still fighting for the
right to vote in many parts of the United States as recently as the 1960’s.
Reconstruction under the Radical Republicans was an effort to improve the
situation for Blacks in the South, but it met a lot of resistance, for a long time,
from Racist Whites who did not want to see change in southern society.