

Thomas Nast's political cartoon "Is This a Republican Form of Government?" condemns Northern indifference to the violence African Americans endured as Reconstruction ended.

23.5 The End of Reconstruction

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.

Many taxpayers also blamed their soaring tax bills on corruption—the misuse of public office for personal gain—by the South's new leaders. While some Southern officeholders did line their pockets with public funds, most, whether black or white, were honest, capable leaders. Still, when taxes increased, opposition to the new state governments increased as well.

But 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."

Violence Against African Americans At first, Democrats tried to win black voters away from the Republican Party. When that tactic failed, they attempted to use legal means to keep blacks from voting or from taking office. In Georgia, for example, the legislature refused to seat elected black lawmakers until they were forced to by the state supreme court. When legal methods failed, whites turned to violence.

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.

The Enforcement Acts In 1870 and 1871, Congress passed three laws to combat violence against African Americans. Known as the Enforcement Acts, these laws made it illegal to prevent another person from voting by bribery, force, or scare tactics.

President Grant sent troops into the South to enforce these acts. Hundreds of people were arrested for violence against blacks. Those who were brought to trial, however, were seldom convicted. Few witnesses and jurors wanted to risk the Klan's revenge by speaking out against one of its members.

The Amnesty Act of 1872 By this time, most Northerners were losing interest in Reconstruction and the plight of the freedmen. It was time, many people said, to "let the South alone."

One indication of this changing attitude was the passage of the Amnesty Act of 1872. Amnesty means forgiveness for past offenses. The Amnesty Act allowed most former Confederates to vote once again.

The effects of the Amnesty Act were seen almost immediately. By 1876, Democrats had regained control of all but three states in the South. Republicans clung to power in South Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida, but only with the help of federal troops.

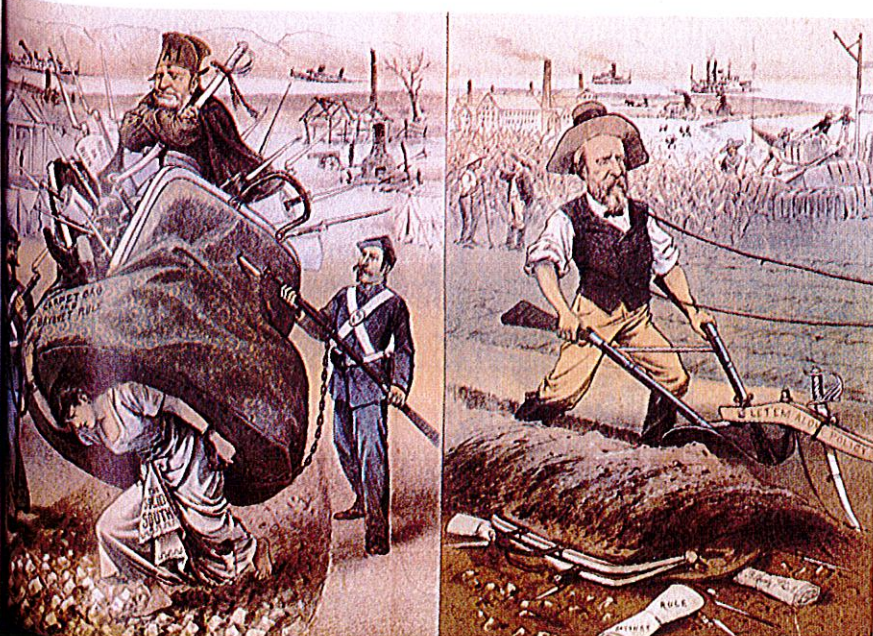
The Disputed Election of 1876 In 1876, Americans went to the polls to choose a new president. The Democrats nominated New York governor Samuel J. Tilden as their candidate. Rutherford B. Hayes was the Republican nominee. When the votes were counted, Tilden won a majority of popular votes and 184 electoral votes, just one short of the 185 needed for election. Hayes received 165 electoral votes. Twenty electoral votes from four states were in dispute.

Congress, which was controlled by Republicans, appointed a commission to decide which candidate should get the disputed electoral votes. The commission awarded all 20 to Hayes, giving him exactly the 185 electoral votes he needed to win. The Democrats threatened to block the commission's decision. Inauguration day grew near with no new president in sight.

The Compromise of 1877 After weeks of negotiation, Democratic and Republican leaders in Congress agreed to a compromise. The Democrats accepted the electoral commission's decision, allowing Hayes to become president. In return, Hayes agreed to withdraw the remaining federal troops still occupying Southern states.

Once President Hayes withdrew all remaining federal troops from the South in 1877, Reconstruction was officially over. After that, Democrats quickly took control of the last Southern states. "This is a white man's country," boasted South Carolina senator Ben Tillman, "and white men must govern it."

Most white Southerners celebrated the end of Reconstruction. But for freedmen, the return of the South to "white man's rule" was a giant step backward. "The whole South—every state in the South," observed a Louisiana freedman, "has got into the hands of the very men that held us as slaves."



This cartoon compares the Reconstruction policies of President Grant and President Hayes, who succeeded Grant in office. In the first panel, Grant is shown riding in a carpetbag supported by an oppressed South. Two soldiers symbolize martial law. In the second panel, Hayes is shown plowing under the carpetbag. The label on the plow reads "Let 'Em Alone Policy." Which president do you think the cartoonist favored?