17.1: Introduction

Even before the Civil War officially ended with the surrender of the last Confederate forces in 1865, Americans thought about what the reunited nation would look like. Issues not contemplated at the beginning of the war took center stage as the nation began transitioning from war to peace. National leaders had to decide the terms of peace, especially who would control southern governments and how the rebelling states would return to the Union. They also needed to address the legal and social status of former slaves and the development of a new labor system to replace slavery. Finally, they needed to determine what branch of government would handle the process: the executive branch or the legislative branch. During Reconstruction, from 1865 to 1877, the federal government took responsibility for making many administrative decisions for the southern states until residents formed new governments. Once that happened, the federal government sought to ensure the new governments protected the legal rights of the freedmen.

Andrew Johnson, who became president after Abraham Lincoln, shared his predecessor’s view that the executive branch should control Reconstruction. He devised a plan for readmitting the southern states to the Union and proceeded to implement that plan in 1865. Many Republicans in Congress, however, disagreed because white southerners appeared determined to maintain slavery in any way possible. So, Congress asserted their control over Reconstruction by enhancing the federal government’s protection of the freedmen in late 1866. The battle between Johnson and Congress ultimately led Republicans to impeach the president. Although Johnson remained in office, the ongoing debate soured many northerners and southerners on the efforts to reconstruct the South. In 1868, Republican Ulysses S. Grant won the presidential election based on his promise to bring peace to the country.

During Reconstruction, Republicans controlled the state governments in the South, but struggled to maintain this control. First, they represented a diverse group of voters, and they could not find a means to balance the interests of their black and white supporters. Second, conservatives, mostly members of the Democratic Party, sought to regain control of their state governments. They used threats and violence to keep Republicans away from the polls when elections rolled around. The problems associated with reconstructing the southern states seemed only to get worse during Grant’s
presidency. People began to lose patience with the constant focus on southern issues; many Americans wanted national leaders to focus on more pressing issues, such as the depression that followed the Panic of 1873. In the end, neither the executive branch nor the legislative branch found an effective means to reunite the nation and to protect the rights of the freedmen. Reconstruction officially ended in 1877 after Republican Rutherford B. Hayes became president and pulled the last of the federal troops out of the South.

17.1.1: Learning Outcomes

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

• Examine the challenges the Lincoln administration confronted in its attempts to reconstruct the Border States and Union-occupied territory during the Civil War.

• Analyze the economic and political problems facing the nation at the conclusion of the Civil War.

• Demonstrate an understanding of Reconstruction and its impact on race relations in the United States.

• Analyze the positions of Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Johnson, and the Radicals in Congress on the nature and course of Reconstruction and the rights of the freedmen.

• Explain the effects of Reconstruction, the Black Codes, and the actions of the Freedmen’s Bureau on African Americans in the South and North.

• Examine the social fears that helped give rise to groups such as the Ku Klux Klan.

• Assess the problems the Grant administrations faced in its attempts to deal with the political and economic issues confronting the nation.