

Reconstruction Point Counterpoint

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Lexile: 1100
Word Count: 1003

Vocabulary

▶ redrawn ▶ sharecropper ▶ unfairness ▶ segregated

Issue for Discussion

To what extent did Reconstruction help African Americans? Did African Americans get trapped in a situation similar to slavery, or did they make any progress during this period?

Directions

Read the two responses to this question below. As you read, pay special attention to the evidence and reasoning used. Please note that these arguments represent different points of view in historical debates rather than the personal views of individuals.

Argument A

What changes did freedom bring to former slaves? While the end of slavery was important, what did it actually mean for millions of African Americans? The constitutional amendments that followed did end slavery, made African Americans citizens (overturning the Dred Scott decision of 1857), and gave African American men the right to vote. Families that had been separated could finally come together again. During Reconstruction, African Americans could control their own lives, keep their families together, and have some choices about their work and education. For a short time, they could even take part in politics by voting and holding office.

However, this period of progress didn't last long. Reconstruction fell apart in the 1870s for several reasons: Northern whites lost interest, the federal government didn't enforce the laws properly, the economy was bad, there was political conflict, and most importantly, Southern whites used violence

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to restore white control. Early plans to give land to former slaves never worked out, leaving African Americans to survive in a hostile environment with many disadvantages.

African Americans (and many poor whites) tried to make a living by working for white landowners, but they often ended up in debt that kept growing. Whether they were sharecroppers or wage workers, most remained poor. While having separate facilities was better than being completely excluded, segregated schools usually had less funding and fewer resources. Public education struggled, and opportunities decreased. The few people who succeeded were rare exceptions. It's no surprise that many African American families moved west and north looking for better lives, though things weren't much better anywhere else.

They couldn't count on the political system either. Jim Crow laws limited African American opportunities more and more. After using violence to stop voting, whites created laws requiring literacy tests and poll taxes to prevent African Americans from voting. Though African Americans initially held state and national offices after Reconstruction, this changed when voting districts were redrawn to reduce African American voting power and then when African Americans were stopped from voting completely. Court decisions in the 1880s took away many of the civil rights gains from the 1860s and 1870s. By 1890, Republicans didn't care much about African American rights, and Democrats actively worked against them.

The foundations of freedom laid during Reconstruction, though ignored for many years, did eventually help support the civil rights movement in the mid-1900s. But for the African Americans who were freed during the Civil War, Reconstruction's promises weren't kept. Though slavery ended, racism, unfairness, discrimination, violence, and lack of opportunity continued.

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Argument B

Although Reconstruction didn't fulfill its promises to African Americans until the Civil Rights era, it did create some progress, even if that progress was brief. As W. E. B. Du Bois, the leading African American activist of the early 1900s, said: "The slave went free, stood a brief moment in the sun; and then moved back again toward slavery."

Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation freed Southern slaves during the Civil War, and the Thirteenth Amendment made freedom permanent. After the war, the Republican Congress fought with President Andrew Johnson, who took office when Lincoln was killed in April 1865.

The Radical Republicans who controlled Congress wanted African Americans to have equal rights under the law in the South, so they passed laws to make this happen. Johnson wanted to give control back to Southern whites and didn't care about equality or protection for African Americans.

White men in the South were already attacking and killing former slaves, but this didn't bother Johnson, who believed whites were superior. Congress was shocked by this and passed a Civil Rights Act. The Thirteenth Amendment had ended slavery but didn't mention citizenship or voting rights. The Civil Rights Act made former slaves into citizens with equal protection under the law. To make sure this law would last, Congress added it to the Constitution as the Fourteenth Amendment.

The Republicans in Congress then worried about African American men's right to vote, so they added the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution to protect voting rights. The Republicans thought these three amendments would permanently protect African American rights. African Americans began voting more and serving in government at all levels.

But by 1870, many of these Republicans had left Congress. Southern states ignored the amendments and passed Jim Crow laws and Black Codes that

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took away most African American rights. The Ku Klux Klan and similar groups used violence to terrorize and intimidate African Americans.

This violence and loss of rights continued for about 100 years, despite the constitutional amendments that were supposed to prevent it. In the 1960s, African Americans and their white supporters began protesting these unfair laws. When television showed the violent response to these peaceful protests, and leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. spoke out, the nation finally paid attention.

The three amendments passed during Reconstruction gave African Americans constitutional rights and led to progress, even though these rights were quickly taken away. The amendments stayed in the law books for a century, and Senator Charles Sumner called them "sleeping giants." These amendments finally became active again and now protect racial equality as originally intended. While racism still exists, the amendments have become Reconstruction's most important lasting achievement, eventually creating progress for African Americans.



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