



The Collapse of Reconstruction

MAIN IDEA

Southern opposition to Radical Reconstruction, along with economic problems in the North, ended Reconstruction.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The failure of Congress and the Supreme Court to protect the rights of African Americans during Reconstruction delayed blacks' achievement of full civil rights by over a century.

Terms & Names

- Ku Klux Klan (KKK)
- panic of 1873
- redemption
- Rutherford B. Hayes
- Samuel J. Tilden
- Compromise of 1877
- home rule

One American's Story

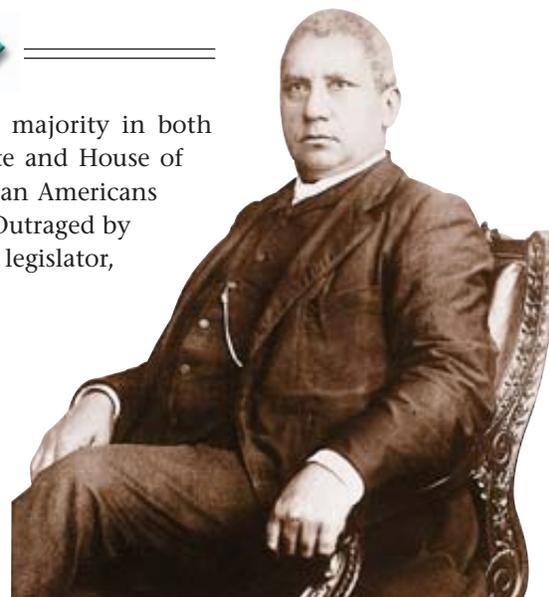
In 1868, white Georgia legislators, who were in the majority in both houses, expelled 27 black members of the state senate and House of Representatives. The new state constitution gave African Americans the right to vote, they argued, but not to hold office. Outraged by this expulsion, Henry M. Turner, an African-American legislator, addressed the Georgia House of Representatives.

A PERSONAL VOICE HENRY M. TURNER

“Whose Legislature is this? Is it a white man’s Legislature or is it a black man’s . . . ? . . . It is said that Congress never gave us the right to hold office. I want to know . . . if the Reconstruction measures did not base their action on the ground that no distinction should be made on account of race, color or previous condition! . . . We have built up your country. We have worked in your fields, and garnered your harvests, for two hundred and fifty years! Do we ask you for compensation? . . . We are willing to let the dead past bury its dead; but we ask you, now, for our RIGHTS.”

—quoted in *The Trouble They Seen: Black People Tell the Story of Reconstruction*

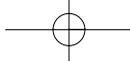
The expelled legislators petitioned the U.S. Congress and were eventually reinstated in office. But by the time Congress acted, more than a year later, the terms of Turner and his colleagues were almost at an end.



▲ Henry M. Turner became a leading proponent of African-American emigration to Africa.

Opposition to Reconstruction

White Southerners who took direct action against African-American participation in government were in the minority. Most white Southerners swallowed whatever resentment they felt over African Americans' change in status. However, some bitter Southern whites relied on violence to keep African Americans from participating in politics.



▲ Klan members—like this Mississippian photographed in 1871—wore costumes to conceal their identities and to appear more menacing.

KU KLUX KLAN Founded as a social club for Confederate veterans, the **Ku Klux Klan (KKK)** started in Tennessee in 1866. As membership in the group spread rapidly through the South, many of the new chapters turned into violent terrorist organizations. By 1868, the Klan existed in nearly every Southern state. Its overarching goal was to restore white supremacy. Its method was to prevent African Americans from exercising their political rights.

ANTI-BLACK VIOLENCE Abram Colby, who organized a branch of Georgia's Equal Rights Association and later served as a Republican member of the Georgia legislature, testified before Congress about Klan atrocities.

★ A PERSONAL VOICE ABRAM COLBY

“[The Klan] broke my door open, took me out of bed, took me to the woods and whipped me three hours or more and left me for dead. They said to me, ‘Do you think you will ever vote another damned radical ticket?’ . . . I supposed they would kill me anyhow. I said, ‘If there was an election tomorrow, I would vote the radical ticket.’ They set in and whipped me a thousand licks more, with sticks and straps that had buckles on the ends of them.”

—quoted in *Testimony Taken by the Joint Select Committee to Inquire into the Condition of Affairs in the Late Insurrectionary States*

Between 1868 and 1871, the Klan and other secret groups killed thousands of men, women, and children, and burned schools, churches, and property. While the vast majority of victims were African-American, whites who tried to help African Americans—whether by educating them, renting land to them, or buying their crops—were also in danger.

Another Klan objective was to turn the Republicans, who had established the Reconstruction governments, out of power. The North Carolina state senator John Stephens, a white Republican, answered warnings that his life was in danger by saying that some 3,000 African-American voters had supported him “at the risk of persecution and starvation” and that he would not abandon them. Stephens was assassinated in 1870.

While Klan members tried to conceal their identities when they struck, Southern Democrats openly used violence to intimidate Republicans before the 1875 state election in Mississippi. Democrats rioted and attacked Republican leaders and prominent African Americans. Their terrorist campaign frightened the African-American majority away from the polls, and white Democratic candidates swept the election. The Democrats used similar tactics to win the 1876 elections in Florida, South Carolina, and Louisiana. **A**

ECONOMIC PRESSURE The Klan and other secret groups tried to prevent African Americans from making economic, as well as political, progress. African Americans who owned their own land or who worked in occupations other than agriculture were subject to attacks and destruction of property.

In fact, economic necessity forced most former slaves—who had little money or training in other occupations—to work for whites as wage laborers or sharecroppers. Some white Southerners refused to hire or do business with African Americans who were revealed by election officials to have voted Republican. The fear of economic reprisals kept many former slaves from voting at all.

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Motives

A What were the goals of the KKK?



LEGISLATIVE RESPONSE To curtail Klan violence and Democratic intimidation, Congress passed a series of Enforcement Acts in 1870 and 1871. One act provided for the federal supervision of elections in Southern states. Another act gave the president the power to use federal troops in areas where the Klan was active. However, President Grant was not aggressive in his use of the power given to him by the Enforcement Acts, and in 1882, the Supreme Court ruled that the 1871 Enforcement Act was unconstitutional.

Although federal enforcement of anti-Klan legislation was limited, it did contribute to a decrease in the Klan's activities in the late 1870s. However, the reason for the reduction in Klan violence was the Klan's own success—by 1880, terrorist groups had managed to restore white supremacy throughout the South. The Klan no longer needed such organized activity to limit the political and civil rights of most African Americans. **B**

MAIN IDEA

Identifying Problems

B Why was the government weak in its ability to confront the Klan?

Vocabulary

amnesty: a pardon granted by a government, especially for political offenses

SHIFTS IN POLITICAL POWER By passing the Enforcement Acts, Congress seemed to shore up Republican power. But shortly after these acts went into effect, Congress passed legislation that severely weakened the Republican Party in the South.

With the Amnesty Act, passed in May 1872, Congress returned the right to vote and the right to hold federal and state offices—revoked by the Fourteenth Amendment—to about 150,000 former Confederates, who would almost certainly vote Democratic. In the same year Congress allowed the Freedmen's Bureau to expire, believing that it had fulfilled its purpose. As a result of these actions, Southern Democrats had an opportunity to shift the balance of political power in their favor.

Scandals and Money Crises Hurt Republicans

As Southern Republicans struggled to maintain their hold on Reconstruction governments, widespread political corruption in the federal government weakened their party. During the early 1870s, scandals plagued the Grant administration. These scandals diverted public attention away from conditions in the South.

FRAUD AND BRIBERY President Grant was considered an honest man. However, he had had no political experience before becoming president and found it difficult to believe that others might use him for their own political advantage. When making political appointments, he often selected friends and acquaintances rather than people of proven ability. Too frequently, Grant's appointees turned out to be dishonest.

Beginning in 1872, a series of long-simmering scandals associated with Grant's administration boiled over. First, the *New York Sun* exposed the Crédit Mobilier affair, in which a construction company had skimmed off large profits from a government railroad contract. This scandal involved several leading Republicans, including Grant's first vice-president, Schuyler Colfax.

REPUBLICAN UNITY SHATTERED A group of Republicans, angered by the corruption, called for honest, efficient government. They formed the Liberal Republican Party in 1872, hoping to oust Grant in that year's presidential election.



THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Although the United States focused largely on domestic problems during Reconstruction, the nation did have one significant dealing with a foreign power. In 1870, President Grant attempted to annex the Dominican Republic, one of two nations sharing the Caribbean island of Hispaniola (the other being Haiti).

This action aroused a storm of controversy. The plan's supporters believed that annexation would increase Caribbean trade and spread "the blessings of our free institutions." Opponents pointed out that the Dominican Republic was caught up in a civil war and felt that the United States should avoid involvement in the conflict. The Senate rejected the annexation treaty.



Analyzing Political Cartoons

SCANDAL IN THE GRANT ADMINISTRATION

Political cartoonists had a field day with Grant's troubles and often criticized the president's refusal to believe that his associates were dishonest. In this cartoon, President Grant pulls packets labeled with the names of various scandals out of a barrel. The caption—"I hope I get to the bottom soon"—suggests that the corruption in Grant's administration runs deep and that there may be more scandals to come.

SKILLBUILDER Analyzing Political Cartoons

1. What political scandals can you identify from the packets lying outside the barrel?
2. Why do you think the cartoonist portrayed Grant as having his head stuck in a barrel?

 SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R24.



U. S. Grant: "I hope I get to the bottom soon."

As the 1872 presidential election approached, the Liberal Republicans held a separate convention. They chose Horace Greeley, the editor of the *New York Tribune* and a vocal pre-Civil War abolitionist, as their candidate. He had supported some Radical Republican causes—abolition and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. However, he had broken with Radicals by calling for universal amnesty for Confederates and for an end to military rule in the South. Claiming that Reconstruction governments had achieved their purpose, he wanted former slaves to fend for themselves.

Believing that it would take a united effort to oust Grant, the Democrats also nominated Greeley. Nevertheless, Greeley lost the 1872 presidential election to Grant by a wide margin. "I was the worst beaten man that ever ran for that high office," Greeley said, "and I have been assailed so bitterly that I hardly know whether I was running for President or the penitentiary." Physically exhausted by his rigorous campaign, Greeley died a few weeks after the election—before the electoral college made his defeat official.

Although the Liberal Republicans did not win the White House, they did weaken the Radicals' hold over the Republican Party. The breakdown of Republican unity made it even harder for the Radicals to continue to impose their Reconstruction plan on the South.

CONTINUED SCANDAL Despite the rift in the Republican party that resulted from the scandals, corruption in Grant's administration continued. In 1875, the so-called Whiskey Ring was exposed. Internal-revenue collectors and other officials accepted bribes from whiskey distillers who wanted to avoid paying taxes on their product—a conspiracy that defrauded the federal government of millions of dollars. One of the 238 persons indicted in this scandal was Grant's private secretary, General Orville E. Babcock. Grant refused to believe that such a close associate was guilty and helped him escape conviction.

Finally, in 1876, an investigation revealed that Secretary of War William W. Belknap had accepted bribes from merchants who wanted to keep their profitable trading concessions in Indian territory. The House of Representatives impeached Belknap, who promptly resigned. The public also learned that the secretary of the navy had taken bribes from shipbuilders and the secretary of the interior had had shady dealings with land speculators. As the evidence mounted, there was increasing disgust with the blatant corruption in the Grant administration, and Grant did not seek reelection in 1876. 

MAIN IDEA

Summarizing

-  Give examples of corruption in the Grant administration.



Economic Turmoil

As if political scandals were not enough for the country to deal with, a wave of economic troubles hit the nation in 1873.

THE PANIC OF 1873 The economy had been expanding since the end of the Civil War, and investors became convinced that business profits would continue to increase indefinitely. Eager to take advantage of new business opportunities in the South, Northern and Southern investors borrowed increasing amounts of money and built new facilities as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, many of those who invested in these new businesses took on more debt than they could afford. A Philadelphia banker named Jay Cooke invested heavily in railroads. Not enough investors bought shares in Cooke's railroad lines to cover his ballooning construction costs, and he could not pay his debts. In September 1873, Cooke's banking firm, the nation's largest dealer in government securities, went bankrupt, setting off a series of financial failures known as the **panic of 1873**. Smaller banks closed, and the stock market temporarily collapsed. Within a year, 89 railroads went broke. By 1875, more than 18,000 companies had folded. The panic triggered a five-year economic depression—a period of reduced business activity and high unemployment—in which 3 million workers lost their jobs. **D**

CURRENCY DISPUTE The economic depression following the panic of 1873 also fueled a dispute over currency. This dispute had its roots in the Civil War. During the war, the federal government had begun to issue greenbacks, paper money that was not backed by equal value in gold. When the war ended, many financial experts advocated withdrawing the greenbacks and returning the nation completely to a currency backed by gold. This action would have reduced the number of dollars in circulation.

In contrast, Southern and Western farmers and manufacturers wanted the government to issue even more greenbacks. They believed that “easy money”—a large money supply—would help them pay off their debts.

In 1875, Congress passed the Specie Resumption Act, which promised to put the country back on the gold standard. This act sparked further debate over monetary policies. As the economy improved, beginning in 1878, the controversy died down. However, the passionate debate over the money question in the 1870s was one of many factors that drew the attention of voters and politicians away from Reconstruction.

Judicial and Popular Support Fades

In 1874, a Southern Democratic senator wrote, “*Radicalism* is dissolving—going to pieces.” Indeed, political scandals, economic problems, and the restoration of political rights to former Confederate Democrats seriously weakened the Radical Republicans. In addition, the Supreme Court began to undo some of the social and political changes that the Radicals had made.

This 1873 cartoon portrays the panic as a health officer, sweeping garbage out of Wall Street. The trash is labeled “rotten railways,” and “shaky banks,” among other things.



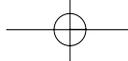
MAIN IDEA

Predicting Effects

D What effect do you think the panic of 1873 might have had on the Republican Party?

Background

See *gold standard* on page R41 in the Economics Handbook.



SUPREME COURT DECISIONS Although Congress had passed important laws to protect the political and civil rights of African Americans, the Supreme Court began to take away those same protections. During the 1870s, the Court issued a series of decisions that undermined both the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

In the *Slaughterhouse* cases of 1873, for example, the Court decided that the Fourteenth Amendment protected only the rights people had by virtue of their citizenship in the United States, such as the right of interstate travel and the right to federal protection when traveling on the high seas and abroad. The Court contended that most of Americans' basic civil rights were obtained through their citizenship in a state and that the amendment did not protect those rights.

Another setback for Reconstruction was *U.S. v. Cruikshank* in 1876, in which the Court ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment did not give the federal government the right to punish individual whites who oppressed blacks. The same year, in *U.S. v. Reese*, the Court ruled in favor of officials who had barred African Americans from voting, stating that the Fifteenth Amendment did not "confer the right of suffrage on anyone" but merely listed grounds on which states could not deny suffrage. By the late 1870s, the Supreme Court's restrictive rulings had narrowed the scope of these amendments so much that the federal government no longer had much power to protect the rights of African Americans. Although the Supreme Court would later overturn them, these decisions impeded African Americans' efforts to gain equality for years to come. **E**

NORTHERN SUPPORT FADES As the Supreme Court rejected Reconstruction policies in the 1870s, Northern voters grew indifferent to events in the South. Weary of the "Negro question" and sick of "carpetbag government," many Northern voters shifted their attention to such national concerns as the panic of 1873 and the corruption in Grant's administration. In addition, a desire for reconciliation between the regions spread through the North. Although political violence continued in the South and African Americans were denied civil and political rights, the tide of public opinion in the North began to turn against Reconstruction policies.

As both judicial and public support decreased, Republicans began to back away from their commitment to Reconstruction. The impassioned Radicals who had led the fight for congressional Reconstruction, Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens, were dead. Business interests diverted the attention of both moderates and Radicals, and scalawags and carpetbaggers deserted the Republican Party. Moreover, Republicans gradually came to believe that government could not impose the moral and social changes needed for former slaves to make progress in the South. As a result, Republicans slowly retreated from the policies of Reconstruction. **F**

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Effects

E How did the *Slaughterhouse* and *Reese* decisions affect African Americans' pursuit of civil rights?

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Issues

F Why did Northern attitudes toward Reconstruction change?

Civil Rights Setbacks in the Supreme Court		
Date	Decision(s)	Ruling
1873	<i>Slaughterhouse</i> cases	Most civil rights were ruled to be state, rather than federal, rights and therefore unprotected by the Fourteenth Amendment.
1876	<i>U.S. v. Cruikshank</i>	The Fourteenth Amendment was ruled not to grant the federal government power to punish whites who oppressed blacks.
1876	<i>U.S. v. Reese</i>	The Fifteenth Amendment was determined not to grant voting rights to anyone, but rather to restrict types of voter discrimination.



Democrats “Redeem” the South

Between 1869 and 1875, Democrats recaptured the state governments of Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. As a result of **redemption**—as the Democrats called their return to power in the South—and the national election of 1876, congressional Reconstruction came to an end.

ELECTION OF 1876 In 1876, the Republicans decided not to run the scandal-plagued Grant for a third term. Instead, they chose the stodgy governor of Ohio, **Rutherford B. Hayes**. Smelling victory, the Democrats put up one of their ablest leaders, Governor **Samuel J. Tilden** of New York. Tilden had helped clean up the graft that had flourished in New York City under the corrupt Tweed Ring.

As most people had expected, Tilden won the popular vote. However, he fell one short of the number of electoral votes needed to win, and 20 electoral votes were disputed. Congress appointed a commission to deal with the problem. The commission, which had a Republican majority, gave the election to the Republican, Hayes, even though he had received a minority of the popular vote.

For the first time in U.S. history, a candidate who had lost the popular election became president. How did it happen? In the oldest tradition of politics, party leaders made a deal. Although Republicans controlled the electoral commission, Democrats controlled the House of Representatives, which had to approve the election results. Southern Democrats were willing to accept Hayes if they could get something in return.

The price they demanded was, first of all, the withdrawal of federal troops from Louisiana and South Carolina—two of the three Southern states that Republicans still governed. Second, the Democrats wanted federal money to build a railroad from Texas to the West Coast and to improve Southern rivers, harbors, and bridges. Third, they wanted Hayes to appoint a conservative Southerner to the cabinet. In the **Compromise of 1877**, Republican leaders agreed to these demands, and Hayes was peacefully inaugurated. The acceptance of this compromise meant the end of Reconstruction in the South.

HOME RULE IN THE SOUTH After the 1876 election, Republicans and Democrats disputed the results in Louisiana’s and South Carolina’s elections, and both states ended up with two rival state governments! When Hayes later removed the federal troops in those states, the Democrats took over. Florida also had questionable election returns, but the state supreme court ruled in favor of the Democrats. As a result, Republicans no longer controlled the government of any Southern state.

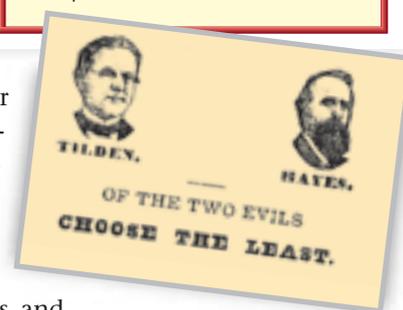
The Democrats had achieved their long-desired goal of **home rule**—the ability to run state governments without federal intervention. These so-called Redeemers set out to rescue the South from what they viewed as a decade of mismanagement by Northerners, Republicans, and African Americans. They passed laws that restricted the rights of African Americans, wiped out social programs, slashed taxes, and dismantled public schools. **G**

HISTORICAL SPOTLIGHT

THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE AND THE 1876 ELECTION

The nation was in such turmoil over the disputed 1876 election that people talked of another civil war. Of the 20 contested electoral votes, 19 came from Florida, South Carolina, and Louisiana. Republican officials in those states threw out election returns from counties where violence kept Republican voters from the polls. The Democrats refused to accept the altered returns, and each party sent its own set of results to Washington, D.C.

Fortunately for the country, the warlike slogans proved to be just political rhetoric. After a joint session of Congress met to witness the counting of electoral votes, which did not settle the dispute, the parties struck a deal—the Compromise of 1877.

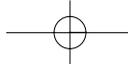


▲ An advertisement expresses ambivalence about the two candidates in the 1876 election.

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Causes

G How did the Compromise of 1877 bring about the end of Reconstruction?



LEGACY OF RECONSTRUCTION Despite the efforts of African Americans and many Radical Republicans, Reconstruction ended without much real progress in the battle against discrimination. Charles Harris, an African-American Union Army veteran and former Alabama legislator, expressed his frustration in an 1877 letter.

A PERSONAL VOICE CHARLES HARRIS

“We obey laws; others make them. We support state educational institutions, whose doors are virtually closed against us. We support asylums and hospitals, and our sick, deaf, dumb, or blind are met at the doors by . . . unjust discriminations. . . . From these and many other oppressions . . . our people long to be free.”

—quoted in American Colonization Society Papers in the *Congressional Record*

Although Radical Republicans wanted to help the former slaves, they made several serious mistakes. First, they assumed that extending certain civil rights to freed persons would enable them to protect themselves through participation in government, especially in lawmaking. However, Congress did not adequately protect those rights, and the Supreme Court undermined them. Second, the Radicals balked at distributing land to former slaves, which prevented them from becoming

POINT

“Reconstruction was a failure.”

Federal and state governments failed to secure the rights guaranteed to former slaves by constitutional amendments.

- State Republican parties could not preserve black-white voter coalitions that would have enabled them to stay in power and continue political reform.
- Radical Republican governments were unable or unwilling to enact land reform or to provide former slaves with the economic resources needed to break the cycle of poverty.
- Racial bias was a national, not a regional, problem. After the Panic of 1873, Northerners were more concerned with economic problems than with the problems of former slaves.
- The Supreme Court undermined the power of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

At the end of Reconstruction, former slaves found themselves once again in a subordinate position in society. The historian Eric Foner concludes, “Whether measured by the dreams inspired by emancipation or the more limited goals of securing blacks’ rights as citizens. . . . Reconstruction can only be judged a failure.”

COUNTERPOINT

“Reconstruction was a success.”

Reconstruction was an attempt to create a social and political revolution despite economic collapse and the opposition of much of the white South. Under these conditions its accomplishments were extraordinary.

- African Americans only a few years removed from slavery participated at all levels of government.
- State governments had some success in solving social problems; for example, they funded public school systems open to all citizens.
- African Americans established institutions that had been denied them during slavery: schools, churches, and families.
- The breakup of the plantation system led to some redistribution of land.
- Congress passed the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which helped African Americans to attain full civil rights in the 20th century.

THINKING CRITICALLY

1. CONNECT TO HISTORY **Evaluating** What are the two major arguments each side makes as to whether Reconstruction was a success or failure? Which perspective do you agree with, and why?

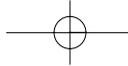


SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R16.

2. CONNECT TO TODAY **Analyzing Issues** One historian has referred to Reconstruction as “America’s Unfinished Revolution.” Is the U.S. still dealing with issues left over from that period? Research Reconstruction’s legacy using newspapers, magazines, or other sources. Make a short persuasive presentation in class.

W. E. B. Du Bois summarized the achievements of the period this way: “[I]t was Negro loyalty and the Negro vote alone that restored the South to the Union; established the new democracy, both for white and black.”

Despite the loss of ground that followed Reconstruction, African Americans succeeded in carving out a measure of independence within Southern society.



economically independent of the landowning planter class. Finally, the Radicals did not fully realize the extent to which deep-seated racism in society would weaken the changes that Congress had tried to make.

But congressional Reconstruction was not a complete failure. The Thirteenth Amendment permanently abolished slavery in all of the states. Furthermore, Radical Republicans did succeed in passing the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, and although the Supreme Court narrowed the interpretation of the amendments during the 1870s, they remained part of the Constitution. In the 20th century, the amendments provided the necessary constitutional foundation for important civil rights legislation.

During Reconstruction, African Americans had founded many black colleges and volunteer organizations, and the percentage of literate African Americans had gradually increased. The memory of this time of expanding opportunities lived on in the African-American community and inspired the fight to regain civil rights.



◀ Medical students at Howard University, an African-American institution founded in 1867



ASSESSMENT

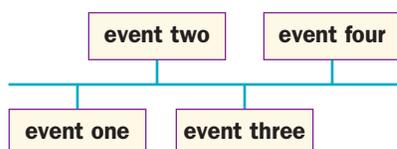
1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Ku Klux Klan (KKK)
- redemption
- Samuel J. Tilden
- home rule
- panic of 1873
- Rutherford B. Hayes
- Compromise of 1877

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES

Re-create the time line below. Fill in the major events that ended Reconstruction.



Which event do you think was most significant and why?

CRITICAL THINKING

3. ANALYZING EFFECTS

What were the positive and negative effects of Reconstruction?

4. EVALUATING LEADERSHIP

During Reconstruction, was the presidency weak or strong? Support your answer with details from the text.

5. EVALUATING DECISIONS

Do you think the political deal to settle the election of 1876 was an appropriate solution? Explain why or why not. **Think About:**

- the causes of the conflict over the election
- other possible solutions to the controversy
- the impact of the settlement