

In 1872, anti-Grant Republicans bolted and launched the Liberal Party. To clean up the corruption, Liberals proposed ending the spoils system, by which victorious parties rewarded loyal workers with public office, and replacing it with a nonpartisan civil service commission that would oversee competitive examinations for appointment to office. Liberals also demanded that the federal government remove its troops from the South and restore “home rule” (southern white control). Democrats liked the Liberals’ southern policy and endorsed the Liberal presidential candidate, Horace Greeley, the longtime editor of the *New York Tribune*. The nation, however, still felt enormous affection for the man who had saved the Union and reelected Grant with 56 percent of the popular vote.

## **Northern Resolve Withers**

Although Grant genuinely wanted to protect blacks’ civil and political rights, he understood that most Northerners had grown weary of reconstruction. Citizens wanted to shift their attention to other issues, especially after the nation slipped into a devastating economic depression in 1873. More than eighteen thousand businesses collapsed, leaving more than a million workers on the streets. Northern businessmen wanted to invest in the South but believed that repeated federal intrusion was itself a major cause of instability in the region. Republican leaders began to question the wisdom of

their party's alliance with the South's lower classes — its small farmers and sharecroppers. One member of Grant's administration proposed allying with the "thinking and influential native southerners ... the intelligent, well-to-do, and controlling class."

Congress, too, wanted to leave reconstruction behind, but southern Republicans made that difficult. When the South's Republicans begged for federal protection from increasing Klan violence, Congress enacted three laws in 1870 and 1871 that were intended to break the back of white terrorism. The severest of the three, the Ku Klux Klan Act (1871), made interference with voting rights a felony. Federal marshals arrested thousands of Klansmen and came close to destroying the Klan, but they did not end terrorism against blacks. Congress also passed the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which boldly outlawed racial discrimination in transportation, public accommodations, and juries. Federal authorities never enforced the law aggressively, however, and segregation remained the rule throughout the South.

By the early 1870s, the Republican Party had lost its leading champions of African American rights to death or defeat at the polls. Other Republicans concluded that the quest for black equality was mistaken or hopelessly naive. In May 1872, Congress restored the right of officeholding to all but three hundred ex-rebels. Many Republicans had come to

believe that traditional white leaders offered the best hope for honesty, order, and prosperity in the South.

Underlying the North's abandonment of reconstruction was unyielding racial prejudice. Northerners had learned to accept black freedom during the war, but deep-seated prejudice prevented many from accepting black equality. Even the actions they took on behalf of blacks often served partisan political advantage. Northerners generally supported Indiana senator Thomas A. Hendricks's harsh declaration that "this is a white man's Government, made by the white man for the white man."

The U.S. Supreme Court also did its part to undermine reconstruction. The Court issued a series of decisions that significantly weakened the federal government's ability to protect black Southerners. In the *Slaughterhouse* cases (1873), the Court distinguished between national and state citizenship and ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment protected only those rights that stemmed from the federal government, such as voting in federal elections and interstate travel. Since the Court decided that most rights derived from the states, it sharply curtailed the federal government's authority to defend black citizens. Even more devastating, the *United States v. Cruikshank* ruling (1876) said that the reconstruction amendments gave Congress the power to legislate against discrimination only by states, not

by individuals. The “suppression of ordinary crime,” such as assault, remained a state responsibility. The Supreme Court did not declare reconstruction unconstitutional but eroded its legal foundation.

The mood of the North found political expression in the election of 1874, when for the first time in eighteen years the Democrats gained control of the House of Representatives. As one Republican observed, the people had grown tired of the “negro question, with all its complications, and the reconstruction of Southern States, with all its interminable embroilments.” Rather than defend reconstruction from its southern enemies, Northerners steadily backed away from the challenge. By the early 1870s, southern Republicans faced the forces of southern racism largely on their own.

## **White Supremacy Triumphs**

To most white Southerners, Reconstruction meant intolerable insults: Black militiamen patrolled town streets, black laborers negotiated contracts with former masters, black maids stood up to former mistresses, black voters cast ballots, and black legislators such as James T. Rapier helped enact laws. Whites fought back by extolling the “great Confederate cause,” or Lost Cause. They celebrated their soldiers, “the noblest band of men who ever fought,” and

made an idol of Robert E. Lee, the embodiment of the southern gentleman.

But the most important way white Southerners responded to reconstruction was their assault on Republican governments in the South. These biracial governments attracted more hatred than did any other political regimes in American history. The northern retreat from reconstruction permitted southern Democrats to set things right. Taking the name **Redeemers**, Democrats in the South promised to replace “bayonet rule” (a few federal troops continued to be stationed in the South) with “home rule.” They promised that honest, thrifty Democrats would supplant corrupt tax-and-spend Republicans. Above all, Redeemers swore to save southern civilization from a descent into “African barbarism.” As one man put it, “We must render this either a white man’s government, or convert the land into a Negro man’s cemetery.”

Southern Democrats adopted a multipronged strategy to overthrow Republican governments. First, they sought to polarize the parties around race. They went about gathering all the South’s white voters into the Democratic Party, leaving the Republicans to depend on blacks, who made up a minority of the population in almost every southern state. To dislodge whites from the Republican Party, Democrats fanned the flames of racism. A South Carolina Democrat

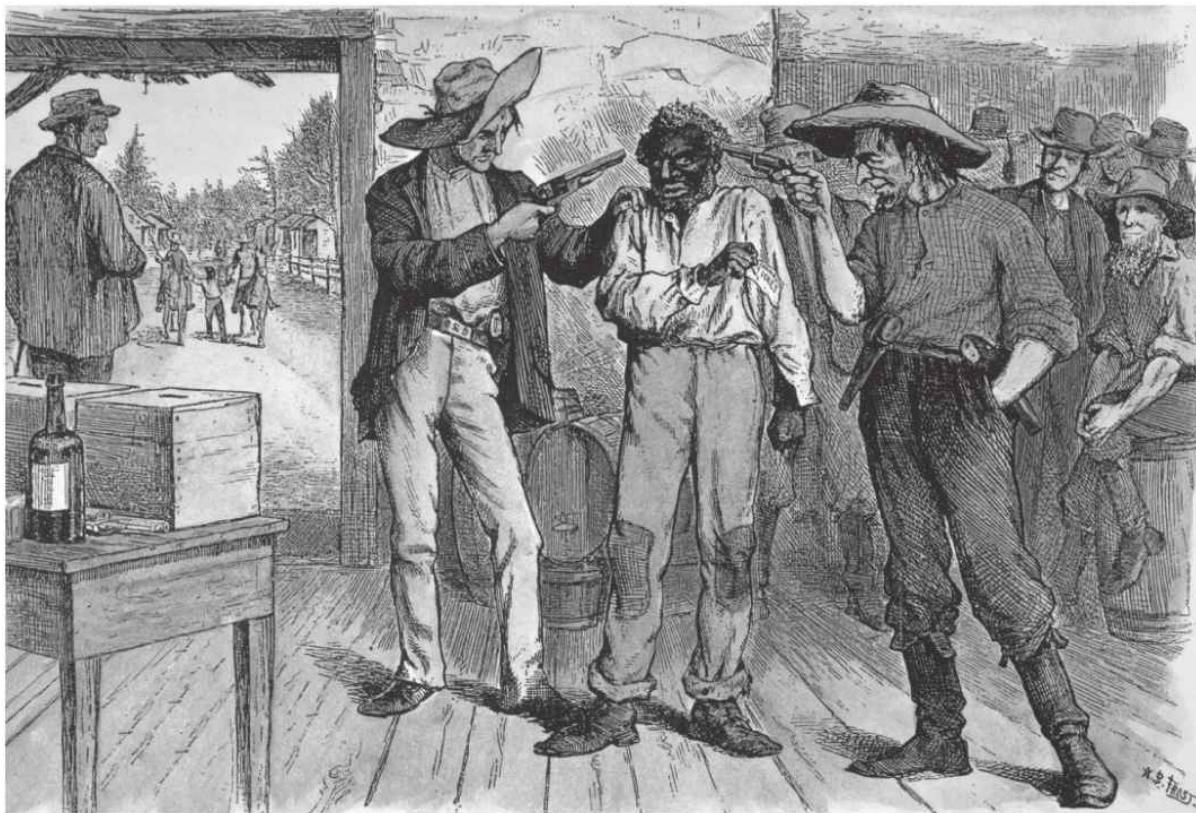
crowed that his party appealed to the “proud Caucasian race, whose sovereignty on earth God has proclaimed.”

Democrats also exploited the severe economic plight of small white farmers by blaming it on Republicans.

Government spending soared during Reconstruction, and small farmers saw their tax burden skyrocket. “This is tax time,” a South Carolinian reported. “They are so high & so little money to pay with” that farmers were “selling every egg and chicken they can get.” In 1871, Mississippi reported that one-seventh of the state’s land — 3.3 million acres — had been forfeited for nonpayment of taxes. The small farmers’ economic distress had a racial dimension. Because few freedmen succeeded in acquiring land, they rarely paid taxes. In Georgia in 1874, blacks made up 45 percent of the population but paid only 2 percent of the taxes. From the perspective of a small white farmer, Republican rule meant that he was not only paying more taxes but paying them to aid blacks.

If racial pride and financial hardship proved insufficient to drive yeomen from the Republican Party, Democrats turned to terrorism. “Night riders” targeted white Republicans as well as blacks for murder and assassination. Whether white or black, a “dead Radical is very harmless,” South Carolina Democratic leader Martin Gary told his followers.

Still, the primary victims of white violence were black Republicans. Violence escalated to an unprecedented ferocity on Easter Sunday in 1873 in tiny Colfax, Louisiana. When Democrats turned to fraud to win a local election, black Republicans refused to accept the result and occupied the courthouse. After three weeks, 165 white men attacked and set the courthouse on fire. When the blacks tried to surrender, the attackers murdered them. At least 81 black men were slaughtered that day. Although the federal government indicted the white killers, the Supreme Court ruled that it did not have the right to prosecute. And since local whites would not prosecute neighbors who killed blacks, the defendants in the Colfax massacre went free.



The Granger Collection, New York.

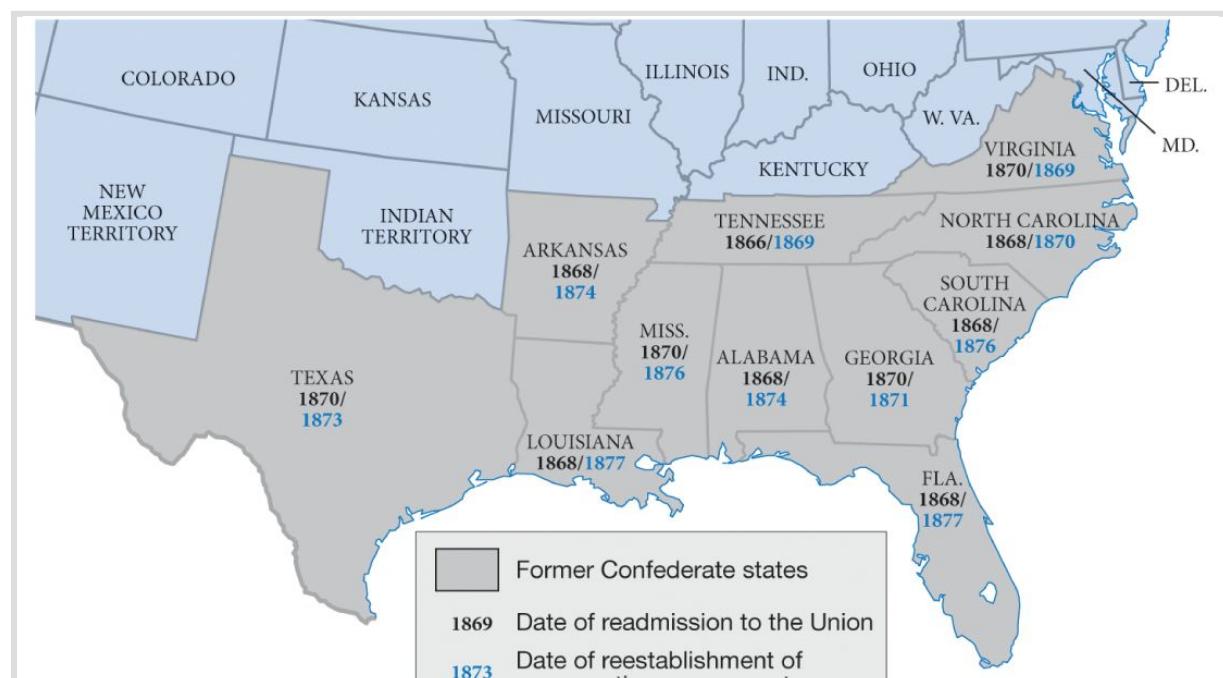
**"Of Course He Wants to Vote the Democratic Ticket"** This Republican cartoon from the October 21, 1876, issue of *Harper's Weekly* comments sarcastically on the possibility of honest elections in the South. The caption reads: "You're free as air, ain't you? Say you are or I'll blow yer black head off." The cartoon demonstrates not only some Northerners' concern that violence would deliver the election to the Democrats but also the perception that white Southerners were crude, drunken, ignorant brutes.

#### Description

Two ballot boxes are on a table in front of them with a liquor bottle beside them. The black man is holding a Democratic ticket in his hand. White men look on from behind them.

Even before adopting the all-out white supremacist tactics of the 1870s, Democrats had taken control of the

governments of Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina. The new campaign brought fresh gains. The Redeemers retook Georgia in 1871, Texas in 1873, and Arkansas and Alabama in 1874. As the state election approached in Mississippi in 1876, the Republican governor appealed to Washington for federal troops to control the violence, only to hear from the attorney general that the “whole public are tired of these annual autumnal outbreaks in the South.” Abandoned, Mississippi Republicans succumbed to the Democratic onslaught in the fall elections. By 1876, only three Republican state governments survived in the South ([\*\*Map 16.3\*\*](#)).



Roark et al., *The American Promise*, 8e, Value Edition © 2020 Bedford/St. Martin's

**MAP 16.3 The Reconstruction of the South**

Myth has it that Republican rule of the former Confederacy was not only harsh but long. In most states, however, conservative southern whites stormed back into power in months or just a few years. By the election of 1876, Republican governments could be found in only three states, and they soon fell.

### **Description**

"The map mentions the date of readmission to the union and the date of reestablishment of conservative government in the eleven states.

Former confederate states: Texas; Arkansas; Louisiana; Mississippi; Alabama; Georgia; Florida; South Carolina; North Carolina; Virginia; and Tennessee.

Date of readmission to the Union: Texas was readmitted in 1870; Arkansas in 1868; Louisiana in 1868; Mississippi in 1870; Alabama in 1868; Georgia in 1870; Florida in 1868; South Carolina in 1868; North Carolina in 1868; Virginia in 1870; and Tennessee in 1866.

Date of reestablishment of conservative government: Texas re-established its government in 1873; Arkansas in 1874; Louisiana in 1877; Mississippi in 1876; Alabama in 1874; Georgia in 1871; Florida in 1877; South Carolina in 1876; North Carolina in 1870; Virginia in 1869; and Tennessee in 1869."

## **An Election and a Compromise**

The year 1876 witnessed one of the most chaotic elections in American history. The election took place in November, but not until March 2 of the following year did the nation know who would be inaugurated president on March 4.

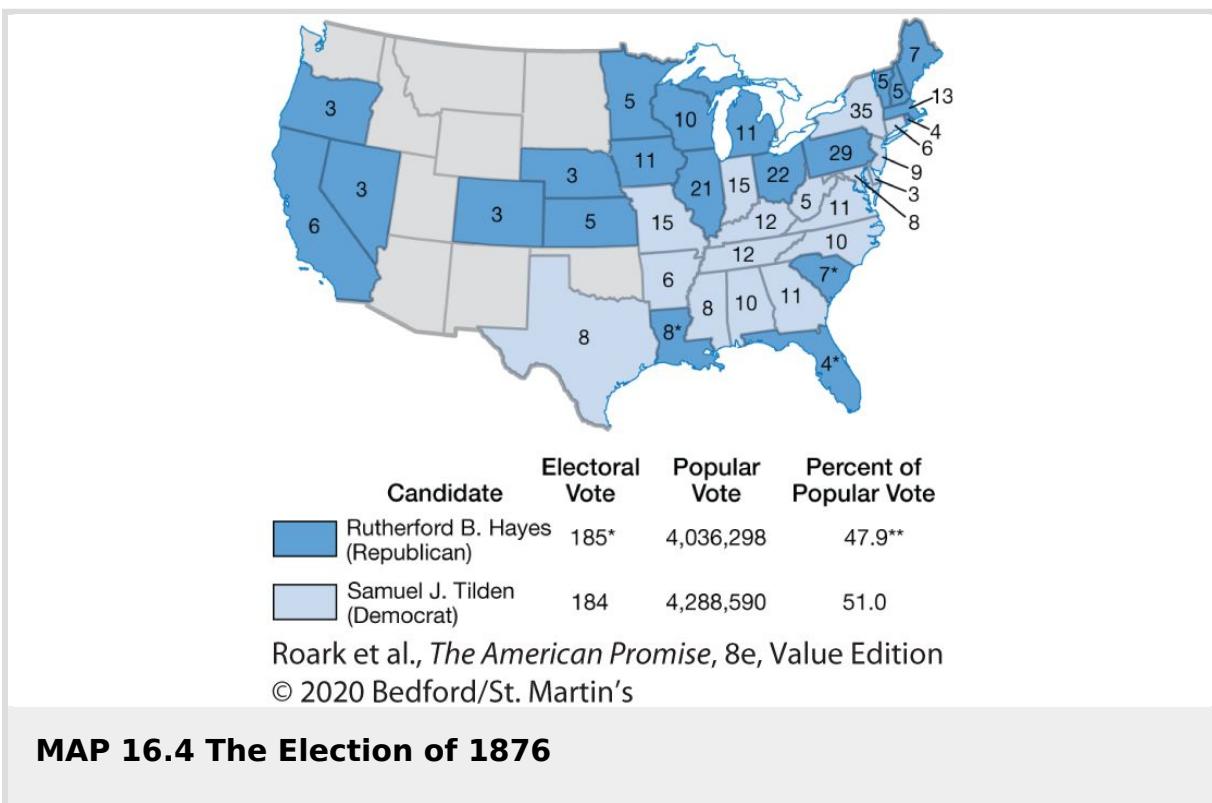
Sixteen years after Lincoln's election, Americans feared that a presidential election would again precipitate civil war.

The Democrats nominated New York's governor, Samuel J. Tilden, who targeted the corruption of the Grant administration and the "despotism" of Republican reconstruction. The Republicans put forward Rutherford B. Hayes, governor of Ohio. Privately, Hayes considered "bayonet rule" a mistake but concluded that waving the bloody shirt remained the Republicans' best political strategy.

On election day, Tilden tallied 4,288,590 votes to Hayes's 4,036,298. But in the all-important electoral college, Tilden fell one vote short of the majority required for victory. The electoral votes of three states — South Carolina, Louisiana, and Florida, the only remaining Republican governments in the South — remained in doubt because both Republicans and Democrats in those states claimed victory. To win, Tilden needed only one of the nineteen contested votes. Hayes had to have all of them.

Congress had to decide who had actually won the elections in the three southern states and thus who would be president. The Constitution provided no guidance. Democrats controlled the House, and Republicans controlled the Senate. Congress created a special electoral

commission to arbitrate the disputed returns. All of the commissioners voted their party affiliation, giving every state to the Republican Hayes and putting him over the top in electoral votes ([Map 16.4](#)).



#### MAP 16.4 The Election of 1876

##### Description

"The map shows that Samuel J. Tilden (Democrat) lost the electoral vote but won the popular vote by margin as opposed to Rutherford B. Hayes (Republican) in the Presidential elections held in America in 1876.

Rutherford B. Hayes (Republican) won 185 electoral votes in total. They included: 7 were in Maine; 5 votes in New Hampshire; 5 votes in Vermont; 13 votes in Massachusetts; 29 votes in Pennsylvania; 22 votes in Ohio; 7 votes in South Carolina; 4 votes in Florida; 8 votes in Louisiana (in South Carolina, Florida and Louisiana 19 votes were disputed); 21 votes in Illinois; 11 votes in Michigan; 10 votes in

Wisconsin; 5 votes in Minnesota; 11 votes in Iowa; 3 votes in Nebraska; 5 votes in Kansas; 3 votes in Colorado; 6 votes in California; 3 votes in Oregon; and 3 votes in Nevada.

Samuel J. Tilden (Democrat) won 184 votes in total. These were: 35 votes in New York; 4 votes in Rhode Island; 6 votes in Connecticut; 9 votes in New Jersey; 3 votes in Delaware; 8 votes in Maryland; 5 votes in West Virginia; 11 votes in Virginia; 10 votes in North Carolina; 8 votes in Mississippi; 10 votes in Alabama; 11 votes in Georgia; 12 votes in Tennessee; 12 votes in Kentucky; 15 votes in Indiana; 8 votes in Texas; 15 votes in Missouri; and 6 votes in Arkansas.

Rutherford got 4,036,298 popular votes, which is 49.7 percent of the total popular votes as opposed to 4,288,590 popular votes, 51 percent for Samuel."

Some outraged Democrats vowed to resist Hayes's victory. Rumors flew of an impending coup and renewed civil war. But the impasse was broken when negotiations behind the scenes resulted in an informal understanding known as the **Compromise of 1877**. In exchange for a Democratic promise not to block Hayes's inauguration and to deal fairly with the freedmen, Hayes vowed to refrain from using the army to uphold the remaining Republican regimes in the South and to provide the South with substantial federal subsidies for railroads.

Stubborn Tilden supporters bemoaned the "stolen election" and damned "His Fraudulency," Rutherford B. Hayes. Old-guard Radicals such as William Lloyd Garrison denounced

Hayes's bargain as a "policy of compromise, of credulity, of weakness, of subserviency, of surrender." But the nation as a whole celebrated, for the country had weathered a grave crisis. The last three Republican state governments in the South fell quickly once Hayes withdrew the U.S. Army. Reconstruction came to an end.

**REVIEW**

How did the Supreme Court undermine Reconstruction?



# **Conclusion: Was Reconstruction “a revolution but half accomplished”?**

In 1865, when General Carl Schurz visited the South, he discovered, he said, “a revolution but half accomplished.” White Southerners resisted the passage from slavery to free labor, from white racial despotism to equal justice, and from white political monopoly to biracial democracy. The old elite wanted to get “things back as near to slavery as possible,” Schurz reported, while African Americans such as James T. Rapier and some whites were eager to exploit the revolutionary implications of defeat and emancipation.

Although the northern-dominated Republican Congress refused to provide for blacks’ economic welfare, it employed constitutional amendments to require ex-Confederates to accept legal equality and share political power with black men. Congress was not willing to extend such power to women, however. Conservative southern whites fought ferociously to recover their power and privilege. When Democrats regained control of politics, whites used both state power and private violence to wipe out many of the gains of Reconstruction, leading one observer to conclude

that the North had won the war but the South had won the peace.

The Redeemer counterrevolution, however, did not mean a return to slavery. Northern victory in the Civil War ensured that ex-slaves no longer faced the auction block and could send their children to school, worship in their own churches, and work independently on their own rented farms.

Sharecropping, with all its hardships, provided more autonomy and economic welfare than bondage had. It was limited freedom, to be sure, but it was not slavery.

The Civil War and emancipation set in motion the most profound upheaval in the nation's history. War destroyed the largest slave society in the New World. The world of masters and slaves gave way to that of landlords and sharecroppers. Washington increased its role in national affairs, and the victorious North set the nation's compass toward the expansion of industrial capitalism and the final conquest of the West.

Despite massive changes, however, the Civil War remained only a "half accomplished" revolution. By not fulfilling the promises, the nation seemed to hold out to black Americans at war's end, Reconstruction represents a tragedy of enormous proportions. The failure to protect blacks and guarantee their rights had enduring consequences. It was

the failure of the first reconstruction that made the modern civil rights movement necessary.