Steve Yeh 11/14/12

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General William Tecumseh Sherman once said,”War is cruelty. There is no use trying to reform it. The crueler it is, the sooner it will be over.” He said this during the Civil War, which brought total annihilation of the South due to the usage of total war. At least 618,000 Americans died during the four years of war. It was sure that the years after the Civil War would be used to rebuild America. This time period was called Reconstruction. There were many discrepancies between the Radical Republican’s interpretation of Reconstruction (which was harsher and stricter) and the Democrat’s interpretation (which was more lenient). The Radical Republicans from the North, lead by Thaddeus Stevens, introduced the Reconstruction Act which divided the South into five military districts monitored by the federal government and supported the 13th and 14th Amendments which abolished slavery and extended citizen’s rights such as guaranteeing “equal protection of the laws” and protecting a person’s “life, liberty, or property, without due process of the law.” This later was called the Radical Reconstruction. The 15th Amendment was also passed during this time period which extended suffrage to freedmen along with white males. But, many freedmen were deprived of suffrage due to literacy tests and poll taxes because the South did not want to let freedmen become “equal” with the whites in government. Reconstruction ended in 1876 due to the fact that Rutherford B. Hayes had been elected President and had clandestinely vowed to end Reconstruction. Overall, I believe Reconstruction was a failure because it’s only accomplishment was abolishing slavery. Even the only success brought hardships. Freedmen were being legally murdered in the South because of the KKK and were stuck in the cycle of poverty because they had to be sharecroppers or risk becoming a slave as punishment for not being a sharecropper.

After the Civil War ended in 1865, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments were passed to give freedmen the rights of a United States citizen (which weren’t reinforced until almost a century later). The first was the 13th Amendment, passed by Congress in the same year the Civil War ended. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery and involuntary servitude (Doc.1). Before the Civil War, plantation owners enslaved Africans to work on the farms for the cotton production which was immense in the South’s bucolic economy. After the 13th Amendment was passed, Congress immediately set up the Freedmen’s Bureau, a government agency that helped freedmen with food, clothing and public education. This was exactly what abolitionists wanted. Abolitionists had been combating slavery all throughout the Civil War, which started in 1861 and ended in 1865. The second amendment passed during the Reconstruction era was the 14th Amendment. In the 14th Amendment, it states: “…*nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of the law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”*(Doc.2). The 14th Amendment denied the action of states taking away people’s rights and that the laws protect everyone, not just one ethnic group (Doc.2), which was persistently violated by the South. The “due process” and “equal protection” clauses helped formerly enslaved persons, freedmen, restore their full rights. Also, Congress passed the Reconstruction Act in 1876 which threw out the state governments that refused to endorse the 14th Amendment. The last amendment passed was the 15th Amendment. This amendment affirmed that all citizens shall not be denied suffrage because of their ethnicity, color, or previous state of servitude (Doc.3). Afterwards, after gaining their right to vote, nearly all African Americans voted for the Republicans, who passed the amendments in Congress. Therefore, Republicans remained in power in Congress during Reconstruction. African Americans became equal in power with the whites in government by becoming enfranchised or even becoming government officials such as the first black senator, Hiram Revels. Thus, African Americans finally had a sense of equality with whites.

Though African Americans became protected by the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, the South came up with new techniques to keep African Americans from exercising their rights. One method was the violence and intimidation tactics used by the White League and the Ku Klux Klan (Doc.6). The KKK used violence and intimation tactics such as a public lynching (legal murders), burning of Freedmen Schools, burning of crosses and racial slurs to keep the freedmen from voting. By this time, there were also laws in the South called black codes that cruelly limited African Americans’ rights. The Mississippi Vagrant Act passed in 1865 stated: “*All freedmen, free Negroes , and mulattoes…found with no lawful employment or business, or found unlawfully assembling themselves…shall be deemed vagrants, and on conviction thereof shall be fined… and imprisoned.*” Some black codes even made it unlawful for a black to not be a sharecropper. A sharecropper worked on a landowner’s land and used the landowner’s credit to buy supplies, clothing, food etc. (Doc.5). A person being a sharecropper would almost always become stuck in the cycle of poverty because that person would almost never have enough money from the crops grown to pay off the debt owed to the landowner (Doc.5). Consequently, the person would have to promise a greater crop the next year (Doc.5). The Southern state governments also placed poll taxes, literacy tests, property tests and the Grandfather clause to make sure that there were many obstacles in the way for an African American who wanted to vote (Doc.7). Almost all Southern states used at least one method of a voting restriction specifically used against black voters (Doc.7 Table). As a result, hardly any African Americans could vote. President Rutherford B. Hayes, in 1876, ended Reconstruction. In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that segregation would be legal if the facilities segregated would be equally funded and cared for which was almost never the case in the South. On one hand, many African Americans felt that this was “worse than slavery” with all the restrictions, violations of the Reconstruction Amendments, violence and limitations. On the other hand, the South had succeeded in destroying African Americans’ lives.

I believe that Reconstruction was a failure. Almost all of the successes achieved were countered by the South (15th Amendment, KKK/Voting Restrictions). It took 95 years to finally cleanup the Reconstruction. The Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s was, I believe, the true success. Everything that the South did was undone by the Civil Rights Movement (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, *Brown v. Board of Education*). The rights given to the freedmen in Reconstruction were finally acknowledged by President Lyndon B. Johnson in his “The American Promise” in 1965 (Doc.8). President Johnson stated that his Voting Rights Bill of 1965 would prohibit restrictions to voting in all elections, open all polling places to all people on no account of the color of their skin and extend the rights of citizenship to every citizen of this land (Doc.8). The first black president, Barack Obama, was elected in 2008 and was elected another full term in 2012, 136 years after the end of Reconstruction. In the final analysis, African Americans finally acquired their full citizenship rights but at a price of a century of segregation and limitations due to the fact that, in my opinion, Reconstruction had failed.