

To What Extent were the rights and interests of American Negroes safeguarded in the period 1865-1890?

At the close of the war more attention was given to the reconstruction of Southern institutions than to the elevation of the ex-slave. While a handful of the Radical Republicans, such as Sumner and Stevens, were aware that slavery had not prepared the ex-slave for participation in a free competitive society, most liberals assumed that the termination of slavery meant the end of their problems. They believed that blacks could immediately enter into community life on an equal footing with other citizens. Any suggestion that the ex-slave needed help to get started drew considerable resentment and hostility from liberals and conservatives alike. With the abolition of the peculiar institution, the anti-slavery societies considered their work finished. Frederick Douglass, however, complained that the slaves were sent out into the world empty-handed. In fact, both the war and emancipation had intensified racial hostility. The ex-slave had not yet been granted his civil rights. At the same time, he was no longer covered by property rights. Therefore he was even more vulnerable to physical intimidation than before.

After Lincoln's assassination, Andrew Johnson further accelerated the pace of reconciliation. Granting personal pardons by the thousands, he initiated a plan for restoration which was even more lenient. Southern states resumed home rule, and, in the Federal election of 1866, they elected scores of Confederate officials to Congress. At the same time other Confederate officials were elected to other local posts throughout the South. One of the most urgent tasks taken up by these new home-rule governments was the determination and definition of the status of the ex-slave. State after state passed black codes which bore an amazing resemblance to those of slavery days. Blacks were not allowed to testify in court against whites. If they quit their jobs, they could be imprisoned for breach of contract. Anyone found without a job could be arrested and fined \$50. Those who could not pay the fine were hired out to anyone in the community who would pay the fine. This created a new system of forced labor. At the same time, blacks could be fined for insulting gestures, breaking the curfew, and for possessing firearms. This created the kind of supervision of personal life which was similar to that of slavery. Although the Thirteenth Amendment had made slavery unconstitutional, the South was trying to recreate the peculiar institution in law while not admitting it in name.

Congress removed home rule from the Southern states and divided the area into five military districts. Even those Southerners who had already received federal pardons were now required to swear a stricter oath in order to regain their right to vote. State Conventions met to draft new constitutions. These conventions were dominated by a coalition of three groups: new black voters, whites who had come from the North either to make personal fortunes or to help educate the ex-slave, and Southern whites who had never supported the Confederacy. The oath of allegiance required a citizen to swear that he was now and always had been loyal to the Federal Government. This excluded all the Confederate officials. These new Southern reconstruction governments operated under the protection of the Army and with the encouragement of the Federal Government. They strove to reconstruct the South economically, politically, and socially.

During the period of 1865-1890 blacks played a significant political role throughout the South. Besides voting in large numbers, they were elected to local, state, and federal offices. Between 1869 and 1901, two became U. S. Senators and twenty were members of the House of Representatives.

Whites in the South and wanted nothing to do with a government which permitted Negro participation. They spread the myth that Reconstruction governments were in the grip of intolerably stupid and corrupt black men. Although Negroes were elected to state governments in significant numbers, the fact was that at no time were they in control. Moreover, when the critics themselves came to power, they did nothing to undo the work of the Reconstruction governments. This fact cast doubts on the sincerity of their criticism. The one thing which the white conservatives did when they regained power was to disenfranchise the blacks. This indicated that their real complaint in regard to Reconstruction was the participation of Negroes in government. With the Federal Government protecting the civil and political rights of the ex-slave, the South was unable to use the law to keep him in his place. The passionate belief in white superiority and a desperate fear of black retaliation caused many whites to resort to physical intimidation to achieve their purposes. The Ku Klux Klan was the most notorious of a large number of similar organizations which spread throughout the South. Negroes and White sympathizers were beaten and lynched. Some had their property burned, and others lost their jobs if they showed too much independence.

In 1869 Congress took action against the Klan and other white supremacy organizations. The Klan was officially disbanded, but, in fact, it only went underground. Most of these organizations were spontaneous local developments, and this made it difficult for either federal or state governments to find and destroy them. Often their tactics were successful in shaping election results. Their propaganda was also useful in influencing public opinion. They insisted that they were only protecting women, children, and civic morality. The federal military forces stationed in the South were too small to be effective against such widespread guerrilla activities, and many of the soldiers, though they had fought against slavery, were still in sympathy with white supremacy.

Although Reconstruction did protect some of the political and civil rights of the Afro-American community, it achieved almost nothing in improving the social and economic situation. The concept of social and economic rights was almost nonexistent a century ago. Political rights, however, without economic security could be a mere abstraction. Meaningful freedom had to be more than the freedom to starve. This meant that the ex-slave needed land, tools, and training to provide him with an economic base that would make his freedom real. The ex-slave had limited education, limited experience, a servile slave attitude, and he was in need of social and economic training to compensate for the years of slavery. Without this he could not enter a competitive Society as an equal. Emancipation was not enough

Most slaves had been engaged in plantation agriculture and were destined to continue in some kind of farm work. Sumner and Stevens led the fight in Congress to provide each of them with forty acres and a mule, and this would have provided the basis for their

developing into an independent class of farmers. However, they were doomed to remain a subservient mass of peasants. The prewar slave plantation was replaced by sharecropping, tenant farming, and the convict lease system. In some cases the ex-slave was provided with land, tools, and seed by plantation owner who, in turn, was to get a share of the crop at the end of the season. His share was always so large that the cropper remained permanently in his debt. Similarly, tenant farmers paid rent for their land and were extended loans by the storekeeper for their provisions. Interest rates ran so high that they too remained in permanent bondage. Finally, some plantation owners leased convicts from the state and worked them in chain gangs which most closely resembled the prewar slave system. In every case, the result was that black farm laborers remained members of a permanent peasant class.

The other hope for the advancement of the ex-slave was through the development of industrial skills. At this time the American labor movement was emerging and was striving to protect and elevate the status of industrial workers. If the ex-slave had been integrated into this movement, it would have helped many of them to achieve economic security. At the same time, it would have strengthened the labor movement itself. However, white workers usually saw blacks as job competitors rather than as part of a mass labor alliance. In 1866 the National Labor Union decided to organize black workers within its ranks, but by 1869 it was urging colored delegates to its convention to form their own separate organization. This resulted in the creation of the National Negro Labor Convention. This split between black and white workers tended to push blacks into political action while whites put all their efforts into economic advancement.

The Freedmen's Bureau was the one federal attempt to raise the social and economic standing of the ex-slave. Along with the American Missionary Association, the Freedmen's Bureau did significant work in education. Hundreds of teachers staffed scores of schools and brought some degree of literacy and job skills to thousands of pupils. However, beyond the field of education, the bureau did little except to provide temporary help. Begun as a war measure, when the Radical Republicans came into control, they put it on a more permanent footing. Even liberals, however, were not prepared to support a long-term social experiment, and, after some half dozen years, the Bureau was terminated. This left the Afro-American community without the economic base necessary for competing in American society on an equal basis.

The one achievement of Reconstruction had been to guarantee minimum of political and civil rights to the ex-slave, but white supremacy advocates were adamant in their intention to destroy this advance. Where terror and intimidation were not successful, relentless economic pressure by landowners, merchants, and industrialists brought most of the ex-slaves into line. Year by year they exerted less influence at the voting booths. Although the country was aware of this, Northern liberals were growing weary of the unending fight to protect the freedman. Furthermore, masses of Northern whites sympathized with Southern race prejudice. While they did approve of ending slavery, they were not willing to extend social and political equality. The North had begun to put a higher priority on peace than on justice. Industrialists were expanding their businesses

rapidly, and they wanted the South to be pacified, so that it would be a safe area for investment and expansion. If this meant returning power to white conservatives, they were willing to pay the price. The presidential election of 1876 degenerated into chaos and confusion. Samuel J. Tilden, the Democratic candidate, and Rutherford B. Hayes, the Republican, disputed its results. Democrats and Republicans both claimed twenty electoral votes from Georgia, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Florida. The first returns had shown that Tilden was the victor, but Republicans, especially Army veterans, warned that they would not accept such a result. The South was willing to support Republican Hayes if, when in power, he would remove the troops and restore home rule. The votes were counted again in the four states in question, and all twenty were awarded to Hayes allowing him to win by one electoral vote.

Hayes began on an ambivalent note. On one hand he said that the country must have honest and equal government, this would appear to be a concession to the South which complained vehemently about the supposed corruption of black Reconstruction. On the other hand, he admitted that the rights of blacks must be protected by the Federal Government. In practice, however, by returning the South to home rule, he abandoned the ex-slave. He said that the ex-slave's interest would be best protected by being left in the hands of honest and influential Southern whites. Hayes had expressed an awareness of the brutality and intimidation which still continued in the South, but he had apparently concluded that federal intervention only aggravated the problem. In his opinion Southern gentlemen were not thieves and cut-throats, they too were educated, civilized, and Christians. The fact that they were not aware of the brutality in their midst and that some of them undoubtedly participated in it, bewildered him. He was willing to proceed on the assumption that, if the Southern whites were left alone, they would, as they asserted, treat the ex-slave honestly and fairly. Hayes seemed unaware that men could be educated, civilized, and claim to be Christians while at the same time behaving as bigots and racists. To satisfy the industrialists in the North and the white conservatives in the South, Hayes buried the last remains of Reconstruction. However, he made a one-sided compromise. While he committed himself to immediate action, the South was only bound by vague promises to be fulfilled at some indefinite date. At the end of his term white supremacy in the South was more firmly rooted than it had been when he took office.

In Conclusion the period 1865-1890 was not just a radical period in United States history, but was undoubtedly the root of all change in the South. For African Americans in the South, Reconstruction would open up new doors of simple everyday privileges, freedoms that would change their lives forever. New rights such as voting were granted to African Americans by Congress in ratifying the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments of the Constitution. In its prime, the Reconstruction gave African Americans a higher status in society. Their people were also acknowledged as equals for the first time ever, and although this period of Reconstruction did not last long, it played a definitive role in the transformation of the South and a people as a whole. But to actually say how well they were safeguarded you would have to say they were not. The fact that these rights were mostly lost by the blacks shows that the safeguards were just not adequate to deal with the racism in the south.

