

The Lost Cause Myth: A Legacy of Reconstruction

Reconstruction at its most basic was an attempt by the federal government to enfranchise the formerly enslaved and bring the Confederate States back into the Union. People's opinions on Reconstruction were vastly different, depending on their opinion of rights for the formerly enslaved.

The three Reconstruction Amendments were passed by a Congress with a large Republican majority that did not include representation from the former Confederate states. In fact, Congress made ratification of the 14th Amendment necessary for Southern states to be readmitted to the Union. A majority of White Southerners did not approve of equal rights for the formerly enslaved, much less voting rights. Former Confederate states were all readmitted to the Union by 1870, but they fought the intent of the Reconstruction Amendments by enacting laws, called Black codes, to enforce racial segregation and limit the power of Black voters. Southern radical groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, gained popularity and power. They used violence, including murder, and intimidation to maintain White control over Black people. Reconstruction ended with the Compromise of 1877, ushering in the Jim Crow era that denied African Americans the right to vote, hold certain jobs, obtain an education, and other opportunities.

Another legacy of Reconstruction is the myth of the Lost Cause. Generations of American students were taught a Lost Cause mythology that masked the hard truth about the Civil War – that it was fought to preserve slavery. This Lost Cause ideology was designed to glorify the Confederate cause and to reinforce White supremacy. An honest reckoning with American history requires that students dismiss the Lost Cause mythology and understand the brutality of the slave system and its enduring legacy.

Pre-Reading:

Reconstruction in Mississippi: <https://mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/issue/reconstruction-in-mississippi-1865-1876>

The First Black Legislators: <https://mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/issue/first-black-legislators-mississippi>

The Clinton Riot of 1875: From Riot to Massacre: <https://mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/issue/the-clinton-riot-of-1875-from-riot-to-massacre>

Materials:

Students will need a computer, tablet, or laptop with internet access. Teacher can also print out and copy documents if internet options are not available.

Directions:

Students should have a working knowledge of the causes and outcome of the Civil War before completing this assignment. Students should be learning about or have recently learned about Reconstruction in America.

Students should read the introduction and watch the explanation video on YouTube. Dr. Kimberly Kutz Elliott, "Nast & Reconstruction, understanding a political cartoon," in Smarthistory, March 17, 2021, accessed May 23, 2023.

- Nast Cartoon with quiz: <https://smarthistory.org/nast-reconstruction-political-cartoon/>

Students should use the cartoon analysis tool from the National Archives to understand the Nast political cartoon about the effects of Reconstruction.

- Cartoon analysis document: <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/analyze-a-cartoon-intermediate> Click on the link to download the fillable PDF.

Assessment:

Teacher may choose to take the YouTube quiz and the cartoon analysis tool for a formative assessment or as part of a larger Reconstruction project.

