

Era 5: Civil War and Reconstruction (1850-1877)

Overview

The Civil War was perhaps the most momentous event in American history. The survival of the United States as one nation was at risk and on the outcome of the war depended the nation's ability to bring to reality the ideals of liberty, equality, justice, and human dignity. The war put constitutional government to its severest test as a long festering debate over the power of the federal government versus state rights reached a climax. Its enormously bloody outcome preserved the Union while releasing not only four million African Americans but also the entire nation from the oppressive weight of slavery.

The war can be studied in several ways: as the final, violent phase in a conflict of two regional subcultures; as the breakdown of a democratic political system; as the climax of several decades of social reform; and as a pivotal chapter in American racial history. In studying the Civil War, students have many opportunities to study heroism and cowardice, triumph and tragedy, and hardship, pain, grief, and death wrought by conflict. Another important topic is how the war necessarily obliged both northern and southern women and children to adapt to new and unsettling situations.

As important as the war itself, once the Union prevailed, was the tangled problem of Reconstruction. Through examining the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments--fundamental revisions of the Constitution--students can see how African Americans hoped for full equality, as did many white lawmakers. They can assess the various plans for Reconstruction that were contested passionately. The retreat from Radical Reconstruction--the first attempt at establishing a biracial democracy--should be of concern to all students who need to understand how shared values of the North and South sharply limited support for social and racial democratization. The enduring republican belief in the need to respect local control made direction by central government power unpopular. Northerners, like southerners, did not support schemes to redistribute wealth under Reconstruction because of the need to protect private property. Northerners, like southerners, believed in the social inferiority of blacks.

Students should learn how southern white resistance and the withdrawal of federal supervision resulted in the "redemption" of the South through the disfranchisement of African Americans, the end of their involvement in Reconstruction state legislatures, greater racial separation, the rise of white intimidation and violence, and the creation of black rural peonage.

Balancing the success and failures of Reconstruction should test the abilities of all students. Too much stress on the unfinished agenda of the period can obscure the great changes actually wrought. Moreover, it needs to be remembered how most white Americans were diverted from completing Reconstruction toward new goals brought about by social change. A new generation sought new fields of endeavor afforded by industrialization. They were not imbued by the reformist idealism of their predecessors. Indeed, they were receptive to new doctrines of racial and social inequality. The legacies of the era of war and reconstruction need to be considered with reference to the North and West as well as the South.