A Brief History of Reconstruction

After the American Civil War, the daunting task of attempting to put a broken country back together fell upon the leaders of the country. There were many aspects and arguments to consider about how to proceed with such a delicate act; however, the primary goal was to quickly and successfully have the North and the South no longer need separate labels, but once again exist under the banner of the United States of America. The three main points of Reconstruction that were under debate and needed to be resolved were: if and how Confederate states would be allowed back into the Union; the civil status of all Confederate leaders; and the constitutional and legal status of the freedmen.

The first steps that eventually were made to try and reunite a nation were The Reconstruction Acts of 1867, outlining the process to be readmitted into the Union; the Fourteenth Amendment which granted freedmen national citizenship; and the Fifteenth Amendment which gave freedmen the right to vote. These all occurred following the Civil War, but at scattered intervals and each one came with its own set of opposition and problems due to political separation.

In order to be readmitted into the Union, each Southern state had to follow certain steps: their alliance with the confederacy had to be surrendered and a vow taken to never follow the Confederacy again, a new government system within the state had to be instilled and then assuming this new government was successful, the state could reapply for status within the Union. Pre-dating this was the discussion of what to do with Confederate leaders. President Johnson originally declared no mercy on these rebels and that they would all pay for their crimes committed; however, in practice he actually forgave many of these rebels and even went so far as to return their land. (The Freedman’s Bureau had actually taken the criminals land to redistribute to the newly freed slaves, but President Johnson argued it was unconstitutional and had all land returned to the white owners). Only one war criminal hung for his crimes and the rest were allowed to return to their daily lives. In due course, many of the original war leaders even returned to power in the South, outraging congress. This led to the creation of “Black Codes” or Jim Crow laws in the South which was the birth of segregation. Segregation called for “separate but equal” policies which had schools, public transportation and other public places house two forms: one for blacks and one for whites (a policy that existed in the South until the 1960s). Most of these states found themselves successfully reinstated with the help of President Johnson. Johnson however was not gaining any favor within his Cabinet and Congress. In 1865, the 13th Amendment abolished slavery. Next was the 14th Amendment which granted citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the United States. The 15th Amendment provided that a national vote could not be denied because of race, color or previous servitude. Johnson rallied against the 15th Amendment, using his influence to block full ratification of the amendment (since three-fourths of the states are needed to ratify an amendment). The amendment was later successfully ratified, but his opposition led to more battling within governmental officials, pinning Democrats against Republicans. Eventually, this would lead the impeachment trial of Andrew Johnson where he was acquitted by one vote. However, the impact of the trial led to a huge loss of support for Johnson, and the successful establishment of the amendments that promoted the freedom of people of color post-slavery.

Historians today agree that the Reconstruction movement, though begun as a measure of good faith to try and restore the country, ended as a failure. The purpose was to have both sides of the country agree on the equality of all men, but the aftermath of trying to impose a “quick recovery” meant in the end having all states “United” only by name. The support of Southern “Black Codes” and the lack of punishment for Confederate leaders perpetuated the inequality of ex-slaves in the Southern states, not to mention the undeniable violence that ensued against African-Americans from those who could not accept their liberty. Many of these crimes would go unnoticed and unpunished for years after. Unfortunately, segregation would still keep our country apart in a very real way for almost another 100 years.