

# How was the promise of Reconstruction broken by white supremacy and hatred?

Following the Civil War, federal assistance from the Freedmen's Bureau and the passage of the Reconstruction Amendments to the U.S. Constitution supported Black Americans as they forged freer lives. Millions of formerly enslaved people mobilized to participate in government, build institutions of education and form independent communities. Their efforts, however, were thwarted from the moment the shackles of slavery were broken.

In 1865, following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, Vice President Andrew Johnson assumed the presidency. A Southern Democrat and known racist, Johnson was instrumental in reversing the limited civil and political liberties afforded to Black people after the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> Johnson restored Southern states to the Union, granting amnesty to most former Confederates and allowing rebel states to form new governments hostile to Reconstruction. In 1866, Johnson vetoed the Freedmen's Bureau and Civil Rights bills, and reversed the famous "40 acres and a mule" order granting land to Black people. Johnson also attempted to block ratification of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, providing citizenship rights to Black people, and was impeached, in part, for suspending a secretary of war who opposed his Reconstruction policies.

Fueled by rage over their defeat in the Civil War and an unwillingness to relinquish generations of privilege and white supremacy, the reestablished Southern states sought to build back their confederacy. From 1865–1866, a series of Draconian laws known as the Black codes were enacted in most Southern states that attempted to return Black Americans to a state of subordination and dependency on the white-owned plantation system.<sup>2</sup> The Black codes took away the rights of Black people to vote, hold office and testify against white people in court. They segregated schools and public facilities, limited land and home ownership and restricted access to certain neighborhoods and jobs. Repressive vagrancy statutes constrained the assembly rights of Black people and punished them for unemployment. Since job opportunities were severely restricted, Black people were forced to labor in low-paying agricultural jobs, as sharecroppers and on the plantations of their former imprisonment. The children of those arrested for Black codes violations were commonly seized under the guise of "apprenticeship" and forced into servitude. The Black codes were thus a coercive instrument that exploited Black people as cheap labor to rebuild the destroyed Southern economy, and that reinstated the conditions of slavery.

1 Elizabeth R. Varon, "Andrew Johnson: Impact and Legacy," The Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/president/johnson/impact-and-legacy>.

2 Constitutional Rights Foundation, "Southern Black Codes," <https://www.crf-usa.org/brown-v-board-50th-anniversary/southern-black-codes.html>.

In addition to repressive laws, white Southerners used violence to control Black communities and obstruct the growth of interracial democracy. In 1865, six Confederate veterans from Pulaski, Tennessee, formed the Ku Klux Klan, which began as a fraternal organization but quickly evolved into a terror movement aimed at crushing political equality and restoring a white-dominated social order.<sup>3</sup> Klan membership included Democratic veterans, poor white farmers and southerners sympathetic to white supremacy. Keeping Black people from the voting booth and restoring white dominance became the organization's main goals. Men claiming to be the ghosts of Confederate soldiers galloped on horses in the dead of night, terrorizing, flogging and murdering Black Americans. To prevent their identity from being revealed in public, members dressed in disguise, wearing sheets and hooded masks.

The Ku Klux Klan and, later, groups such as the White League and Red Shirts, incited violence and massacres throughout the South. In 1866 in Memphis, three days of rioting took place after a clash between white police officers and Black veterans of the Union Army. Mobs of white residents and police rampaged Black neighborhoods, killing 46 Black people and committing arson and robbery.<sup>4</sup> Two months later in New Orleans, white, conservative Democrats—including police and firemen—attacked progressive Republicans (mostly Black) over attempts to rewrite the state's constitution. At least 34 Black people were killed

and 119 wounded.<sup>5</sup> Such violence was a way to enforce white supremacy by disenfranchising Black people and keeping them from housing and employment opportunities considered to be for white people.

The injustice of the Black codes and unrestrained violence perpetrated by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan drew the attention of Republican leaders in the U.S. Congress and led to new protections for Black Americans. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 (ratified in 1870), Enforcement Act of 1870 and Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871 affirmed Black citizenship rights, curbed intimidation of Black voters and allowed the federal government to use military force to suppress terrorist organizations. Such safeguards allowed Black communities to make progress throughout the 1870s; however, the atmosphere of extreme hostility to racial equality had been indelibly cemented in Southern culture. The Compromise of 1877—which settled the disputed presidential election of 1876—resulted in the last of the federal troops being pulled from the South, the loss of political positions won by Black representatives and the demise of Reconstruction. Soon Black people were completely absent from state and local government, and no longer held positions in the U.S. House or Senate. The Black codes were replaced by Jim Crow segregation, and a new era of white supremacy and domination was ushered in that would last for nearly a century.

3 History.com, "Ku Klux Klan," November 2, 2020, <https://www.history.com/topics/reconstruction/ku-klux-klan>.

4 Ryan, James Gilbert. "The Memphis Riots of 1866: Terror in a Black Community During Reconstruction." *The Journal of Negro History* 62, no. 3 (1977): 243-57. Accessed December 9, 2020. doi:10.2307/2716953.

5 Reconstruction Era National Historical Park, "An Absolute Massacre"—The New Orleans Slaughter of July 30, 1866," <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/neworleansmassacre.htm>.