

The History Channel, History.com “The Failure of Reconstruction” [transcript]

Narrator: The Civil War ends in 1865, and the Union Army celebrates with a triumphant parade down Washington’s Pennsylvania Avenue. But while the fighting is over, conflict continues through the era known as Reconstruction.

H. W. Brands, Historian (*University of Texas, Austin*) “One way of looking at Reconstruction is, the struggle between North and South shifts from the battlefield to the political realm.”

Edward O’Donnell, Historian (*Holy Cross*) “Well you have four million formerly enslaved people, what is their status going to be moving forward?”

Narrator: The US government sends the army to occupy the South, and passes three historic amendments to the Constitution.

Jim Downs, Historian (*Connecticut College*) “The Thirteenth Amendment abolishes slavery in the United States, the Fourteenth Amendment grants birthright citizenship to freed slaves, and the Fifteenth Amendment provides freed slaves with the right to vote.”

Brands: “One of the striking things about Reconstruction is how, within a very short time after the end of slavery, Southern states were electing black officials. They were electing governors, they were electing members of Congress, they were electing local officials.”

O’Donnell: “So that creates, in those early years of Reconstruction, 1865 to the early 1870s, a really revolutionary moment in American history. Equally as revolutionary, in some ways, as the original Revolution a century earlier.”

Narrator: But Reconstruction also brings widespread corruption, abetted by Northern carpetbaggers who come South to take advantage of the situation. White Southern resentment leads to increased violence, and it is clear that Reconstruction’s days are numbered.

Brand: “As soon as the North decided, okay, we’ve had enough of this conflict, we’ve had enough of trying to tell the South what to do, then Southern blacks will be thrown back on the mercies—and they weren’t very merciful at all—of the Southern white majority.”

Narrator: Reconstruction finally comes to an end in 1877, when the last Northern troops are removed from the South.

Brand: “Reconstruction is generally thought to last about ten years. In some ways, the struggle continued for another hundred years. It wouldn’t be until the 1960s, not the 1860s, but the 1960s, that African-Americans first really began to enjoy the rights that they were promised under the Constitution at the end of the Civil War.”

<http://www.history.com/videos/the-failure-of-reconstruction#the-failure-of-reconstruction>

Discussion questions for “The Failure of Reconstruction” TV clip

What words are used to describe Reconstruction?

What are the main elements of Reconstruction?

In this clip, who is primarily responsible for Reconstruction?

When did Reconstruction begin and end?

What did Reconstruction accomplish, according to this clip?

What did it NOT accomplish, according to this clip?

Summarize the clip’s *interpretation* of Reconstruction in a sentence.

Does this square with your understanding of Reconstruction, based on your reading?

Where might historians disagree?