

## Politics in War & Reconstruction: 1861 – 1876 \*

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The Civil War and its aftermath intensified politics in the North, sharpening the divide between Republicans and Democrats and factionalizing the Republican Party. The war did not politically unite the North during the war. Abraham Lincoln confronted deep factionalism in his own party and a Democratic Party calling for peace with the rebel Confederates. Within his own party, Lincoln faced opposition from Radical Republicans who insisted upon emancipation of slaves and vengeance on the South. Conservative Republicans called for caution. These factional divisions worsened after Lincoln's assassination in 1865, leading the Republican Congress to impeach its own party leader, Andrew Johnson, who succeeded Lincoln in the White House.

In April 1861, just a month after Lincoln's inauguration, South Carolina, acting under orders from Confederate President Jefferson Davis, fired on the federally manned Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. Following the attack, the important state of Virginia voted to join the deep southern slave states in forming a new Confederacy. Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina announced their secession from the Union, but the slave states of Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri stayed in the Union. The Civil War had begun. Both sides proved wrong in expecting a short war. The war lasted four bloody years; there were 750,000 casualties by most recent estimates.

Both the North and the South believed they were upholding the Constitution. The Confederates modeled their new government on the Constitution. The Confederate president, Jefferson Davis, based in the new capital in Richmond, led a one-party regime, but faced continued opposition from a few vociferous state governors who complained about his authoritarian policies. For Northern unionists, Southern secession betrayed the principles of democracy by overturning the results of a legitimate election.

Lincoln's primary concern in the beginning of the war was to keep the border slave states from joining the rebellion. One consequence of this strategy was that he needed to tread lightly on the slave question. At the same time, northern opponents of the war, labeled by Lincoln followers as snakelike Copperheads, vigorously attacked Lincoln's war policies and called on their followers not to support the war. In response, Lincoln undertook drastic measures, including arrests of newspaper reporters, editors, and opposition leaders, and the suspension of habeas corpus. Government and military officials suppressed Copperhead newspapers such as the *New York News* and the *Chicago Times*. Lincoln justified his actions on constitutional powers of the commander-in-chief.

Republicans came into power on the high idealistic promise of “free soil, free labor, and free men.” This belief in economic opportunity was expressed in legislation to provide free western land to settlers in the Homestead Act (1862) and federal funding of a transcontinental railroad from Omaha to Sacramento, and to support colleges through the Morrill Act (1862). Republicans enacted a high protective tariff to support American manufacturing. While some of these laws benefited the nation as a whole, special interests often took advantage of such legislation for their own personal gain. While expressing high ideals, Republicans pursued “politics as usual” during the war.

Neither northern Republicans nor northern Democrats fully accepted a two-party system. After all, by 1861, Americans had witnessed political parties come and go over for some seventy years—the Federalists, the Whigs, and the Know-Nothings. The concept of “loyal opposition” found little expression within either political party. Conspiracy theories prevailed in both. Politically aligned newspapers, 1,300 in the North, provided a continual source for these alleged conspiracies. Democratic papers reported that Lincoln and his allies were planning a military coup. Throughout the war, Republicans issued warnings against conspiracies by such pro-Confederate groups operating in the North, such as the Knights of the Golden Circle and Sons of Liberty. Later historians question how active these organizations actually were.

Within the new Republican Party, patronage, corruption, and bribery remained mainstays. By the war's end, the federal government had grown to 53,000 employees, making it the largest employer in the nation. A new pension system for Union veterans and their dependents, established in 1865, created huge patronage opportunities for the party, by ensuring the Northern veteran votes. With patronage came unavoidable corruption.

The New York Customs House was a perennial problem. In Pennsylvania, the former secretary of war, Simon Cameron, driven from the cabinet for incompetence and corruption, tried to bribe his way into the Senate in 1862. In response, some opponents threatened Democratic state legislators with assassination if they bolted to Cameron, who was playing both sides of the aisle. Democrats won the seat in the end, but old-style power politics, intrigue, and factionalism prevailed in Pennsylvania, as it did in Illinois, Indiana, and many other states.

Even in the midst of a Civil War, elections continued. During the forty-eight-month duration of the Civil War, Americans went to the polls for local, state, and national elections at least half of those months. Americans lived and ate politics. Political rallies often lasted all afternoon, characterized by debates over resolutions, oratory, and singing. Political activity took more violent forms as well, as mobs broke into newspaper offices.

In July 1863, mob activity—stimulated by the Confederate secret service—manifested itself most vilely in a week-long riot in New York City.

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\* Critchlow, Donald T. *American Political History: A Very Short Introduction*. (Chapter 5) New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

This race riot, mostly by Irish Catholic working-class men and women, turned into the largest insurrection in American history at the time. Much of this anger was directed toward free blacks living in the city. Rioters murdered hundreds of people and burned to the ground fifty buildings, including two Protestant churches and a black orphanage. Federal troops arriving from the Gettysburg battle finally suppressed the riot.

At the same time, the war invigorated reform. Women in particular became involved in voluntary activities through the U.S. Sanitary Commission, which offered medical relief to soldiers, and the freedmen's aid movement, which helped provide government relief to destitute freed slaves. Hundreds of thousands of women participated in local societies raising money, supplies, and books for soldiers and freed blacks. These activities produced a postwar generation of women leaders found in urban charity and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. In the North, black ministers, abolitionists, and professional men organized to improve conditions of northern blacks. These efforts led Massachusetts in 1865 to enact the first comprehensive public accommodations law outlawing segregation. New York City, San Francisco, Cincinnati, and Cleveland desegregated their streetcars during the war. Less successful were efforts in the North to give voting rights to blacks.

In the first two years of the war, 1861-62, it went poorly for Union forces as they suffered major military defeats. This heightened opposition in the North among Democrats and Republicans about Lincoln's conduct of the war. Lincoln's greatest political success in the first years was containing further secession in the border states. Military occupation of western Virginia allowed the creation of a new state that elected a new governor and sent two senators and three representatives to Washington. Military authorities reorganized Maryland's and Missouri's governments.

In Missouri, which was under martial law, Union commander and former presidential candidate John C. Fremont issued an edict, threatening to court-martial and execute civilians in arms, confiscate property of those who aided the enemy, and free the slaves of rebels. Fearing that this order might push border states to rebellion, Lincoln ordered the general to bring his order in line with the Confiscation Act enacted by Congress, which allowed, through judicial proceedings, the confiscation and freeing of slaves of those assisting the rebellion. Lincoln's countermand stirred up widespread protest among radical abolitionists in the North.

In late 1862, as the war continued to go poorly, Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation that promised to free slaves of rebels in Confederate states. This limited measure served military purposes and expressed Lincoln's deep belief that the war was about freeing the slaves. Press notices about the forthcoming proclamation aroused Democratic opponents and cheered the radical wing of Lincoln's own party. Shortly after the draft of the proclamation began to be circulated in the northern press, Lincoln suspended

the right of habeas corpus, the right to appear before a court after an arrest. In September, Lincoln declared that all slaves in states in rebellion would be free and authorized the enlistment of blacks into the army. The proclamation and the suspension of habeas corpus cost Lincoln votes in the midterm elections of 1862. On New Year's Day 1863, he signed the final proclamation of emancipation. He believed that the war was about preserving the union and ending slavery. Lincoln had finally acted to free slaves in the rebel states.

The failure of the war effort, rising inflation, charges of corruption, and suspension of habeas corpus revived the Democratic Party in the North in the 1862 midterm elections, especially in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and New York. The Emancipation Proclamation won Republicans some support in New England, but played poorly among Irish voters in the urban East and lower Midwest. Democrats took control of states across the lower North. In New York, Democrat and fierce Lincoln opponent Horatio Seymour won the governorship against a badly divided Republican Party. Democrats won thirty-five congressional seats, including Lincoln's home district of Springfield, Illinois. Because of secession, Republicans still held control of Congress, but the election losses revealed that the Democratic Party—the party of traitors in the eyes of Republicans—was not going the way of the Federalists in 1812.

Even after the war began to turn more favorably toward the union in 1863, political fighting continued, as bitter as ever, reaching a peak in the 1864 presidential election. Lincoln entered his campaign for reelection convinced that he would lose. Union forces had suffered military defeats, and the Republican Party stood ideologically divided. Radical Republicans expressed discontent with Lincoln's mild approach to reconstruction. Disillusioned with Lincoln, Radical Republicans met in Cleveland in May 1864 to form a new party called Radical Democracy to nominate John C. Fremont. But his campaign quickly fizzled with lack of support. He withdrew from the race in September, declaring that winning the war was too important to divide the Republican Party.

Democrats turned to General George B. McClellan, who had built the Union army in the east, chased Confederate general Robert E. Lee all over Virginia, failed to take Richmond, and was fired by Lincoln. The party platform urged accommodation with the Confederacy. Democrats, however, were far from united. A group of War Democrats broke with the party to join Republicans to organize the National Union Party. Opposition to Lincoln's nomination formed around journalist Horace Greeley, Senator Benjamin Wade, and Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase. Lincoln's popularity within the Republican Party forced Chase to withdraw his challenge, allowing Lincoln to win the nomination. He replaced Vice President Hannibal Hamlin with a new running mate, Andrew Johnson, a War Democrat and military governor of Tennessee, and temporarily renamed the party the Union Party. The slogan, "Don't change horses in the middle of a stream," captured the general mood of

the country. Lincoln centered his campaign on emancipation. Republican state parties stressed the treason of antiwar Northern Democrats.

Secretary of State and Lincoln confidant William Seward set the tone for the 1864 election in a speech entitled “The Allies of Treason,” given shortly after news that Democrats had nominated George B. McClellan for president and that Atlanta had fallen to General William T. Sherman. Republican charges of cowardice and treason were matched by Democratic rhetoric of moral corruption and miscegenation, a newly invented word to describe interracial marriage. New female employees in the Treasury Department were accused of engaging in prostitution. The nation’s capital, Washington, D.C., had become “the Sodom of America” under Republican rule. Lincoln’s policy of using black troops became a symbol for these opponents of a perceived nation in decline. They warned that financing the war through the printing of paper money would bring economic decline to the nation.

Lincoln defeated McClellan in the general election. He was aided by Democratic Party division, the fall of Atlanta in September, and the soldier vote. Twenty-five states participated in the election. McClellan won only three: Kentucky, Delaware, and his home state of New Jersey. Lincoln swept the others, winning 55 percent of the popular vote and 212 electoral votes. Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner declared the Democratic Party dead: “It was no longer patriotic.... It should no longer exist.” Sumner’s remark revealed that the concept of two-party competition was not widely accepted among Republicans. Moderation was not a part of politics, before and during, the Civil War.

In his second term, Lincoln feared that his Emancipation Proclamation might be overturned by a hostile judiciary, so he undertook to enact the federal Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, ensuring that blacks be guaranteed permanent freedom. He brought it before Congress in late 1863 to formally abolish slavery throughout the United States. Radical Republicans led by Senator Sumner and Pennsylvania Representative Thaddeus Stevens wanted a more expansive amendment but were defeated in committee. Lincoln, working with William Seward and friendly congressmen, instructed that all stops be pulled out to ensure passage of the amendment. All stops meant patronage, political pressure, and outright bribes. He also made direct appeals to win over reticent House members.

The president sought to reconcile the nation through allowing Confederate states to rejoin the Union once 10 percent of the population of a rebellious state pledged to support the union and accept emancipation. Lincoln’s pragmatic approach to postwar reconstruction sought to reconcile the South, while ending slavery forever. The Radical Republican wing feared that former Confederates would gain control of reconstructed states and suppress the newly won rights of freed slaves. Tensions became evident when Lincoln used a pocket veto of the Wade-Davis bill in July 1864, which made

readmission to the union contingent on 50 percent of a state’s population swearing loyalty to the Union.

On April 14, 1865, Lincoln was assassinated by a white supremacist southern fanatic, John Wilkes Booth. Whether the politically skilled Lincoln might have prevailed over Radicals in his own party cannot be known. Nor can we know if Lincoln would have taken more coercive measures to protect the rights of freed slaves under violent attack by whites anxious to maintain power and privilege. What is certain, though, is that his successor, Andrew Johnson, ran into a buzz saw in Congress. The radical wing of the Republican Party emerged ascendant following Lincoln’s death. Driven by antislavery idealism and a conviction to win the peace and to protect freed blacks from white violence, Radical Republicans sought to crush any revival of the Democratic South and to complete a social transformation of the former slave states.

The most important political consequence of the Civil War and Reconstruction proved to be the transformation of slaves into equal citizens of the nation. Congress enabled this through constitutional amendments—the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth—which abolished slavery, granted equal citizenship, and protected voting rights for former slaves. These amendments, as well as new civil rights legislation, altered federal-state relations. The four million men and women freed from slavery discovered opportunities for political and civic involvement in the North and the South. The struggle to fulfill these rights and to engage in civic life brought political acrimony at every level of government, national, state, and local. Many black leaders in the South gained their first experience as Union soldiers to become active in organizing Union Leagues tied to the Republican Party throughout the South.

Andrew Johnson proved tone-deaf to public opinion and Congress. His major political goal, it seemed, was to break the political control of the southern aristocracy, yet his policies faced opposition from congressional Radical Republicans for being too lenient toward the South. In 1865, he issued proclamation pardons for all southern rebels willing to sign loyalty oaths. Excluded from this general amnesty program were Confederate officials and owners of taxable property worth more than \$20,000, who had to apply individually for presidential pardons. Many of the restored southern state legislatures enacted Black Codes sharply curtaining basic rights of black freedmen. These new codes imposed harsh labor regulations that were intended to maintain planter hegemony and, in effect, instituting a new form of forced labor. For example, in Mississippi black laborers leaving their jobs before the contract expired were required to forfeit all wages earned previously.

Reports of violent intimidation of blacks by newly organized white groups such as the Ku Klux Klan further outraged the North. Opponents of Republican-dominated reconstructed state legislatures noted that special interests used bribery to win charters for railroads, urban streetcar franchises,

mineral rights, banking, and manufacturing, to the dismay of reformers. Critics of southern Reconstruction tended to overlook urban corruption in the North.

At the core of Radical Republicanism lay a civic ideology grounded in American citizenship and equal rights. Radical Republicans, however, remained divided on black suffrage. They were committed to “loyal” government, a free labor economy, and protection of freedmen’s basic rights. The widespread belief of congressional Republicans that the federal government needed to shoulder responsibility for the newly freed slaves was symbolized in the creation of the Freedmen’s Bureau in 1865, charged with aiding blacks in the South. In addition, Congress passed a Civil Rights bill in 1866 to protect the legal rights of all citizens through federal oversight. President Johnson surprised Congress when he vetoed both bills. This proved to be a major political mistake.

Congress pushed forward, overriding Johnson’s vetoes. Using their overwhelming majority in Congress, Radical Republicans passed the Fourteenth Amendment providing citizenship rights and legal protection to all male citizens. Johnson believed that Radicals had misjudged public opinion, and he denounced them in the midterm elections in 1866. On the campaign trail, his harsh attacks and vituperative language, best suited to Tennessee stump speeches, dismayed friends and the general public. Reminding voters of the war’s high cost by literally waving blood-soaked shirts at rallies, Radicals won large majorities in Congress in 1866, ensuring a clash with Johnson.

In 1867 Congress passed—over Johnson’s veto—the Reconstruction Act establishing five military districts covering ten ex-Confederate states (Tennessee had been readmitted). Under the law and supplemental measures, twenty thousand federal troops, including black units, were assigned to the districts. Southern states were required to adopt new constitutions drafted by conventions elected by universal male suffrage. The U.S. Army registered voters. Former federal officers and high-ranking Confederate soldiers who had supported the rebellion were barred from participation, and blacks formed a majority of registered voters in Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. In South Carolina, Mississippi, and Louisiana, Republicans prevailed because of large black majorities among the electorate. Republican Party leaders in these states were mostly white, but black leaders increasingly demanded their share of leadership and patronage positions.

By 1868 Congress had approved new state constitutions and readmission into the Union of former Confederate states in time for the coming presidential election.

Radicals moved to impeach President Johnson when he attempted to remove Secretary of War Edwin Stanton from the cabinet in violation of dubious legislation passed by Congress forbidding presidential removal of cabinet officers. As impeachment proceedings progressed, public opinion as well as business leaders reacted unfavorably to the arrogance of Congress. The widely disliked president pro-tem of the Senate, Benjamin Wade of Ohio, would

become president if Johnson was removed. He was acquitted, 35 to 19, one vote short of conviction, when seven Republicans joined Democrats in opposing removal.

Johnson hoped that Democrats might nominate him in 1868. Instead, a divided convention finally turned to New York governor Horatio Seymour, a pro-southern and anti-Reconstruction politician. Republicans went with northern war hero Ulysses S. Grant, a military career officer, who had not previously shown much interest in partisan politics. The Republican platform called for the continuation of Radical Reconstruction and black suffrage in the South, but left the issue of black suffrage in the North to the states. Following tradition, Grant did not actively campaign, but promised, “Let us have peace.” He swept the Electoral College, although the popular vote was much closer. Grant’s victory was aided by the black vote through the enactment of the Fifteenth Amendment giving blacks voting rights. Republicans carried all the southern states except Georgia and Louisiana, but the majority of the total white vote in the North and the South went to Seymour.

Grant pursued a contradictory policy of trying to reconcile white southerners, while using the army to protect black rights. In doing so, he alienated members of his own party and Democrats. In the South, Republicans broke into factions. A few opportunistic white southerners joined the Republican Party, but most stuck with the Democrats. In Georgia, Governor Joe E. Brown, a former Confederate-turned-Republican, sought to expel blacks from the party. Seeking to reduce black influence in the legislature, he moved the state capital from Milledgeville in the heart of the black belt to Atlanta, a railroad-dominated town. Throughout the South, white vigilante movements used violence to intimidate black and white Republican voters. More than a few blacks fled the South to northern cities or to found their own communities in Kansas.

By 1872, it was clear that Radical Reconstruction was in decline. Even liberal reformers such as newspaper editor Horace Greeley proved willing to retreat from it. The longtime reformer loathed the era’s sleazy, crooked politics apparent in both the North and the South. Disgusted with Grant, liberal Republicans broke ranks to form the new Liberal Republican Party, which nominated Greeley as their candidate for president. Democrats, hoping to split the Republican vote, endorsed Greeley as their candidate in a strange coalition of liberal reformers and Democrats. Reformers such as Henry Adams, crusading editor of *The Nation*, historian and grandson of the former president John Quincy Adams, backed Greeley.

The campaign proved once again to be nasty. Greeley was attacked as a traitor. Thomas Nast, a nationally prominent cartoonist, depicted Greeley as extending his hand to Lincoln’s assassin, John Wilkes Booth. Democrats charged Grant with being a military dictator for sending federal troops to

Louisiana through the Martial Act. Although divided, Republicans prevailed, electing Grant to a second term.

Grant's second term was marred by an economic crash in 1873 and corruption. Insider trading in the gold market reached into the White House, involving Grant's personal secretary. Revelations of a Whiskey Ring, in which distillers bribed Treasury officials to evade liquor taxes, further damaged the administration. In 1872, numerous prominent Republicans in Congress were discovered to have accepted stock from Credit Mobilier, a dummy corporation set up for the Union Pacific Railroad, which had been given huge land grants by Congress. Grant's political problems worsened when Democrats gained control of the House in the midterm 1874 elections.

Scandal, political corruption, and economic depression played to Democrats as they entered the 1876 election. The party nominated New York reformer Samuel Tilden, a Wall Street lawyer. Republicans nominated Rutherford B. Hayes, an Ohio politician and the husband of a leading temperance reformer. Tilden won the popular vote, but the electoral vote was so close that it came down to disputed votes in South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana, that if counted for Hayes gave him the election. Both parties submitted "official returns" from the three states. Southern white Democrats challenged these votes and prepared to seize power through force. A divided Congress with a Democratic-controlled House and a Republican Senate turned the election deadlock into a national crisis. Finally, after a secret meeting of Republican and southern Democratic leaders, a special commission was established with eight Republicans and seven Democrats who reached a grand compromise that gave the election to Hayes. Democrats were allowed to "win" the state election in three states. The eventual withdrawal of federal troops allowed Southern states to suppress the rights of blacks as citizens.

The Republic had survived the Civil War and Reconstruction. Slavery had been abolished and blacks gained constitutional rights as citizens. During Reconstruction, blacks got their first taste of political involvement. During the war, women gained political experience on the national level, although they still lacked voting rights. The South became heavily Democratic, and Republicans became an established party. Two-party competition remained intact, warts and all.

A civil war challenged the constitutional order of the republic, but in the end, at great expense, the Constitution remained the foundation of the nation. Rights of citizenship and voting rights had been granted to black men, and however constricted by state rule, these rights were now embedded in the Constitution awaiting full implementation by future generations.