

The Civil War

During both the civil war and civil war reconstruction time periods, there were many changes going on in the Union. The Emancipation Proclamation, as well as legislation such as the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments, was causing a new awakening of democracy; while the renouncing of secession by the South marked a definite triumph for Nationalism. As well, the government was involved in altercations of its own. During reconstruction, the legislative and executive branches eventually came to blows over the use of power. The nation was being altered by forces which caused, and later repaired, a broken Union.

The first of these "forces", was the expansion of democracy. As early as 1862, Lincoln was taking a major step in that direction. On September 22, Lincoln announced the freeing of all slaves in areas not in Union control. Although the proclamation did not free all slaves everywhere, it was the action that would push Congress to pass the thirteenth amendment in 1865. The amendment, ratified later in 1865, stated that "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude . . . shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." It seemed democracy had triumphed by giving freedom to slaves, but the amendment was not complete. It only stopped slavery, and made no provisions for citizenship; therefore, blacks were still not considered United States citizens. The fourteenth amendment was the democratic expansion that fixed that problem. Originally passed to "put a number of matters beyond the control or discretion of the president," the amendment also made "All persons born or naturalized in the United States . . . citizens of the United States." It also provided that, "No State shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States." This not only gave new meaning to black men's freedom, but it also gave a new and broader meaning to citizenship. Those drafting the amendment hoped that the broadness of would cover "unanticipated abuses", yet, the general phrasing was only an advantage to abusers. There is no listing of the "privileges or immunities" offered to U.S. citizens. In fact, there is not even a clarification of what rights a "citizen" has. These generalities, and the abuses that went with them, prompted the adoption of the fifteenth amendment in 1870. The final major step towards democratic expansion during reconstruction, the fifteenth amendment granted "The right of citizens of the United States to vote," and that right, "shall not be denied on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." This amendment finally took out loopholes existent in the thirteenth and fourteenth amendments. The government of the United States was coming closer to being a government by all of the people, and not just whites. Civil war reconstruction offered more than just extended democracy, however. It was also a time of national unification.

One of the major boosts to United States nationalism, began with the simple Union victory over the confederacy. Secession was unconstitutional according to those who supported the Union. By defeating the confederacy, the Union had only confirmed that fact. As well, the radical Republican reconstruction plan called for an official renunciation of secession, before states could be readmitted to the Union. If secession from the Union was now illegal, then Daniel Webster's theory of the Constitution being a people's government, and not a compact of states had to be true. "The Constitution . . . [begins] with the words 'We the people,' and it was the people, not the states, who . . . created it," Webster claimed in his nationalist theory of the Constitution. The Union became more united than ever before, because now it truly was a Union, ". . . now and forever, one and inseparable." There were changes, though, that were occurring in the reconstruction time period that were not as helpful to the Union as democracy and nationalism. While the nation was reveling in these more encouraging developments, the Union government was having internal conflicts.

Congress and the president began dueling over power distribution starting at about the time of Andrew Johnson's presidency. Johnson became president after Lincoln's death and immediately set the tone for the rest of his dealings with Congress. His plan for reconstruction was much to relaxed for radical Republicans in Congress, and Johnson lacked the diplomatic abilities of Lincoln. Johnson did prescribe loyalty oaths for southern whites if they were to receive pardon and amnesty, he did exclude high confederate officials from that allowance, and he did require a state convention of state leaders loyal to the Union to elect new congressional delegates. Johnson did not, however include some provisions being called for by Congress. His plan recommended, but did not require, the repeal of secession ordinances and repudiation of secession, repudiation of the Confederate debt, and the ratification of the thirteenth amendment. These points absent from the Johnson program were the instigation congress needed to take charge of reconstruction. The first step by Congress, against Johnson, was taken in December 1865. Under Johnson's program, southern representatives had been elected to Congress. A majority of congress voted to refuse accepting the delegates, and appointed a committee to begin work on reconstruction. In 1866, Congress overrode a presidential veto for the first time in history, when Johnson vetoed a civil rights bill. The bill would have given blacks a considerable new amount of freedom from discriminatory southern actions. Johnson took his stand against the radical Republicans in congress when the fourteenth amendment was first passed. While Congress required ratification of the amendment as part of reconstruction, Johnson denounced the amendment and advised states not to ratify it. "the battle between the executive and legislative branches settled into a predictable rhythm: Congress would pass a bill, the president would veto it, Congress would override it." This "rhythm" continued until Johnson violated the Tenure of office act, which required senate approval to remove presidential cabinet members. Johnson violated the act by removing Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. The House of Representatives approved articles of impeachment and in May 1868, Johnson was impeached by the House. The senate, by one vote, did not remove him from the office of president. Neither side had won that battle for power; Johnson had lost his ability to be an effective president, yet it had been established that impeachment could not be used as a congressional political weapon.

The Civil war time period, as well as that of reconstruction, was filled with political changes in the United States. The war had aroused the democratic spirit of the nation, and had so aroused a good deal of legislation to improve the equality of all people. Post-war times brought forth the nationalistic spirit of the nation, proving once and for all that this Union was indeed, "indivisible under God." The lust for power and justice during reconstruction caused the fight between the executive and legislative branches, a fight that was not completely resolved. These changes, both good and bad, made the Union the United States once again. "a . . . nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." It has been the United States ever since.

