

American Government & Politics: A Christian Worldview– Article: “The Consolidation of State Power via Reconstruction: 1865–1890” (20–25 Minutes)

TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS/KEY

Goal

Students analyze a summary of the enormous increase in size of U.S. and state governments after the end of the North/South War, during the Reconstruction period and following.

Instructions

1. Instruct students to read the article and answer the review questions. (Give them 10–12 minutes.)
2. Have students discuss their answers in pairs or small groups (if time).
3. Ask for volunteers to share their answers as a class.

Key

1. What does the author say was the main purpose of Reconstruction?
“To centralize and consolidate state power and to establish Republican Party political control,” and to economically plunder the South for as long as possible.
2. How was the answer to Question #1 accomplished?
Northern politicians stripped whites of the right to vote, gave it to ex-slaves, instructed them how to vote, and used the power of government to enrich themselves by various means.
3. What does it say about politicians and military officers who (a) capture and imprison state governors without a trial, (b) increase property taxes so high as to make them unaffordable, and (c) confiscate property of farmers, to name three examples?
It shows that their cause is unjust, and they are not trying to “execute judgment and justice,” but instead to use their power to oppress and spoil those whom they have militarily conquered.
4. Name one other action that occurred during Reconstruction that stood out to you. Why did you choose it?
AWV.
5. What point does the author make near the article’s end about government corruption?
That regardless of political party, government power tends to corrupt those individuals who wield it.

Debrief

- Feel free to point out any of the government overreaches noted in this article that students forget.
- Remind students about George Mason’s warning in his “Objections to the Constitution”: that the way the U.S. Constitution was structured, that it was inevitable that one section of the nation would gain power/economic control over another with fewer representatives and votes for President, and then use that power to plunder the other section of the nation. Unfortunately, Mason was prophetic.

The Consolidation of State Power via Reconstruction: 1865–1890

Journal of Libertarian Studies

Thomas J. DiLorenzo • July 30, 2014

[A]...myth has it that federal policy in the conquered South was aimed at “binding the nation’s wounds” and establishing a “just and lasting peace,” as Lincoln said. Yes, many Americans sought these noble goals, but they are to be distinguished from the state, whose objectives were quite different.

...[T]he main purpose (and effect) of the 1865–1877 “Reconstruction” policies was to centralize and consolidate state power and to establish Republican Party political hegemony [control]....Its purpose was to continue the economic plundering of the Southern states for as long as possible, and to establish a national Republican Party political monopoly....

[Many historians] documented in great detail how the Republican Party—which is to say the federal government—ignored presidential vetoes and federal court rulings, disenfranchised white Southerners [stripped them of the right to vote] while giving the vote to ex-slaves (who were instructed to vote Republican), formed new state puppet governments run by Republican Party hacks from the North, and used this power to plunder Southern taxpayers for more than a decade after the war....

The Southern economy was almost completely destroyed by the federal army and navy during the War for Southern Independence. As described in the *Documentary History of Reconstruction*, “Never had a completer ruin fallen upon any city than fell upon Charleston.” In 1870, five years after the war’s end, the Tennessee Valley consisted “for the most part of plantations in a state of semi-ruin,” with many others “of which the ruin is...total and complete....The trail of war is visible throughout the valley in burnt up gin-houses, ruined bridges, mills, and factories...and large tracts of once cultivated land stripped of every vestige of fencing.”

In Virginia, “from Harpers Ferry to New Market...the country was almost a desert....The barns were all burned; a great many of the private dwellings were burned; chimneys standing without houses, and houses standing without roofs.” Southern soldiers returning from the war found their homesteads destroyed, their farms devastated, and their communities on the brink of starvation. Roads and railroad beds were mostly destroyed, and in North Georgia there was “a degree of destitution that would draw pity from a stone....”

Southern state governments were run by military dictatorships in the form of federally appointed U.S. Army generals, for the most part. The sitting governors of Southern states whom the federal army captured at the end of the war were imprisoned without trial....

Congress responded to the South’s rejection of the Fourteenth Amendment by passing the Reconstruction Act of 1867, which established a comprehensive military dictatorship to run the ten states that were not yet restored to the union....

[G]reat resources were expended on registering the male ex-slaves to vote, while most Southern white men were disfranchised by a law denying the vote to anyone involved in the late “rebellion.” So rigorous were the restrictions placed on white Southern males that anyone who even organized contributions of food and clothing for one’s family and friends serving in the Confederate army was disfranchised, as were all who purchased bonds from the Confederate government....

The so-called “Union Leagues,” run by Republican Party hacks and federally funded, administered the voter registration of...ex-slaves....[T]hese men, along with government bureaucrats associated with the “Freedmen’s Bureau,” promised blacks that if they voted Republican, they would be given the property of the white population....

What did the Republican Party do with its monopolistic political power? It first plundered Southern taxpayers by greatly expanding state and local governmental budgets. Little of this governmental expansion benefited the general public; the main beneficiaries were the thousands of “carpetbaggers” (and a few “scalawags”) who populated the newly bloated governmental bureaucracies and who benefited from government contracts. A few crumbs went to ex-slaves to solidify their political support. As Dunning observed:

[T]he expenses of the governments were largely increased; offices were multiplied in all departments; salaries were made more worthy of the now regenerated and progressive commonwealths; costly enterprises were undertaken. ... The result of all this was promptly seen in an expansion of state debts and an increase of taxation that to the property-owning class were appalling and ruinous....

Perhaps the most insidious effect of the expansion of...government was that it provided for tax-funded government schooling, influenced heavily by the federal government. Generations...have been taught a politically correct version of history (and of many other subjects) in federalized, government-run schools....

Property taxes were increased by intolerable amounts so that government officials could then confiscate property for “unpaid taxes....” In Mississippi at one point, about one-fifth of the entire state was for sale....By 1872, property taxes in the South averaged about four times what they were in 1860, and in South Carolina, they were thirty times higher....Tax collectors, in turn, stole much of this money. In Florida in 1872, more than half a million dollars collected in taxes collected was never turned over to the state treasury....

Although the South was destitute, a punitive five cents per pound federal tax was placed on cotton, making it difficult, if not impossible, for many cotton growers to stay in business. A military order was issued that anyone who had sold cotton to the Confederate government must give up their cotton to the U.S. government. Hundreds of U.S. Treasury agents swarmed over the South, confiscating cotton with the backing of armed U.S. troops. Little money made it to the U.S. Treasury, however, for the Treasury agents embezzled much of it....One can get an idea of how wealthy some Republican politicians became through this racket by the example of Illinois native Henry Clay Warmoth, the governor of Louisiana who, on an \$8,000 per year salary, “accumulated” more than \$1 million in four years....

The corruption that accompanied railroad “construction” in the South was multiplied many times over through the massive subsidies for transcontinental railroads funded by the federal government. Per-mile subsidies created incentives to build wildly circuitous routes in order to collect more subsidies, cheap construction materials were used, and the emphasis was on speed, not workmanship. Republican legislators accepted bribes in return for appointing railroad commissioners who were political supporters with no railroad experience. By May of 1869, the corruption and inefficiency were so rampant that both the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads were bankrupt....

Republicans were not necessarily more corrupt than were Democrats (or anyone else, for that matter), but the expanded size and scope of government, and its centralization in Washington, guaranteed such actions. Government power corrupts....

Reconstruction ended in 1877, after which the Democratic Party in general, and Southern Democrats in particular, slowly gained influence in Washington. The result was a temporary slowdown of the relentless march toward centralization of state power that the party of Lincoln had initiated....

[V]irtually every program enacted under Reconstruction caused a permanent expansion of the central government. Once one recognizes that Republican Party politicians were the political heirs to the Whigs, who were themselves heirs to the Hamiltonians, it becomes clear that this result was not just a by-product of the quest for “social equality,” as revisionist historians argue, but the intended effect all along.

The above article may be found here:

<https://mises.org/journal-libertarian-studies/consolidation-state-power-reconstruction-1865-1890>

Questions for Review:

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2. How was the answer to Question #1 accomplished?
3. What does it say about politicians and military officers who (a) capture and imprison state governors without a trial, (b) increase property taxes so high as to make them unaffordable, and (c) confiscate property of farmers, to name three examples?
4. Name one other action that occurred during Reconstruction that stood out to you. Why did you choose it?
5. What point does the author make near the article’s end about government corruption?