



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Delegate Magazine 1976

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Reconstruction and Dissension

It was Lincoln's opinion that the states of the South should be considered as never having left the Union since they had no Constitutional right to secede. But with this lenient concept a strong Republican group in Congress, headed by Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner, did not agree. They held that the Southern slaveholders had repudiated the Union and its Constitution, had been acknowledged as belligerents and that under the laws of war they should be made to pay for their dereliction. Complicating the political picture of a devastated South, with some 4,000,000 Negroes suddenly torn from generations of slavery, was the wartime birth of a powerful industrialism in the North. How could a South, long used to slavery's ways, be rebuilt upon an economy of free labor? How could the seceded states be brought back into the Union without handing over political power to the ex-Confederates, who conceivably might turn history's clock back again? What was the best way to help the new freedmen?

A conflict developed rapidly between President Johnson and Congress over Reconstruction policy. Johnson granted pardons to ex-Confederates so liberally and restored home rule in the South so rapidly that Republicans feared the revival of a slave-minded Democratic Party. Meeting in December, 1865, Congress moved to take over the Reconstruction program through a Joint Committee of Fifteen, dominated by Thaddeus Stevens. Johnson vetoed the bills which would make the Freedmen's Bureau permanent and would guarantee civil rights to Negroes. When Congress overrode his vetoes Johnson took his case to the country, but in the 1866 Congressional elections overwhelming Republican majorities were elected to both houses.

Aroused by the refusal of most Southern states to ratify the Fourteenth Amendment protecting Negro citizenship, by the revival of the Black Codes of slavery days and by growing violence against the Negro, the Stevens Committee won Congressional approval for its Reconstruction Act of 1867. It divided the South into five military districts controlled by martial law, proclaimed universal manhood suffrage, required that new state constitutions be drawn up and that the Fourteenth Amendment be ratified by all states seeking admission to the Union. Whenever possible, abandoned lands were to be sold or leased to freedmen, but in the end little came of this.

The freed Negroes found themselves in possession of the ballot, counted as whole men now rather than three-fifths of a population. Now, they were - on paper at least - entitled as citizens to the equal protection of the country's laws.

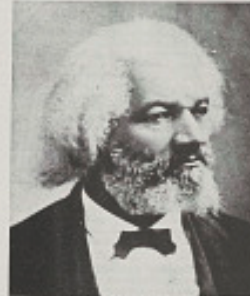
[[image - black & white photograph of Frederick Douglass]]
[[caption]]Frederick Douglass petitioned President Johnson and Congress for protection of freedmen's rights. [[/caption]]

[[image - black & white photograph of Charles Sumner]]
[[caption]]Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, the foremost champion of the Negro in the Senate. [[/caption]]

[[image - black & white photograph of Thaddeus Stevens]] [[most of photograph cut off]]
[[caption]]Representative Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, a Republican leader. [[/caption]]

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