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Abstract: Under U.S. President Andrew Johnson's plan of restoration, Southern voters had elected Confederate officers to the U.S. Congress, and the new state governments had adopted Black Codes. The amendment also tried to push Southern states toward black suffrage by warning that a state's congressional representation would be reduced if black men were kept from voting. Radical Republicans such as Pennsylvania congressman Thaddeus Stevens wanted to take land away from white owners. They proposed to give the land to ex-slaves along with enough money to enable them to survive until they could grow crops on their new farms. The amendment prohibited any Confederate officer who had sworn before the war to protect the U.S. Constitution from holding political office. This meant that most of the new state officers elected under Johnson's plan were ineligible for their jobs.

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Under President Andrew Johnson's plan of restoration, Southern voters had elected Confederate officers to Congress, and the new state governments had adopted Black Codes. Northern congressmen condemned these actions and refused to readmit Southern states to the Union. It would be a daunting task to find a way to protect African Americans without punishing white ex-Confederates to such a degree that they would hate the United States forever.

Radical Republicans such as Pennsylvania congressman Thaddeus Stevens wanted to take land away from white owners. They proposed to give the land to ex-slaves along with enough money to enable them to survive until they could grow crops on their new farms. Some white conservatives were happy with Johnson's program and wanted only to abolish the Black Codes. In June 1866, Congress launched a plan that was more radical than Johnson's but more moderate than the Radicals wanted. After it passed, Congress sent it to the states for ratification as a new amendment to the Constitution — the 14th Amendment.

This amendment declared that black people were American citizens and said that no state could take their "life, liberty, or property, without due process of law" or "deny to any person ... the equal protection of the laws." The amendment prohibited any Confederate officer who had sworn before the war to protect the U.S. Constitution from holding

political office. This meant that most of the new state officers elected under Johnson's plan were ineligible for their jobs. The amendment also tried to push Southern states toward black suffrage by warning that a state's congressional representation would be reduced if black men were kept from voting.

Southern whites were outraged, and President Johnson supported them. He urged them not to ratify the 14th Amendment, assuring them that the Republicans would be swept out of power in the 1866 congressional elections. When that happened, Southern states could return to the Union under the president's plan.

Only Johnson's home state of Tennessee, which was controlled by the president's political enemies, ignored him. There, legislators passed the amendment, and Tennessee was readmitted to the Union. Whites in the other Southern states then turned on African Americans who they believed were the cause of the Reconstruction argument. During the summer of 1866, both Memphis and New Orleans exploded into race riots that left more than 80 blacks dead at the hands of white mobs.

Horrified by Southern white violence, voters backed Congress and gave Republicans more than two-thirds of the seats in the House of Representatives, enabling them to pass legislation with or without Johnson's approval. Congress launched its own program of reconstruction with the Military Reconstruction Act of March 2, 1867. This landmark piece of legislation divided the 10 unreconstructed states into five military districts overseen by military commanders. It also mandated that the Southern states write new constitutions. Confederates prohibited from holding office under the terms of the 14th Amendment could not vote for delegates to the constitutional conventions. All other men — black as well as white — could. Once elected, the new constitutional conventions were required to establish new state governments that guaranteed black suffrage and ratified the 14th Amendment. When these requirements were met, Southern states could apply to Congress for readmission to the Union.

Under these conditions, Southern states simply refused to start enrolling voters, preferring to remain under military control rather than allow black voters to participate in their new governments. To secure the new constitutions, Congress had to pass three more Reconstruction acts. Even when the U.S. military began voter registration, many white men refused to participate. Freedmen did. Their supporters pointed to their interest in political questions and their determination to make informed choices as proof that they were good citizens. Detractors insisted that freedmen were destroying the South's economy by attending political rallies instead of working in the fields.

The delegates elected under the Military Reconstruction Act wrote moderate constitutions guaranteeing to all men the right to vote and providing for taxation to support schools and other public services Southern states had not had previously. The majority of voters in seven Southern states — Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, and South Carolina — agreed to adopt the new constitutions and elected legislatures. These new bodies, in turn, ratified the 14th Amendment. In June 1868, Congress readmitted these seven states to the Union (Georgia was later returned to military rule). Only a year after its passage, the Military Reconstruction Act seemed to be a success.

Suffrage is the right to vote.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): The 14th Amendment granted citizenship to all people born in the United States.

PHOTO (COLOR): In this famous 1867 drawing by Alfred R. Waud, the first African American to vote casts his ballot.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): The meaning of this 1866 political cartoon is clear: Words and discussion are far superior to bloodshed.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): The January 23, 1886, issue of Harper's Weekly ran this illustration of the House of Representatives in session.

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By Heather Cox Richardson

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