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Reconstruction: Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again

By Toni Lee Robinson

The headlines screamed the good news. The Civil War was over! The North had triumphed. National rule and unity were secured, and slavery was abolished. The torn and weary nation could move on. But there was one big problem. Like Humpty Dumpty, the broken country needed someone to put it back together again.



Riot at Charleston 1866

Congress itself was but half a body. When the southern states seceded from the Union, the congressmen from nearly all of those states left Washington, D.C. Their seats in Congress remained empty. Now that the war was over, the government of America had to restore the defeated enemy within its own borders in order to heal itself.

Life in a country crushed by war is often grim. In the southern U.S., destruction was everywhere. Many homes, farms, and businesses had been burned. People struggled to find enough to eat.

Roads, fields, and railways lay in ruins. In some places, the iron rails had been taken by Union troops, heated, and twisted around tree trunks. These were called "Sherman's neckties", named after Union General William Sherman. The twisted, useless metal was a symbol of the shattered South.

President Lincoln and others had been planning for the rebuilding of the South long before the end of the war. This rebuilding project was called Reconstruction. Lincoln's plan called for pardon for those who promised to support the U.S. Constitution and to obey anti-slavery laws. This promise was called a loyalty oath. Governments could be set up in any state where ten percent of white men took the oath.

Lincoln saw the Reconstruction project as a way to help the South recover from the hardships of war and to heal the nation's bloody wounds. When questioned by a soldier about how to treat residents of a captured southern city, Lincoln replied "I'd let 'em up easy if I were you. I'd let 'em up easy."

Many members of Congress felt Lincoln's plan was far too lenient. They viewed Reconstruction as a chance to punish the South for its rebellion. They wanted to enforce the North's vision of a new way of life in the South. They passed the Wade-Davis Bill, demanding that over half of the white males in a state must swear loyalty before a state government could be formed.

President Lincoln quietly vetoed the bill and put his own plan into effect. This angered Congress. The members refused to allow representatives from newly formed state governments to join them. Congressmen bitterly criticized Lincoln and insisted that Congress alone had the authority to carry out Reconstruction.

Here, in a country already split by war, was another conflict. But the turbulent nation was to suffer an even heavier blow. On April 14, 1865, President Lincoln was assassinated. At his death, Vice-President Andrew Johnson became president.

Johnson's plans for rebuilding were even more hated by Congress than Lincoln's had been. So, the southern landscape that had seen many bloody battles was now the setting of a political war.

America was torn by violent quarrels. "All the king's horses and all the king's men" couldn't seem to fix it. How could it ever come together to care for its people?

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Questions

- _____ 1. What was the name of the project to rebuild the South?
- A. Regeneration
 - B. Destruction
 - C. Reconstruction
 - D. Restoration
- _____ 2. Of what substance were "Sherman's neckties" made?
- A. wooden boards
 - B. iron railroad rails
 - C. woolen fabric
 - D. discarded Union uniforms
- _____ 3. What was Lincoln's attitude toward the conquered South?
- A. He wanted the South to be a separate country.
 - B. He wanted to bring back slavery there.
 - C. He wanted to rebuild it and see the nation healed.
 - D. He disliked the South.
- _____ 4. What was Congress's attitude toward the South?
- A. They wanted the southern way of life for themselves.
 - B. They thought everyone should be pardoned.
 - C. They wished the South to return to self-government as soon as possible.
 - D. They wanted to punish Southerners for the rebellion.
- _____ 5. According to the Wade-Davis Bill, what percentage of white males were required to swear loyalty oaths before a new state government could be formed?
- A. 100 percent
 - B. 10 percent
 - C. 25 percent
 - D. over 50 percent

- _____ 6. What happened to disrupt President Lincoln's plans for rebuilding the South?
- A. He lost the election.
 - B. War with England interfered.
 - C. A hurricane caused major damage.
 - D. He was killed.
- _____ 7. Who was the second president to attempt Reconstruction?
- A. Johnson
 - B. Washington
 - C. Grant
 - D. Lincoln
- _____ 8. Who did Congress think should be in charge of Reconstruction?
- A. Congress
 - B. General Grant
 - C. Confederate officers
 - D. President Lincoln

What do you think was causing the divisions in the U.S. at the time of the Civil War and during Reconstruction?
