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The capital city of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia, lay in ruins after the Civil War in 1865.

Putting the Union Back Together

In one of his most famous speeches against slavery, Abraham Lincoln stated, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” He was not talking about a real house, though. He was talking about the United States. At the time of his speech, the Southern states depended on slavery to make their plantations profitable. The Northern states wanted to eliminate slavery. North and South disagreed violently, making the United States a “house divided.”

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Later, in that same speech, Lincoln said, “I do not expect the house to fall.” Tragically, for Abraham Lincoln and the American people, the house did fall. The North and the South went to war, and in the rubble of Civil War, more than 620,000 Americans lost their lives to battle and disease. (More than 400,000 were injured.) Never before had such a large house fallen with such terrible consequences.

A Plan for Forgiveness

Even before the war ended, though, Lincoln had worked on a plan to reconstruct the fallen house as smoothly and peacefully as possible. He knew people would want to be repaid for what they had lost in the war. They would even want revenge. Lincoln’s plan for Reconstruction called for the Confederacy (the South) and the Republic (the North) to forgive one another and to get back together quickly.

Lincoln’s assassination in April 1865 proved tragic, not only for him but also for the United States. Under Lincoln’s successor,



President Abraham Lincoln gives his first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation to his cabinet (from left): Edwin Stanton, Salmon Chase, Lincoln, Gideon Welles, Caleb Smith, William Seward, Montgomery Blair, Edward Bates.

Politics, As Usual

When the Civil War ended with a victory for the Union, the United States faced many difficult issues: How would the nation be reunited politically? What would be the political status of four million newly freed slaves?

With the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln in April 1865, the task of defining the political landscape fell to his successor, Vice President Andrew Johnson. Johnson's policies did little to help the former slaves and were more favorable to former white Confederates.

By 1866, Republicans in Congress had taken some control of Reconstruction. They passed the Reconstruction Acts, which placed the South under military rule, excluded former Confederate leaders from the political process, and encouraged African American men to register to vote.

This changed the political balance of power in the South. By 1868, voters in Southern states ratified new state constitutions and elected Republican officials to key offices. By 1870, the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, giving black men the right to vote.

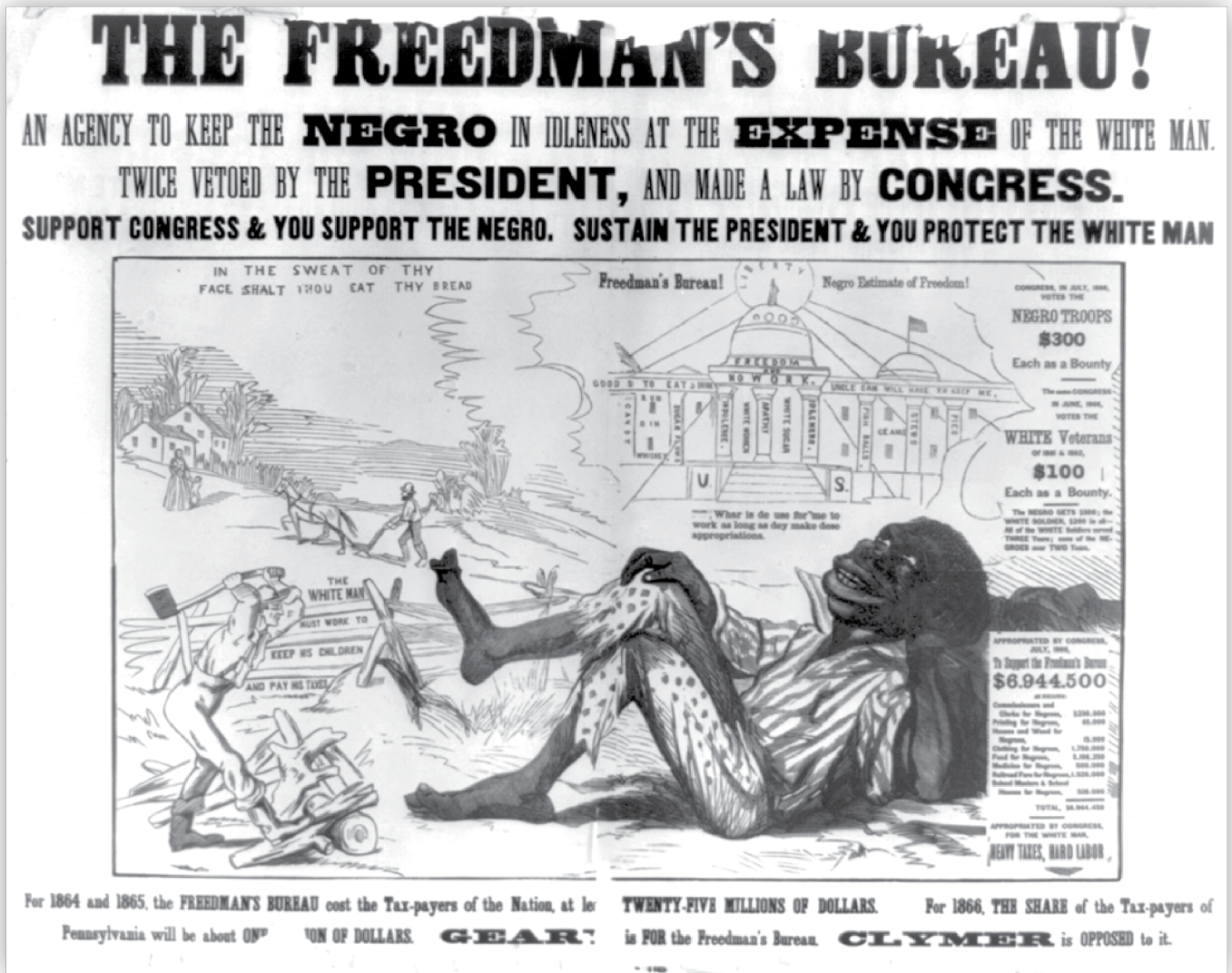
Republicans did not stay in power for long. White Democrats regrouped and organized against their opponents, many resorting to fraud and violence. By 1877, the efforts of Reconstruction had fallen by the wayside.

The end of Reconstruction meant the death of interracial democracy. Reconstruction governments were hardly perfect, but they did offer political influence to former slaves attempting to build new lives. With white Democrats back in charge, black Southerners were stripped of many of the political rights they had won earlier. Although legally free, African Americans had lost a great deal.

Andrew Johnson, a group of Radical Republicans took charge of Congress. While many of the new congressmen wanted to "bind up the wounds" of the nation, a few demanded revenge on the "proud traitors" from the South. Lincoln had wanted to let the Confederates rejoin the Union as soon as they promised to be loyal. Some members of Congress pushed to make it difficult and costly for the South to come back.

White Southerners felt Congress was harsh, but the new Radical Republicans did what they thought was necessary to rebuild the country "correctly." Not only did they appoint Northern generals to oversee Reconstruction, but they passed laws to make life better for freed slaves (or freedmen) and allow them the rights of full citizenship. Congress's most important actions were three constitutional amendments: the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments. The 13th Amendment (1865) outlawed slavery in the United States; the 14th Amendment (1868) guaranteed freed slaves the status of full citizens of the United States; and the 15th Amendment (1870) guaranteed freed male slaves the right to vote. All these amendments were necessary to give black men political equality.

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Rejoining the Union

Besides having to abide by these national laws, each Southern state had to set up a government based on both black and white voters. The Military Reconstruction Act 1867, divided the South into five military districts governed by tough Northern generals. These generals were required to oversee elections in which former Confederate leaders from the army and government could neither vote nor hold office, while freed slaves were encouraged to do so. This infuriated white southerners and fed the resentment that continued between North and South. Even so, these elections did produce a constitutional convention in each Southern state. The conventions then wrote new constitutions, which ensured every male citizen the right to vote, regardless of race. As each Southern

A newspaper political cartoon from the 1860s uses racial stereotypes and misinformation to persuade people to oppose the Freedman's Bureau. Cartoons like this appeared all over the country as defeated white Southerners tried to maintain their plantation lifestyle. The intent was to prevent emancipated African Americans from gaining civil and political rights.

state ratified its new constitution and chose a new, loyal government, it was approved by Congress to rejoin the Union.

The new state constitutions and the amendments to the U.S. Constitution succeeded in ending slavery and giving freedmen the right to vote. But laws cannot make people stop hating. Racism continued in both North and South. The South was determined to keep white men in power and to keep freedmen separate (or segregated). The North was little better.

Soon leaders in the South and North grew tired of Reconstruction. It was very expensive, and the temporary governments often were corrupt. In addition, new issues, such as tariffs, currency, and expansion in the West, sidetracked Northern leaders. Finally, in the Compromise of 1877, Northern Republicans agreed to let the South retain white supremacy if it would support the election of presidential candidate Rutherford B. Hayes.

Freedmen, But Free?

Reconstruction reunited the North and the South, and it ended slavery by putting the 13th Amendment to work. But Reconstruction failed to bind the races together. Nevertheless, it did take the first step toward overcoming racism. One agency that helped in this process was the Freedmen's Bureau, created by Congress in March 1865.

The Freedmen's Bureau offered economic relief to freed slaves and provided them with hospitals and schools. The bureau maintained more than 4,000 schools for African American children, most of which were staffed by Northern women who were sent South through the American Missionary Association. By the end of Reconstruction, 600,000 Southern blacks were in elementary schools.

Just as important as the elementary schools were the black colleges founded to train teachers and leaders. The federal government set up Howard University in Washington, D.C., while private foundations in the North set up industrial schools in the South for freedmen (such as Hampton Institute in Virginia and Fisk University in Tennessee).