

LESSON PLAN

Lesson 12: Political Violence and the Overthrow of Reconstruction

Essential Question

What can we learn from the history of Reconstruction as we work to strengthen democracy today?

Guiding Question

- What makes democracy fragile?
- What can be done to protect and strengthen democracy?

Learning Objectives

- Students will know that the “in” groups and “out” groups that result from racism and other socially constructed divisions in society can leave citizens vulnerable to ostracism, intimidation, and violence.
- Students will understand that violence and intimidation often silence the voices and votes of citizens, on which democracy depends.

About This Lesson

In previous lessons, students learned about challenges to the achievements of Radical Reconstruction, including the first wave of violent backlash in Southern states and the factors that led many Northerners to turn against federal policies that protected freedpeople. In this lesson, students will confront a new, more decisive period of violence that spread across the South between 1873 and 1876. Students will reflect on the factors that led to the success of this violence in precipitating the defeat of Republican governments in the former Confederacy, and they will consider the choices available to individual citizens and government officials who did not support this campaign of violence and intimidation.

Additional Context and Background

From 1873 to 1876, a campaign of violence and intimidation, organized by the Democratic Party, swept across several Southern states with the goal of toppling Republican-controlled state governments and removing federal officeholders from

power. Democrats at the time claimed that they were “redeeming” the South, a word that imbued their actions with a sense of religious significance. They argued that they were saving the South from evil—the “evil” of being controlled by Republicans, Northerners, and Black Americans. Historians continue to refer to this campaign to return the South to Democratic Party control as “Redemption,” even though most agree that the literal meaning of the word is not consistent with the way that they interpret the events of this period.

By learning about the violent methods that opponents of Reconstruction used to reestablish “home rule” in the former Confederate states, students will have the opportunity to deepen their thinking about a variety of important themes in this unit. These include:

- The corrosive effects of violence and intimidation on the ability of citizens to vote their consciences and speak their minds in a democracy
- How “in” groups and “out” groups that result from racism and other socially constructed divisions in society weaken a democracy, leave some groups of citizens vulnerable, and encourage other groups to either perpetuate or accept ostracism, intimidation, and violence
- The fragility of democracy and the difficulties of responding effectively to those who desire to undermine it

Early Democratic Victories in the South

While pinpointing the end of the Reconstruction era is a topic debated by historians today, there is no dispute in dating when each state of the former Confederacy returned to Democratic Party control in the 1870s:

| <u>Year</u> | <u>State</u> |
|-------------|-----------------------------|
| 1870 | Tennessee |
| 1871 | Georgia |
| 1873 | Texas |
| 1873 | Virginia |
| 1874 | Alabama |
| 1874 | Arkansas |
| 1875 | Mississippi |
| 1876 | Florida |
| 1876 | Louisiana |
| 1876 | North Carolina |
| 1876 | South Carolina ¹ |

¹ Eric Foner, *Freedom's Lawmakers: A Directory of Black Officeholders during Reconstruction*, revised ed. (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), xi–xxxii.

While violence and intimidation toward freedpeople and their white Republican allies occurred in every Southern state, by 1873 four states were already in the hands of a Democratic governor and legislature. In fact, the efforts to roll back the effects of Radical Reconstruction began as soon as those laws and policies took hold. For states in which Black Americans comprised small minorities of the population, “Redemption” came earliest. Tennessee and Virginia Democrats never lost control of their state legislatures, and they elected Democratic governors in 1870 and 1873, respectively. Georgia Democrats regained control of their state’s legislature in 1870 and the governorship in 1871. All of these states pioneered the implementation of poll taxes and similar measures, not forbidden by the Fifteenth Amendment, to further diminish the power of the African American voting bloc.² Meanwhile, Texas returned to Democratic rule in 1873, largely as a result of an influx of white immigrants who generally voted Democratic.³

These trends, combined with discontent with Republican governance in the face of the economic depression that began in 1873, enabled Democrats to regain control of the US House of Representatives in a historic landslide in 1874.

“Redemption” Violence

All of these factors combined to complicate efforts by the Grant administration to enforce Reconstruction policies and protect freedpeople; Grant no longer had the support of Congress or the public in such endeavors. As a result, a new wave of violence erupted in the South, and, unchecked, it spread from Louisiana to Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina.

The violence that swept several Southern states between 1873 and 1876 is notable for the following characteristics:

- It was planned and perpetrated by paramilitary groups allied with the Democratic Party in the South.
- These Democratic groups publicly and explicitly stated their intentions to “redeem” their states—to restore them to Democratic Party rule—by using violence and intimidation to affect elections.
- Unlike with Ku Klux Klan violence, perpetrators were not masked and often attacked political rallies and other public gatherings in broad daylight.⁴
- Perpetrators primarily targeted African American Republican voters and candidates. White Republicans were sometimes attacked and murdered, but more often they were singled out for social ostracism in their communities.

² Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, Perennial Classics ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 422–23.

³ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877*, Perennial Classics ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 549.

⁴ “Illegitimacy and Insurgency in the Reconstruction South,” in Michael Perman and Amy M. Taylor, eds., *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction: Documents and Essays*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2011), 459.

- The Democratic Party and associated paramilitary groups in the South explicitly used racism to divide their allies from their enemies.⁵ They said that Democrats belonged to the “white party” while Republicans belonged to the “Negro party.” White Republicans were called “traitors to their race.”

The White Line and the Red Shirts

In Mississippi and Louisiana, the White Line, a paramilitary arm of the Democratic Party, instigated much of the violence. Two of the most brazen White Line attacks occurred in Louisiana in 1873 and 1874. The murder of some 100 freedmen in Colfax, Louisiana, in April 1873 constituted perhaps the greatest loss of life from any racial incident in American history. The next year at Coushatta, Louisiana, White Line members ambushed and murdered six white Republican leaders and several African American witnesses, striking a significant blow against the Republican leadership in the state. Many White Line attacks followed a similar pattern, as described by historian Michael Perman: “Whites would provoke a public racial incident, and, after the brawl or riot that ensued, white men would scour the nearby countryside in search of blacks to beat up and kill.” Specific examples of incidents that followed this pattern are described in handouts in this lesson. In 1875, White Line violence resulted in Democrats winning elections for governor and a majority of seats in the legislature in Mississippi.⁶

The success of the White Line in Mississippi in 1875 inspired another Democratic paramilitary group to use violence during political campaigns the following year. This group, the Red Shirts, was mostly associated with South Carolina, but they were also active in North Carolina. Red Shirts murdered scores of African Americans and threatened still others during political campaigns in both states. Like the White Line, this group disrupted Republican political rallies and massacred Black state militia members, most notably at Hamburg on July 4, 1876. Instructions circulated to Red Shirt members stated that murder was preferable to threats: “A dead Radical is very harmless—a threatened Radical is often troublesome, sometimes dangerous, and always vindictive.”⁷

The goal of the White Line and Red Shirt campaigns was twofold: to intimidate African Americans from voting and to encourage more white Southerners to go to the polls. Perman points out the irony of using violence to commandeer the machinery of democracy: “Lawless and utterly undemocratic means were employed to secure the

⁵ “Illegitimacy and Insurgency in the Reconstruction South,” in Michael Perman and Amy M. Taylor, eds., *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction: Documents and Essays*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2011), 459.

⁶ “Illegitimacy and Insurgency in the Reconstruction South,” in Michael Perman and Amy M. Taylor, eds., *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction: Documents and Essays*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2011), 460.

⁷ In Dorothy Sterling, ed., *The Trouble They Seen: The Story of Reconstruction in the Words of African Americans* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1994), 465.

desired outcome, which was to win a lawful, democratic election.”⁸ While these groups succeeded at returning their state governments to the Democratic Party, one aspect of their strategy may have failed. According to election records, the number of voters from African American communities actually rose at the height of the violence. However, the violent campaigns were so successful at driving more white Southerners to the polls that “home rule” was restored across the South by the late 1870s.⁹

Pleas for Federal Intervention

In response to the “Redemption” campaign of violence, Southern Republican governors again called for the assistance of the federal government, as they did in response to Ku Klux Klan violence a few years before. This time Grant’s options were limited. Since Democrats controlled the US House of Representatives after 1874, any effort by Grant to intervene would be in defiance of Congress. Additionally, in 1876 the Supreme Court overturned the federal convictions of two perpetrators of the Colfax massacre and declared parts of the Enforcement Acts of the early 1870s unconstitutional. The court ruled that under these laws, the federal government only had the right to stop states from denying the rights of citizens. If individuals acted to deprive other individuals of their rights, only states, not the federal government, could prosecute them. Freedpeople would have to rely on the governments of their own states, increasingly violent and increasingly Democratic, to protect them.

Therefore, despite Grant’s stated desire to protect the Black citizens of the South, his authority to do so was diminished. In response to Mississippi Governor Adelbert Ames’s plea for intervention, Grant famously responded, “The whole public are tired out with these annual autumnal outbreaks in the South, and the great majority are ready now to condemn any interference on the part of the Government.”¹⁰ After sympathetically responding to South Carolina Governor Daniel Chamberlain’s plea, Grant nevertheless asserted that any protection for freedpeople there would have to be provided “without aid from the Federal government.”

The Disputed 1876 Election

The 1876 election spelled the end of Republican governments in the former Confederacy and their protection for freedpeople. The presidential contest between Republican Rutherford B. Hayes and Democrat Samuel Tilden came down to the election results

⁸“Illegitimacy and Insurgency in the Reconstruction South,” in Michael Perman and Amy M. Taylor, eds., *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction: Documents and Essays*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2011), 461.

⁹ “Illegitimacy and Insurgency in the Reconstruction South,” in Michael Perman and Amy M. Taylor, eds., *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction: Documents and Essays*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2011), 460–61.

¹⁰ Michael Fitzgerald, *Splendid Failure: Postwar Reconstruction in the American South* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007), 191.

of South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana; the candidate who received the electoral votes from those three states would win. Widespread violence, intimidation, and fraud helped Tilden and Democratic governors win the vote counts in all three states. Amid the controversy following the disputed results in those states, both parties claimed victory and inaugurated separate governors in South Carolina and Louisiana (while Florida's supreme court settled the dispute there).

Congress appointed a 15-member commission to decide the presidential election, and its members voted for Hayes by a vote of eight to seven. The state elections in South Carolina and Louisiana remained unresolved, and with the two Southern states each having inaugurated two opposing governments, fears of a new civil war spread. To defuse the situation, President Hayes agreed to remove federal troops in South Carolina and Louisiana, leaving no protection for the Republican governments and thus ending them. "Home rule" now prevailed, and Democratic governments now controlled all Southern states. Historians commonly cite Hayes's removal of the few remaining federal troops from the South as the end of the Reconstruction era.¹¹

While the return of the former Confederate states to Democratic Party rule was the result of a variety of political, social, and economic factors, the role of violence and intimidation by Democratic paramilitary groups in bringing about this outcome is unquestionable. By confronting the violence of this period of American history, students can reflect more deeply on the fragility of democracy and the constant struggle of maintaining a healthy democratic society.

Notes to the Teacher

1. Note About the "N" Word

Election Violence in Mississippi (1875) and **A Teacher Describes Violence and Intimidation (1875)** in this lesson include the "N" word. In these documents, we have chosen to let the word remain as it originally appeared, without any substitution. The dehumanizing power of this term and the ease with which some Americans have used it to describe their fellow human beings is central to understanding the themes of identity and human behavior at the heart of the unit.

The dehumanizing power and loaded history of the "N" word cannot be ignored, nor can the impact it can have on students if not handled sensitively. We advise against speaking this word out loud in the classroom, but since it appears in this lesson, it is necessary to acknowledge it, understand its problematic nature, and set guidelines for students when reading aloud or quoting from the text (e.g., to say "the 'N'-word" when students encounter it spelled out in full in a text). Otherwise, the presence of

¹¹ Eric Foner, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Vintage Books, 2006), 198–99.

this word might both harm students and distract them from an open discussion on a particular topic.

2. Teaching Emotionally Challenging Content

In this lesson, students will encounter emotionally challenging content, including depictions of violence. Consider briefly reviewing the class contract with students before beginning the lesson. This will help reinforce the norms you have established and reinforce the classroom as a safe space for students to voice concerns, questions, or emotions that may arise.

3. Note on Language about the “Redemption” Campaign

In the mid-1870s, paramilitary groups aligned with the Democratic Party carried out a campaign of violence throughout Republican-controlled states in the South that intimidated, threatened, and killed enough Black and Republican voters to enable white supremacist Democrats to regain control of every former Confederate state. These paramilitary groups called themselves “Redeemers” because they claimed that they were bringing about “redemption” for the supposed misrule of Republican and Black officeholders. Because these terms appear so often in the historical record, contemporary historians continue to refer to this wave of violence as the “Redemption” campaign, even though the literal meaning of the term does not reflect contemporary attitudes and interpretations about what happened. When referring to this campaign of racial and political violence, we use quotations around the words “Redemption” and “Redeemer” to indicate this.

Materials

- **Video:** [Violence and Backlash](#) (9:40–16:45)
- **Reading:** South Carolina “Red Shirts” Battle Plan (1876)
- **Reading:** Election Violence in Mississippi (1875)
- **Reading:** A Teacher Describes Violence and Intimidation (1875)
- **Reading:** Election Day in Clinton, Mississippi (1875)
- **Image:** [“Of Course He Votes the Democratic Ticket” \(1876\)](#)

Activities

1. Provide Context about the End of Reconstruction

Show the rest of the video [Violence and Backlash](#) (9:40–16:45). Preview the following questions with students before showing the video:

- What events shifted people’s priorities about the rights of freedpeople? How

did events that began in 1873 and 1874 shift how the federal government made decisions about whose rights and safety it would protect?

- Why did violence return after the government “broke the back of the Klan”? How was it different?
- How does George Lipsitz interpret the meaning of violence during Reconstruction?

2. Confronting “Redemption” Violence

The goal of the next activity is for students to learn about and respond to individual incidents of violence against freedpeople and white Republicans in the mid-1870s and to begin to understand why this wave of terror was so decisive in ending Republican control of Southern state governments.

Explain to students that they will now analyze individual reports of violence in Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina in the years 1874 to 1876, and they will consider the effects of this violence on the health of democracy in these states. Give each student one of the following documents:

- **South Carolina “Red Shirts” Battle Plan (1876)**
- **Election Violence in Mississippi (1875)**
- **A Teacher Describes Violence and Intimidation (1875)**
- **Election Day in Clinton, Mississippi (1875)**
- **[“Of Course He Votes the Democratic Ticket” \(1876\)](#)**

Explain to students that their task is to read the document they have been assigned and to record the following in their journals:

- One to three phrases or sentences from the document that capture the essence of the events it describes
- A brief description of a choice that an individual made during the events described in the document and the consequences of that choice
- A color that represents how they think the events described in the document impacted the health of democracy (a choice that they will need to be able to explain in the next class period)

4. Debriefing Redemption Violence

Ask students to work in pairs or small groups to discuss the individual reports of violence they analyzed in the previous activity. Students can share with their classmates the words, phrases, and sentences they identified from their documents, discuss the choices they observed, and then explain the color they chose to

represent the event's impact on the health of democracy. After students have had sufficient time to share their work with each other, you might share the following quotation from historian Michael Perman with the whole group:

Lawless and utterly undemocratic means were employed to secure the desired outcome, which was to win a lawful, democratic election.¹²

Discuss as a class how the documents that students examined support or refute Perman's claim. Make sure that students use specific evidence from their documents in the discussion.

¹² Perman, *Major Problems in the Civil War and Reconstruction*, 461.