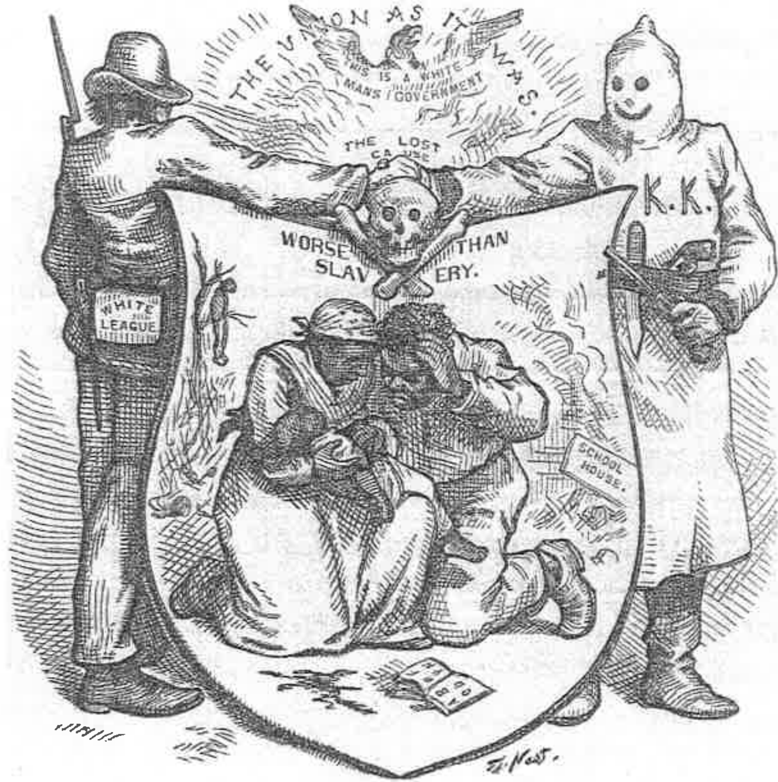

Plate 20. "The Union as It Was, the Lost Cause Worse than Slavery." Published in the autumn of 1874, Thomas Nast's biting cartoon suggested that African Americans faced a perilous future in former Confederate states as Reconstruction drew to a close.

CHAPTER 11

THE END OF RECONSTRUCTION, 1868-1877

"WHAT THE AMERICAN public always wants," a perceptive critic once observed, "is a tragedy with a happy ending." The famous agreement forged at Appomattox yields a tidy and triumphant conclusion to the Civil War, and U. S. Grant's election to the presidency in 1868 seemingly prepared the way for Republicans to solidify their impressive record of legislative accomplishment by fulfilling the promise of emancipation. Yet the final years of the Reconstruction Era—a period as a whole often described as an "unfinished revolution" or a "splendid failure"—unfolded as a tragedy, yes, but without the happy ending. Major issues left unsettled by the war itself, such as self-determination, political democracy, race relations, and state rights, were contested during the final years of Reconstruction, when Republican regimes held sway for differing lengths of time in much of the former Confederacy. The

fate of the national two-party system, as well as the structure of state and local politics across the South, hinged, to a significant degree, on how Republicans fared in implementing congressional Reconstruction from 1868 to 1876.

During these years, America's global power expanded, spectacular economic changes reshaped both factories and farms, and the forces of immigration, urbanization, and industrialization brought urgent challenges that demanded new solutions—but no issue commanded more attention than Reconstruction because of its importance to the generation that had fought the Civil War. Northerners wished for harmony with the white southern population, while desiring to define freedom's meaning for the formerly enslaved men and women. Republicans pursued legislative and constitutional avenues to commit the country to equality before the law regardless of race, to define citizenship to include black people, and to enhance the power of the national state to protect the rights of all citizens.

In 1867, Radical Reconstruction awarded black men the right to vote in the South, beginning a momentous experiment in interracial democracy. Appreciating the great importance of the black vote for their party's future, in February 1869 the outgoing Republican Congress strove to guarantee African American suffrage with the last of the three Reconstruction amendments. The Fifteenth Amendment stated that the "right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." It passed both houses of Congress and went to the states, where, because Republicans controlled the majority of the legislatures, it obtained the required three-fourths majority for ratification by March 1870. The Fifteenth Amendment represented another huge advancement for black Americans, which, like emancipation, had been unimaginable a short while before.

The final stage of Reconstruction, the "Redemption" of the South, culminated with the contested presidential election of 1876. The compromise that brought Republican Rutherford B. Hayes to the White House is usually credited with ending the northern attempt to remake the former Confederate States so black and white people could coexist peacefully and where black men could vote without fear of violent reprisals. In the end, the Union held. Reconstruction's accomplishments were considerable, but full realization of the potential political and social fruits of emancipation proved too formidable a goal in a nation where most white people never had been primarily concerned with the status of black people. An uneasy white reconciliation in the reunited nation proved easier to achieve than black equality, and by 1876 the northern people, most of whom would have identified reunion as the primary object and success of the war, had withdrawn their support for the Republican version of Reconstruction.

I. THE SOUTHERN REPUBLICAN COALITION IN POWER

When President Grant assumed office in 1869, the majority of the ex-Confederate states had Reconstruction governments in place. Republican rule rested on black votes and restrictions on white suffrage. The Republican vision of Reconstruction—a free-labor society in the South, protection and civil rights guaranteed for its freedpeople, and a competitive two-party system—was ready to be tested in a great experiment in biracial governance. Could African Americans be accepted as one more group of law-abiding citizens who could claim a place beside their former masters in the South? Or would Reconstruction leave them "nothing but freedom?"

Overseeing the critical policy would be a southern Republican Party that had no natural roots in the region. Establishment of these "Black Republican" governments met with immediate opposition from violent white supremacists intent on overturning them and restoring Democratic Party rule. Throughout congressional Reconstruction, the majority of the southern white population viewed the Republicans as

an instrument of despised change. Outside the South, the party attracted the most prosperous, educated, and influential elements of the population and was supported by an increasingly powerful block of middle-class voters. In contrast, the party's southern base consisted of the poor, the illiterate, the powerless whites, and the black voters; southern Republicans held power but desperately needed long-term support of the freedmen, of some southern whites, and of northern men who made their postwar careers in the South.

African Americans formed by far the largest—80 percent or more—part of the fragile Republican coalition. With the support of President Grant and the protection of the U.S. Army, the freedmen joined Union Leagues (organized political groups supporting Republicans), voted enthusiastically, engaged in other political actions, and were elected to all levels of government throughout the South. South Carolina and Louisiana had a majority of black legislators, and seventeen African Americans were elected to the U.S. Congress, including the first two to serve in the U.S. Senate: Hiram R. Revels and Blanche K. Bruce, both of Mississippi. The research of modern scholars demonstrates that most black officeholders were competent and intelligent men, and that ordinary black voters cast their votes to uphold the new Republican state governments.

Black leaders came mostly from the elite of the community. A majority were literate and educated, and many had enjoyed free status before the Civil War. Often professionals who worked as ministers, farmers, artisans, and small businessmen, prominent African Americans also included a large number of veterans of the Union army. Francis L. Cardozo from South Carolina, who served as that state's secretary of state and treasurer, attended the University of Glasgow. Hiram Revels was a North Carolina-born minister and educator, while Ben Turner of Alabama, an ex-slave who described himself as "destitute of education," made his reputation in the U.S. Congress as a champion for black literacy. South Carolina congressman Joseph H. Rainey worked as a barber

before the war and spent his years as a national legislator urging greater enforcement of civil rights laws.

By the end of Reconstruction, more than six hundred African American men served as legislators. As a group, they contradicted a major myth of Reconstruction promulgated in the early twentieth century by historians who described elected black officials as ignorant or incompetent. A majority of black officeholders managed effectively the duties of their offices. Most ex-slaves were illiterate, but blame for that condition must be placed on a system that denied them access to education. Yet although black men made undeniable political gains, the vast gap between the Republican Party's leadership and its base of illiterate ex-slaves grew ever more problematical.

Indeed, Republican politicians, whether black or white, could offer little hope to freedpeople who were often less interested in advances in the legislature or in demanding their civil rights on public transportation in Atlanta than in improving their economic fortunes. They were engaged in a daily struggle to find a place for themselves and their families in the new South. Black politicians pressed for confiscation and redistribution of land from white planters to freedpeople, but the majority of white Republicans expressed scant support. The entire region suffered from economic depression and looked to reviving the cotton market as a way to brighten prospects. This required adjustments and compromises from the former plantation owners as well as the black labor force. Sharecropping provided the compromise but offered little upward mobility. It brought black laborers, who farmed parcels of a white owner's land in return for a share of the profits, into dependency and debt, making it difficult to live with dignity. Although many black southerners carved out relatively stable lives as property owners, others moved from lives of chattel slavery to lives of debt peonage. No longer enslaved, most sharecroppers nonetheless missed out on the economic benefits they had expected from emancipation. Especially common among African Americans, sharecropping also ensnared many white

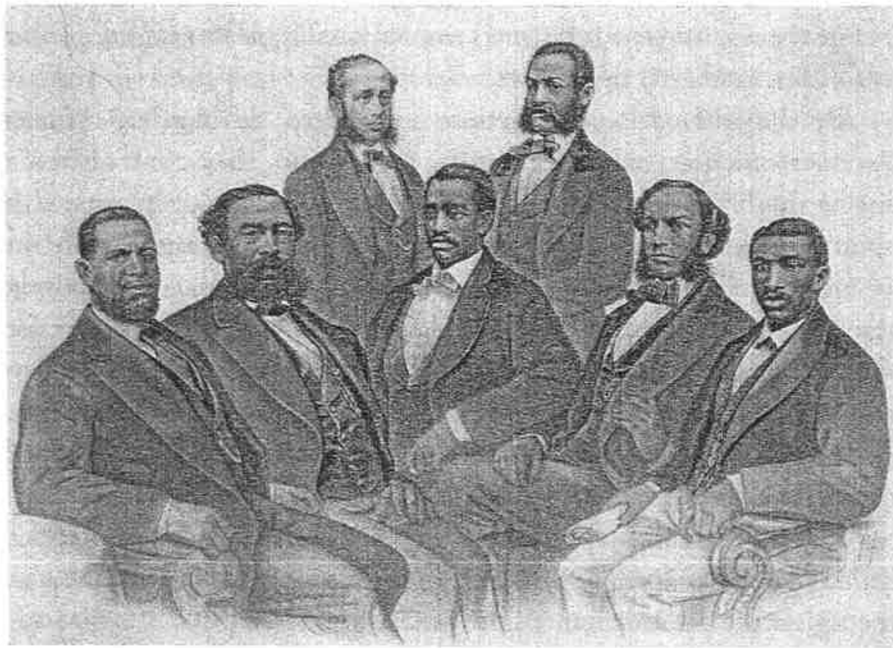

Plate 21. "The First Colored Senator and Representatives." In 1872, Currier and Ives offered this group portrait of African Americans who served in the U.S. Congress during Reconstruction.

farmers. Yeomen who sought to participate in staple crop production were caught in the web of debt that merchants could spin. They, too, had hopes for a Republican Reconstruction that would improve their prospects.

"Scalawag," a derogatory term meaning "a low worthless fellow," referred to white southerners who voted with the Republican Party during Reconstruction. The second largest element of the Republican coalition, they welcomed the opportunity to diminish or destroy the power of planters they believed had kept the prewar South backward and dependent. Scalawags tended to be Unionists during the Civil War and lived in the uplands of Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, Arkansas, and Alabama. Although the scalawags ranged widely in

terms of their social standing, economic background, and political loyalties, they did share common beliefs. First and foremost, they wanted the South to enjoy a progressive and prosperous economy based upon the benefits of free labor and industrialization.

James L. Alcorn of Mississippi ranked among the more prominent scalawags. A former Whig and Confederate officer elected as a Republican governor, he supported both emancipation and the Fourteenth Amendment and was determined to implement an agenda to bring his state into the modern world. Scorned by many of their fellow southerners, scalawags such as Alcorn dominated state public offices, working toward a more economically progressive and diverse South. Scalawags welcomed northern investment and technology that promised new or improved roads and bridges and a substantially enlarged railroad system. They sought opportunities to build or expand businesses and factories and to raise the standard of living for all, not just the class of plantation owners who dominated the prewar economy.

Other notable scalawags included Georgia governor Joseph E. Brown and the former Confederate general James Longstreet, who in 1867 proclaimed that defeated southerners should accept the new order. A supporter and friend of U. S. Grant, Longstreet joined the Republicans and moved to New Orleans, where he worked in a cotton firm and headed an insurance company. Eventually he held a number of prominent positions in the federal government, earning the permanent scorn of numerous "unreconstructed" ex-Confederates who dismissed the fact that he had been one of Robert E. Lee's most trusted lieutenants. The wealthier scalawags of New Orleans and Atlanta looked forward to, and lobbied for, government-sponsored subsidies and loans for railroad construction and textile mills.

Most scalawags were neither prominent nor wealthy, and their continued support represented a vital part of the Republican Party's future in the region. Simply put, the party could not sustain itself without backing from a diverse and substantial group of white men. The plain

hardworking farmers of the region—representing the greatest number of the scalawags—expected the Republicans to make good on their pledge for debt relief and cheap land. The yeomanry wanted to put the vestiges of a slavery-based economy behind them, and they looked forward to the material benefits of Unionism for themselves and their children, including increased access to education and better employment.

As the 1860s came to an end and the new decade began, scalawags came under increasing pressure to join a resurgent white Democratic Party. A widely circulated taunt defined a scalawag as "a native born white man who says he is no better than a negro and tells the truth when he says it." Foreshadowing the ultimate failure of the Republican coalition, most scalawags rejected any move toward social or political equality with the former slaves, ultimately adhering to the region's pervasive racism.

The third and smallest part of the Republican coalition was composed of northern whites who came south during the war and settled there afterward. Although tiny in number—perhaps 2 percent of the overall southern Republican vote—they dominated the party's leadership, holding 30 percent of the elected positions. These men were often former Union soldiers, Freedmen's Bureau agents, businessmen, lawyers, doctors, journalists, missionaries, engineers, and educators. Called "carpetbaggers," a term coined by hostile southern whites implying that all their worldly belongings could fit into a carpetbag suitcase, they provided a solid core of leadership for the party. Albion W. Tourgée and Oliver Otis Howard were noteworthy representatives of the group. Tourgée, an author and soldier, moved to North Carolina just after the war and distinguished himself as a superior court judge fighting for black equality and against the Ku Klux Klan. Howard boasted a more celebrated career. A native of Maine, corps commander with the Army of the Potomac who later headed the Army of the Tennessee, and commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, he founded Washington's Howard

University, a black college, in 1867. Carpetbag politicians made up a highly educated group who, although often idealistic, also migrated for the South's sunny weather and economic opportunities. As businessmen, judges, or public officials, their collective ambition sought to bring a modern social and economic structure to the region, while at the same time dramatically widening the democratic possibilities for ordinary people. More than sixty northerners served in the U.S. Congress from the southern states, while nine carpetbaggers served as Reconstruction governors, including New England-born U.S. senator and Mississippi governor Adelbert Ames, who fought a losing battle for the political and equal rights of black people in the Magnolia State.

II. REPUBLICAN STATE GOVERNMENTS AT WORK AND UNDER FIRE

Republican governments brought many positive changes to the South in a short period. Several states, including South Carolina with its black-dominated legislature, passed progressive civil rights laws, and in most states the judicial system underwent a needed reorganization. For the first time and with assistance from northern philanthropists, Republicans established public schools for both races. State financial aid supported railroad development and helped rebuild damaged or destroyed infrastructure, while industrial commissions worked to attract northern capital. These Republican reforms were worthy but also expensive. By 1870, tax rates rose to three or four times their 1860 levels. The rising costs of government fell hardest on small white landowners, who responded by forming taxpayers associations in every state to protest. Many withheld their taxes, forcing some state governments into a serious fiscal crisis. The anti-tax movement that swept across the South strengthened the Democrats' argument regarding the general inefficiency, wastefulness, and corruption of Republican rule.

Unfortunately Democratic charges contained considerable truth.

Republican-dominated state houses were notably plagued by violence, corruption, and political turmoil. Opponents accused numerous Republican state legislators of accepting railroad bribes, seizing profits from shady land deals, and awarding business contracts to friends and supporters. Funds for public schools mysteriously disappeared into the wrong pockets. Louisiana's corruption was particularly notorious, and its malfeasance received national press coverage. Inexperienced governments trying to solve longstanding and difficult problems can explain some of the corruption. In reality, this kind of financial and political chicanery was widespread in the decades after the Civil War. The postwar decades featured unprecedented economic growth, with great quantities of cash flowing from big business interests into friendly politicians' pockets. Northern states, including New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana, experienced their own massive corruption stories that reached the federal level when the Crédit Mobilier and Whiskey Ring scandals rocked Grant's administration. The corruption and graft, high tax rates, and wasteful spending allowed Democrats to create and exploit a portrait of a helpless and beaten white population whose fortunes were dependent on the wiles and whims of incompetent blacks, greedy scalawags, and vengeful carpetbaggers. Political attacks on southern Republican governments following this script helped the Democratic Party bring Reconstruction to a thudding halt.

The unexpected success of black officeholders, improvements in literacy among the ex-slave population, and economic advancements by some freedpeople both incited and united a powerful political drive toward instituting a new system of white supremacy. "The great and paramount issue is Shall Negroes or White Men Rule?" cried a Democratic politician. By far the most potent white outrage focused on black suffrage and the presumed racial equality it bestowed. Republican power in the South, made possible by African American voters, had to be smashed and blacks returned to a subordinate position. The political comeback of the Democratic Party relied on, and benefited from, a

reign of terror to intimidate black and white Republican leaders and voters.

The most notorious terrorist group, among many, was the Ku Klux Klan. It attracted members from all ranks of southern society, including veterans and dozens of former Confederate officers. The hooded organization caused constant turmoil in numerous election cycles in every former Confederate state. Few in the North imagined the consequences of widespread lawlessness that undermined Reconstruction. KKK-inspired voter intimidation, numerous political murders, and general terror paralyzed Republican governments in Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and the Carolinas in the late 1860s and early 1870s. A Klan leader, the Confederate military hero Nathan Bedford Forrest, explained the targeting: "I have no powder to burn killing negroes. I intend to kill radicals."

Terrorism did not go unchallenged. Republicans defended themselves by organizing militias to capture Klan members and bring them to justice. Often they returned from their forays to burned-out homes or found their families frightened by threats. Even if Klan perpetrators were caught, white southern juries would not convict. For example, a Mississippi district attorney's case fell apart when five witnesses were killed. This type of occurrence exerted a chilling effect on jurors everywhere. One response lay in the imposition of martial law enforced by local or state militias. Many Republican governors and other officials proved reluctant to take this unpopular step, fearing an even worse backlash from the Klan.

The actions taken in 1869 by one carpetbag governor, Clayton Powell of Arkansas, offered an example of strong state leadership. A Union army veteran who fought guerrillas in Missouri, Powell organized black and white militias under the command of Union army veterans, ordered the militia to capture and arrest Klan members who committed election outrages, and proclaimed martial law in affected counties. Military courts tried the Klansmen, several of whom received

death sentences carried out by a firing squad. Powell effectively broke the Klansmen's power in Arkansas, but other states did not fare as well. As the Klan grew ever bolder, beleaguered state and local officials pleaded with the federal government for assistance in maintaining order.

In response, President Grant signed into law three measures known as the Force Acts of 1870-71. These enabled him to use the power of the federal government to restore order by sending troops, imposing martial law, and suspending the writ of habeas corpus. In addition, Grant appointed a proactive attorney general, Amos T. Akerman, and established the Department of Justice as a part of the cabinet. Akerman wielded his power through federal marshals and military forces to arrest thousands of Klansmen in several states. Although only sixty-five Klansmen went to federal prison, Grant's strong response made the presidential election of 1872 the "fairest and freest" in the South until the late twentieth century.

The Force Acts helped smash the KKK, but their negative impact on the fate of Reconstruction among northerners was profound. The actions taken under the law, however justified, violated the cherished American belief in the separation of powers. Most citizens assumed that once the Civil War ended, state rights and a national government whose powers were limited would again prevail. Across the country, Democratic newspapers vilified Grant for imposing a "military dictatorship" on the helpless region. He defended his actions as undertaken only when "acts of violence . . . render the power of the State and its officers unequal to the task of protecting life and property and securing public order therein." This explanation fell on increasingly deaf ears in the North as well as the South.

III. RETREAT FROM RECONSTRUCTION AND SOUTHERN REDEMPTION

Ulysses S. Grant won reelection in 1872 handily, overcoming a se-

rious challenge from anti-Reconstruction Democrats and dissatisfied Republicans. But Republicans, who sustained majorities in both houses of Congress that year, noted that popular enthusiasm for a harsh Reconstruction had waned. In the 1870s, the enormous difficulty of reconstructing the South belied a formerly optimistic vision of an easy reunion. Harmony between the sections clearly could not be achieved quickly. In fact, it had become a huge undertaking that involved not only readmitting the seceded states but also reinventing a South without slavery, restoring a semblance of harmony between former enemies, and rebuilding the Southern infrastructure and economy destroyed by the conflict. As optimism increasingly gave way to a practical desire to let the southern states exercise "home rule," congressional resistance to leniency toward former rebels lessened. In 1872, Congress passed an Amnesty Act that removed officeholding disabilities for everyone except a few of the highest-ranking politicians and military officers of the former Confederacy. (In 1898, Congress issued a universal amnesty for all those who had not been granted it in earlier acts.)

In the 1870s, both the federal government and the northern voters began to tire of the continual fight to reconstruct their former foes. Other issues, such as the Indian wars in the West, began to draw attention and energy away from southern problems. Republicans lost badly at the ballot box in 1874, as negative reactions to the devastating depression of 1873 restored Democratic control of the U.S. House of Representatives for the first time since 1859. Meanwhile, the Republican coalition weakened under relentless pressure from white Democrats in the South, who refused to support what they considered illegally constituted state governments. The Democratic cry that Republicans had denied votes to competent white southern voters while enabling "unfit" African Americans to cast ballots resonated with many northerners. Southerners railed against "Black Republicanism" and fought against "Negro rule." Nothing seemed to stop the crumbling of the Republican Party and the reemergence of southern Democrats. When

whites regained control of their state governments, they immediately removed African Americans from office and did whatever possible to deny black voters their voice in politics.

By 1876, southern Republican governments remained only in Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina. After fraud marred the closely fought presidential election of 1876, backroom deals and a series of compromises allowed Republican Rutherford B. Hayes to take the White House over Democrat Samuel B. Tilden. Despite the fact that the Republican Party relied on African American votes for their power in the South, Hayes ended Reconstruction when he pulled the last U.S. troops out of the region. By April 1877, "Redemption" was complete with all states of the former Confederacy again under Democratic rule.

The election of 1876 and its aftermath solidified a status quo that remained in place for the remainder of the nineteenth century. Republicans controlled the majority of northern voters and held a virtual monopoly on the presidency. Although elections were usually close, every president between 1860 and 1900, with the exception of Grover Cleveland, was a Republican and all but Lincoln a veteran of the Union army. The Democrats, meanwhile, typically controlled the House of Representatives, dominated the "Solid South," and held power in a number of northern localities, particularly New York City. African Americans, most of them still living in the South, were largely denied a voice in politics. It would take another depression, in 1932, to begin the historic transformation of the Democratic Party from its antebellum incarnation as a pro-slavery and state rights political organization to its later liberal incarnation.

One of the most controversial eras in American history, congressional Reconstruction, until the 1960s, was widely depicted in popular culture as well as in textbooks as an experiment gone terribly wrong. According to this interpretation, only when the South's white Democratic "Redeemers" wrested state governments from the clutches of the Republican Party and occupying Federal troops did sanity again prevail

throughout the region. Current history books present a far more positive and complex depiction of the era, although scholars continue to debate its successes and failures. Most historians do not find it surprising that the Republican Party's control in the South lasted fewer than ten years, but many do find it surprising that it ever was able to wield any power at all.

Was Reconstruction a success or failure? The overriding goal of the war for most loyal citizens had been restoration of the Union. By the measure of reestablishing political, economic, and social relations between North and South, Reconstruction was a success. By 1876, the nation was stable and strong. If another goal was to fulfill the promise of emancipation by bringing justice to the freedpeople, then it was a failure. Four million Americans had cast off the shackles of slavery, but poverty and racism severely limited their freedom. Yet the judgment of failure should be qualified. African Americans tested the limits of freedom and found great meaning in their new family and community lives. By late 1866, for example, Charleston's African American community had built eleven churches in the city. By 1869, the Freedmen's Bureau was in charge of 3,000 schools that educated over 150,000 black children throughout the states of the ex-Confederacy. Half of the teachers in those schools were African American. Finally, the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments provided the foundation for the civil rights movement of the 1960s, when some of the major promises of the Civil War and Reconstruction era were finally fulfilled. The Union had been saved and the seeds for a more just and equitable society sown during the course of a seismic war and its aftermath.