

The Four Infamous Reconstruction Acts Of the United States Government

[Source: United States Statutes at Large, XIV, 428-29; XV, 2-4, 14-16, 41, reprinted in Robert W. Johannsen, Reconstruction, 1865-1877 (New York: Free Press, 1970), pages 89-92.]

First Reconstruction Act - March 2, 1867 - (passed over President Johnson's veto)

An Act to provide for the more efficient Government of the Rebel States

WHEREAS no legal State governments or adequate protection for life or property now exists in the rebel States of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Florida, Texas, and Arkansas; and whereas it is necessary that peace and good order should be enforced in said States until loyal and republican State governments can be legally established: Therefore,

Be it enacted . . . , That said rebel States shall be divided into military districts and made subject to the military authority of the United States as hereinafter prescribed, and for that purpose Virginia shall constitute the first district; North Carolina and South Carolina the second district; Georgia, Alabama, and Florida the third district; Mississippi and Arkansas the fourth district; and Louisiana and Texas the fifth district.

SECTION 2. And be it further enacted, That it shall be the duty of the President to assign to the command of each of said districts an officer of the army, not below the rank of brigadier-general, and to detail a sufficient military force to enable such officer to perform his duties and enforce his authority within the district to which he is assigned.

SECTION 3. And be it further enacted, That it shall be the duty of each officer assigned as aforesaid, to protect all persons in their rights of person and property, to suppress insurrection, disorder, and violence, and to punish, or cause to be punished, all disturbers of the public peace and criminals; and to this end he may allow local civil tribunals to take jurisdiction of and to try offenders, or, when in his judgment it may be necessary for the trial of offenders, he shall have power to organize military commissions or tribunals for that purpose, and all interference under color of State authority with the exercise of military authority under this act, shall be null and void.

SECTION 4. And be it further enacted, That all persons put under military arrest by virtue of this act shall be tried without unnecessary delay, and no cruel or unusual punishment shall be inflicted, and no sentence of any military commission or tribunal hereby authorized, affecting the life or liberty of any person, shall be executed until it is approved by the officer in command of the district, and the laws and regulations for the government of the army shall not be affected by this act, except in so far as they conflict with its provisions: Provided, That no sentence of death under the provisions of this act shall be carried into effect without the approval of the President.

SECTION 5. And be it further enacted, That when the people of any one of said rebel States shall have formed a constitution of government in conformity with the Constitution of the United States in all respects, framed by a convention of delegates elected by the male citizens of said State, twenty-one years old and upward, of whatever race, color, or previous condition, who have been resident in said State for one year previous to the day of such election, except such as may be disfranchised for participation in the rebellion or for felony at common law, and when such constitution shall provide that the elective franchise shall be enjoyed by all persons as have the qualifications herein stated for electors of delegates, and when such constitution shall be ratified by a majority of the persons voting

on the question of ratification who are qualified as electors for delegates, and when such constitution shall have been submitted to Congress for examination and approval, and Congress shall have approved the same, and when said State, by a vote of its legislature elected under said constitution, shall have adopted the amendment to the Constitution of the United States, proposed by the Thirty-ninth Congress, and known as article fourteen and when said article shall have become a part of the Constitution of the United States said State shall be declared entitled to representation in Congress, and senators and representatives shall be admitted therefrom on their taking the oath prescribed by law, and then and thereafter the preceding sections of this act shall be inoperative in said State: Provided, That no person excluded from the privilege of holding office by said proposed amendment to the Constitution of the United States, shall be eligible to election as a member of the convention to frame a constitution for any of said rebel States, nor shall any person vote for members of such convention.

SECTION 6. And be it further enacted, That, until the people of said rebel States shall be by law admitted to representation in the Congress of the United States, any civil governments which may exist there in shall be deemed provisional only, and in all respects subject to the paramount authority of the United States at any time to abolish, modify, control, or supersede the same; and in all elections to any office under such provisional governments all persons shall be entitled to vote, and none others, who are entitled to vote, under the provisions of the fifth section of this act; and no persons shall be eligible to any office under any such provisional government who would be disqualified from holding office under the provisions of the third article of said constitutional amendment.

Second Reconstruction Act - March 23, 1867 - (passed over President Johnson's veto)

An Act supplementary to an Act entitled "An Act to provide for the more efficient Government of the Rebel States," passed . . . [March 2, 1867] . . . , and to facilitate Restoration.

Be it enacted . . . , That before . . . [September 1, 1867] . . . , the commanding general in each district defined by . . . [the act of March 2, 1867] . . . , shall cause a registration to be made of the male citizens of the United States, twenty-one years of age and upwards, resident in each county or parish in the State or States included in his district, which registration shall include only those persons who are qualified to vote for delegates by the act aforesaid, and who shall have taken and subscribed the following oath or affirmation: "I, do solemnly swear (or affirm), in the presence of Almighty God, that I am a citizen of the State of ; that I have resided in said State for— months next preceding this day, and now reside in the county of —, or the parish of , in said State (as the case may be); that I am twenty-one years old; that I have not been disfranchised for participation in any rebellion or civil war against the United States, or for felony committed against the laws of any State or of the United States, that I have never been a member of any State legislature, nor held any executive or judicial office in any State, and afterwards engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the United States, or given aid or comfort to the enemies thereof; that I have never taken an oath as a member of Congress of the United States, or as an officer of the United States, or as a member of any State legislature, or as an executive or judicial officer of any State, to support the Constitution of the United States, and afterwards engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the United States, or given aid or comfort to the enemies thereof; that I will faithfully support the Constitution and obey the laws of the United States, and will, to the best of my ability, encourage others so to do, so help me God." . . .

SEC. 2. And be it further enacted, That after the completion of the registration hereby provided for in any State, at such time and places therein as the commanding general shall appoint and direct, of which at least thirty days' public notice shall be given, an election shall be held of delegates to a convention for the purpose of establishing a constitution and civil government for such State loyal to the Union, said convention in each State, except Virginia, to consist of the same number of members as the most numerous branch of the State legislature of such State . . . [in 1860] . . . , to be apportioned

among the several districts, counties, or parishes of such State by the commanding general, giving to each representation in the ratio of voters registered as aforesaid as nearly as may be. The convention in Virginia shall consist of the same number of members as represented the territory now constituting Virginia in the most numerous branch of the legislature of said State . . . [in 1860] . . ., to be apportioned as aforesaid.

SEC. 3. And be it further enacted, That at said election the registered voters of each State shall vote for or against a convention to form a constitution therefore under this act.... If a majority of the votes given on that question shall be for a convention, then such convention shall be held as hereinafter provided; but if a majority of said votes shall be against a convention, then no such convention shall be held under this act: Provided, That such convention shall not be held unless a majority of all such registered voters shall have voted on the question of holding such convention.

SEC. 4. And be it further enacted, That the commanding general of each district shall appoint as many boards of registration as may be necessary consisting of three loyal officers or persons, to make and complete the registration, superintend the election, and make return to him of the votes, lists of voters, and of the persons elected as delegates by a plurality of the votes cast at said election; and upon receiving said returns he shall open the same, ascertain the persons elected as delegates, according to the returns of the officers who conducted said election, and make proclamation thereof; and if a majority of the votes given on that question shall be for a convention, the commanding general, within sixty days from the date of election, shall notify the delegates to assemble in convention, at a time and place to be mentioned in the notification, and said convention, when organized, shall proceed to frame a constitution and civil government according to the provisions of this act, and the act to which it is supplementary; and when the same shall have been so framed, said constitution shall be submitted by the convention for ratification to the persons registered under the provisions of this act at an election to be conducted by the Officers or persons appointed or to be appointed by the commanding general, as herein before provided, and to be held after the expiration of thirty days from the date of notice thereof, to be given by said convention; and the returns thereof shall be made to the commanding general of the district.

SEC. 5. And be it further enacted, That if, according to said returns, the constitution shall be ratified by a majority of the votes of the registered electors qualified as herein specified, cast at said election, at least one half of all the registered voters voting upon the question of such ratification, the president of the convention shall transmit a copy of the same, duly certified, to the President of the United States, who shall forthwith transmit the same to Congress . . .; and if it shall moreover appear to Congress that the election was one at which all the registered and qualified electors in the State had an opportunity to vote freely and without restraint, fear, or the influence of fraud, and if the Congress shall be satisfied that such constitution meets the approval of a majority of all the qualified electors in the State, and if the said constitution shall be declared by Congress to be in conformity with the provisions of the act to which this is supplementary, and the other provisions of said act shall have been complied with, and the said constitution shall be approved by Congress, the State shall be declared entitled to representation, and senators and representatives shall be admitted therefrom as therein provided.

Third Reconstruction Act - July 19, 1867 - (passed over President Johnson's veto)

An Act supplementary to an Act entitled "An Act to provide for the more efficient Government of the Rebel States," passed . . . [March 2, 1867] .; . , and the Act supplementary thereto, passed . . . [March 23, 1867].

Be it enacted . . ., That it is hereby declared to have been the true intent and meaning . . . [of the acts of March 2 and March 23, 1867] . . ., that the governments then existing in the rebel States of Virginia,

North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Florida, Texas, and Arkansas were not legal State governments; and that thereafter said governments, if continued, were to be continued subject in all respects to the military commanders of the respective districts, and to the paramount authority of Congress.

SEC. 2. And be it further enacted, That the commander of any district named in said act shall have power, subject to the disapproval of the General of the army of the United States, and to have effect till disapproved, whenever in the opinion of such commander the proper administration of said act shall require it, to suspend or remove from office, or from the performance of official duties and the exercise of official powers, any officer or person holding or exercising, or professing to hold or exercise, any civil or military office or duty in such district under any power, election, appointment or authority derived from, or granted by, or claimed under, any so-called State or the government thereof, or any municipal or other division thereof, and upon such suspension or removal such commander, subject to the disapproval of the General as aforesaid, shall have power to provide from time to time for the performance of the said duties of such officer or person so suspended or removed, by the detail of some competent officer or soldier of the army, or by the appointment of some other person, to perform the same, and to fill vacancies occasioned by death, resignation, or otherwise.

SEC. 3. And be it further enacted, That the General of the army of the United States shall be invested with all the powers of suspension, removal, appointment, and detail granted in the preceding section to district commanders.

SEC. 4. And be it further enacted, That the acts of the officers of the army already done in removing in said districts persons exercising the functions of civil officers, and appointing others in their stead, are hereby confirmed: Provided, That any person heretofore or hereafter appointed by any district commander to exercise the functions of any civil office, may be removed either by the military officer in command of the district, or by the General of the army. And it shall be the duty of such commander to remove from office as aforesaid all persons who are disloyal to the government of the United States, or who use their official influence in any manner to hinder, delay, prevent, or obstruct the due and proper administration of this act and the acts to which it is supplementary.

SECT 5. If be at further enacted, That the boards of registration provided for in the act. . . [of March 23, 1867] . . . shall have power, and it shall be their duty before allowing the registration of any person, to ascertain, upon such facts or information as they can obtain, whether such person is entitled to be registered under said act, and the oath required by said act shall not be conclusive on such question, and no person shall be registered unless such board shall decide that he is entitled thereto; and such board shall also have power to examine, under oath, . . . any one touching the qualification of any person claiming registration; but in every case of refusal by the board to register an applicant, and in every case of striking his name from the list as hereinafter provided, the board shall make a note or memorandum, which shall be returned with the registration list to the commanding general of the district, setting forth the grounds of such refusal or such striking from the list: Provided, That no person shall be disqualified as member of any board of registration by reason of race or color.

SEC. 6. And be it further enacted, That the true intent and meaning of the oath prescribed in said supplementary act is, (among other things,) that no person who has been a member of the legislature of any State, or who has held any executive or judicial office in any State, whether he has taken an oath to support the Constitution of the United States or not, and whether he was holding such office at the commencement of the rebellion, or had held it before, and who has afterwards engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the United States, or given aid or comfort to the enemies thereof, is entitled to be registered or to vote; and the words "executive or judicial office in any State" in said oath mentioned shall be construed to include all civil offices created by law for the administration of any general law of a State, or for the administration of justice.

SEC. 7. And be it further enacted, That the time for completing the original registration provided for in said act may, in the discretion of the commander of any district, be extended to . . . [October 1, 1867] ., .; and the boards of registration shall have power, and it shall be their duty, commencing fourteen days prior to any election under said act, and upon reasonable public notice of the time and place thereof, to revise, for a period of five days, the registration lists, and upon being satisfied that any person not entitled thereto has been registered, to strike the name of such person from the list, and such person shall not be allowed to vote. And such board shall also, during the same period, add to such registry the names of all persons who at that time possess the qualifications required by said act who have not been already registered; and no person shall, at any time, be entitled to be registered or to vote by reason of any executive pardon or amnesty for any act or thing which, without such pardon or amnesty, would disqualify him from registration or voting.

SEC. 8. And be it further enacted, That section four of said last-named act shall be construed to authorize the commanding general named therein, whenever he shall deem it needful, to remove any member of a board of registration and to appoint another in his stead, and to fill any vacancy in such board.

SEC. 9. And be it further enacted, That all members of said boards of registration and all persons hereafter elected or appointed to office in said military districts, under any so called State or municipal authority, or by detail or appointment of the district commanders, shall be required to take and to subscribe the oath of office prescribed by law for officers of the United States.

SEC. IO. And be it further enacted, That no district commander or member of the board of registration, or any of the officers or appointees acting under them, shall be bound in his action by any opinion of any civil officer of the United States

SEC. 11. And be it further exacted, That all provisions of this act and of the acts to which this is supplementary shall be construed liberally, to the end that all the intents thereof may be fully and perfectly carried out.

Fourth Reconstruction Act - March 11, 1868

An Act to amend the Act . . . [Of March 23, 1867] ., .

Be it enacted . . ., That hereafter any election authorized by the act [of March 23, 1867] . . ., shall be decided by a majority of the votes actually cast; and at the election in which the question of the adoption or rejection of any constitution is submitted, any person duly registered in the State may vote in the election district where he offers to vote when he has resided therein for ten days next preceding such election, upon presentation of his certificate of registration, his affidavit, or other satisfactory evidence, under such regulations as the district commanders may prescribe.

SEC. 2. And be it further enacted, That the constitutional convention of any of the States mentioned in the acts to which this is amendatory may provide that at the time of voting upon the ratification of the constitution the registered voters may vote also for members of the House of Representatives of the United States and for all elective officers provided for by the said constitution; and the same election officers who shall make the return of the votes cast on the ratification or rejection of the constitution, shall enumerate and certify the votes cast for members of Congress.

A Timeline of Reconstruction: 1865-1877

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- 1865 [Thirteenth Amendment](#) approved in January. Ratified in December. Abolished slavery in the United States.
- Congress establishes [Freedmen's Bureau](#) in March to provide assistance to the emancipated slaves.
- Assassination of President Lincoln, April 15. Vice President Andrew Johnson becomes president.
- End of the Civil War (April 9, 1865). Lee surrenders to Grant.
- [President Johnson](#) presents plans for Reconstruction.
- [Benjamin Butler](#), notorious Union General in the Civil War and advocate of rights for African Americans, elected to Congress as a radical member of the Republican party.
- Mississippi enacts [Black Code](#).
- Joint Committee of Fifteen on Reconstruction created.
- [Ku Klux Klan](#) created in Tennessee.
- 1866 Civil Rights Act passed despite Johnson's earlier veto.
- [Fourteenth Amendment](#) to the Constitution approved by Congress.
- Memphis race riot/Massacre (May 1).
- [Freedmen's Bureau](#) responsibilities and powers expanded by Congress. Legislation is vetoed by Johnson but Congress overrides his veto.
- [New Orleans Race Riot](#)/Massacre (July 30).
- 1867 First Reconstruction Act passed over Johnson's veto.
- Second Reconstruction Act passed over Johnson's veto.
- Third Reconstruction Act passed over Johnson's veto.
- Republican convention in New Orleans. Party platform includes equality for African-Americans.
- 1868 Former slave, Oscar J. Dunn, elected lieutenant governor of Louisiana.
- Fourth Reconstruction Act passed.
- [Fourteenth Amendment](#) ratified. Entitles all persons born or naturalized in the United States to citizenship and equal protection under the laws of the United States.
- [Francis L. Cardozo](#) elected secretary of state in South Carolina. Holds office from 1868 to 1872.
- Thaddeus Stevens, radical republican and supporter of land for Freedmen, dies.
- [John W. Menard](#) of Louisiana elected to the United States Congress. Menard is barred from his seat by white members of Congress. When Menard pleaded his case to be seated, he became the first Black representative to speak on the floor of the House.
- James J. Harris and P.B.S. Pinchback are the first African American delegates to a

Republican convention. They support the nomination of Ulysses S. Grant for president.

- 1869 Former Union General [Ulysses S. Grant](#) becomes president. Although allied with the Radical Republicans in Congress he does not provide strong leadership for Reconstruction.
- 1870 Hiram Revels elected to U. S. Senate as the first black senator.
Jasper J. Wright elected to South Carolina Supreme court.
Fifteenth Amendment ratified. The Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gave the vote to all male citizens regardless of color or previous condition of servitude.
Joseph H. Rainey, first black member sworn in as member of U. S. House of Representatives. December 12, 1870.
- 1870 - 71 Forty-first Congress. Two black members in the House of Representatives including Robert Brown Elliot from the 3rd District in South Carolina.
- 1871 Forty-second Congress. Five black members in the House of Representatives: Benjamin S. Turner of Alabama; Josiah T. Walls of Florida; and Robert Brown Elliot, Joseph H. Rainey and Robert Carlos DeLarge of South Carolina.
Act to Enforce Fourteenth Amendment (Ku Klux Klan Act).
- 1872 [Freedmen's Bureau](#) abolished.
- 1872 - 1873 P. B. S. Pinchback, acting governor of Louisiana from December 9, 1872 to January 13, 1873. Pinchback, a black politician, was the first black to serve as a state governor, although due to white resistance, his tenure is extremely short.
- 1874 Blanche K. Bruce elected to U. S. Senate.
Robert Smalls, black hero of the Civil War, elected to Congress as representative of South Carolina.
- 1873 - 75 Forty-third Congress. Six black members in House the House of Representatives.
- 1875 - 77 Forty-fourth Congress. Six black members in the House of Representatives.
- 1875 March 1--[Civil Rights Act](#) enacted by Congress. It provides blacks with the right to equal treatment in public places and transportation.
The Supreme Court later declared this Act unconstitutional.
Blanche Kelso elected as Senator of Mississippi. He is the first African-American Senator to serve a complete six year term.
- 1876 U. S. Senate votes not to seat P. B. S. Pinchback.
[Wade Hampton](#) inaugurated as governor of South Carolina. The election of Hampton, a leader in the Confederacy, confirms fears that the South is not committed to Reconstruction.
- 1877 [Rutherford B. Hayes](#) inaugurated President of the United States.
- 1877-79 Forty-fifth Congress. Four black members in House.
Last federal troops leave South Carolina effectively ending the Federal government's presence in the South.
Robert Brown Elliott yields office of attorney general of South Carolina.