

Reconstruction and Backlash-The Black Codes Student Context

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Vocabulary & Key Terms:

- amnesty
- carpetbagger
- insurrection
- mulatto
- scalawag
- vagrant

Student Context:

When Republican President Abraham Lincoln ran for reelection in 1864 during the American Civil War, he chose the Tennessee-born Democrat, Andrew Johnson to serve as his Vice President. While Tennessee seceded and joined the Confederacy, Johnson remained loyal to the Union. Lincoln was assassinated on April 15, 1865 only six days after Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered, making Johnson president of the United States at a pivotal moment in reconstructing the Union.

President Johnson surprised the nation with his approach to Reconstruction. Johnson was a defender of states' rights and ignored Congress in favor of his own policies to reconstruct the Union. The Thirteenth Amendment had ended slavery and freed formerly enslaved people but did not go so far as to grant citizenship rights to these four million people. In this post-war context of a new presidential administration and tensions regarding the process of reconstructing a deeply divided country, the legal status of freedpeople was an open question. This legal void meant that there was an opportunity for former Confederate Southern states to determine the legal status of freedpeople.

What emerged were laws, known as Black Codes. These pieces of legislation were passed by Southern state legislatures. The codes defined the legal status of freedpeople and determined the extent to which they had rights and responsibilities as citizens. These Black Codes became a source of national tension and controversy. As different visions for Reconstruction emerged between President Johnson and Congress, Black Codes were at the

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center of political debates and motivated debate over the future legal status and rights afforded to freedpeople in a reconstructed United States.