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Lecture Nine: The Reconstruction Era (1865-1877)

1. Introduction to Reconstruction and Its Dual Nature

The Civil War's profound consequences and division of America led to Reconstruction, a period aimed at rebuilding and politically reunifying the country. It encompassed various leaders, goals, and achievements, ultimately being viewed as both a success and a failure.

2. The Initiatives and Challenges of Reconstruction

The Beginning of Reconstruction: Reconstruction commenced immediately after the Civil War in 1865. It entailed the arduous task of restoring a nation torn apart by conflict, especially in the regions of the South that had been under Union control. The economic and political rebuilding was a complex endeavor, complicated by the release of slaves with little guidance on how to navigate their newfound freedom.

3. Plans and Leaders of Reconstruction

The Lincoln Plan: One of the proposed approaches to Reconstruction was the Lincoln plan, also known as the 10 per cent plan. It mandated that Confederate states wishing to rejoin the Union accept the emancipation of slaves and pledge loyalty to the Union. President Lincoln intended this plan to be lenient and moderate, with the aim of weakening the Confederate states.

4. The Radical Republicans and the Impeachment of Johnson

Radical Republican Agenda: Following Lincoln's assassination, President Andrew Johnson, a Republican, took office with the aim of Reconstruction. However, the Radical Republicans, led by figures like Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner, were dissatisfied with his lenient approach. They sought to hold the South accountable for the war and protect the rights of four million freed slaves.

5. The Reconstruction Act and the Compromise of 1877

Congressional Intervention: In response to Johnson's policies, Congress impeached him and formulated the Reconstruction Act. This act involved the deployment of troops to the South and required states to adopt the 14th amendment, guaranteeing equal treatment and citizenship to all individuals born on American soil. The act aimed to secure African American rights and suffrage.

6. The Ambiguous Outcome and End of Reconstruction

Presidential Election and the Compromise of 1877: The disputed presidential election of 1876 between Samuel Tilden and Rutherford B. Hayes led to the Compromise of 1877, where Hayes emerged as the winner. As a result, federal troops were withdrawn from the South, leading to the end of Reconstruction. However, this withdrawal exposed African Americans to oppressive "black codes" and restricted their freedom.

7. Assessing the Success of Reconstruction

Reconstruction's Ambivalent Legacy: Evaluating Reconstruction's general success is complex. While marred by the assassination of one president and the impeachment of another, Reconstruction marked a significant step towards reunifying America and establishing laws to protect African American rights, including suffrage and citizenship. Although there were limitations and exceptions, it inspired future movements, such as women's rights advocacy.