

# Was Reconstruction a success or a failure?

## Point

### Reconstruction was a failure.

Federal and state governments failed to secure the rights guaranteed to former slaves by constitutional amendments.

- Radical Republican governments were unable or unwilling to enact land reform or to provide former slaves with the economic resources needed to break the cycle of poverty.
- State Republican parties could not preserve black-white voter coalitions that would have enabled them to stay in power and continue political reform.
- Racial bias was a national, not just a southern, problem. Northerners became more absorbed in westward expansion and industrialization than with the problems of the former slaves.
- The Supreme Court undermined the power of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments.

At the end of Reconstruction, former slaves found themselves once again in a subordinate position in society. The historian Eric Foner concludes: "Whether measured by the dreams inspired by emancipation or the more limited goals of securing blacks' rights as citizens...Reconstruction can only be judged a failure."

## Counterpoint

### Reconstruction was a success.

Reconstruction was an attempt to create a social and political revolution despite economic collapse and the opposition of much of the white South. Under these conditions, its accomplishments were extraordinary.

- African-Americans only a few years removed from slavery participated at all levels of government.
- State governments had some success in solving social problems. ; for example, they funded public school systems open to all citizens.
- African-Americans established institutions that had been denied them during slavery: schools, churches and families.
- The breakup of the plantation system led to some redistribution of land.
- Congress passed the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments, which helped African Americans to attain full civil rights in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Despite the loss of ground that followed Reconstruction, African Americans succeeded in carving out a measure of independence within Southern society.