

CAMBRIDGE

Brighter Thinking

The Making of a Superpower: USA, 1865–1975

A/AS Level History for AQA
Student Book

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1 The Era of Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865–1890



In this section we will examine the way in which Americans rebuilt after the Civil War. This was a period in which Republicans competed over how the South should be run, and northerners and black and white southerners vied for control of southern state governments. In Washington, DC, presidential authority seemed to be weakening. Meanwhile, America's economy grew rapidly but unevenly. We will look into:

- The weaknesses of federal government: Johnson, Grant and the failure of Radical Reconstruction.
- The politics of the Gilded Age and the era of weak presidents; political corruption.
- Social, regional and ethnic divisions: divisions within and between North, South and West; the position of African Americans.
- Economic growth and the rise of corporations: railways; oil; developments in agriculture; urbanisation.
- Laissez-faire dominance and consequences; the impact of the ending of the frontier.
- The limits of foreign engagement and continuation of isolationism: the continuation of the Monroe Doctrine; territorial consolidation (Alaska) and tensions over Canada.

Introduction

In 1865 America was emerging from the long national nightmare of civil war, which had cost it greatly in terms of population and production. Its development over the next half century was uneven, but vigorous. By 1920 President Wilson had a claim to global leadership – he was arguably more effective by that stage as a world leader than as the leader of his own country – and America had established itself as a dominant power not merely in the western hemisphere but in the world as a whole. Wilson's predecessors had included some remarkable but contradictory men. Theodore Roosevelt, known as a progressive politician, lost the only election in which he campaigned on the Progressive ticket. William Howard Taft had given every appearance of not wishing to be president, but had also managed his career carefully to ensure that he attained that office. Lincoln's successors were unpopular, incapable or corrupt – in the minds of many of their contemporaries, at least. There is a common narrative of this period as an era where the power of the presidency was weakened, and then strengthened again. This picture may be too simple.

America also developed economically. The new corporations that sprang up in America were largely unregulated at first, and part of the story of these years is the story of how limits were placed on the activities of tycoons and their companies. We will also see the ways in which change occurred, and explore the reasons why a richer country did not mean a better life for most Americans, and why the labour movement did not take hold in America in the way it did in some European countries. American economic expansion helped to create different ways of being American. The massive immigration that was required to provide labour for the growing economy transformed the character of American life, ultimately producing a reaction from the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who had come to see themselves as indigenous Americans. In the West, independent American communities developed, far from the government in the East, but dependent upon it for capital.

We will see how liberation from slavery did not spell the end of African Americans' struggle. The period of Reconstruction that forms the first part of our narrative has been characterised as an utter failure (because so many of its reforms were later undone) and as a great success (because so many of its reforms were successful). Among African Americans themselves, different strategies evolved for improving their position. Among white people – in the South in particular – hostility against black people grew rapidly into lawlessness.

Finally, we will see how Americans acquired an accidental empire, and were ultimately persuaded to give up their international isolationism, although only on a temporary basis, to fight in the First World War. Throughout this part of the book, and as you consider the key questions about how America changed, which are outlined in the section on Themes in American history, be careful not to assume that any of the changes we can trace (or indeed, any of the continuities) were inevitable.

- In this part you will build a sense of the way in which the growth of the American economy led to changes in its politics, and evaluate the impact of the First World War on America.

- You will consider the arguments historians have made about success and failure of individuals and political movements.
- You will begin to see and explain the reasons for changes in American society and the rate at which they occurred.

With Lincoln's death in April 1865, Vice President Andrew Johnson was elevated to the presidency. His task would be a difficult one: he would have to reunite a country that had recently turned on itself in war. During that war, half of the country had seen economic development and improvement, while the other half, the South, had been devastated in myriad ways. The victorious Union had to find some way to reintegrate its rebel states – whose inhabitants did not see themselves as rebels at all – while dealing with the social upheaval caused by the elimination of slavery.

The period known as **Reconstruction** would set the stage for much that would define later economic development, political discourse and social conflict within the southern states. It was ended by a messy compromise in 1877. It gave way to an era known in the author Mark Twain's terminology as the 'Gilded Age' – an era of massive economic growth that certainly enabled the rich to get richer, and allowed some of the poor to become richer too.

By 1890 the South was politically, if not quite economically or socially, reintegrated into the Union; the position of African Americans had not changed substantially since Emancipation. Some Americans were united by a desire to gain and retain wealth. For many, America had become more than ever a land of opportunity; for many others, very little had changed. White Americans were united in a way that had not been true in the 1860s, but the dream some had had of racial integration had been lost.

The weaknesses of federal government

Some historians blame the failure of Reconstruction on weaknesses in the federal government – that is, that Presidents Johnson and Grant, and the Congresses that served from 1865 to 1877, were not strong enough to make it happen. There are two main problems with this view. The first is that it makes an assumption that the **federal government** worked together as a single entity – and that is not true. The second is that it suggests that the federal government was itself responsible for Reconstruction. It was, but so were the individual states being reconstructed, and in seeking reasons for the failure of Reconstruction (if, indeed, failure it was) we should not discount the fact that many southern whites simply did not want their states to be reconstructed, and that resistance was simply too strong to be easily overcome.

Lincoln's early attempts to plan for the readmission of southern states had successfully stressed that African Americans should have a measure of legal equality – although when he proposed giving them the vote he was unenthusiastic, never proposing more than a very limited suffrage. He seems to have intended that states should be allowed to re-enter into political union, by which he meant send senators and representatives to Washington and vote in presidential elections, when their slaves had been emancipated and 10% of their citizens had sworn a loyalty oath. Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, himself had had



Key terms

Reconstruction: the process by which rebellious southern states would be readmitted to the Union and have their political rights restored and their economies and societies stabilised. It was begun in 1863 by President Lincoln, although it stalled in 1864 because of Congressional opposition. Most historians believe that it ended in 1877 when President Hayes was inaugurated, although some believe that it lasted until the 1880s or 1890s.

no illusions about how easy the process of social integration would be, and he had openly discussed and attempted to implement plans by which America's African-American population might voluntarily remove itself to Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America or the West. Given that the slave trade had been outlawed three generations earlier, this was not only impractical but also of no interest to the vast majority of African Americans, whose link to Africa was of very little importance to them. Lincoln's various schemes to achieve this came to nothing.

By 1864 Lincoln was sure that the Union would win the war, and was planning for the peace. He navigated the 13th Amendment through Congress in 1865, banning slavery across the United States, with deliberate haste as he knew that it would be easier to achieve this before the rebellious southern states were defeated and readmitted to the Union: their senators and representatives might, he feared, object. Lincoln's last great political victory showed all his strengths. He has been called the great conciliator, able to draw disparate groups together. A genial man, he built good personal relationships and used them to broker compromise whenever he could. And so, the story goes, Lincoln might have been able to impose Reconstruction without upsetting anyone, by persuading and cajoling them. He might have been able somehow to convince both Congressmen and southern white society to pull together for the good of the Union. He might have been able to oversee the quiet dissolution of the Republican Party, its purpose served, after the war. If we are to blame the weakness of the federal government for the failure of Reconstruction, we must remember that the task might have been beyond even a Lincoln who survived an assassin's bullet.

Thematic link: individuals and groups

Reconstruction under Andrew Johnson

President Johnson (Figure 1.1) had been selected as Lincoln's running mate in the election of 1864 because it made it more likely that Lincoln would win. Johnson was a southerner, and a former Democrat; he matched well with the northern (officially former) Republican on the National Unity Party's nomination. Johnson did not really believe in Reconstruction. He referred to the process that he had to undertake after the formal end of the war as restoration. For him, the rebel states had never really left the Union; there was no basis for keeping them out of political life once they had formed loyal governments. On 29 May he issued a general pardon to those prepared to take an oath of loyalty, and recognised the government of Virginia. This was one of the governments set up by Lincoln towards the end of his life following the Ten Percent Plan, which stated that once 10% of voters in a state had taken that oath of loyalty to the Union those loyalists might form a government. Lincoln had vetoed a previous Congressional plan that had placed the bar at 50%; Congress, however, had been adjourned at the time of Lincoln's death and was not due to reconvene until December 1865. Johnson was governing on his own.

It may seem remarkable that defeated southerners were treated as leniently as they were. There was clearly no appetite at all in the South for further fighting; equally clearly, the North had won, and the Union would be preserved. There seemed little need for revenge. The rebel president, Jefferson Davis, was

imprisoned for only two years. Their iconic general, Robert E. Lee, lost his estate at



Figure 1.1: Andrew Johnson had been selected as Lincoln's vice president in 1864 under the banner of National Unity. He was the only southern senator to remain loyal to the Union when his state, Tennessee, seceded. He had then gone on to serve as Military Governor of Tennessee following its partial reconquest in 1862. Politically, Johnson was a follower of Andrew Jackson, and a Democrat: he and Lincoln were elected under the banner of the National Union Party in 1864. He believed in states' rights, and believed that bankers and aristocrats were out to undermine freedom. His only notable achievement as vice president had been to invite public ridicule by giving a drunken speech at his own inauguration.

**Key term**

Confederate debt: The significance of the Confederate debt issue was that to honour the debt would be to recognise the legitimacy of the governments that had taken on the debt in the first place. The North, of course, had always refused to do this – hence the Civil War. It might seem strange that southern states were anxious to take on more debt. The reason is that the creditors (those to whom the debt was owed) were themselves southerners. They had lent their own money to their government during the war. The southern leaders who had financed the war would lose a lot of money unless they were able to get it back from the southern states afterwards.

**Key term**

Radical Reconstruction: refers to the specific set of plans for Reconstruction put forward by Republicans in Congress in the years from 1867. This programme, also known as Congressional Reconstruction, was almost entirely opposed by President Johnson. Congressional leaders went far further than President Johnson in supporting the rights of African Americans in the South.

Arlington, Virginia (a plantation that stood on a hill overlooking Washington, DC) but lived the remainder of his life a free man, with honour. The South, it seemed to many in the North, had suffered enough, and if the point of the war had been to preserve the Union and perhaps, eventually, to end slavery – well, then, the war was won. In the South itself there was little will to carry on with the war, which led to a greater acceptance of the peace. The entire South, with the exception of Texas, was devastated. In 1865 there were few southern objections to Johnson's plan, which was to bring southern states back to their rightful place in the Union as quickly as possible, while trying to prevent further deaths through dislocation and poverty. Slavery was gone, but the basics of southern life, its struggle to preserve its unique identity – 'The Cause', as it was known – was still active in the South, particularly among women.

The North, meanwhile, was divided on the issue of how radically to reconstruct the South. To Johnson, and many of those who had supported Lincoln in 1864, the only remaining questions to be settled were ratification of the 13th Amendment banning slavery and the repudiation of **Confederate debt** (see Figure 1.2). The first was a done deal. The second – which meant that the rebellious states would pay for the debts incurred by the Confederacy – was accepted as inevitable by the Southern states. At the time northerners referred to these as the 'fruits of victory'. Johnson, never a Republican, may well have thought that with slavery gone and free labour established as the economic model for the whole of the United States, the sectional Republican Party would be no more, and a conservative unionist party would emerge. This party, he may have expected, would have Andrew Johnson at its head. Meanwhile, the Radical Republicans in Congress were becoming increasingly alienated by the policies that Johnson was implementing during the Congressional recess: those who had hoped for more substantial fruits than these could see their opportunity to impose **Radical Reconstruction** drifting away.

The rights of black people in the South were protected to a certain extent by the Freedmen's Bureau. Set up by Lincoln in March 1865, the Bureau was intended to manage the dislocated newly emancipated African American populations of the South in the first year following the war. It provided legal services, advice for those who had never worked for wages before, help to find lost families and the like. The Bureau provoked considerable opposition within the South, the meagre resources of which were already stretched beyond breaking point. The newly elected governments of the southern states issued legislation that has become known collectively as Black Codes. This legislation was aimed at minimising the disruption caused to plantation owners by the abolition of slavery – that is, at ensuring that the practical working conditions of free African Americans were not substantially different from those of the slaves they had been.

The southern reaction to Johnson's moderate Reconstruction, or restoration, was positive. Southern leaders' public position on the Black Codes was that they provided freedmen with the discipline they would need in their newly free lives – an echo of the old paternalist justifications for slavery. They also seemed to serve a further function: by far the easiest way for black southerners to earn a living would be by working in plantation agriculture – that is, doing exactly the same work as they had during the time of slavery. No wonder one former slave claimed

that there were ‘two snakes – one pointing South and named Slavery, and the other pointing North and named Freedom’, and both were ‘full of poison’.

Many in the North saw these Black Codes for what they were – the old Slave Codes, modified. They saw that the newly passed stiff penalties for crimes such as murder, rape and arson in many of the states, including Tennessee, were being applied only to black criminals. They saw that southern politicians were beginning to argue about precisely how much of the war debt they should take on. They also saw the nature of the politicians whom southerners had elected to form their governments. Whether through defiance or because there were very few southern leaders who had not been prominent supporters of the Confederacy, southern voters elected prominent Confederates. Most notably, one of the new senators from Georgia would be Alexander H. Stephens, until recently the vice president of the Confederacy. By the time the Congress reassembled in 1865, a significant proportion of its members was in no mood to support the South – or President Johnson.

Congressional reactions to Johnson

Johnson’s time governing without Congress was unsuccessful. Johnson himself was arrogant and either unable or unwilling to compromise: he was certainly not willing to recall Congress, which he could have done, in order to consult them. He was an alcoholic given to intemperate, rambling speeches. He claimed for himself a view of presidential power that was equivalent to Lincoln’s, but he had neither Lincoln’s gift for creating and maintaining consensus nor the ability to see the urgency of his situation as commander-in-chief in a war. It was also clear to Radical Republicans in Congress that Johnson expected that the Republican Party would turn out to have been a single- or dual-issue party – preservation of the Union and the ending of slavery – and that a new configuration of parties was in the making. In this he was aided and abetted by some members of the **Cabinet**, such as William Seward, the secretary of state who had also been Lincoln’s closest advisor. During 1865 they had watched as Johnson rode roughshod over radical members of his Cabinet and surrounded himself with the kinds of advisors who, it was noted, might have been expected to have inhabited the White House had the Democrats won the presidency. Congress was not due to reconvene until late in the year.

The Radical Republican opposition to Johnson is best exemplified in the reactions of the Congressional leaders Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, and Senator Benjamin Wade (who saw himself as the real Republican leader) and Representative Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania: see Figure 1.3.

Thematic link: individuals and groups.

The alienation of moderate Republicans, 1866

The Radicals were not in the majority among Congressional Republicans in 1865. By 1867, they were. The reasons for this can be found in Johnson’s conduct in 1866, when he proved entirely incapable of managing his relations with Congress.

ACTIVITY 1.1

Read the section headed ‘The causes of the American Civil War’ in the Introduction. Use this information to make a list of what seem to you to be the most significant causes of the American Civil War.

How many of those causes had been resolved by the outcome of the war in 1865? For each of the causes you have selected, explain whether the issue was resolved, and why.

Compare your explanations with those of others in your class. What more might people in the North have wanted to be done in 1865 and 1866?

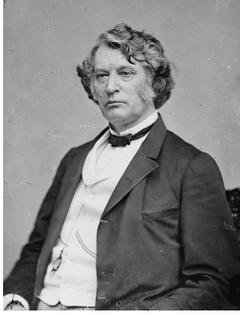
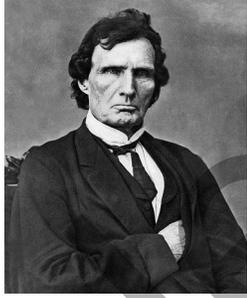
| Leader | Charles Sumner | Benjamin Wade | Thaddeus Stevens |
|----------------------------|---|--|---|
| |  |  |  |
| Position on Reconstruction | States that had seceded had committed 'state suicide' and would not be allowed to return until Congress agreed. Full voting rights for freed slaves would be a condition of return. | Reconstruction had to be completed before southern states were readmitted, because otherwise southern votes in Congress might make the process less radical. | Southern plantation owners were the enemy. Their estates should be confiscated and given to freed slaves. |

Figure 1.3: Radical Republicans and their opposition to Johnson

citizenship, that it was unwise to determine such a measure with 11 states unable to vote on it in Congress and that it was discriminatory against white people. This time, the president's **veto** was overridden and the Civil Rights Bill became an Act. For this to happen to a president whose own supposed party controlled both houses of Congress, on a major bill, was unprecedented.

Johnson was not in control of the Republican Party. Still, Congressional Republicans attempted to work with him. Unable to pass bills for fear of his veto, and recognising that it would not necessarily be beneficial for there to be a series of veto overrides, they sought to change United States law in the only way over which a president has no formal influence: a constitutional amendment. The 14th Amendment is one of the key achievements of the Reconstruction period. It defined citizenship for the first time, although without mentioning race. Instead, citizenship was conferred on anyone born in the United States. It also encouraged black suffrage by reducing representation in Congress for states that denied male citizens the right to vote. It specifically set out that equal rights would not be denied to people on grounds of race or of having been a slave. Johnson was not appeased. He advised the South not to ratify the 14th Amendment, and the amendment failed in the summer of 1866.

The **mid-term elections** loomed. President Johnson actively campaigned against the Republicans, going on a campaigning tour known as the 'Swing Around the Circle' – the first time a sitting president had done this. It was a disaster. Moderate Republicans failed to come around to his notion of a National Union Party, so he was left with very few supporters drawn from Democratic ranks. His



Key term

veto: the president is entitled to veto legislation of which he disapproves, which prevents it from becoming law. He can be overridden by a vote of two-thirds of both the House and the Senate.

ACTIVITY 1.2

1. Look carefully at the section on The alienation of moderate Republicans, 1866. Highlight all the words and phrases that suggest that the split between Johnson and Congress was Johnson's fault.
2. What do you think was the most important reason for Johnson's split with Congress? You might wish to consider the clash of personalities between Johnson and congressional leaders, the different ideological positions that the two sides took, their different attitudes to the South and Johnson's actions during 1866, but do not lose sight of the fact that it was the Radical leaders who ultimately created the split.

campaign stops were ill-conceived, his audiences hostile and his speeches vulgar and sometimes incoherent and drunken. He was booed and jeered. Meanwhile outbreaks of violence were beginning around the South, which seemed to suggest that the Radicals' predictions that stronger measures were needed might be true. The worst example of violence was in New Orleans, Louisiana, in July 1866. The mid-term elections, when they came, confirmed that the Radicals were in the ascendancy. Stevens was in effective control of the House, and Senator Wade of the Senate.

Radical Reconstruction and the impeachment of President Johnson

In 1867, led by Wade and Stevens, the Radicals began their own process of Reconstruction by passing a series of Reconstruction Acts. They were designed to enforce the provisions of the 14th Amendment and to ensure that the southern states would be reorganised along lines acceptable to the North. The first of these acts, passed on 2 March, organised the 10 remaining excluded states (Tennessee had been fully readmitted in 1866) into military districts. They would have to call constitutional conventions to produce new constitutional documents granting African-American people the vote, and ratify the Fourteenth Amendment before readmission. The remaining Reconstruction Acts represented Congress's response to the various attempts by southern states to wriggle out of this, by refusing to call constitutional conventions, or by organising voter boycotts. Johnson's vetoes were overridden.

Congressional leaders also faced opposition from the US Supreme Court, which was supposedly the guarantor of the constitutionality of the actions of the other two branches of the US government. In the case known as *ex parte Milligan* (December 1866), the Court had held that when the civil courts were open, martial law could not be imposed. This had the effect of threatening the operation of the military courts, which were part of the Freedmen's Bureau. Congress threatened to close the Court. The Supreme Court was suitably intimidated until 1868 when it accepted a case known as *ex parte McCordle*, which was about military tribunals. Congress promptly passed a law banning the Court from hearing appeals in that sort of case, on 27 March 1868. The Court could not do anything about this.

During this period, ex-Confederate states were run by Republican parties consisting of black people allied with three main types of white voters:

- Poor white farmers, who had never been slaveowners and had often been opposed to secession in the first place.
- Planters who thought that these changes were inevitable, and wanted both to modernise and to show themselves willing to embrace the new order. These were the so-called 'scalawags' – southerners who were viewed as betraying their class and section.
- 'Carpetbaggers' – northern politicians who moved South (in the popular image, with their belongings slung over their shoulders in a bag made of carpet) to seek political office there.

These governments established state-supported schools to try to educate their devastated populations, many of whom had no formal education at all. They

invested in railroads in an attempt to modernise the South, and sometimes they even managed to redistribute land from white planters to black people, especially in South Carolina. However, they were faced with tremendous opposition as they were seen as tyrannical, and were vulnerable because they lacked support and were seen by many white people as illegitimate.

This picture was encouraged by Johnson. The Reconstruction efforts were mostly based on the military occupation of the South, and Johnson was Commander-in-Chief. He dismissed Radical military leaders. He obstructed efforts to remove the vote from Confederate sympathisers by encouraging them to go to court, and he tried to set up opportunities for them to swear their allegiance, which were clearly illegitimate. Congress was forced to frame new legislation to oppose him. But by June 1868 all the states apart from Mississippi, Texas and Virginia were back in the Union, and the 14th Amendment had been ratified.

Johnson's vetoes, his proclamations and his rhetoric were not making the Radical reformers' job any easier. They devised a plan to be rid of him. There was no vice president and, by the rules of the time, Johnson would have been replaced by the most senior senator – Benjamin Wade. The only way in which they could do this was by **impeaching** and convicting him of bribery, treason or high crimes and misdemeanours. Irritating though they found him, he did not seem to be guilty of any of these.

At his impeachment trial (March to May 1868), Johnson's lawyers convincingly demonstrated that he had not in fact breached the terms of the Tenure of Office Act in dismissing Secretary of War Edward Stanton (who had barricaded himself in his office for months), and that even if he had, this was not a high crime or misdemeanour and was not an impeachable offence. Nor had he violated the terms of Congress's Command of the Army Act, which attempted to restrict him to commanding the army only by direct communication with its leading general Ulysses S. Grant. The final accusation against him was that he had made 'intemperate harangues' designed to bring Congress into disrespect. This was undeniably true, but hardly a high crime. Even so he only just survived. To be convicted by the Senate would have taken 36 votes; in the end, there were 35 votes against him. Seven of the votes in his favour came from moderate (or liberal) Republicans, who were perhaps uncomfortable with the obvious unconstitutionality of what seemed like a revolution against presidential power, or who perhaps did not wish to see a President Wade who may have seemed to be equally as intransigent as Johnson. One of those seven Republicans was Lyman Trumbull. Neither he, nor any of the others, held federal office again. There were widespread allegations that at least some of the Republicans who supported Johnson had been bribed to do so.

Grant and the failure of Radical Reconstruction

It was no surprise that the Republicans refused to nominate Johnson for the presidential election of 1868 (in fact, Johnson attempted unsuccessfully to persuade the Democrats to nominate him instead). The Republicans nominated Ulysses S. Grant, the commanding general of the US army, who seemed absolutely perfect. He was highly popular, a war hero and had no discernible political



Figure 1.4: Ulysses S. Grant was a very successful commander in the US Civil War, but a less successful president.

opinions. Congressional Republicans expected that they would have a malleable candidate who would not obstruct them. Grant won the election easily. His support in the South came mostly from newly enfranchised African Americans. This was noted by hostile white southerners who started to think about how to stop black people from voting. Republicans in Congress came up with the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, which expressly forbade the banning of the right to vote on the grounds of race or having been a slave. This was eventually passed in 1870, and would be creatively ignored for most the next 100 years, in ways detailed in several sections of this textbook. Grant supported Republican governments in the South with military force if necessary, for example in Louisiana in 1872, when he sent federal troops to support the claim of the Republican candidate for governor, William Pitt Kellogg, in a dispute among members of the Louisiana elections returning board over who had actually won the election; his opponent, John McEnery, had been an officer in the Confederate army.

Radical Reconstruction: the position in the South

There are two narratives of Radical Reconstruction. One of them happened in the North, among Republicans, as politicians argued about what should be done, and Republicans' ideas about what to do in the South became confused with ideas about who should be president, and about whether Congress should have greater power than the other branches of the federal government. Do not forget, though, that this was a dispute over how to treat a defeated enemy upon whom a solution had to be imposed (or perhaps, how to treat an honoured but misguided friend who should be a partner in negotiation). Johnson's impeachment did not succeed in removing him, but it did settle for the moment the issue of who should run the process of Reconstruction. With Johnson sidelined, and then with Grant in the White House, the Radicals had won. So what, then, happened in the South?

In 1865 the South had suffered a quarter of a million dead, an economy in ruins and a political class either utterly defeated or utterly inexperienced. By 1877, for a variety of reasons, the Reconstruction governments of the South had failed. There were economic and social components to this failure that were reflected in the structure of southern society in the post-Reconstruction age.

What *might* southern society have looked like, had Radical Reconstruction worked as intended? We might have expected to see some of the following:



Voices from the past: Lyman Trumbull

Lyman Trumbull was a United States senator from Illinois. As Chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, he wrote the 13th Amendment and the 1866 Civil Rights Act. His legislation therefore had a profound impact on the lives of African Americans. He lost his Senate seat in 1873 as a direct result of his failure to convict Andrew Johnson. Trumbull spent the rest of his life campaigning against the corruption of the period known as the 'Gilded Age'.

Trumbull started life as a Democrat, joining the Republican Party in the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In 1872 he supported the Liberal Republicans, and then became a Democrat again. He would end his life as a Populist. His political trajectory was not entirely uncommon.

- Land, not slaves, now used for collateral and security in the South for those wishing to borrow money.
- Black landownership.
- Equality of opportunity for black people (education, jobs, etc.).
- Equal civil rights and suffrage for black people.
- Black political officeholders.

There were stunning successes in terms of black officeholding – a black majority in the legislature of South Carolina, where black voters outnumbered whites (as they did in from Mississippi to Florida); there were also a couple of black US senators from Mississippi. In 1870 there were more black officeholders in the United States than at any time in the next 100 years. Across the South in the late 1860s white voters joined with black voters to elect Republican governments and federal representatives. It was not all, or even most, white voters who did this. Poor white voters, it seems, had joined forces with poor black voters to stand behind the Republican ticket.

The early 1870s would sometimes be called ‘Black Reconstruction’ by those writing from a (hostile) southern perspective, although it is only in South Carolina that black people came even close to running the Republican Party in a state. Across the South, black people who participated in government tended to be northerners moving back South, or ministers, businessmen and academics. There were examples of semi-literate former slaves taking office a few years after emancipation, but not many. The majority of southern African-American politicians of the 1870s were already established figures, and most had been born free.

Radical Reconstruction had many achievements. Southerners (white and black) went to school in great numbers for the first time. The Freedmen’s Bureau, southern governments (especially that of South Carolina, where the Speaker of the House, and the majority of the representatives, were black) and northern charities collaborated to make this happen. Meanwhile, taxes went up for three main reasons:

- The social programmes introduced by Radical Reconstruction governments in, for example, education, were expensive. Six times more South Carolinian children were in school in 1870 than in 1860; in North Carolina four generations of the same family studied the same books together in order to learn how to read.
- The damage done to the South during the Civil War needed to be repaired.
- The tax base of the South had been severely damaged during the Civil War, so the income of southern governments was diminished anyway.

There were also examples of governmental waste and corruption – South Carolina had some very modern issues of fraudulently claimed legislative expenses and poorly negotiated expensive government contracts (one year the legislature spent half a million dollars on printing). None of this looked like anything much more than teething trouble for the new administrations.

The efforts of southern Radical governments to establish themselves, and of African Americans to gain advancement, met serious resistance in other ways. The Freedman’s Bureau, the operation (or not) of which had formed part of the

argument between Johnson and Congress, has been criticised by historians for failing to push forward the land reforms suggested by Radicals such as Thaddeus Stevens. A few plantations were confiscated and redistributed to African Americans – in South Carolina, of course – but the major effect of suggestions of land reform was to antagonise southern white landowners, who tended to be influential and wealthy. Instead, the Bureau backed down, helping white plantation owners to manage black farmers working on their land. The more charitable explanation is that the Freedmen's Bureau made it a lot easier for black farmers (mostly ex-slaves) to find work in the jobs that needed doing, which were of course very similar to the jobs they had always done. It also helped them to find homes near those jobs.

There are compelling examples of positive African-American efforts to improve life in the Reconstruction era South. Here is one. A northerner, Jonathan Clarkson Gibbs, from Pennsylvania, moved to South Carolina in 1864 to tend to the African-American population in the devastated South. His motivation was partly humanitarian and partly corrective – he was concerned that the religious knowledge of southern blacks was inaccurate. He came to believe that peace in the South, and racial harmony, could be maintained simply enough – by the provision of rudimentary education, clean clothes and personal hygiene equipment such as toothbrushes. By 1867 he had moved to Florida and opened a school; by 1868 he was Florida's Secretary of State – a position that the influential historian Eric Foner¹ has argued was largely ceremonial. That is, black people were made secretary of state, but white people took the decisions. In the Floridian constitutional convention of which he had been part, Gibbs and his faction had pushed the creation of a state-run public school system; as secretary of state, Gibbs used his position on the State Education Board to make this happen. When he ceased to be secretary of state in 1873 (the last full year of his life) he became Superintendent of Public Instruction, keeping his seat on the Board of Education. He claimed that he was, genuinely, second in power only to the governor during his tenure as secretary of state; in reality, he was allowed to build and direct schools, and to investigate the violence and fraud that were a feature of Southern society.

To white southerners, the whole period seemed fraught with danger. Their new governments were imperfect; there was no magical solution to the South's economic problems; no doubt the sight of emancipated, educated and assertive African Americans was alarming to many southerners brought up on the racial theory of white supremacy, especially as under Radical rule ex-Confederate officers could not vote (these pillars of white society were denied the vote, while their former slaves could cast their own ballots!). Perhaps, if there had been more money, and if the governments had not been corrupt (it should be noted that Grant's government, and northern state governments, were just as corrupt themselves – but they could afford to lose more money), Radical Reconstruction might have been pushed through in the South.

Among the various other rifle clubs and protest groups that grew up in the Reconstruction era, the most significant was perhaps the Mississippi Plan. This involved Red Shirts – the local white paramilitary group – openly attacking black people, scalawags and carpetbaggers. The group was part of the Democratic Party,

and had first come to prominence in 1874 in Vicksburg, Mississippi, in a conflict that had resulted in the black sheriff being shot by his own white deputy. White Republicans fled the state; black people found themselves economically isolated. The Red Shirts ensured that black people largely did not vote in the statewide elections in 1875. President Grant, who had intervened in Louisiana in 1872, refused to intervene for political reasons, as he was concerned about how it would look to send in federal (northern) troops to attack white southerners on behalf of the black community, just 10 years after the end of the Civil War. The plan was so successful that it was exported to the Carolinas in 1876. In all three states, the Radical governments fell.

The slow failure of Radical Reconstruction

As problems mounted in the South, northern enthusiasm for Reconstruction began to wane. It became clear that the object of ‘maintaining Republican government’ was at least as important to some northern Radicals as was building stable political societies in the South. The southerners who participated in government were outnumbered by those who did not. Republican regimes in the South were supported largely by northern members of the Union League, who were widely and often correctly suspected of encouraging compliance to the Radical platform rather than creating self-sustaining local parties. The Radicals were also running out of leaders. Grant was no radical, and he surrounded himself with his friends rather than with people of particular political gifts or beliefs. Stevens had died in 1868, and Wade, blamed for having undermined attempts to convict Johnson because he was so unattractive as a successor, lost his Senate seat in 1869. Sumner would die in 1874. There were no great leaders to take their place. The most high-profile Radical remaining was Grant’s vice president Schuyler Colfax, who as vice president had comparatively little influence and no ability to initiate any action. Vice presidents throughout American history have complained about how little they have been able to achieve. In the South there was active opposition to Radical Reconstruction; in the North there was simply diminishing support.

In 1869 the federal government had failed to deal properly with attempts to corner the market in gold. American businesses had lost money, and Grant, then a new president, had seemed unequal to the task of ensuring financial and economic stability. Then came a financial crash, which Grant was also unable to deal with. The Panic of 1873 was inconvenient in the North but in the still-impoorished South, it was a disaster. The revenue base of southern governments was undermined. The Freedmen’s Savings Bank went bust, meaning that hundreds of thousands of black investors were sent back into poverty. Meanwhile the North, with labour unrest on the railroads, a crisis of credit and rising unemployment, realised that sorting out the South might no longer be its priority.

The end of Radical Reconstruction must not be blamed squarely on economic factors connected to the Panic. In 1872, an Amnesty Act had restored political rights to almost all the ex-Confederates, and the Freedmen’s Bureau that Johnson had so disliked was allowed by Congress to lapse. The rhetoric of the 1872 election campaign – fought between two Republicans from the North, one of whom, Horace Greeley, was unenthusiastically endorsed by the Democrats, who saw no hope of winning a national election – had been of reconciliation. By the time of the

ACTIVITY 1.3

Read the Section on Radical Reconstruction: the problem in the South. Isolate the reasons for the stagnation of Radical Reconstruction during Grant's presidency. How many of them could have been blamed on Grant?

next election campaign the regimes of the carpetbaggers and scalawags had failed in every state but Louisiana, South Carolina and Florida. The South was once again run by the same political class that had run it in the 1850s.

The Compromise of 1877

The reasons for the failure of Radical Reconstruction can be summed up in three ways. First, resistance in the South grew too great to be contained. Whether this took the form of violent resistance against black participation in leadership, or non-violent resistance against perceived black domination, or simply of growing resentment against carpetbaggers and scalawags, Southern society did not as a whole change its worldview and embrace the new order. Second, the North ran out of leadership and energy in its pursuit of Radical Reconstruction. The battles of the Johnson era had nearly caused a revolution – and what had the North to show for it? A ragtag bunch of governments that needed constant support and showed no signs of being able to look after themselves. For both of these reasons, it had become clear by the mid-1870s that the political class of the South could not have been entirely replaced even if there had been the will to do so. Third, the economic difficulties caused by the Panic of 1873 caused the North, and the US government as a whole, to divert its focus from the South, while also undermining the economic progress made by former slaves and allowing white people to reassert their dominance in yet another way.

The 'official' failure, though, came in the murky circumstances known as the Compromise of 1877. The general election of 1876 had produced a clear popular majority for the Democratic candidate Samuel J. Tilden of New York over Rutherford B. Hayes of Ohio, the Republican candidate for the presidency. A majority of votes is not, however, what is needed to win the presidency. Instead, each state is assigned a number of votes in an **electoral college**. In 1866, Tilden achieved 184 votes and Hayes 166; 185 were needed for a majority. The remaining 19 votes belonged to South Carolina, Louisiana and Florida, and therein lay the problem. They were still controlled by carpetbaggers, although not securely, and each of these states had submitted two sets of election results and two sets of electors. Give all three states to Hayes, allowing the submissions from the carpetbag electors, and he would win. Give even one of those states to the Democrats, and Tilden would be President.

It appears that neither side was innocent. The Democrats, it seems, had tried to prevent people from voting as they wished; the Republicans had tried to prevent officials from counting accurately. The issue ultimately came down to Florida – not for the last time in a presidential election – and a Congressional committee awarded the votes to Hayes. Their decision had been along party lines. Congressional Democrats threatened to disrupt the formal process by which the votes were received; this would have left the country with no president at all. In return for the votes he needed, Hayes offered the following compromise:

- He would appoint a southerner to the Cabinet.
- He would subsidise southern railroads.
- He would withdraw federal troops from the South. This would mean the collapse of the carpetbag governments that relied upon federal troops for protection.



Key terms

electoral college: where each state is assigned a number of electors based on its population. To win election as president, a candidate needs to win more votes in the electoral college – which means a few big states, or lots of small states. Most states award their votes on an all-or-nothing basis. Winning a state worth 10 electoral college votes (ECVs) by a narrow margin is more useful to a presidential candidate than winning three states worth three ECVs each by huge margins. It is possible to win fewer states, and fewer votes, and still to win the presidency.

The carpetbag governments of the South thereby sacrificed their own existence in order to win the White House for their party. The Union had been preserved, and various constitutional amendments were in place to protect the rights of black people in the South. In one way or another, those amendments would be largely ignored – but the Republicans held the White House. It remained to be seen whether this was a prize worth having.

One big question about Reconstruction that has been debated by historians since the 1960s is this: is it better to think of it as amazing because of how far it went, or as a tragic wasted opportunity to heal the racial divide in America? Kenneth Stampp² argued that the Radical Republicans had noble aims and substantial achievements, such as the 14th Amendment. Michael Les Benedict³ stressed the ways in which Congress was reluctant to intervene directly, preferring to respect the principle of states' rights even for those states that had recently seceded. Eric Foner⁴ combines these two strands of thought.

Historians writing about Reconstruction at the moment tend to focus on the reasons for its failure, which begs the question: what were its aims? Since different constituencies had such different aims, Reconstruction was either a failure or a success, and everything in between, depending on what people thought it might achieve. Also, if you think that it is amazing how far the country went in the direction of equal rights, given the massive opposition, and institutional obstacles, then 'failure' is hardly the right term. Can something be fairly judged a failure if its aims were never attainable?

If failure is an appropriate term, why did Reconstruction fail? One explanation is that southern whites were unutterably violently opposed, and so cohesive that they were bound to come out on top. Sarah Anne Rubin⁵ grounds this in their emotional attachment to the Confederacy. Others focus on internal divisions within the non-white population. Michael Fitzgerald⁶ suggests that the programme of land redistribution that was part of Radical Reconstruction was fatally stalled by objections from mixed-race and free black landowners whose sympathies lay with other landowners, rather than with other African Americans.

David Blight⁷ makes the point that in the popular imagination the Civil War became a noble struggle between two sets of white men who fought bravely for what each believed to be key to the American tradition. One set fought for freedom – by which they meant the freedom of states to order their own social affairs – and the other for the Union. Over the 1870s each side came to understand the other's point of view – the North conceded the South's view on race, and the South conceded the North's view on secession. A Civil War that had claimed nearly 700 000 lives became a national patriotic event about white Americans. Black Americans dropped out of the narrative.

The politics of the Gilded Age and the era of weak presidents and political corruption

In 1873 Mark Twain (who two years later would publish *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, the first novel produced on the new-fangled typewriter) coined the term the 'Gilded Age' to describe the America of his day. He was referring not just to



Speak like a historian: Stevens, Sumner and other Radicals

Uniting Stevens, Sumner and other Radicals in 1865 was the conviction that the Civil War constituted a “golden moment”, an opportunity for far-reaching change that, if allowed to pass, will have escaped for years, if not forever. While some of their constituents demanded the execution of Southern leaders as punishment for treason, only a handful of Radical leaders echoed these calls. Rather than vengeance, the driving force of Radical ideology was the utopian vision of a nation whose citizens enjoyed equality of civil and political rights, secured by a powerful and beneficent national state. For decades, long before any conceivable political benefit derived from its advocacy, Stevens, Sumner and other Radicals had defended the unpopular cause of black suffrage and castigated the idea that America was a “white man’s government”. Although Stevens and Sumner were racial egalitarians, many Radicals could not free themselves entirely from the prejudices so pervasive in their society. Yet even those who harbored doubts about blacks’ innate capabilities insisted that to limit on racial grounds the egalitarian commitments central to American political culture made a mockery of republican institutions. There was no room for a legally and politically submerged class in the “perfect republic” that must emerge from the Civil War.

Source: Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution*.⁸

the new taste for lavish interior design, but to the state of American politics and society in his day. America’s prosperity, at least partly based on the farming of golden wheat and the mining of golden minerals, was perhaps only skin deep. Scratch the surface, and real suffering might be revealed.

Presidents Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Arthur, Cleveland (twice) and Harrison are often thought of as being ‘weak’, as to a certain extent is President McKinley (1897–1901). Certainly none of them was a Lincoln or a Roosevelt, and certainly much of the important political action of the era was Congressional (much, in fact, was not even federal). If the presidency declined in power, though, then most Americans would have thought this a good thing. Lincoln had suspended *habeas corpus* (the right to avoid arbitrary arrest) as a Civil War measure, and had entirely ignored the Supreme Court’s order that he reinstate it. The most powerful president in the history of the Republic up to that point, he had also faced the gravest emergency. It seemed right, perhaps, that his successors return running the country to the states, and running the federal government to the Congress. Besides, and the key point: these men believed that Congress should run the country.

These presidents had all seen what had happened to Andrew Johnson. His battles with Congress had resulted in his near-impeachment, and he was widely known to have been saved only by a combination of corruption, reluctance to undermine the rule of law and fear of elevating Benjamin Wade to the presidency. There was a clear message for his successors – and for the party leaders who would nominate them for election.

The Stalwarts and the Spoils System

Ulysses S. Grant, the great general, had proved compliant but also not particularly competent. His administration was discredited from the start, and that the corruption scandals that surrounded him never touched him personally and only served to underline his out-of-touch irrelevance, and that of his office. His successor Rutherford B. Hayes had come to office in such murky circumstances in the election of 1876 that he was known as His Fraudulency. He had no clear mandate because he had lost the popular vote and seemed to have lost the electoral college vote too. He was allowed to get on with the business of undoing the remaining parts of Radical Reconstruction – the deal that had seen him elected – but was immediately blocked when he tried to do anything else.



Figure 1.5: Republican Party factions in the 1880s.

ACTIVITY 1.4

1. Why did Radical Reconstruction fail?

Some reasons why Radical Reconstruction failed might be:

 - The actions and failings of presidents.
 - The failure of Radical Republican leadership.
 - Opposition in the South.
 - The Panic of 1873.
1. Construct a mind map of these reasons for the failure of Radical Reconstruction. Write a conclusion to an essay 'Why did Radical Reconstruction fail?'.
 2. With reference to the extract from Eric Foner's book and your understanding of the historical context, how convincing is this interpretation of the failure of Radical Reconstruction?



Key terms

Mugwumps: who supported Grover Cleveland, a Democrat, in the presidential election of 1884, were anti-corruption candidates who felt unable to support Senator James G. Blaine for president, although they otherwise joined the Half-breeds in opposing the Stalwarts.

Half-breeds: including James G. Blaine, supported reform of the civil service to make it more professional and less dependent on patronage.

Stalwarts: led by men such as Roscoe Conkling of New York, favoured a system whereby the president (and the party machine that selected him, and which they controlled) had freedom to make whatever civil service appointments he wished.

Both Stalwarts and Half-breeds worked on the assumption that the Democrats were not able, in the 1880s, to win the presidency (which, without the help of the Mugwumps, they were probably not).



Figure 1.6: The presidency of Rutherford B. Hayes started in controversy. He was not an effective president.

This took the form of an attempt to reform the spoils system – the idea that winning an election gave the newly elected politicians the right to appoint people to (lucrative) public offices as civil servants. He dismissed the candidates of Senator Roscoe Conkling of New York from their positions in the New York Customs House in 1878. The Senate simply refused to confirm his nominated replacements. Conkling was a major leader of the Republican Party, and when it came to 1880 he and his Stalwart faction had their revenge upon Hayes when they refused to renominate him. Without major-party backing, he would not be able to hold on to the White House.

Hayes's failure did become a success of sorts – one of the few achievements of the presidents of the Gilded Age was indeed to begin some kind of reform of the civil service. The **Stalwarts** were able to remove Hayes, but not win the battle over who should succeed him. The candidate, James Garfield, was balanced by Chester A. Arthur – a dedicated Stalwart, and one of the New York Customs House officials dismissed by Hayes in 1878 – as vice president. Garfield won the election, and asserted his right to appoint the replacement officials in 1881, much to the disgust of Conkling who, relying on the doctrine of **senatorial courtesy**, objected. Conkling resigned from the Senate to make his point – but the New York legislature refused to re-elect him. The Stalwarts appeared to have lost, until Garfield was assassinated by a Stalwart supporter hoping, as he said at the time, to elevate Vice President Arthur to the presidency. Garfield took three months to die from his wounds. When he did die, in September 1881, the Stalwart Arthur proved surprisingly (and disappointingly to his former comrades) happy to reform the civil service, in the 1883 Pendleton Act. This Act introduced competitive examination

as an entry requirement for the civil service, eliminating at least in theory some of the corruption. Arthur, meanwhile, suffered the same fate as Hayes, when his nomination was refused by his own party (this time in 1884) following an argument about the spoils system.

Thematic link: government and politics

Grover Cleveland – a strong weak president?

The Democrat Grover Cleveland came to office as the Republican Party argued about the spoils system. Cleveland had been supported by some anti-Stalwart reforming Republicans (who called themselves **Mugwumps**). Cleveland's victory in the presidential election depended upon his winning New York, and the decision of the Mugwumps to vote for him there was probably decisive. Nevertheless, after some apparent initial hesitation, he divided the spoils of his office among Democrats, which was precisely what the Mugwumps had not wanted him to do. From Cleveland's point of view it was entirely understandable. He was the first Democratic president since 1861, and his party members expected to hold office. He did continue to attempt civil service reform, but only after sharing out the spoils.

Cleveland was faced with two areas in which he sought to limit the disorder that had built up over the previous 20 years. He encouraged states to sort out the considerable land ownership issues that had grown up in the West, where new residents had a habit of putting their fences up whether they had a title to the land or not, and there was growing tension between settlers. He also sought to limit the large number of claims for Civil War pensions, many of which appeared fraudulent. By the standards of the 1880s he was an energetic president. He was brought down by an argument over tariff reform. Party lines had broken down in the 1888 election. The question was: how high should the tariff be? The higher it was, the better for big business. Local parties were thrown into chaos over this question.

Although he won more states and more votes than his opponent Benjamin Harrison of Indiana, the Northeast voted against him en masse in 1888 and Cleveland was ejected from office. Harrison had been nominated by the Republicans as a deliberately weak figure from a swing state, which duly voted for him, providing crucial votes to contribute to Cleveland's defeat. The tariff, when it was passed in 1890, was known as the McKinley Tariff after William McKinley, the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, to popular dismay. The Republicans of the Billion Dollar Congress, as it was known, were soundly defeated in the 1890 mid-term elections. Two years later, President Harrison followed them out of office – to be replaced by the vindicated former President Cleveland, the only person to have held the presidency in non-consecutive terms.

Non-presidential politics

As the saying of the time went, an honest man is one who, when bought, stays bought. Even by these unexacting standards, many of the politicians of the Gilded Age were not honest. Many congressmen followed the interests of big business slavishly, seeking to improve the United States by expanding them. Speakers of the House and senior senators, often ex-war heroes, dominated proceedings. Senators, in particular, answered to their state legislatures, and state legislatures



Key term

senatorial courtesy: the doctrine, broadly accepted in American politics, that senators of the president's party should be allowed to choose civil servants working in federal roles within their own states. At the very least, they should be consulted.



Key term

tariff: a tax placed upon the importation or exportation of goods. Higher tariffs are usually seen as good for industrialists, and lower tariffs as good for consumers.

answered to their party machines. They promoted states' rights and small central government. The Supreme Court, still smarting from Lincoln's conduct during the war, tended to support them.

America's rapid industrial and demographic growth led to a clearly defined role for the federal government: stay out of the way, regulate interstate commerce (although what, precisely, that meant, was ill-defined), and ensure the safety of Americans, which essentially meant safety from Native Americans who objected to the expansion. Local – city or municipal – governments, meanwhile, flourished. The new immigrants needed housing, feeding and work, and the party machines needed votes. The rapidly expanding party organisations became powerful, and corrupt. In New York City the Democrats centred their organisation around William M. Tweed (widely known as 'Boss' Tweed), who was also associated with the Fraternal Association at Tammany Hall. In Philadelphia, the Gas Ring grew up – originally formed in the 1840s to provide power, by the 1880s they were an entirely corrupt cabal running the city. If corruption seemed to be hard-wired into politics in the Gilded Age, it was at a local level as well as on the national stage.

There were more positive aspects to state and local governments too. They were, after all, doing most of the governing. Most federal employees in the 1880s worked in the Post Office or in customs: the most impressive achievement of the federal government at the time was perhaps the wholesale delivery of pensions to civil war veterans, but this level of endeavour was the exception rather than the rule. William Novak⁹ argues forcibly that late 19th-century American governance was very effective. Instead of comparing an authoritative European-style national bureaucracy with a supposedly powerless American government, we need to consider the many diverse forms of **state capacity**. In particular, we must not be distracted by the laissez-faire nature of American politics from the many deliberate things that state and local governments did to shape politics, society and the economy. Novak cites the work of Albert Shaw, who wrote *The American*



Voices from the past: Grover Cleveland

The idea that the 1880s was the era of weak presidents and corruption has taken a real hold in the American imagination. Grover Cleveland, perhaps, is an exception to this picture. His unique status as the only ex-president to win the presidency can be explained in this way: he lost the presidency in the first place by standing up to powerful interests, and won it back when he had been proven right. The eight years of his presidencies were the only years a Democrat held the White House between 1861 and 1913.

It is difficult to criticise Cleveland for implementing the spoils system when he became president. He had watched a series of presidencies destroyed by

Republican Party infighting, and did not wish to provoke similar among his own Democrats. The issues on which he chose to take a stand were important ones, which risked his own popularity. He could have left the states to sort out land rights in the West (alienating farmers), and he could certainly have continued to ignore the issue of war pensions. He then lost an election that he could have won, in 1888, by refusing to take the principled stand on the tariff that alienated big business.

Discussion point

1. If Cleveland was, in fact, a strong weak president, does it mean that the so-called era of weak presidents is misnamed? Might we call it instead the era of weak Republican presidents?

State and the American Man in 1887 explicitly to confront the idea that American government was weak. Shaw looked at the actions of the state of Minnesota in producing regulatory legislation, and argued that the American public was in danger of believing its own publicity about how little government did for it. Shaw, who had also worked on laws in Illinois, cited among other legislation the Granger Laws – laws passed across the Midwest under pressure from the interest group the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry. These laws regulated charges for grain storage and short-haul railroad freight, both of which were otherwise set by eastern corporations to the disadvantage of Midwestern farmers.

Elisabeth Clemens¹⁰ has written an especially good book about how women, farmers and workers were able to mobilise as interest groups – giving considerable power to mass-based private (non-party, non-Union) organisations. Such organisations inevitably sought to exert pressure initially at local levels.



Figure 1.7: Tammany Hall, the powerful unofficial centre of the Democratic Party's organisation in New York City.

Social, regional and ethnic divisions

During the Gilded Age, the economy was regionalised. The Northeast, centred on New York City, was the home of banking and commerce. The Midwestern Ohio Valley was the home of the industrial belt. The South and the West provided

ACTIVITY 1.5

- The labels historians give to periods should be the starting point of historical debate, not the end of it. This period is sometimes referred to as the 'era of weak presidents'.
 - Create a graph with time on the x axis and presidential power on the y axis. Mark the x axis from 1865 to 1890.
 - Now draw a line on the graph to represent how presidential power rose and fell over time. Annotate key turning points.

Does this period deserve the name 'the era of weak presidents'?

Come back to this activity when you have completed the course. Were future presidents much stronger?

- 'The most important political decisions of the 1880s were taken at a local, not a national, level.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.

raw materials and crops. The South, and immigration from Europe and China, provided cheap labour. The key to this was the system of railroads. This helped the integration of the economy while also holding back the South, which found it cheaper to import consumer goods rather than develop manufacturing capacity at home. This meant that there were different tensions apparent within and between the northern, western and southern regions of the United States, but at their heart these tensions were all economic.

This was an era of massive immigration. Immigrants to the United States, with the exception of some Chinese landing on the Pacific coast, tended to enter at Castle Clinton, the southernmost point of Manhattan Island, New York City. What happened next was a matter of either luck or good management. Some immigrants were expected, and met by their families. Others were met by members of their own ethnic communities, who organised themselves to support new arrivals from the old country. Some were alone, sometimes because they were pioneers and there was as yet no community to welcome them. They might well fall prey to unscrupulous welcoming committees and find their luggage stolen, or lodgings in an expensive guesthouse with no guarantee of work.

Many immigrants stayed in New York City or the nearby towns of New Jersey. Others boarded a train. Some went all the way to California. Those with families rarely went west of the Mississippi. Scandinavians settled Minnesota and Wisconsin. Germans also headed to the Midwest. The Irish settled in Boston and Chicago as well as New York. The origins and destinations of immigrants to the USA in this period can be seen in Figure 1.9.

Divisions within and between North, South and West

In 1861 sectional tension – that is, a feeling that the different geographic regions of the United States also had different political, economic and cultural priorities – had caused a civil war that even those pleased with the abolition of slavery regretted for its violence and destructive consequences. The option of secession – that is, of leaving the United States and thereby demonstrating that the Union was no longer forever – was off the table: millions of Americans had died to protect it. Relations between North and South were only part of the equation. There was also, in America, the West – meaning, roughly, the area beyond the Mississippi River in which there was a mixture of new states and proto-state colonies.

There are some basic distinctions that can be drawn between the three sections – North, South and West. The North had more industry and commerce than the others (although in 1865 it was still more agricultural than anything else). Slavery was confined to the South (including Texas, a state with characteristics of both South and West). Related to this, cash crops like cotton (the kinds of crops that relied upon intensive agriculture) grew almost exclusively in the South. The West was a land of wide-open spaces with pioneers, cowboys and Native Americans, some of whom were understandably hostile. It was still, just about, the land of the buffalo – although pioneers from out East were rapidly killing them off. In the run up to the Civil War the West had been the scene of conflict between North and South over the expansion of slavery.

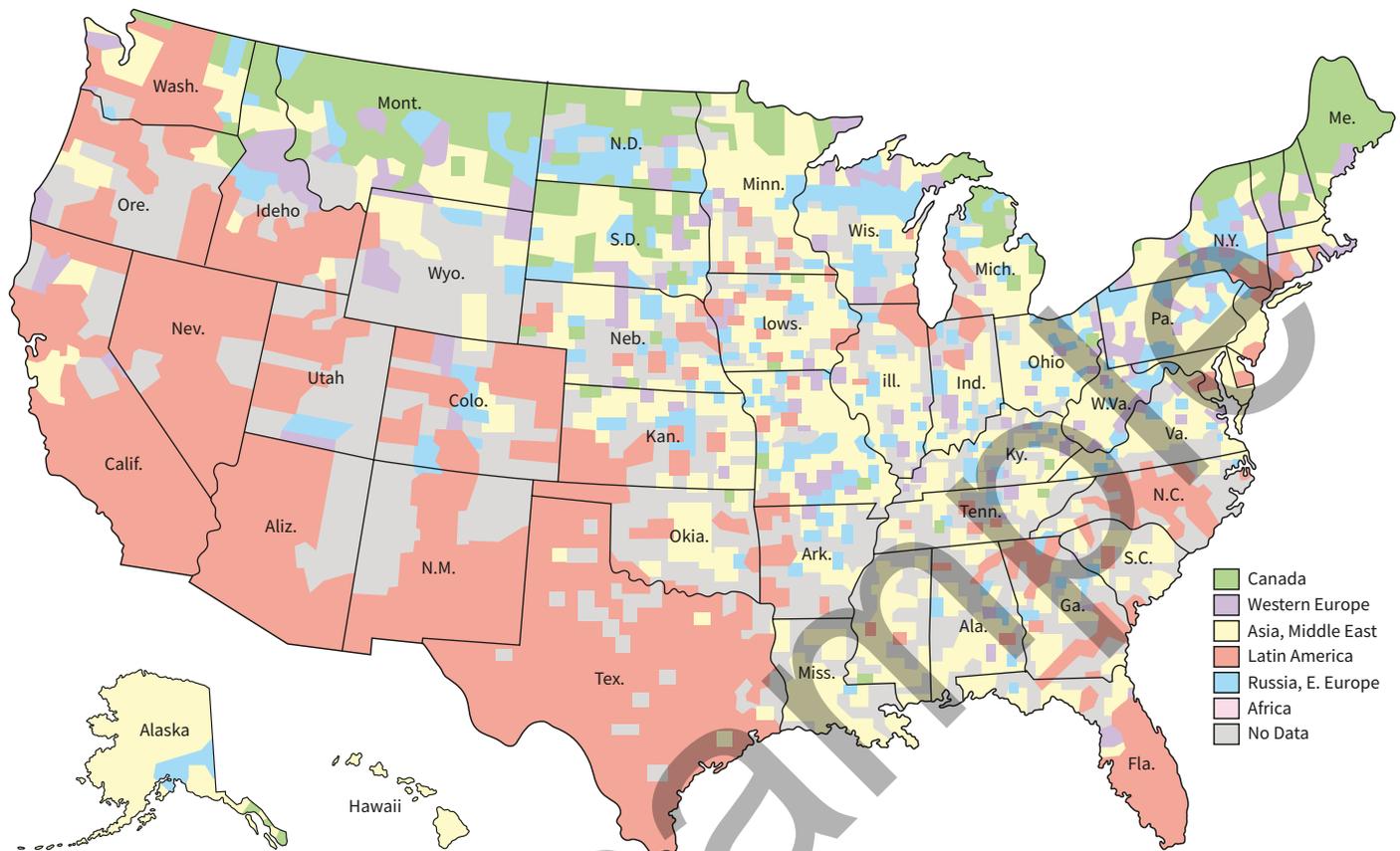


Figure 1.9: Immigration to the USA in the late 19th century.

Slavery in the antebellum (pre-Civil War) period had been both the symbol and the substance of the divisions between North and South. It was the symbol because it seemed to characterise the South (it became known as the ‘peculiar institution’ – peculiar in the sense of ‘distinctive’ rather than ‘strange’. After the war tension remained between North and South, which was partially resolved (arguably to the detriment of the African-American population of the South) by 1890. The tensions between the North and the South, and the way they progressed, are illustrated in Figure 1.10.

1865 – 1866: Moderate tension over the nature of the peace

There was no doubt that the North had won, or that emancipation would occur. The conspiracy that claimed the life of Abraham Lincoln (and would also have taken Andrew Johnson and Secretary of State Seward) was at least partly conceived by John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's assassin, in order to cause such chaos that the south might escape relatively unscathed from its defeat; Johnson's policy of moderate Reconstruction appeared to confirm that this was so. The South appeared, however, to be pushing its luck when it began to introduce Black Codes and gave political office to high-ranking Confederates such as Alexander H. Stephens (the Confederate Vice president, elected as senator for Georgia).

1866 – 1887: Extreme tension, which then fell away, over the nature of Reconstruction.

Undoubtedly some of the northern Radicals in Congress – Stevens and Wade, for example – had a punitive agenda towards the South. Black southerners on the whole were fully behind northern efforts to reconstruct the South; many influential white southerners were opposed to the nature of northern interference (hence the particular insult of 'carpetbagger' levelled at politicians who moved from North to South to impose what seemed like the northern way of life upon the South. When in 1872 it started to become clear that the northern-dominated federal government no longer viewed radical Reconstruction as its major priority, opposed white southerners became reconciled to the North. This all came to a head in the compromise of 1877; the new president, Rutherford B. Hayes, removed federal troops from the South and supported federal subsidies for southern railroads. He had meant to do this anyway, but the policies were sold as a concession by the North and the South was suitably grateful.

1877 – 1890: The picture of the South as a distinct section co-existing with, but different from, the North – peculiar even without its institution – began to grow.

The Civil War seemed now like a distant nightmare; the northern federal government let the South get on with running its own affairs (northern states also saw little interference). The Old South became a romantic, almost tragic, figure, with war memorials and veterans' reunions and nostalgic books such as Thomas Page's collection of short stories *In Ole Virginia* (1887). When there was tension in this period, it was because northern corporations were expanding into the South in a vigorous and largely unregulated way, invited in by southerners who held a series of industrial fairs (such as that in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1881). There was tension in the textile industry caused by the obvious advantages of the new southern textiles mills which were, unlike the northern mills they had copied, very close to the raw materials and therefore incurred fewer costs.

Figure 1.10: Tensions between North and South, 1865–1890.

The West had been an outlet for the tension between the North and the South in the antebellum period, and the key characteristics of its sectional culture had developed: by 1890 it had a distinct political culture. Formed in the late 1880s, western farmers' movements would ultimately become Populism, the history of which is more fully documented in the section on Political tensions and divisions in Chapter 2. In terms of western relations with the North and the South, though, the key points are:

- In the 1870s and early 1880s there was an assumption that western and northern economic interests were so fully aligned that northern capital (based in New York City, and actually expressed as 'out East') would come to the rescue of western pioneering and agricultural production, should that become necessary. When

crises did begin to hit – there was an agricultural depression in the 1880s – the financiers out East were unsympathetic.

- Early in this period the South existed as a rival to the West, at least in the sense that both sought northern investment (for example, involving the expansion of railroads). Later on, as the West became disillusioned with the North, western agricultural interests sought to make common cause with southern farmers, in opposition to northern capital.

Tensions in the North

The population of the United States doubled from around 31 million to around 63 million from 1860 to 1890, despite a Civil War that had claimed nearly 1% of the total population among its dead. In 1890 one in seven – nine million – Americans were foreign born. Add to this the number of second-generation immigrants, and trouble might be expected, especially in the North, where immigrants tended to be concentrated. There was in fact remarkably little tension between communities: there were so many immigrants from so many different groups, and so much work, that tension did not really have time to arise. Anti-Catholicism had been a feature of relations in the big cities of the North in the 1850s – the Know-Nothing Party, a forerunner of the Republicans, had certainly been anti-Catholic – but it subsided.

One source of tension in the North was what should be done about railroads. The heart of the problem was ‘freight rates’ – the amount charged by the railroad corporations to move goods. This contributed to tensions between North and South, and North and West (and Midwest – the area centred on Chicago, which was a railroad hub itself) – but also created tension in the North itself, especially in Massachusetts. Boston, Massachusetts, played second fiddle on the East Coast to New York City as a transport and commercial hub, and found its influence diminishing. This ultimately resulted in the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887, which enabled Congress to regulate the railroads and therefore the freight rates; the case that precipitated the passing of the act originated in Illinois, and the context in which it was passed was the growing dissatisfaction of western farmers with state-based attempts (called ‘Granger Laws’) to deal with the various issues surrounding railroad charges (their charges were unclear, too high and anti-competitive). The impetus behind its passing, however, came from northern businessmen in Boston and New York.

The Section on Urbanisation later in this chapter outlines the urbanisation that occurred in the North, which was fuelled by industrial expansion. In this period, the new urban citizens were most often immigrants and the children of immigrants. For the first time large numbers of immigrants to the North were neither Protestant nor English-speaking; inevitably, tensions began to arise not so much between the different communities as between the new communities and the original population, which had the money and power that the newcomers lacked. This helps to explain why American trade unionism failed to take off. It was not that northern workers were entirely satisfied with the unrestrained capitalism of the Gilded Age; instead the capitalist bosses were able to keep the working classes from uniting.

The pattern in Europe was clear. In the 1840s Marx and Engels had formulated the idea of revolutionary socialism, which predicted that the working classes would

unite and seize power from the bosses who owned the land and the means of production; by the 1880s the processes were well underway, which would lead to the rise of viable socialist parties in western Europe and the Russian Revolution in the east. In America there was no moment when the working classes banded together; American labour could not sustain anything more than a very moderate trade union movement. There was a radical fringe – the Haymarket riot of 1886 in Chicago, inspired by a German anarchist named August Spies and Samuel Fielden, a radical socialist and Methodist lay preacher from Lancashire, is the best example of this. The social tensions of the North were, however, constrained by a number of factors:

- The availability of both a ready supply of labour and a ready supply of jobs (if not in the North, then out West).
- The disunity of the working class.
- The booming American economy.

Perhaps the social tensions of the North were also moderated by the example of the South; it became clearer and clearer throughout the 1880s that the white immigrant labourers of the North were not the worst off of all Americans.

The Haymarket Affair, 1886

Police were attempting to disperse a protest in favour of an eight-hour working day in Haymarket Square, Chicago, on 4 May 1886. The previous day, several workers had been killed by police; this protest, though, was peaceful. A bomb was thrown at the police, and in the ensuing chaos many people were wounded and at least 11 killed, seven of them police officers. Although the bomb-thrower was not caught, the bomb-makers were; they were anarchists, and foreign-born. Eight men were convicted, four of whom were hanged. The juries, and the judge, were clearly biased against the defendants.

There were doubts expressed at the time about whether the men were guilty of this particular bombing; some of them were certainly ‘guilty’ of being anarchists, or perhaps revolutionary socialists. Three would later be pardoned. This would not be the first time that fear of revolutionary socialism would come to America.

Amidst the controversy, the cause of those promoting an eight-hour working day was, of course, seriously damaged.

Thematic link: economy and society

The West

How should we tell the story of the West? Should we start with the deaths of Wild Bill Hickok and Billy the Kid, stories of saloon bars and cowboys? Should we focus on the last stands of the **Native Americans** and the final battles to expand? Should we focus instead on the pioneering settlers homesteading their way across the new nation, walking across the endless landscape in search of the home they would find just over the horizon?

The story of the West is, of course, the story of all of these things. It has been romanticised in print (the American ‘Dime novels’ began in the 1860s) and on film,

in children's games of cowboys and indians, and in the view of the pioneers as the 'real' Americans, hardy survivors, rugged individualists. The reality is complex.

Let us begin with the story of the final destruction of the Native Americans as independent peoples. By the 1860s the remaining tribes were mutually antagonistic. The white Americans faced their biggest problems in the Plains area – the vast area between the Mississippi and the Rockies. The Sioux War in 1865–67 was all about American efforts to build infrastructure into the northwest across Montana, through buffalo hunting grounds. The Sioux, like other Plains tribes, were reliant on buffalo for everything. They hunted the animals sparingly, using every part of the animals they killed. In Wyoming in 1866, 81 American soldiers were killed by a band of around 1000 Native Americans, including some Sioux under Crazy Horse. This incident has become known as Fetterman's Massacre after the defeated US commander. The federal government, with little stomach for a fight against the warlike Sioux, negotiated plans for reservations for Native Americans in the West. These were areas that would not be open for American settlement and railroads. These Dakota settlements were immediately violated in 1875 when gold was found in the Black Hills. General George Armstrong Custer



Voices from the past: *Adventures of Buffalo Bill*

This is part of the prologue to *Adventures of Buffalo Bill*, an American Dime novel from 1882.

'The land of America is full of romance, and tales that stir the blood can be told over and over again of bold Privateers and reckless Buccaneers who have swept along the coasts; of fierce naval battles, sea chases, daring smugglers; and on shore of brave deeds in the saddle and afoot; of red trails followed to the bitter end and savage encounters in forest wilds.

And it is beyond the pale of civilization I find the hero of these pages which tell of thrilling adventures, fierce combats, deadly feuds and wild rides, that, one and all, are true to the letter, as hundreds now living can testify.

Who has not heard the name of Buffalo Bill – a magic name, seemingly, to every boy's heart?

...

A child of the prairie, as it were, Buffalo Bill will go down to history as one of America's strange heroes who has loved the trackless wilds, rolling plains and mountain solitudes of our land, far more than the bustle and turmoil, the busy life and joys of our cities, and who has stood as a barrier between civilization and savagery, risking his own life to save the lives of others.

...

Knowing the man well, having seen him amid the greatest dangers, shared with him his blanket and his camp-fire's warmth, I feel entitled to write of him as a hero of heroes, and in the following pages sketch his remarkable career from boyhood to manhood.

Born in the State of Iowa in 1843, Buffalo Bill, or Will Cody, was inured to scenes of hardship and danger ere he reached his tenth year, and being a precocious youth, his adventurous spirit led him into all sorts of deeds of mischief and daring, which well served to lay the foundation for the later acts of his life.'

Source: Colonel Prentiss Ingraham, *Adventures of Buffalo Bill from Boyhood to Manhood. Deeds of Daring, Scenes of Thrilling, Peril, and Romantic Incidents In the Early Life of W. F. Cody, the Monarch of Bordermen*.¹¹

Discussion point

What can this extract about Buffalo Bill tell a historian about the way in which Americans viewed the Frontier West by the 1880s?

famously fought an ill-advised battle there in 1876, at Little Big Horn. Custer's Last Stand, as it is known, was the last victory for the Sioux, who had been defeated by the end of 1877. There were other battles – Geronimo became a famous Native American leader in 1886, and 1890 saw the Battle of Wounded Knee, but in the end men armed with rifles and supplied by railroads, and with a unity of purpose, were able to defeat fractured tribesmen who in the words of the chief of the Nez Perce, surrendering in Oregon in 1877, had become, '... tired; my heart is sick and sad ... I will fight no more forever'. The effect of the final defeat of the Native Americans was to enable Americans to 'close' the frontier. This meant that there would be no more westward expansion, and the consequences of that are discussed in the section on The impact of the ending of the frontier towards the end of this chapter.

The popular image of the Wild West is either lawless, or of a single sheriff bravely upholding law and order. The fact is that in many areas the states' and federal governments' writs did not entirely reach. The Plains were vast and new communities sprang up where there seemed to be good farmland, or a river, or a junction of routes on the Cow Roads along which cowboys drove their cattle. In farming communities there was plenty of space and a pioneering spirit, and the settlers were armed to protect themselves from Native Americans. In Cow Towns – staging posts on their routes – there might be sporadic violence caused by a combination of stir-crazy armed cowboys and alcohol – think of a thousand Westerns with swinging saloon doors. In Deadwood, in the Black Hills of South Dakota, and Tombstone, Arizona – both notoriously lawless places in the 1870s – the problem was caused by the fact that these were gold and silver towns and there was more to steal. Law was provided by the local sheriff and whatever firepower he could muster on his side.

The West attracted cowboys because it had excellent land on which cattle could be grazed. The reality of life as a cowboy was that it was long, hard and badly paid. Cows had to be driven to market, which meant the East. In 1866 the Long Drive began, as cowboys realised that rather than driving cows all the way East they could be driven to the railroad in Missouri – just 600 miles from Texas. Cow Towns such as Abilene, Texas, sprang up on the route to provide overnight services for the cowboys. In 1875 the invention of the refrigerated railcar made this more efficient. The cow business boomed until 1886–87, when a late spring led to disaster. There was too little pasture to provide food on all the ranches, and cattle died in unseasonable snowdrifts. In 1887 there was a summer drought, and there were droughts on and off for 10 years.

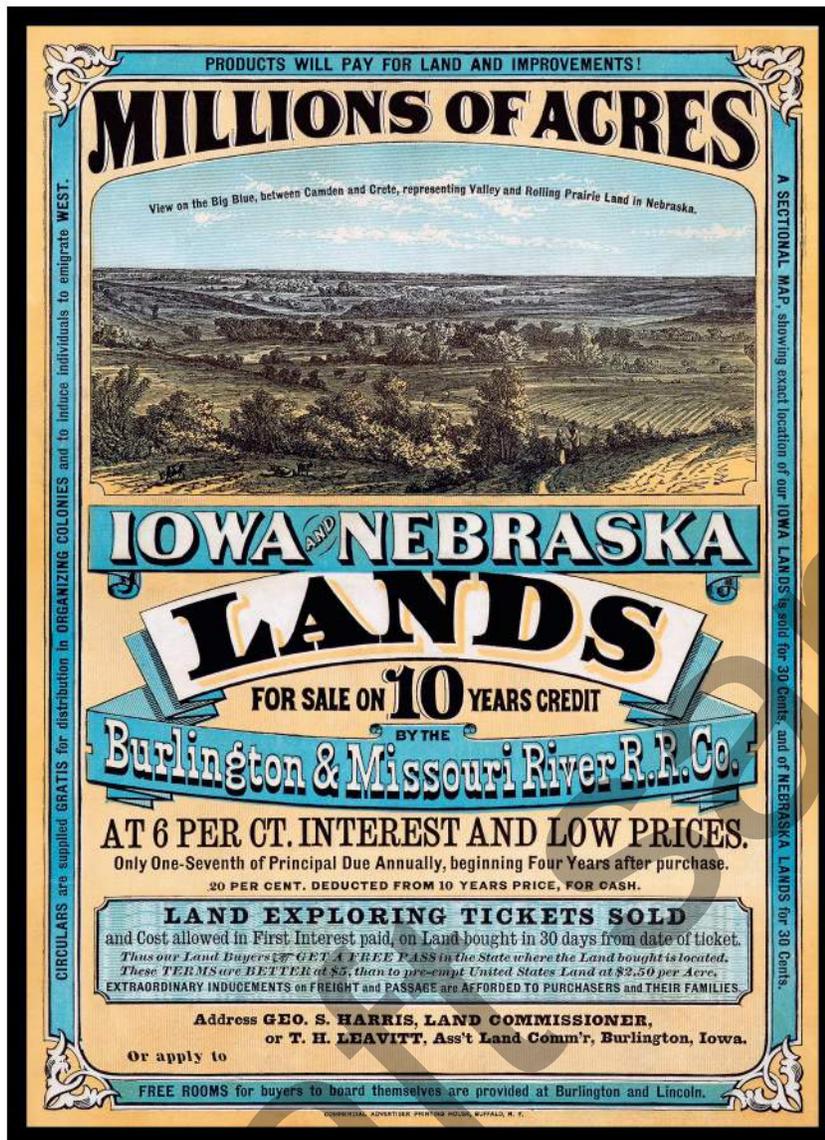


Figure 1.11: This poster illustrates the appeal of taking land in the West.

The range was ultimately replaced by the ranch. Cowboys fenced in land, perhaps using the relatively newly invented barbed wire. They did not take any particular steps to purchase the land beforehand. This ultimately led to tension with the sheep farmers who came West in the 1880s – tension heightened by various unscientific assertions that sheep dung poisoned the water for cattle, and such like. It was these tensions that President Cleveland sought to ameliorate, alienating the West in the election of 1888.

Although it is right that large areas of the West were effectively lawless in the famous Wild West way, and the dominant myth of the West was of individualism, it is also true that the federal government had vastly more influence in the development of the trans-Mississippi West than it ever has done anywhere else

ACTIVITY 1.6

The idea of 'redemption' referred to saving the South from radicals, carpetbaggers and scalawags. 'Bourbonism' referred to the period after the fall of Napoleon in France, when there was an ultra-conservative monarchy. Why did post-Reconstruction southern governments happily call themselves 'Redeemers' and 'Bourbons'?

in the USA. Land policy, which was the fundamental political issue in the West, was always pre-eminently a federal issue. The federal government was by far the biggest landowner and even the second biggest – the railroads – owed their land, and their ability to enforce their ownership of it to the federal government. Late 19th-century California, for example, was dominated by the Southern Pacific Railroad and its powerful owners, including Leland Stanford and Samuel P. Huntington. The Railroad's monopolistic power and dominant position as a land owner gave it huge power to shape settlement patterns, and stimulated massive resistance, as did New York City's financial domination; the droughts had made it clear that neither the railroads nor the bankers were willing to help the farmers when times were hard.

The post-Reconstruction society of the South
The Old South had been defeated in 1865 and some form of Reconstruction was clearly necessary; the abolition of slavery meant a major change to the nature of the southern economy and society. Only the most radical of the Radicals were aiming at immediate and full black equality. The failure of Radical Reconstruction is outlined in the section on Grant and the failure of Radical Reconstruction. Even the changes that had occurred by 1877 were not permanent. Why not? We have already seen the political reasons for the unpopularity of the new southern governments, led by scalawags and carpetbaggers and by some African-American leaders. There were some fundamental structural problems, too.

The post-Reconstruction governments were often known as Redeemers, or Bourbons. Their reputations were better than those of the scalawag governments, which they had replaced, and their focus was at first largely on providing industrial expansion. They would not begin to enact social legislation – enshrining **segregation** in law – until the 1890s. Writing in 1955, in the wake of the Supreme Court decision that concluded that segregation was unconstitutional, C. Vann Woodward¹² argued that segregation was not inevitable, immutable or natural, but that it was the result of contingent political decisions made a decade or so beyond the end of Reconstruction. This idea has been the basis of all historical discussion of the origins of segregation ever since.

Socially, what was to be done with southern society? Actual racial integration was the aim of only a few northern Radicals, such as Thaddeus Stevens. Most had no such plans. If black people were to take leadership roles in southern society then they would have to be landowners, and by definition all southern landowners in 1865 were white. The interests of the large landowners were sufficient to prevent any serious effort at land redistribution, and land remained largely in the hands of white plantation owners and smallholders. They, and only they, had access to whatever credit there was.

Finally, how were black people to participate en masse in the leadership of a society? Black leaders emerged, but this was rare. The vast majority of the black population had no education – and government-provided education was one of the first elements of Radical Reconstruction to fail when the money ran out. In this regard, they were little different to the poor white population.

Class divisions in the South

There was racism in the Gilded Age in the South. There was racism in the North as well. In terms of describing the southern economy, it is possible to make the claim that race is not the most important factor. Class is.

The southern economic model had always included white yeoman farmers on their smallholdings, and this is of course what the majority of white southerners had always done. There were mineral deposits, especially in the Appalachians, which encouraged mining. After the war the railroads began to expand into the South giving industry a chance to grow. Floridians started to cultivate fruit and vegetables. The real money, though, was made by doing what the South did best: growing cash crops like cotton. Other crops were grown, such as rice and tobacco, but cotton was king. This, therefore, was the model to which the South turned after the Civil War, and much of the industrialisation was directed at the cotton industry. Textile factories in the South, often using female labour, had an advantage over textile factories in the North as they were closer to the supply of cotton and had fewer raw material transport costs.

Circumstances were more difficult. The South had always supplied cotton both to the North and to the British, but the British had made other arrangements during the Civil War and the USA's market share in 1867 was smaller than it had been in 1857. But cotton it was – and cotton was best grown on a large plantation with numerous unskilled manual labourers, whose payment was in something other than cash, which was scarce. Anyone trying to break up the large plantations into smallholdings found it very difficult to manage their finances and their risk. In fact, the original smallholders found themselves less and less profitable over time. The model that emerged, tenant-farming, is explained in Figure 1.13. The arrangement was to the advantage of the landlords, who owned the land and had by far the best access to credit. The tenants bore the risk of catastrophe should the crop fail (the boll weevil did serious damage to cotton crops in the 1880s) or reduce in price (cotton in 1890 sold for half its 1860 price). Storekeepers could exact tremendous penalties on those who failed to meet their loan repayments. The absence of cash in the economy made it difficult for tenants to build up any capital of their own: they were trapped.

ACTIVITY 1.7

Read the section on The post-Reconstruction society of the South. How would you argue against the claim that class was more important than race in the southern economy during this period?

ACTIVITY 1.8

Identify three key problems faced by the South in the period 1865–90. Evaluate how well the South coped with these problems, and identify anything that Southern governments might have done differently to create better conditions by 1890.

Do you think it is fair to criticise the post-Reconstruction governments of the South?

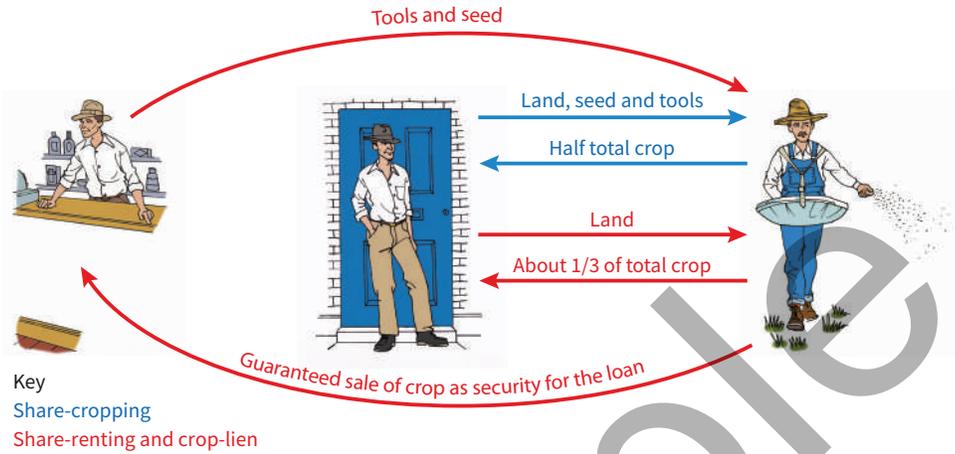


Figure 1.12: Tenant-farming in the South.

There was very little land redistribution in the Reconstruction period. In the South, land (and therefore access to the best credit), was generally owned by the major landowners whose identity had not substantially changed since before the Civil War. This meant that black people, and poor white people, had to farm as tenants. The precise economic arrangements made between landlords and tenants varied, but depended on three essential questions:

1. Who provided the seed?
2. Who provided the tools?
3. How did the tenant pay for the land, the seed, and the tools, given that there was not much cash available in the economy?

Thematic link: economy and society

The position of African Americans

The section on the Radical Reconstruction: the position in the South tells the story of the South in the late 1860s and early 1870s. The most intractable legal consequence of this era was the Reconstruction Amendments (the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments), which did not fare well in the Gilded Age. The latter two were in particular creatively ignored as black people found themselves prevented in various ways from voting and civic participation. Even if they had been able to vote, for whom would they have voted? Certainly not the Democrats, but not the post-1877 Republicans, either. Only in South Carolina, and only for a short time in the 1870s, were there viable black candidates to vote for in any numbers at all.

The Supreme Court also made its presence felt. In the Slaughterhouse Cases of 1873 it confirmed that the 14th Amendment did not prevent the states from setting their own rules for citizens' rights, including the right to vote. In 1875, in the case of *US v Cruikshank*, the Court confirmed that while the state was not allowed to infringe anyone's (by which they meant black people's) rights, nor did it have a positive duty to prevent anyone else from doing so. In an era of small government, this meant that discrimination was largely legal. In 1883 the Court struck down the 1875 Civil Rights Act, holding that discrimination in public was legal. Private

individuals could do what they wanted, wherever they were. By implication, this might also be permissible for the governments of the states.

There were social, political and economic attacks on African Americans. By 1887, the railroad company in Georgia had coined the phrase ‘separate but equal’ to describe its railroad provision, which segregated black from white customers. Florida also introduced segregation. Three years later, the Louisiana legislature made segregation on railroads compulsory. This was the beginning of the so-called ‘Jim Crow’ laws (Jim Crow was the name of a supposedly comical black character, and had become an insult directed at any black American). Meanwhile, voting rights were eroded by the Redeemer governments. Mississippi introduced a poll tax in 1890 to prevent black people from voting, prompting Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge to attempt to introduce a Force Bill to force elections to be fair: it failed. Violence against black people began to resurface. The rise of Populism in the West and South brought with it a reaction from the Redeemers, who began to focus on race in order to hold onto the support of working-class southern whites – hence the introduction of Jim Crow laws, and the toleration of the practice of employers attempting to tie their black workers to unfair contracts that effectively re-enslaved them. In a series of cases in Georgia, employees found themselves signing contracts they could not read, and that committed them to debts they could not afford to pay, and therefore had to work off. The police and courts assisted in this process.

Was life entirely negative for African Americans? Black people formed their own churches, banks and insurance mutuels (insurance companies jointly owned by those they insured) – they had felt unwelcome from, excluded from or cheated by the white alternatives. The schools of the era of Radical Reconstruction were no longer funded, but northern charities provided some of the money needed and educational progress continued. In many cases, the schools that were formed were entirely African-American. The best-known example is the Institute, in Alabama. Its head, Booker T. Washington, would become an influential black leader who sought an accommodation with white people in the South. That accommodation was needed was a sign that the very highest-minded goals of Radical Reconstruction had failed.

Economic growth and the rise of corporations

In 1890, the United States overtook Great Britain as the world’s most productive economy. At the heart of this economic growth were capitalism and a more-or-less unrestrained free market. The centre of this world was Wall Street, New York City, the home of the New York Stock Exchange. It is no accident that most of the individual capitalists introduced in this section have names that are familiar to anyone who has been to New York City and spent time in the Guggenheim Museum or the Frick Collection, enjoyed ice-skating at the Rockefeller Center or gone to Carnegie Hall. The Gilded Age was the era of the ruthless capitalist who was also a philanthropist.

What were the ingredients for this apparent economic miracle? Economic expansion requires:

- A good source of raw materials to produce something.

ACTIVITY 1.10

Create a mind map of ‘American society’ in 1890. Consider whether your links should be sectional, racial, class-based, religious – or can you think of any other potential links?

Use your mind maps as a basis for a discussion of what it meant to be American by 1890.

- A market in which to sell whatever you produce.
- A plentiful supply of labour to make it.
- A source of power.
- Protection from serious threat of invasion or disruption.
- Sound infrastructure with which to transport your raw materials to factories and your goods to market, and raw materials with which to expand that infrastructure.
- Individuals willing to take the risks needed to innovate and build businesses – and to suffer the consequences of these risks should their plans go wrong.
- Room to expand (this minimises the opportunity cost of failed ventures: you can open as many failing businesses as you like and they do not take up space that could otherwise have been taken up by successful businesses).
- A helpful government, which often means simply a government that does not get in the way.

This set of criteria describes reasonably precisely the United States after the Civil War. The United States had its own supplies of coal and iron, and underwent an industrial revolution overseen by a government that was neither willing nor able to restrain it. If there was lawlessness in the mining towns of the frontier, that was a small price to pay for expansion. If the Plains Indians had to be given territory, the pioneers knew that there was for the time being plenty to go around. The key American ideology of freedom came to mean something quite specific: it was the freedom to better oneself by taking whatever risks one wished. For a businessman, this risk might be financial. For an immigrant, one might risk one's life.

Thematic Link: economy and society

Thematic link: ideas and ideology

The role of Congress was to avoid getting in the way. A major problem was the money supply. The economy was booming until the Panic of 1873, when controversies over the paper currency introduced during the Civil War when there was a shortage of specie (coinage) became very serious. The key issue was that paper currency is not inherently valuable; it is representative (so, these days, are coins) because it has an inherent value much less than the 'promise to pay the bearer on demand' written on it. Paper currency only works if it is guaranteed by a bank sufficiently large that its promises are believed – that meant the Federal Reserve in the USA, and it ultimately meant the federal government. The Greenback Party, which participated in the presidential elections of the Gilded Age, argued unsuccessfully for a looser relationship between the money available and notes printed. The federal government instead raised money to buy up gold bullion. It confirmed that money definitely had some kind of meaning, ensuring that inflation could not run out of control. This dampened economic growth.

Meanwhile, corporations grew up to extract and move wealth. The great corporate tycoons of the late 19th century were utterly cutthroat in business, fixed in rivalry with one another, and perfectly happy to bribe or otherwise persuade politicians to let them have their own way. They were responsible for miserable working conditions, and suppressed the unions that tried to improve them. At the same time, though, they had cordial personal relations – the only obviously personal animosity was between the railroad magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt and the financier Jay Gould, who had tried to bring him down in 1873. They also hired

public relations experts, and many of them were noted philanthropists who made vast endowments, often to purchase art, and gave huge amounts to charity. They sometimes enjoyed their exalted positions through genuine innovation. Carnegie and Frick were American pioneers of the Bessemer process, which made for the more efficient production of better steel. Sometimes a few early successes made the big tycoons better able than others to absorb unsuccessful ventures (in mining, especially, many ventures failed). The trend was towards monopolies and cartels. Some of the corporations, and some of the relationships between them, can be seen in Figure 1.13.

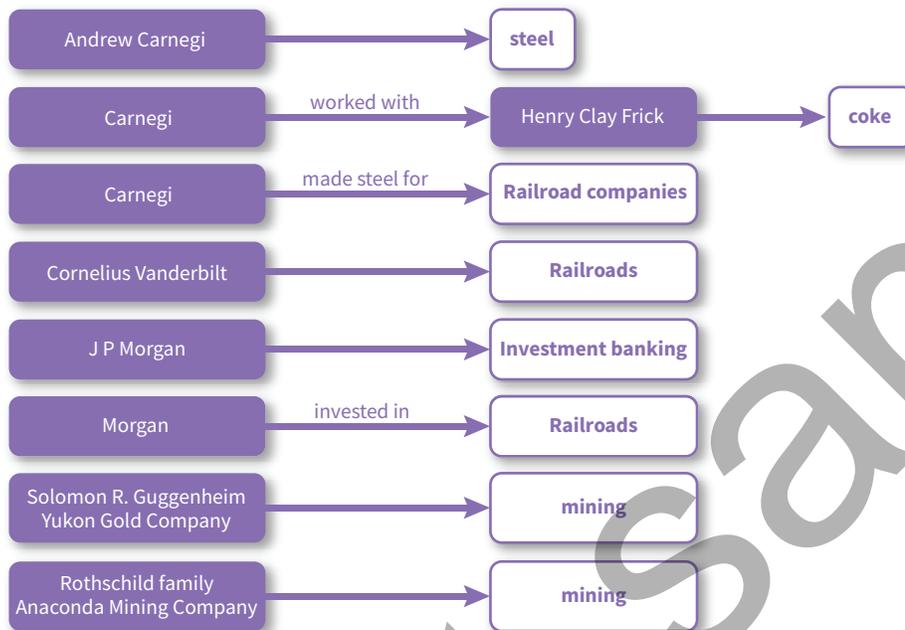


Figure 1.13: Magnates and corporations in late 19th-century America.

Railroads

Congress saw the role of the federal government as to facilitate, but not to speculate. Rather than building railroads, the government instead made land grants to railroad companies along the proposed routes. These land grants were traded between companies and used to raise finance, some of which went back to the Treasury, and formed a powerful part of the economy. The railroads served to bind the interests of the Northeast, the Midwest and the West very firmly together, with Wall Street at the geographic periphery of the system but the figurative heart. When the Congress did try to make railroad charges reasonable and just, in the 1887 Interstate Commerce Act, it did so because it realised that railroads ran between states and were therefore definitely the federal government's responsibility. Initially, the railroads found creative ways around the legislation, although ultimately the act paved the way for J.P. Morgan, the investment banker, to organise ('Morganize') the railroads in the 1890s.

Oil

John D. and William Rockefeller controlled Standard Oil, incorporated in Ohio but formed to extract 'black gold' newly discovered in the West, most obviously in Texas. Standard Oil was established in 1882 as a trust – a new corporate device designed to split up a business that was a monopoly so that it did not look like a monopoly. This was a polite fiction. The Rockefellers, like so many of the businessmen of the era, had built up a dominant position by being very good at making money, and they were not willing to let it go. Standard Oil was remarkable for being the first trust created in America. It should not be assumed that it was necessarily a bad thing; the price of oil dropped as Standard Oil made its production more efficient, capitalising on its dominance of the market. It would regularly be one of the top five companies in the United States by wealth – United States Steel, the first billion-dollar company, was the wealthiest.

Rockefeller made his company more profitable in a number of ways. Some may seem to have been more 'ethical' than others; perhaps 'ethics' were not a particularly useful concept in the context of late 19th-century industrial capitalism. Standard Oil:

- Had deliberately efficient production.
- Controlled all stages of the process from extraction to warehousing of the final product.
- Used anti-competitive tactics such as price-slashing to force competitors out of business (this meant that he set his own prices deliberately low, forcing competitors who were less able to absorb a loss to do the same).
- Had systematised marketing.

Rockefeller was widely disliked; he was also very rich.



Hidden voices: Mussel Slough, California

On 11 May 1880 there was a gunfight at Mussel Slough, California. Seven men were killed. The fight was over land that had originally been granted to the Southern Pacific Railroad; the railroad company had used a different route, and the land had been settled by a group of settlers who now claimed 'squatters' rights'. The railroad company wanted to reclaim the now valuable settled land.

The settlers presented themselves as fighting not just for their homes but more than that, for a way of life – a vision of a cooperative community that was under threat from the rapacious forces of a monopolistic corporation that corruptly dominated California politics. They

presented a petition to President Hayes in which they described themselves as 'respectable American citizens' not 'outlaws'. They had created 'a little Eden made by patience and endurance'. More than that the local newspaper, the *San Francisco Bulletin*, compared life on the Frontier with life in the cities: 'While our large cities are filled with agitators, millions of acres of the richest land on earth is only awaiting a little intelligent labor'.

When he heard about the Mussel Slough killings, Karl Marx, who was in London, wrote that California was important because it showed how quickly capitalism was moving.

Developments in agriculture

Farmers were an important part of the American economy. Market relations penetrated further than ever before. Subsistence agriculture – the idea that small communities produced the food they needed for themselves – had been marginalised into the Appalachian Mountains and a few places in the West. The idea of agriculture as a cash business – always the idea of the southern plantations – became dominant. In the South, both cotton production and prices were down. Production bounced back to its 1860 level by 1880, but prices never recovered, and there was more land being farmed. The South was in truth barely able to feed itself, and the average condition of the southern farmer was to be mildly malnourished because he spent his time in debt to his landlord and the storekeeper, farming poorer land.

In the West, the land was poorer still. There was conflict between the two major types of pasture farmer – a function of land disputes, although expressed as sheep farmers accusing cattle ranchers of poisoning water supplies. Cattle farming, in particular, needed vast spaces in the West. Railroads helped, and so did barbed wire. Western arable farmers found life difficult. The land was poorer than in the Midwestern Mississippi Valley, and there was constant danger of tornados, grasshoppers, drought or economic crises making it difficult to transport goods across the country. No wonder that, by the late 1880s, poor western and southern farmers were beginning to find a common political cause: see the section on The ideas and influence of Bryan, Roosevelt and Taft in Chapter 2.

Urbanisation

The tension that grew up in the cities was based on class, and it was expressed at least sometimes in violence. The new urban class, often living in hastily erected slum conditions, found their routes to power blocked. There were partial solutions to this in the party machines that evolved to look after poor city dwellers. In order to win votes, party bosses such as those in Tammany Hall organised social activities like baseball and singing. They helped with legal disputes, providing a translation and advice service and helping new members of the community to avoid being cheated by the legal system. If their case was weak, with any luck the judge was a member of the machine, but he could always be bribed if he was not. In return for this, the party bosses expected (and got) votes and party workers. These party machines did so much of the work of integrating and supporting urban workers that governments did not need to – and unions were not always wanted.

Still, labour unions began to be formed. Someone, it seemed, had to stand up for the ordinary person. Most labour unions failed quickly. One such was the Order of the Knights of Labor. This short-lived labour union had begun as a fraternal organisation and secret union during the Pennsylvania coal strike disputes of the 1870s. Its membership was deliberately cross-cultural (although heavily Catholic, perhaps inevitably as so many labourers were of Irish origin). It also accepted labourers of all types, expelling people such as bankers and lawyers and others engaged in professions that were not useful. Over time, the Knights had evolved into a union promoting higher wages and better safety at work. By 1886, with

700 000 members, they were campaigning for an eight-hour day. They lost control of their own protest at Haymarket in Chicago, which became violent. Their protest failed, and very soon so did their union. Similarly, attempts to organise workers on the railroad in Pittsburgh had failed in 1877, put down by the government amidst scenes of violence. It is worth noting that at least one reason why labour unions failed to take hold in the USA was that many of the workers were recent immigrants who had come to the country with the express intention of working very, very hard. The industrialisation of the United States had been very, very fast, and had occurred on a scale unknown in Britain, France or Germany. Wage labour was dramatically more common than before. Even where unions were wanted by the workers, and where the workers had the time and the wherewithal to organise themselves before the corporations simply found some new workers, unions were seen as undemocratic because they interfered with the absolute right of everyone to freedom of action in the market, which was becoming part of the definition of liberty. Labour conditions were poor. Government did not help and always backed the capitalists over the workers when it came down to it, either through an aggressive tariff policy or by force. The only union really to emerge from this period was the American Federation of Labor in 1886, founded by Chicago cigar makers in response to the Knights of Labor's failure to deal with wage cuts. The AFL survives to this day.

Beneath the thinnest of gold coatings lay a leaden world, where everything was judged by its price in the market. According to the interpretation of this period, which was dominant throughout most of the 20th century, issues and principles counted for little, parties were divided by nothing more than a fight for the spoils of office and most politicians were cynical and corrupt. In fact, the period from the end of the Civil War to the end of the 19th century saw the beginnings of a fundamental shift in the structures of political life. Rather than a stagnant 30 years between the excitement of the Civil War and the activism of the Progressive Era, interesting only because of the comic value of gross corruption, the late 19th century was in fact a crucial transformative period, which Mark W. Summers¹³ has called an 'Age of Energy'. A fair case can be made that public life in the Gilded Age was not democratic politics at its worst, but the opposite: late 19th-century Americans participated in politics as never before and laid the foundations for the important structural changes that came later.

Laissez-faire dominance and consequences

The first major issue that you need to think about is this: how was it that capitalist relations came to be so embedded in American life, so natural? Capitalism may well be the great American revolutionary legacy. As a way of thinking about the world, and about organising social relations, it has swept all before it. Capitalism was not of universal benefit and yet, by the end of the 19th century it seemed that it was, and whether to be a capitalist society was, for Americans, no longer a question that seemed worth asking. Why should that be? Why were the obvious negatives of unregulated laissez-faire capitalism overlooked by American society as a whole?

Laissez-faire capitalism: not the free market

There were two areas in which laissez-faire capitalism did not necessarily mean a free market. The first was that tariffs – the imposition of import and export duties governing the movement of goods and raw materials – were very common. In fact they were the federal government's major source of income. The second is that corporations were free to distort the market where they wished to, for example by forming uncompetitive trusts, or northern corporations using railroad pricing to try to force southern competitors out of business.

Unregulated capitalism is very difficult to predict. The success or failure of a business venture can depend on a number of factors. There was a lot of speculative investment and markets tended to overheat. The Panic of 1873 was caused by the bankruptcy of Jay Cooke, who had marketed the government loan book when it had been raising money during the Civil War. The message was clear: the government should be risk averse, and that meant staying out of direct involvement in capitalism. Besides, if something was worth doing it would continue to happen. In 1873, railroad stocks had crashed; the same would happen in 1893 but the railroads would continue to run and business would continue to be done. The cycle of boom and bust still had an upward trajectory, and everyone involved, it seemed, understood the risks.

The capitalist magnates understood how to make businesses run. They consolidated their businesses, buying each other out, rather than trying to cooperate – as they had realised quickly that cooperation did not work and hostile competition risked the future of the corporation. An interventionist government would have stopped this as the consolidated corporations and trusts formed effective monopolies and cartels – by driving out competition they could set their own prices. During the Gilded Age this did not matter as the volume of business was so high that prices could be low. Of course, there were 'robber barons' but none seemed wholly bad – or very few. Jay Gould, who had attempted to corner the gold market in 1869 and then tried to bring down Vanderbilt in 1873, seemed the worst of them.

The consequences of unregulated capitalism

Southerners who thought that the South needed to modernise saw an excellent model in the North. There was an asymmetrical relationship between the two. The northern railroad corporations, so admired by forward-thinking southerners, were in hostile competition with any southern challengers who might arise. Until the passing of the Interstate Commerce Act freight rates were certainly used to promote 'northern' rather than 'American' interests. Until 1886 the two systems even ran on a different gauge and so were incompatible. For their part, though, southern textile companies placed pressure on their northern counterparts. For some, this unregulated capitalism allowed the Old South – slavery and agriculture-based – to become modern. Birmingham, Atlanta, became the centre of a thriving iron industry. 'Buck' Duke of North Carolina modernised the tobacco industry. His company, which he built up (so he said) with great personal effort, became the giant American Tobacco Company. Redeemer governments, for all their corruption



Key term

laissez-faire: a French phrase meaning, essentially, 'let it happen'. Laissez-faire capitalism is an economic system based on capital that is unregulated by the government.

(which led, for example, to the granting of contracts to those who offered the biggest kickbacks) were committed to industrialisation.

For the people actually working in the mines, the fields and the factories, and building the infrastructure, life was not quite so good. Abraham Lincoln had said that labour always came before capital, meaning essentially that it was more important to have people to do the work than it was to have work to be done. By the Gilded Age there was plenty of work to be done in the North and West, and plenty of people willing to do it. In some parts of the South the picture was slightly different – economic growth was coming more slowly and there was not quite enough work to go around. Even so, across the country, women began to enter the labour force in greater and greater numbers. Some were attracted by the opportunity, but others by necessity as prices went up and wages went down in a market with plenty of labour. For African-American women in the South this often meant working in domestic jobs.

Opposition to capitalism did occur. In the West, the unpleasant (but perhaps predictable) consequence of capitalism – that the corporations would seek to exploit rather than support workers – had led to opposition to the North (East) focused on railroad companies, and culminating in the late 1880s in the rise of Populism and support for the Interstate Commerce Act. In the South there was a certain amount of nostalgia for the past, reflected in literature such as Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus* (1880). This cultural pining for what had been lost was perhaps a response to the industrialisation that was changing the character of the South.

In the North, there was opposition to capitalism itself from trade unions, but it was muted. How could it be otherwise, when so many of the workers had come to America specifically to participate in the capitalist system, to live the American Dream? Those who had come to America seeking refuge from the conservative governments of Europe – men such as August Spies, the German-born principal protagonist of the Haymarket Riot of 1886 – found libertarianism rather than socialism in America. In general, when there was criticism, the criticism was of the unregulated nature of capitalism rather than of capitalism itself. So the cartoonist Thomas Nast, who worked for *Harper's Weekly*, had been in the 1870s a major critic of the corrupt William 'Boss' Tweed, who controlled political patronage, railroads and a sizeable proportion of immigrant jobs in New York City; by 1886 he was criticising the Knights of Labor for demanding too much for the trade union movement.



Voices from the past: Henry W. Grady

The old South rested everything on slavery and agriculture, unconscious that these could neither give nor maintain healthy growth. The new South presents a perfect democracy, the oligarchs leading in the popular movement – a social system compact and closely knitted, less splendid on the surface,

but stronger at the core – a hundred farms for every plantation, 50 homes for every palace – and a diversified industry that meets the complex need of this complex age.¹⁴

There are further details in the section on Economic growth and the rise of corporations earlier in this chapter. In summary, the consequences of laissez-faire capitalism were:

- Unregulated and uneven, but extreme, expansion of the American economy, involving rapid industrialisation in North and South.
- A degradation of working conditions in North and South – wages were low and industrial accidents high.
- Economic realignment in the West, which became disillusioned (in the true sense of that word) as to the motivations of its partners out East.
- Opportunities for political corruption.
- A rise in immigration in the North, and consequent urbanisation creating slums (which would ultimately lead to the rise of Progressivism – see the section on The ideas and influence of Bryan, Roosevelt and Taft in Chapter 2).
- The creation and ultimate regulation (beginning with the Interstate Commerce Act) of new types of corporations in America.

The economist Henry George is now largely forgotten, but in the late 19th century he was probably the most famous American in the world. His books, especially *Poverty and Progress* (1879) sold millions of copies worldwide. George was born in Philadelphia in 1839 and emigrated to San Francisco as a young man. There he was struck by the apparent paradox that in the less developed West, the poor were relatively better off than in the highly developed eastern cities. He argued that landowners benefited immorally from economic and technological progress. By restricting access to natural resources, profiteering landowners profited from the improvements carried out by others, just as slaveowners lived off the work of their slaves. If wealth stayed with those who actually produced it, however, everyone could share in economic progress and poverty would be eliminated. George's solution was the Land Value Tax, which would make it unprofitable for landowners merely to possess land and charge rent for it. For George, this philosophy was a logical extension of the free labour ideology that had led him to support Lincoln and the abolition of slavery during the Civil War. He also saw it as a bulwark against communism. His system, known at the time as the 'single tax', provided that the resources of an area or country should be owned by all the people, but that individuals should be free to profit from the value that their own labour added to it. This idea would not have been necessary had there been an unlimited supply of land, but George recognised that the acquisition of land by one person denied another person an opportunity to create wealth on that land, and he thought this was unfair. George's critique of laissez-faire capitalism was that it was not free market enough, but he also had radically left-wing ideas about common ownership.

The laissez-faire nature of American capitalism in the Gilded Age was a necessary cause of America's rapid industrial expansion. That America did not have a 'socialist moment', remaining instead libertarian and laissez-faire for as long as it did, is perhaps explained by the safety valve allowed to American industrial expansion by its territorial expansion. There was always somewhere else to go. What might happen when this was closed off?

ACTIVITY 1.11

1. What reasons might Frederick Jackson Turner have given for arguing that the ending of the frontier would be the end of growth conditions?
2. When you have come up with your ideas, look up what Turner actually said. 'The closing of the frontier in 1890 provided a serious challenge to the American ways of life.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.

The impact of the ending of the frontier

In the West, anyone was free to move to another town (and they often did: everyone knew that in the 1880s an abandoned home with the letters GTT scrawled on the door meant that the occupants had Gone To Texas, with its vast open spaces). In the North, though, if workers disliked their job, they could leave it and find another. This might seem to indicate that working conditions should improve – surely, in an economy where there were plenty of jobs, only the best jobs would be done? This was not so. There was a ready supply of immigrants straight off the boat to do the unpleasant jobs (and dangerous: industrial accidents in the USA happened at a higher rate than anywhere else by 1890).

In 1883 Henry George had looked at the country filling up as immigration continued in the East and asked what was to be done with the 'human garbage' who would not be needed when the continent was full, except to be chased for their vote. Laissez-faire capitalism had thrived in an America in which further expansion was possible. In 1890 the final territory, Oklahoma, was opened up for expansion. Frederick Jackson Turner's paper, given in Chicago at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, argued that this would be the end of growth conditions. As often happens in prosperous conditions, these voices of doom were heard but not entirely understood. Turner also argued that the receding frontier explained both American democracy and the American moral character. Both, he thought, would be endangered by the closing of the frontier.

Was there even such a thing as the 'American moral character'? There were different ways of being American, and they have been detailed in this chapter. There was a (white) southern mode of thought – modernising while nostalgic for the lost past, vaguely resentful of northern (Yankee) success. There was a western pioneer spirit, tempered by 1890 by the realisation that northern capitalists would allow western ventures to fail in the free market. There was an increasingly complex northern society, not quite fully multicultural but more a succession of monocultures dominated by a white Protestant hierarchy. Turner and George between them raised three important questions:

- What would the closing of the frontier do to American notions of 'manifest destiny' now that America truly did have a continental empire? Would she seek an overseas empire too?
- How would the American economy function without the constant availability of new resources and new markets provided by the West?
- How would American politicians create an equitable democratic settlement for the maturing communities of the West and South?

To the various consequences of the end of laissez-faire capitalism would be added another: conservationism. The first national park had opened at Yellowstone, Wyoming, in 1872, with the aim of preserving the natural American wilderness for future generations, safeguarding it from development. In the decade after Turner, conservationist feeling would become even more important, not least as a conservationist would become president.

The limits of foreign engagement and continuation of isolationism

In foreign policy terms, what were the Americans up to at this time? Essentially they were defining the limits of their own expansion and paving the way for the ability to defend themselves. By 1890 they were building a fleet to defend their vast coastlines, and had established exclusive refitting rights in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, 3000 miles off their western coast in a prime strategic location in the middle of the Pacific. Lincoln and Johnson's secretary of state, William Seward, had sought to annex Hawaii and been prevented from doing so by the Senate. By 1890 it would be very hard to sneak up on the USA, whose **isolationism** would, it hoped, mean that it would not need to defend itself again. However, in this era of weak presidents it had no ambition to take its place at the top table of world affairs, seeking only security in the western hemisphere.

Modern students are perhaps not used to the idea that America did not seek to participate on the world stage; this is the country that within 80 years would be asserting world leadership. Remember, though, that America was a very long way from any threatening nations. Only the British had the naval power truly to threaten America. They had been repelled twice in the past 100 years, and besides were now friendly enough and clearly unwilling to risk their entire empire in an American adventure. The American government sent few ambassadors abroad (throughout this period, rarely more than 30 at a time). Ambassadors are appointed by presidents, and the presidents of this era did not generally seek to assert their power.

Security concerns did not prevent American isolationist thought; nor did the need to ensure the availability of new markets. Americans provided their own new markets through westward expansion. The primary use of other countries to America in this period – and the area that provided flickers of international engagement, such as with China during Rutherford Hayes's presidency – was as a source of immigrants willing to provide labour.

The continuation of the Monroe Doctrine

From 1865 to 1890, America's foreign engagement took two forms. Americans defended their borders and reasserted the Monroe Doctrine, which stated that the European powers should not intervene in the Western hemisphere. America also expanded its own borders through the purchase of Alaska, and began to take an interest in Hawaii. Why would the USA do anything else? There was no appetite for war with a powerful foe – there was barely appetite for the conflict with the Native Americans, which seemed necessary to secure westward expansion. They had plenty of internal demand to provide a market for the goods that they produced.

During the Civil War the Spanish had re-established their presence in Dominica and from 1864 to 1867 Mexico had been occupied by the French, who installed the Austrian Maximilian as Emperor. Neither sufficiently liberal to win popular support, nor sufficiently conservative to win the support of those Mexican nobles who had supported this French intervention, Maximilian found himself opposed by Johnson's government, and the French acceded to the Americans' request that



Key term

isolationism: the idea that a country should not seek to involve itself diplomatically or politically with other countries or their disputes and wars.

he be removed. By 1867, with the US Civil War over for two years, they had very little choice. The Spanish, meanwhile, gave up on their presence in Dominica as a poor idea because of American opposition (this threatened American access from the Gulf of Mexico, and the mouth of the Mississippi, to the Atlantic Ocean). The yellow fever that affected the Spanish occupation force also helped to make up their minds to leave. The Americans did not seek anything further from the Spanish in the Caribbean. When the Cubans rebelled against Spanish rule in 1868, there were voices in America proposing support for them. These voices included the incoming President Grant, but wiser voices, including those of his secretary of state, prevailed. America was in no position for a foreign adventure. Ten years later, Rutherford Hayes sought to prevent French private citizens from building a canal across the isthmus of Panama, invoking the Monroe Doctrine.

The Monroe Doctrine had originally been about preventing European powers from fighting their imperial wars in the western hemisphere and dragging America in. By the later 19th century it had become more assertive. Hayes opposed French plans to build a Panama canal because this would have given the French too much power in the region – control of a convenient crossing from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In the Caribbean the Spanish (and French) empires were tolerated, but Americans did not want them to expand. The Monroe Doctrine, explaining America's attitude towards European powers, had developed from 'don't fight in the western hemisphere' to 'don't expand in the western hemisphere'. The next logical stage in its development was clear enough: 'don't be in the western hemisphere'. The message from America was: send us your citizens, but leave us alone. The Monroe Doctrine, with its resonant naming after one of the earliest US presidents, the last to have been a Founding Father of the United States, was a convenient and patriotic shorthand for this message.

Territorial consolidation (Alaska) and tensions over Canada

In 1867, William Seward, Lincoln's and Johnson's secretary of state, had purchased Alaska from Russia. The deal became known as Seward's Folly, and the territory as Seward's Icebox. He had anticipated neither the gold nor the oil that were later found there: he viewed Alaska as the ideal base from which to annex at least part of Canada. Instead, the Canadian response was to form a federation – that is, to unite the various British colonies to form the modern nation of Canada as a dominion within the British Empire. The general air of tension along the northern border was not helped by the Fenian raids – raids in the US Northeast by American Irish communities designed to support calls for Irish Home Rule in Britain by attacking British possessions in Canada.

While the Fenian raids were not deliberate US policy, they were not unwelcome. The British had seemed unofficially to have supported the South in the Civil War, and some Americans wanted revenge for this. The issue that was uppermost in their mind was that the British had allowed the Confederate SS *Alabama* to refit without detaining her during the Civil War. In 1871, brought to the table by concerns over the US-Canadian border, the British signed the Treaty of Washington, which allowed an international tribunal to determine (by 1877) that they should pay \$15.5 million in compensation to the United States. The British paid if not happily then happily enough, relations across the US-Canada border

were normalised and for the first time an international tribunal was allowed to settle a dispute between powerful nations.

Thematic link: world affairs



Practice essay questions

1. How far were the gains made by African Americans during Reconstruction wiped out immediately afterwards?
2. To what extent was life in the American West fundamentally different from life elsewhere in America in this period?
3. ‘The economic growth of America from 1865 to 1890 depended entirely upon the laissez-faire attitude of successive governments.’ Assess the validity of this view.
4. Assess the validity of the view that Grover Cleveland was the only president from 1865 to 1890 with any serious accomplishments to his name.
5. Using your understanding of the historical context, assess how convincing the arguments in the following extract are in relation to the objectives of post-Civil War Reconstruction.

‘A desire to return to how things had been went to the heart of white northerners’ ideal of “Reconstruction”. Reunion would take reconciliation if it was to win over those whose allegiance had been lost. Any settlement that was going to last must come by mutual agreement, and the harsher the terms set on the Confederate states, the less prospect that the settlement would last very long. Northern Republicans saw the South as a different society, perverted from what democratic, dynamic society ought to be by its reliance on slave labor and its commitment to a caste system, but not even they could quite see white southerners as a different people. They shared too many traits to be anything but a variant strain of American, and the language of the southern states as wayward “sisters” or southern men as “brothers” in arms never wholly died out. The Union, then, was not meant to destroy the South so much as to save it, against its will.’

Source: Mark W. Summers, *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A New History of Reconstruction*.¹⁵

You can find the work of similar historians in the section on The weaknesses of Federal Government: Johnson, Grant and the Failure of Reconstruction.

Taking it further

1. ‘The surprising thing about the presidency of Andrew Johnson is not that he was impeached; it is that he was not convicted.’ Do you agree?
2. History has not been kind to the Grant regime. In truth, though, it should be noted that there was little he could have been done about the Panic of 1873, and that Panic did not cause the North to begin to lose interest in Reconstruction. There has been a recent move by historians to rehabilitate Grant as a politician – see Jean Edward Smith’s *Grant* (New York, 2001),

Brooks D. Simpson's *Let Us Have Peace: Ulysses S. Grant and the Politics of War and Reconstruction, 1861–1868* (Chapel Hill, 1991) and Frank J. Scaturro's *President Grant Reconsidered* (Lanham, MD, 1998).



Chapter summary

By the end of this chapter you should have gained a broad overview of the way in which American society developed between 1865 and 1890. You should also understand:

- the reasons for and extent of the Congressional reaction to presidential power, and whether presidential power was weakened during this time
- the extent to which the rapid expansion of the American economy, and the formation of new kinds of corporations, were good for all Americans
- the reasons why American foreign policy changed very little at this time, and why there was such an emphasis on securing American's borders
- the reasons for the romanticisation of the American West
- the extent to which the divisions between North and South had been healed, and the extent to which they had been replaced by new divisions
- the significance of immigration.

End Notes

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- ¹⁵ Summers MW. *The Ordeal of the Reunion: A New History of Reconstruction*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press; 2014.