

The Lost Cause Myth: A Legacy of Reconstruction

Reconstruction at its most basic was an attempt by the federal government to enfranchise the formerly enslaved and bring the Confederate States back into the Union. People’s opinions on Reconstruction were vastly different, depending on their opinion of the rights of the formerly enslaved.

The three Reconstruction Amendments were passed by a Congress with a large Republican majority that did not include representation from the former Confederate states. In fact, Congress made ratification of the 14th Amendment necessary for Southern states to be readmitted to the Union. A majority of White Southerners did not approve of equal rights for the formerly enslaved, much less voting rights. Former Confederate states were all readmitted to the Union by 1870, but they fought the intent of the Reconstruction Amendments by enacting laws, called Black codes, to enforce racial segregation and limit the power of Black voters. Southern radical groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, gained popularity and power. They used violence, including murder, and intimidation to maintain White control over Black people. Reconstruction ended with the Compromise of 1877, ushering in the Jim Crow era that denied African Americans the right to vote, hold certain jobs, obtain an education, and other opportunities.

Another legacy of Reconstruction is the myth of the Lost Cause. Generations of American students were taught a Lost Cause mythology that masked the hard truth about the Civil War – that it was fought to preserve slavery. This Lost Cause ideology was designed to glorify the Confederate cause and to reinforce White supremacy. An honest reckoning with American history requires that students dismiss the Lost Cause mythology and understand the brutality of the slave system and its enduring legacy.

Curricular Connections:

8th Grade US History Exploration to Reconstruction (1877)

8.10 Analyze the Reconstruction efforts in the post-Civil War United States. 1. Compare congressional and presidential Reconstruction plans. 2. Analyze southern resistance to Reconstruction reforms (e.g., Black Codes, Jim Crow Laws, Ku Klux Klan, etc.) 4. Examine the roles of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments in expanding liberty for more Americans. 5. Identify the significance of the impact of the Compromise of 1877.

Mississippi Studies:

MS.6 Analyze the role of Mississippi during the Civil War and evaluate the effects of Reconstruction in the state. 4. Analyze the impact of Reconstruction on Mississippi, including the new Mississippi Constitution of 1868. 5. Describe the changing roles and contributions of African American Mississippians during Reconstruction.

U.S. History: 1877 to the Present:

USH 1 | Westward Expansion and the New South: Trace how economic developments and the westward movement impacted regional differences and democracy in the post Reconstruction era. 5. Evaluate Reconstruction Amendments, Black Codes, Jim Crow, disenfranchisement, sharecropping, Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896), and the rise of early civil rights activists as a response to the injustice such as Booker T. Washington, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and W.E.B. DuBois.

United States Government:

USG.6 Differentiate civil rights from civil liberties and describe how each have been interpreted and amended throughout United States' history. 4. Analyze changing interpretations of the Bill of Rights over time, particularly the First and Fourteenth Amendments.

African American Studies:

AAS.4 Evaluate the roles of African Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction. 3. Analyze the effects of Reconstruction on the legal, political, social, cultural, educational, and economic life of freedmen. 4. Assess the successes and failures of Reconstruction as they relate to African Americans (e.g., forty acres and a mule, voting, Clinton Massacre, etc.).

Problems in American Democracy:

PAD.6 Analyze the effectiveness of Reconstruction policies in the United States following the Civil War. 1. Evaluate the efforts to rebuild the Union and restore southern states during Reconstruction. 2. Identify and describe the significance of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution. 3. Assess efforts by former Confederate states to disenfranchise Black voters during the late 1800s including the use of poll taxes and literacy tests.

Pre-Reading:

Reconstruction in Mississippi: <https://mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/issue/reconstruction-in-mississippi-1865-1876>

The First Black Legislators: <https://mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/issue/first-black-legislators-mississippi>

The Clinton Riot of 1875: From Riot to Massacre: <https://mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/issue/the-clinton-riot-of-1875-from-riot-to-massacre>

Materials:

Students will need a computer, tablet, or laptop with internet access. Teacher can also print out and copy documents if internet options are not available.

Directions:

Students should have a working knowledge of the causes and outcome of the Civil War before completing this assignment. Students should be learning about or have recently learned about Reconstruction in America.

Students should read the introduction and watch the explanation video on YouTube.

Dr. Kimberly Kutz Elliott, "Nast & Reconstruction, understanding a political cartoon," in Smarthistory, March 17, 2021, accessed May 23, 2023.

- Nast Cartoon with quiz: <https://smarthistory.org/nast-reconstruction-political-cartoon/>

Students should use the cartoon analysis tool from the National Archives to understand the Nast political cartoon about the effects of Reconstruction.

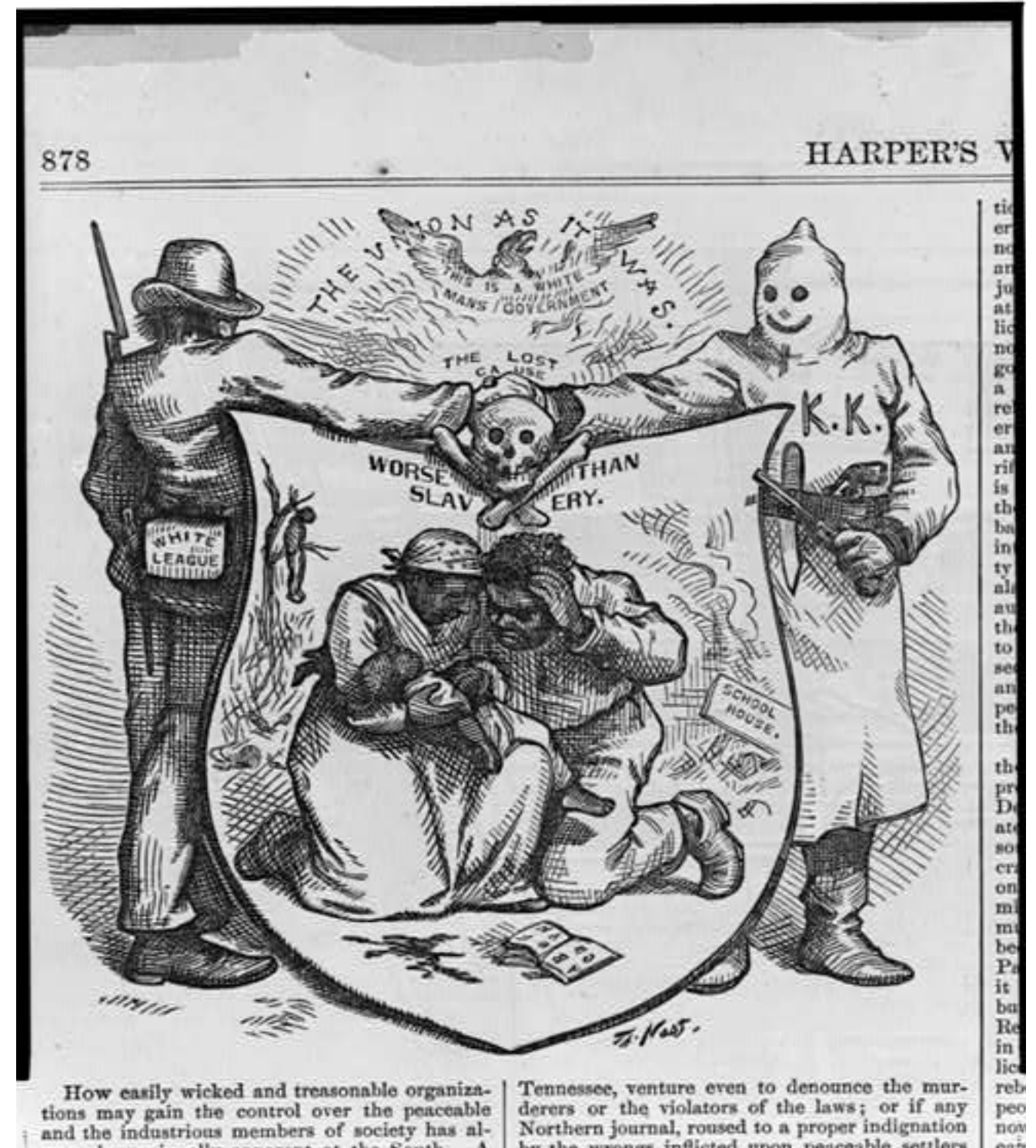
- Cartoon analysis document: <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/analyze-a-cartoon-intermediate> Click on the link to download the fillable PDF.

Assessment:

Teacher may choose to take the YouTube quiz and the cartoon analysis tool for a formative assessment or as part of a larger Reconstruction project.

Teacher Note:

Teacher may want to post cartoon on a larger screen for instructional time. Link to Nast cartoon from the Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3c28619/?st=image>



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