This thesis examines a period in the history of the United States between 1865 and 1877 known as Reconstruction. It develops around the major pieces of legislation that were enacted over the course of its duration, and which incorporated for the first time into the American Constitution civil rights related to the country’s black population of (in the examined period already former) slaves. The Reconstruction Amendments, as Amendments Thirteen, Fourteen, and Fifteen to the U.S. Constitution came to be known, had several functions: one of them was to define the status of freed blacks in the post-war country, and they were also to serve as a means of restoring political and economic stability in the South devastated by the Civil War.

The first part of the thesis looks at the so-called Presidential Reconstruction, which lasted until 1866 and was characterised by rather ‘mild’ provisions in the South on the part of the U.S. government. Lack of national intervention on the level of individual states, insufficient financial funds and President Johnson’s sympathy toward the class of white Southern planters prevented a more radical development in the post-war South. Although Presidential Reconstruction saw some considerable achievements, such as the setting up of schools, health facilities and churches to be attended by the black population, it failed to provide blacks with citizenship and the right to vote.

The second part of the thesis concerns itself with the Radical Reconstruction starting in 1866, that is when Congress passed the Fourteenth Amendment granting former slaves and their children American citizenship. It was followed by other Reconstruction legislation and finally the Fifteenth Amendment, which ‘prohibited each government in the United States from denying a citizen the right to vote based on that citizen's "race, color, or previous
Radical Reconstruction is an era that overlaps what is ironically called the ‘Gilded Age,’ a time of massive industrial growth and expansion of the railroads. It is a time in which the United States economically flourished, or so it seemed, but large debts and the incapacity of the railroads to pay for themselves led to the fall of major financial houses and a collapse of the New York Stock Exchange in 1873. This event precipitated the end of Reconstruction, which came in 1877, with the election as president of Republican moderate Rutherford B. Hayes, who had promised during his campaign that, if elected, he would minimize federal intervention in the Southern states.

The final chapter on Reconstruction’s aftermath and implications looks briefly at what followed after 1877 in terms of civil rights of African Americans and racial segregation (known as Jim Crow), and it also discusses the general socio-economic trends in American society of the day.

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