

Lincoln Plans for Reconstruction

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The major event during the second week of December 1863 took place not on the battlefield, but in Washington, D.C., where President Abraham Lincoln issued his Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction, which set up the provisions under which ex-Confederates could apply for pardons, and the governments of seceded states could be reorganized and restored to the Union. It marked the beginning of debates over Reconstruction that would last until its ending in 1877.

Never recognizing the legitimacy of secession, Lincoln held out hope early in the war that Unionist sentiment in the seceded states would lead to the quick reestablishment of legitimate governments and the restoration of their “proper, practical relations with the Union.” He encouraged the formation of loyal state governments in the south, but this would only occur following the military occupation of the region by Federal forces. In 1861, Lincoln quickly recognized the Restored Government of Virginia, and also gave encouragement to Unionists in their efforts to restore a loyal government in east Tennessee. As the war progressed he supported similar efforts in North Carolina and Louisiana.

By late 1863, however, the president had grown tired with the pace of these efforts. As a result he determined to issue a blanket proclamation to cover all current and future attempts at Reconstruction. On December 8 he submitted his Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction, which laid out the conditions for pardons and the reorganization of governments in the seceded states. Lincoln’s plan contained extremely lenient provisions, reflecting his hope that a non-punitive peace might entice wavering Confederates to return voluntarily. His plan gave full

pardons to those who took an oath to in the future “faithfully support, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States and the Union of the states thereunder.” With the adoption of the Emancipation Proclamation, these ex-Confederates would have to accept the loss of their slaves, but they would retain all other property rights.

Several groups were exempted from the provisions of the president’s plan, including civil and diplomatic officers of the Confederate government, those judges who had left positions in the U.S. government to join the Confederacy, Confederate military officers above the rank of colonel in the army and lieutenant in the navy, members of the U.S. Congress who had joined the rebellion, any officer in the U.S. army or navy who had resigned their commission and served in the Confederate military, and any individual who had refused to recognize captured Union black soldiers and their white officers as legitimate prisoners-of-war. Presumably individuals in these groups would have to apply for special presidential pardons.

The proclamation continued by establishing provisions for the reorganization of loyal state governments. Once ten percent of the number of citizens who had voted in a particular state during the election of 1860 had taken the oath of allegiance, then that state could reorganize a government and resume its former status in the Union. This latter provision led to Lincoln’s proposal being commonly referred to as the Ten Percent Plan.

In the aftermath of Lincoln’s Proclamation, Unionists in Arkansas, Virginia, Louisiana, and Florida began to reorganize. Many in Lincoln’s own party however, criticized the plan as too lenient. The so-called Radical Republicans wanted to require a much larger percentage of citizens to take the oath of allegiance before a state could be restored. They also believed that the plan lacked sufficient measures to guarantee rights for southern ex-slaves. Radical leaders countered Lincoln the following year with the Wade-Davis Bill, which passed congress but was

pocket-vetoed by the president. Lincoln's Ten Percent Plan was the opening salvo in a long-lasting, bitter debate as to the status of both the ex-Confederate states and their black populations.