

The Compromise of 1877

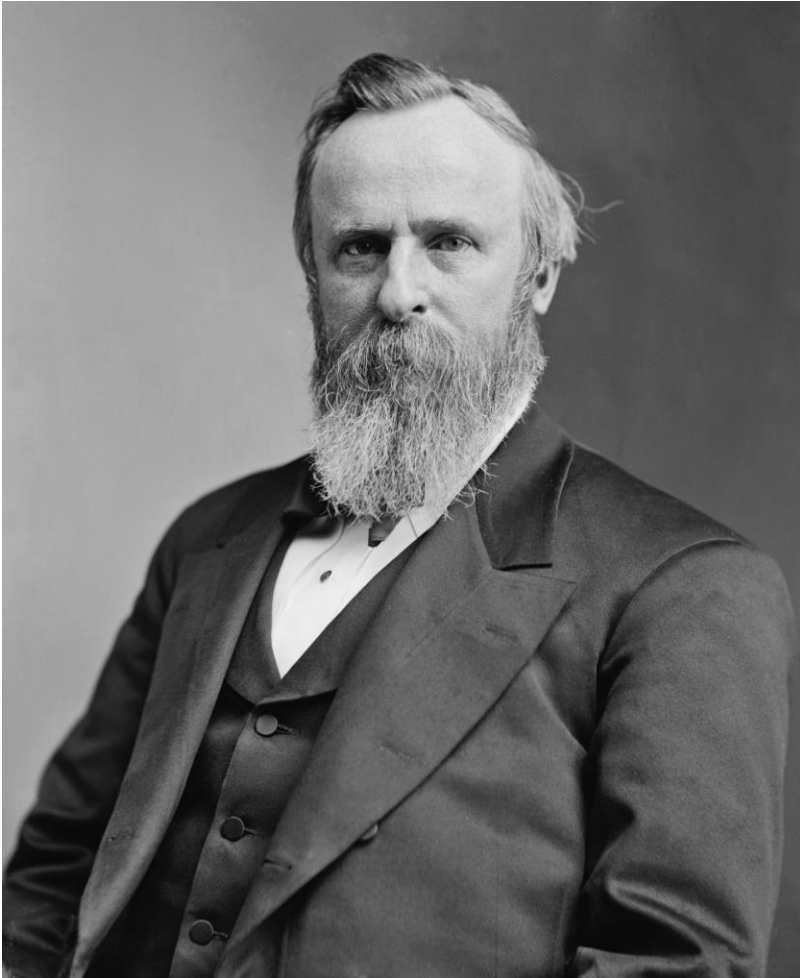
The Compromise of 1877 gave Rutherford B. Hayes the presidency in exchange for the end of Reconstruction in the South.

Overview

- The Compromise of 1877 resolved the contested 1876 presidential election between Democratic candidate Samuel Tilden and Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes.
- Democrats agreed that Rutherford B. Hayes would become president in exchange for the withdrawal of federal troops from the South and the granting of home rule in the South.
- President Hayes' withdrawal of federal troops from Louisiana and South Carolina marked a major turning point in American political history, effectively ending the Reconstruction Era and issuing in the system of Jim Crow.

A contested presidential election

The **Compromise of 1877** resolved the tumult that had arisen following the 1876 presidential election. In that election, Democratic candidate **Samuel J. Tilden** of New York won 247,448 more popular votes than Republican **Rutherford B. Hayes** of Ohio. But the electoral votes in the three southern states of Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina were disputed. For almost four months, from November into late February, tensions remained high as the question of who was to become the nation's next president remained unresolved.



Portrait of Rutherford B. Hayes.

Rutherford B. Hayes won the contested election of 1876 as a result of the Compromise of 1877. [Image](#) courtesy Library of Congress.

In January 1877, Congress established a 15-member Electoral Commission to resolve the issue of which candidate had won the contested states. The commission voted 8-7 along party lines to award the votes of all three states to Hayes. As the commission deliberated, members of Congress and others made their own efforts to end the crisis, but no written, formal agreements resulted.

The presidency in return for home rule in the South

During **Reconstruction**, the period after the Civil War when the South reorganized its political, social, and economic systems to account for the end of slavery, federal troops occupied the South. These troops served to guarantee African American men's right to vote, and the Republican-controlled federal government would only end the military occupation when states rewrote their Constitutions to recognize the citizenship and voting rights of African American men. White Southerners generally despised these troops, and wanted an end to the intervention of the federal government in the South.

The Compromise of 1877 gave white Southerners their chance to stop the military occupation of the South. In the compromise, Southern Democrats agreed not to block the vote by which Congress awarded the contested electoral votes to Rutherford B. Hayes, and Hayes therefore became president. In return, Republicans agreed to withdraw federal troops from actively intervening in the politics of Louisiana and South Carolina (the last two states occupied by federal troops). Accordingly, within two months of becoming president, Hayes ordered federal troops in Louisiana and South Carolina to return to their bases.



Cartoon showing a Southern veteran and a Northern veteran (missing a leg) shaking hands over a tombstone that reads "In Memory of Union Heroes in a Useless War." In the background, an African American family kneels in chains.

This Thomas Nast cartoon, published in 1864, suggested that compromising with the South was tantamount to the United States government betraying the Union dead. [Image](#) courtesy Library of Congress.

The removal of the federal soldiers from the streets and from statehouse offices signaled the end of the Republican Party's commitment to protecting the civil and political rights of African Americans, and marked a major political turning point in American history: it ended Reconstruction.

Another important part of the Compromise of 1877 was that Republicans agreed to home-rule in the South. Home-rule meant that the Republican Party would refrain from interfering in the South's local affairs, and that white Democrats, many of them racist, would rule. Southern Democrats, for their part, pledged that they would "recognize the civil and political equality of blacks." They did not subsequently carry through on this promise but instead disfranchised black men from voting and imposed **Jim Crow segregation** across the South.

The end of Reconstruction

In all, with the Compromise of 1877, the Republican Party abandoned the last remnant of its support for equal rights for African Americans in the South. With the withdrawal of federal troops went any hope of reconstructing the South as a racially-egalitarian society after the end of slavery. As Henry Adams, a black Louisianan, lamented, "The whole South—every state in the South—had got into the hands of the very men that held us as slaves."

In the aftermath of the Compromise of 1877, a few African Americans in some areas of the South continued to vote and serve in government offices into the 1890s, but the Compromise of 1877 marked the effective end of the Republican Party's active support of civil rights for black Americans. Southern states rapidly passed laws disenfranchising African Americans and implementing racial segregation.

What do you think?

What did the Compromise of 1877 mean for African Americans?

Did the white Southern Democrats who promised that they would recognize civil and political rights for African Americans as part of the Compromise of 1877 hold true to this promise?

Why do you think the Republican Party gave up on supporting civil rights for African Americans in this era?