

## LESSON PLAN

## Lesson 13: The Unfinished Revolution

**Essential Question**

What can we learn from the history of Reconstruction as we work to strengthen democracy today?

**Guiding Question**

- Why has democracy been called a “work in progress”?
- What can individuals do to help bring about a more just and equal society?

**Learning Objectives**

- Students will understand that the work of ensuring a democracy’s success is never complete; individuals and communities must constantly choose to act to defend and strengthen it.
- Students will recognize that progress toward justice and equality does not always advance steadily but often experiences great leaps forward and disappointing steps backward.

**About This Lesson**

In the previous lesson, students learned about the violence perpetrated by paramilitary groups to influence elections and return Southern states to rule by the Democratic Party. In this lesson, students will explore echoes of the Reconstruction era that reverberate today, and they will reflect on the idea of democracy as a continuous process rather than a fixed achievement. Finally, students will consider how they can best participate in the ongoing work of strengthening our democracy.

**Additional Context and Background**

So many of the debates at the heart of the Reconstruction era are also central to the entire sweep of American history, and many are still being debated today, including these key questions:

- What does it mean to be free?
- What is equality, and how can it be achieved?

- What is the role of laws and government in creating a more just and equal society?
- Who can be a citizen, and to what rights are citizens entitled?
- Who is entitled to vote?
- What is the proper relationship between the federal government, state governments, and individuals?
- How can democratic societies best respond to violence and extremism in their midst?

These questions contain some of the fundamental issues and problems of a democracy.

### **Contemporary Echoes**

In the twenty-first century, more than 150 years after the beginning of the Reconstruction era, Americans continue to debate the extent to which our society lives up to its ideals of freedom and equality. The principle of equality was enshrined in the Constitution for the first time through the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause. Yet, like the meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment itself, the true meaning of equality has been a source of debate and conflict in American society ever since.

This lesson offers teachers and students the opportunity to explore the ways in which debates over freedom and equality are continuing to take place in contemporary society. Students explore an excerpt from an essay by the scholar Eddie S. Glaude, who draws from the history of Reconstruction and the twentieth-century civil rights movement, to call for a "new American founding." They use Glaude Jr.'s call for a moral reckoning to think about the unresolved issues our nation faces today and how those issues are connected to the history of Reconstruction.

This lesson will then prompt teachers and students to review some of the nineteenth-century debates about freedom and equality that they learned about in this unit and consider the ways that these debates are still alive today. Teachers might provide students with some of the resources suggested in this lesson as a springboard into a deeper research project about one or more of the ongoing debates about the meaning of freedom and equality.

For some students, there is a potential risk in discovering that questions about equality and justice at the core of the Reconstruction era are still at the center of contemporary political debates in the United States: their emotional reactions to some realities of American

society and their own place in it can lead them to feel disempowered. It is therefore important to emphasize how this unit has been grounded in an examination of democracy as an ongoing process. As former federal judge William Hastie said, democracy can “easily be lost, but never is fully won. Its essence is eternal struggle.” The goal of studying Reconstruction and assessing the state of our nation today in relation to its goals is not to dishearten students but rather to illuminate for them the continuous need for constructive participation and engagement to maintain and strengthen our democracy.

## Notes to the Teacher

### 1. Teaching Strategies

These teaching strategies are referenced in this lesson's activities. You may wish to familiarize yourself with them before teaching this lesson.

- [Think, Pair, Share](#)
- [S-I-T](#)

## Materials

- **Reading:** We Need a New American Founding
- **Video:** [The Legacies of Reconstruction](#)

## Activities

### 1. Reflect on the “Eternal Struggle” of Democracy

Before examining the legacies of the Reconstruction era, it is important to introduce students to the idea of democracy as an ongoing process. Ask students to reflect in their journals on the following quotation from federal judge William H. Hastie:

Democracy is becoming rather than being. It can easily be lost, but never is fully won. Its essence is eternal struggle.

Students might respond to the following question as they write:

What do you think Hastie means when he says that democracy's essence is eternal struggle?

After they have spent a few minutes recording their thoughts, use the [Think, Pair, Share](#) teaching strategy to help students share their thoughts with each other.

## 2. Reflect on the Idea of a New American Founding

In the next activity, students will read an excerpt from an article by the scholar Eddie Glaude Jr. in which he draws on the history of Reconstruction and the civil rights movement to call for a “new American founding.” Pass out **We Need a New American Founding** and read it aloud as a class. Then discuss the following questions:

- Why does Glaude Jr. believe that we are in a moment of “moral reckoning”?
- What do you believe are the hard issues we are confronting as a nation?
- What issues feel connected to the history of Reconstruction?
- Why does Glaude Jr. say that he believes we will “probably fail trying” in our efforts to begin again? What is the point of trying something that might fail?

## 3. Explore the Legacies of Reconstruction

Show a clip from the video [The Legacies of Reconstruction](#) (9:04–13:04). Ask students to record notes on the video using the [S-I-T](#) strategy.

Then share the following quote from George Lipsitz, which appears in the video. Lipsitz is referring to how he hopes the study of history will shape students’ responses to present-day injustices:

We know this place; we’ve been here before. We come from a tradition. People of all colors and all races come from a tradition of social justice in which ordinary men and women thought it was worth risking everything to create a fair and democratic society.

Ask students to reflect on the quote using the following questions:

- According to Lipsitz, how does studying the history of Reconstruction empower us today?
- What lessons can you draw from the history of Reconstruction as you consider the power and impact of your choices in the world today?

## 4. Deepen Students’ Reflections on Democracy

Close the lesson and the unit by asking students to return to their initial journal reflection and the Hastie quote they responded to in the opening activity. Ask students to add to their journal reflections using the following prompt:

- How did the ideas in this lesson connect, extend, or challenge your initial thinking about the Hastie quote and democracy as eternal struggle?

Invite volunteers to share their thoughts with the class.

## Extensions

### 1. Deepening Students Connections to Civic Agency

To help students think through how they can strengthen our democracy, you may wish to teach the lesson [Choosing to Participate](#), from the unit [Teaching Holocaust and Human Behavior](#). This lesson brings students into the “Choosing to Participate” stage of the Facing History scope and sequence by asking them to consider how our memory and understanding of history inspires and guides our choices in the world today. In particular, this lesson invites students to envision the ways that they themselves might contribute to the process of creating a more humane, just, and compassionate world.

### 2. Incorporating Bryan Stevenson’s Speech “We Need to Talk about an Injustice”

You may wish to augment the activities in this lesson by sharing [We Need to Talk about an Injustice](#), a speech by Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer who founded the Equal Justice Initiative to seek fairness in the criminal justice system. The following questions can help guide a discussion about the speech:

- What issues has Stevenson chosen to champion in his work? Why do you think he picked these issues?
- What is the relationship between one’s identity and one’s power to make change in society? How do you think Stevenson would answer that question?
- What inspirations does Stevenson describe in his life and work? What legacies influence him?
- What inspires you in your life? What legacies influence you?
- What does Stevenson’s speech teach us about participating in democracy? What qualities do you think are necessary for individuals to develop in order to become upstanders?
- What issues do you think most need to be championed in your community? In your country? How can you address them? How can you help to create positive change?