

Year 2:

Unit 2

"A Brief Moment in the Sun" - Reconstruction (1865 - 1877): Introduction

Unit Purpose: Why This Unit?

Following the Civil War, the nation was at a crossroads. How should it deal with a newly freed population of African Americans in the South? How should it rebuild a nation torn apart and destroyed by war? From 1865 to 1877, the United States dealt with those questions during a period known as Reconstruction. At first, the nation grappled with what it meant to “reconstruct” the nation after the devastation of war. Should the nation prioritize rebuilding the destruction — both physical and emotional — or bring justice to African Americans? This debate over the meaning of Reconstruction never went away, as Republican congressmen and President Johnson, newly freed African Americans and white Southerners clashed over how to rebuild Southern society. Reconstruction led to many advancements for African Americans, such as the right to vote, a rise in self-government, and the growth of public education. For a moment, it seemed as if Reconstruction had succeeded in creating a new and more just society. But white supremacy, coupled with Northern disinterest and corruption, and weaponized through Southern violence, led to the undoing of many of Reconstruction’s achievements. As a result, the Democrats regained control of the South and disenfranchised many African Americans, a period known as “Redemption.”

Reconstruction remains a hotly contested period in American history. For years, Reconstruction was regarded a failure by many historians. But for these historians, Reconstruction was a failure because it gave black Americans too many rights, rights they were unfit to possess, which ultimately led to chaos. In its wake, Americans instead chose to prioritize reconciliation with one another as the true “success” of Reconstruction, regardless of the rights of African Americans who were trampled on to achieve such a reunion. Today, the legacy of Reconstruction continues to affect our society, as we consider just how united a nation we are, and what we had to sacrifice in order to achieve that. As we consider this unit on Reconstruction, it is important to reflect on what the consequences were and continue to be of our national decision to let society force African Americans back into positions of subjugation and conditions like slavery. As historian Eric Foner states, “Citizenship, rights, democracy — as long as these remain

contested, so will the necessity of an accurate understanding of Reconstruction. More than most historical subjects, how we think about this era truly matters, for it forces us to think about what kind of society we wish America to be.”

Unit 2 Learning Goals

Essential Question

If you are successful in this unit, your scholars will be able to answer the Unit 2 Essential Question: *To what extent was Reconstruction a success?*

Big Ideas

The Big Ideas, outlined below, help answer the Unit 2 Essential Question and reflect the key ideas scholars must master by the end of this unit. As you teach Unit 2, connect every lesson back to the Big Idea(s) that the lesson helps illustrate. The Unit 2 Big Ideas were adapted from the UCLA National History Standards United States History Era 5.

- **Big Idea 1: The Civil War had a profound impact on American society, forcing communities to recover and rebuild and leaving many Americans divided about how best to reunite the nation.**
 - With the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, Northerners reeled at the loss of their noble leader, while many Southerners rejoiced at the death of a tyrant.
 - The Civil War had a devastating impact on families across the nation, but in the North, the war also helped develop and strengthen the economy. Southerners, however, had to deal not only with the destruction of their property and plantations, but also with the looming prospect of completely restructuring their society without their slave labor force.
 - President Lincoln, President Johnson, and Congressional leaders all proposed different and opposing plans for Reconstruction, revealing a division among national leaders over the purpose and goals of Reconstruction.
 - President Johnson and the “Radical” Republican leaders in Congress vehemently clashed over Reconstruction policies; while Johnson promoted lenient policies to the South, Republican congressmen hoped to empower the newly freed African Americans and punish former Confederate leaders.
- **Big Idea 2: While Reconstruction policies aimed to redefine social relations in the South and empower African Americans, by the end of the 1870s, Southerners had restored white supremacy in the former Confederacy.**
 - The Radical Republicans in Congress, led by Thaddeus Stevens, passed laws and constitutional amendments to help newly freed African Americans become full citizens in American society.
 - Organizations like the Freedmen’s Bureau, established at the end of the Civil War, provided services, established schools, and built churches to aid newly freed African Americans.
 - Upon gaining the right to vote, African Americans eagerly exercised their new right, and in the years immediately following the Fifteenth Amendment, elected many African Americans to positions in government. This era was dubbed by W. E. B. Du Bois as “Black Reconstruction.”

- Southerners wanted to “redeem” the South and restore the old white supremacist social order to Southern society. As a result, Southerners used violence and other intimidation tactics to bring back to power the Democratic Party and disenfranchise African Americans in the South.
 - Southern redemption efforts, coupled with corruption, racism, and disinterest in the North, brought about the end of Reconstruction.
- **Big Idea 3: In 1877, Reconstruction officially ended, leaving behind a still deeply divided nation and marking an enduring victory for white supremacy over civil rights in the South.**
 - The presidential election of 1876 was a draw, leaving it to Congress to decide the next president of the United States. In a corrupt bargain — known as the Compromise of 1877 — Republican Rutherford Hayes was declared the victor, as long as all federal troops were removed from the South, officially ending Reconstruction.
 - The Compromise of 1877 removed all federal protections of African Americans in the South, indicating that the federal government would no longer protect the rights and freedoms of African Americans from the rising tide of white supremacy.
 - Although Reconstruction ended with the hopes of promoting national reconciliation, many in the North and the South continued to see one another as an enemy or traitor.
 - The legacy of Reconstruction is complex, for while the policies of Reconstruction itself promoted the rights of African Americans, the reality of these policies was short-lived.

Key Terms

The following people, places, and events are foundational to understanding the Big Ideas of this unit. As these words are introduced in each lesson, add them to your word wall and hold scholars accountable for using them in discussion and writing throughout the unit.

- The assassination of Abraham Lincoln
- Black Codes
- Sharecropping
- Reconstruction
- President Andrew Johnson
- Presidential Reconstruction
- Congressional Reconstruction
- The Civil Rights Act of 1866
- Thaddeus Stevens
- Radical Republicans
- The Reconstruction Amendments
- The Reconstruction Acts
- Impeachment
- The Freedmen’s Bureau
- The Ku Klux Klan
- Redemption

- Disenfranchisement
- President Ulysses S. Grant
- The Election of 1876/The Compromise of 1877
- President Rutherford B. Hayes

Geography

The following places are foundational to understanding the geographical context of the unit. As you teach Unit 2, continually reference maps in class not only to build scholar fluency with geography, but also to develop scholars' geographic reasoning skills as they grapple with the Big Ideas of the unit.

- **The states of the United States as of 1877**
- **Major Southern cities:** Richmond, Virginia; Atlanta, Georgia; Charleston, South Carolina; Raleigh, North Carolina; Montgomery, Alabama; and Jackson, Mississippi
- **The Five Military Districts of Reconstruction:** 1. Virginia; 2. North and South Carolina; 3. Florida, Alabama, and Georgia; 4. Mississippi and Arkansas; and 5. Texas and Louisiana

Intellectual Preparation

Class Materials Once you have internalized the Big Ideas of the unit, to be successful, you must study all scholar documents and materials before you teach the first lesson:

- All documents in the [Unit 2 Sourcebook](#)
- All scholar and teacher materials in the [Unit 2 Workbook](#)

Additional Resources The resources below provide additional historical background for the content covered in Unit 2:

- Read “Teaching Hard History” from the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Teaching Tolerance project.
- Review the Reconstruction Timeline on the University of Houston’s Digital History website.
- Read “Five Myths About Reconstruction” by James Loewen published in the [Washington Post](#) and “Why Reconstruction Matters” by Eric Foner published in the [New York Times](#).
- Read Chapter 2, “Regeneration and Reconstruction” from [Race and Reunion](#), by David Blight.
- Watch the Facing History Video Lessons on Reconstruction.

*To access more free American History content and resources, create an account on the Gilder Lehrman Institute website.

Unit 2 Lesson Sequence

Essential Question: To what extent was Reconstruction a success?

The first four lessons introduce scholars to the complex impact of the Civil War on the United States. Lessons 1 and 2 have scholars consider the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and its reverberating effect on Americans, North and South. From these two lessons, scholars will understand not only the complex impact of this assassination on the United States, but also what his assassination revealed about the deep divides ever present between North and South. Scholars will continue to examine this sharp divide in Lesson 3, where they will uncover how the Civil War's impact on North and South further exacerbated this regional divide. In Lesson 4, these divisions come to a head, as scholars examine how different Americans made meaning of the purpose and goals of national Reconstruction. By the end of these lessons, scholars will be prepared to examine how Reconstruction policy ultimately took shape in the United States.

Lesson 1: The Assassination of Abraham Lincoln (Gallery Walk)

- **Central Question:** Why did American responses to the assassination of President Lincoln differ?

Lesson 2: A Lincoln Memorial (PBL)

- **Central Question:** How should Americans remember President Lincoln?

Lesson 3: The Impact of the Civil War (Source Analysis)

- **Central Question:** How did the impact of the Civil War differ in the North and the South?

Lesson 4: Reconstruction (Source Analysis)

- **Central Question:** What was the purpose of Reconstruction?

Lessons 5 through 8 focus on the “radical” Republican policies during Reconstruction and how these policies took shape in the South. Lessons 5 through 7 focus on the Republican platform and the laws and amendments passed; scholars will understand how Republican legislation aimed to promote the rights of African Americans, as well as how these efforts clashed with President Johnson’s own goals for Reconstruction. In Lesson 8, scholars will explore the profound — albeit brief — impact Republican legislation had on African Americans, and the new rights and freedoms they eagerly grasped as a result. By the end of these lessons, scholars will understand how Reconstruction legally redefined social relations in the South.

Lessons 5–7: Radical Reconstruction (DBQ Writing)

- **Central Question:** Why was the Republican Congressional Reconstruction plan considered “radical”?

Lesson 8: “Black Reconstruction” (Source Analysis)

- **Central Question:** How did Radical Reconstruction empower African Americans in the South?

Lessons 9 through 12 examine the backlash to Reconstruction in both the North and the South. In Lesson 9, scholars will learn how Southerners, resistant to the social changes implemented by Reconstruction, did everything in their power to “redeem” the South and restore traditional — white supremacist — social structures instead. Lessons 10 through 12 examine the final years of Reconstruction; while initially Republicans had eagerly passed legislation, by the mid-1870s, corruption and scandal in the North, coupled with racism and general disinterest, led to a decline in Reconstruction policies. As a result, Southerners were able to successfully “redeem” the South

and disenfranchise African Americans. By the end of these lessons, scholars will understand how, despite the “radical” Reconstruction legislation and policies, by the mid-1870s, the realities of these policies were rarely realized for African Americans.

Lesson 9: Southern Redemption (Source Analysis)

- **Central Question:** How did white Southerners use violence against African Americans to “redeem” the South?

Lessons 10–12: The End of Reconstruction (DBQ Writing)

- **Central Question:** Who, North or South, was more responsible for “killing” Reconstruction?

Lessons 13 through 15 introduce scholars to what Reconstruction ultimately meant for Americans after it officially ended in 1877. In Lesson 13, scholars will explore the immediate impact of the end of Reconstruction in the South, while in Lesson 14, scholars will consider the immediate impact of the end of Reconstruction on the nation as a whole. In Lesson 15, scholars will consider how Americans have defined and made meaning of Reconstruction over time — ranging from white supremacist schools of thought in the 1920s to current historical interpretations. By the end of these lessons, scholars should be able to explain all three Big Ideas of Unit 2 and use these ideas to explain the extent to which Reconstruction was a success.

Lesson 13: The Compromise of 1877 (Source Analysis)

- **Central Question:** Who were the “winners” and “losers” of the Compromise of 1877?

Lesson 14: Reunion and Reconciliation (Gallery Walk)

- **Central Question:** How effectively did Reconstruction reunite the North and the South?

Lesson 15: The Legacy of Reconstruction (Source Analysis)

- **Central Question:** How has the legacy of Reconstruction evolved over time?