Drawing lessons from largely forgotten history

Educators want more stress on Reconstruction

BY AVIS THOMAS-LESTER

In August, Michigan history teacher James Gorman watched televised images of torch-bearing white supremacists marching on the University of Virginia in Charlottesville and decided to use the incident to teach his students about similar events that happened in a divided United States 150 years earlier.

He would compare race-based protests by white nationalists, like those in Charlottesville, to segregationists' efforts during the Reconstruction era to roll back civil rights advances made after the Civil War. During Reconstruction — which historians date from roughly 1865 to 1877 — enslaved people were freed, former slaves and free blacks gained citizenship rights, and black men were granted the right to vote. As a result, African Americans made huge strides in education, entrepreneurship and political power. Historians estimate that as many as 2,000 blacks were elected to local, state and federal offices during Reconstruction.

Most of those gains were lost after 1877, when the federal government pulled troops out of the South. A backlash began. Racist legislators effectively stripped blacks of their constitutional rights by passing laws mandating segregation and restricting voting.

The post-Reconstruction attacks on black advancement "were motivated by the same mentality as Charlottesville — TEACHING CONTINUED ON B2"
limiting progress," said Gorman, who teaches in Tawas City, a hamlet of about 2,000 on the Lake Huron coast of Michigan’s Lower Peninsula. "It's important for students to learn about that period, especially as it relates to what is happening today."

To inform his lessons, Gorman chose a curriculum called "Teach Reconstruction" that was created by the Zinn Education Project, a collaboration between social justice education nonprofits Teaching for Change, based in Washington, and Rethinking Schools of Milwaukee. The creators of the Teach Reconstruction project are campaigning for the inclusion of lessons about Reconstruction in history and social studies classes. The project provides educational materials and teaching guides for teachers.

The 150th anniversary of the Reconstruction era has largely unheralded, said Deborah Menkart, executive director of Teaching for Change and co-director of the Zinn Education Project, named after the late historian and social activist Howard Zinn, author of the best-selling "A People's History of the United States."

"It is not getting anywhere near the attention of the Civil War anniversaries," Menkart said. "In order to make a better path forward, we need to know about the eras when the country made a real effort to make change. That's what Reconstruction was. It was a short window in which people worked across racial lines to make change. ... As a colleague said, it is the only period in U.S. history when black lives mattered."

Many states require lessons on the Civil War. Some states, such as Mississippi and Michigan, also require teachers to include Reconstruction in those lessons. But Menkart and others said most school districts do little to ensure the era is presented to students.

Several educators called Reconstruction one of the most pivotal periods in the nation's history. It has long been controversial because it was an effort by the federal government and others to create a successful biracial society, but it failed in the face of a white supremacist backlash.

"Here was this moment at the end of the Civil War when the country has been engaged in this bloody conflict where all the old structures have been destroyed," said Zinn Education Project co-director Bill Bigelow. "There is this question posed about what kind of country we are going to live in. Reconstruction is the answer to that question. So, it is incredibly important for us to think about and teach about because this was a chance to really remake the kind of United States that we were going to be."

Several organizations are providing information to help educators teach about Reconstruction. The National Endowment for the Humanities is sponsoring "American Reconstruction: The Untold Story," a summer institute for teachers in grades K-12 next July at the University of South Carolina at Beaufort. The program was also offered in 2016 and 2017.

This past July, the National Park Service's National Historic Landmarks Program published "The Era of Reconstruction 1861-1900," a 165-page guide for educators, students and others. The guide can be downloaded free from the Park Service's website. The nonprofit Facing History and Ourselves is offering "The Reconstruction Era and the Fragility of Democracy," described as an archive of lessons, videos and primary sources to teach about one of the most tumultuous periods in U.S. history and its legacy today. The materials can be downloaded free.

Bigelow said more than 72,000 teachers have registered on the Zinn Education Project's website to download materials, including Reconstruction teaching activities and lesson plans. The free curriculum features a variety of components, including "Reconstructing the South: A Role Play," in which students consider what black people needed to survive and to achieve real freedom after the war.

Cristina Tosto, who teaches Reconstruction to a diverse group of students in Gulfport, Miss., said the curriculum offers an alternative to the "victim-based" presentation of blacks in history. She makes sure her students know that despite their state's history of Jim Crow oppression, Mississippi elected the first African American to serve a full term in the U.S. Senate, Blanche K. Bruce, during Reconstruction.

"Often the history can be de-
pressing, but there was a lot of progress made, and that’s what I teach my students,” Tosto said. “I want them to know that African American history included progress, triumph and victory, as well as struggle.”

Educators who teach Reconstruction said teachers who don’t may be motivated by more than a lack of knowledge of the era. Bigelow said many teachers avoid it because of the controversy surrounding the subject. Others may feel they’ve covered the material while teaching about slavery, slave resistance and the roots of the Civil War.

Julian Hipkins III, a former staff member at Teaching for Change who is global studies coordinator at Theodore Roosevelt High School in Washington, said the subject of Reconstruction is ideologically uncomfortable for many historians and educators.

“U.S. history is often taught in this continuous arc of improvement, but post-Reconstruction kind of destroyed that myth,” he said.

Hipkins said the period reminds people that race-related advancements have often been followed by backlash. “If you don’t teach that, then every generation thinks that the things they are going through are new,” he said. “When President Trump won, I wasn’t surprised at all because it fell in line with the way U.S. history has gone since the beginning. You have the election of the first black president followed by a president who supports white supremacy. That is actually how the United States works.”

Educators said learning about Reconstruction can help children understand the current racial conflicts in the country. Statistics from the Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit watchdog that tracks hate groups, show that race-related attacks and membership in racist organizations increased in 2017. Teachers said such incidents are especially disturbing for young people who have lived much or all of their lives with a black president in the White House.

Incidents such as “the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville and the protest against it can be difficult for young people to fully comprehend,” said Amrita Wassan, who teaches about Reconstruction as part of her U.S. history course at the Capital City Public Charter School in Washington. “I often hear students voice questions like, ‘Why is no one stopping white supremacists?’ and ‘Why was this rally allowed?’”

It is important for students to see the connection between Charlottesville and similar protests by some of those who want to “make America great again” and previous political fights to reverse the progress of people of color, said Adam Sanchez, a Zinn Education organizer.

Gorman said that is the connection he hopes his students will make in Michigan. He said the Michigan educational content standards require educators to teach about the Civil War and Reconstruction, but Reconstruction often gets short shrift. He wanted his students — 90 percent of whom are white and many of whom have never ventured to a big city — to learn about the racist motivations for the actions that were taken by Southern segregationists to neutralize black advancement after the Civil War and by those who marched recently in Charlottesville.

He also wants the students to understand those conflicts aren’t a world away. There are Confederate flags flying in many areas of Michigan, he said.

“Even though the protests are not happening here, these kids don’t live under a rock,” he said. “They see these protests. Those of us who have lived in other places and have had friends who have shared experiences about oppression are more likely to understand. Those who haven’t, often don’t have a clue. You hope to share something with the students that will help them understand and empathize.”

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