

Teaching kids how battles about race from 150 years ago mirror today's conflicts

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Students at a Washington, D.C. middle school work on a Reconstruction lesson. Photo: Rick Reinhard for The Hechinger Report

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 ago.

He'd compare the race-based hatred spurring protests by white nationalists, like those in Charlottesville, to segregationists' efforts during the Reconstruction era to roll back advances made after the Civil War. During Reconstruction — which many 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, however, in 1877 when the federal government pulled troops out of the South. Once the federal government left, a backlash began. Racist legislators effectively stripped blacks of their Constitutional rights by passing laws mandating segregation and restricting voting rights.

The post-Reconstruction attacks on black advancement “were motivated by the same mentality as Charlottesville — limiting progress,” said Gorman, who teaches in tiny 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 created by the Zinn Education Project, a collaboration between social justice education nonprofits Teaching for Change, based in Washington, D.C. and Rethinking Schools, of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The creators of the Teach Reconstruction project are actively 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 gone 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.”

Zinn Education Project co-director Bill Bigelow, who wrote part of the Teach Reconstruction curriculum, said the Reconstruction campaign started as part of an overall mission “to address gaps in the commercial curriculum and standard textbook treatments of history and also to offer alternatives to those parts of history that are particularly poorly taught and misrepresented.”

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

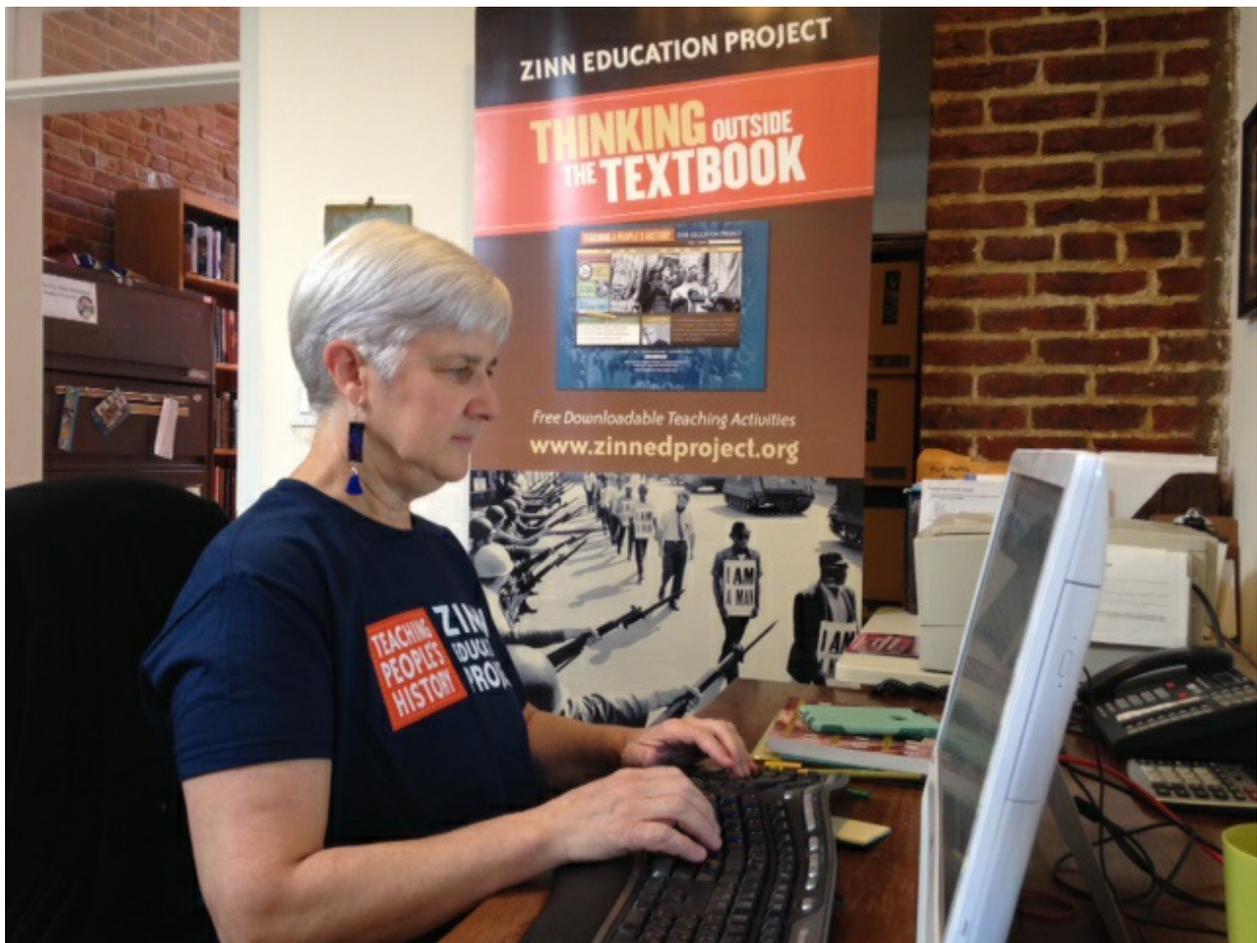
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Rowan University history professor William Carrigan has written that students are unfamiliar

with Reconstruction because popular culture focuses on the Civil War — not the post-war era.

“Students routinely arrived in my class having seen films like ‘Glory’ and ‘Gettysburg’ (and sometimes, more recently, ‘Lincoln’ and ‘Twelve Years a Slave’) and the landmark documentary series by Ken Burns, ‘The Civil War,’ all of which focused overwhelmingly on the war years,” he wrote. But when it comes to the major changes in the South that followed, his students “claimed to have learned very little about Reconstruction in their precollegiate schooling.”

Several educators called Reconstruction one of most pivotal eras in the nation’s history.



Zinn Education Project co-director Deborah Menkart works at the Teaching for Change office in Northwest Washington. Photo: Avis Thomas-Lester for The Hechinger Report

“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,” Bigelow said. “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 educators called Reconstruction one of most pivotal eras 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 bi-racial society that failed in the face of a white supremacist backlash.

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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 in July 2018, at the University of South Carolina Beaufort. Twenty-five teachers will be selected to attend. 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 at the National Park Service website. The nonprofit Facing History and Ourselves is offering "The Reconstruction Era and the Fragility of Democracy," described on its website 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. The website for the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History features a collection of essays, primary sources and teaching materials for educators teaching Reconstruction to students in high school and college.

Zinn Education's Bigelow said more than 72,000 teachers have registered on the 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, Mississippi, 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 ever serve a full term in the U.S. Senate, Blanche K. Bruce, during Reconstruction.

"Often the history can be depressing, 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."

Josh Watne, who teaches seventh grade U.S. history in Thief River Falls, Minnesota, said the Teaching Reconstruction lessons engage children in learning in a way that often makes them empathize with the people who lived the history. Some instructors said they often eschew textbooks for primary sources, such as first-person accounts of life before and after slavery as told by formerly enslaved people and historic documents, such as sharecropper contracts, to teach about that era.

Watne, whose school district is majority white, said he is dismayed that the era is not more prominently included in American students' social studies and history instruction. He said until there is funding for courses focused on the history of minority cultures, teachers have an obligation to present that information in more general courses for primary and secondary students.

"You can't teach the Civil War without teaching Reconstruction," he said. "If you do, it's essentially lying about history. I understand it's a controversial issue and we have to cover a lot in a few months, but from the issues we see today, some topics are more important than others and need not to be left out."

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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 that they've covered the material while teaching about slavery, slave resistance and the roots of the Civil War.

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Bill Bigelow, Teach Reconstruction curriculum writer

Julian Hipkins III, a former staff member at Teaching for Change who now serves as the global studies coordinator at Theodore Roosevelt High School in Washington, D.C., 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 era reminds people that race-related advancements in particular 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. Like, 'Where is this coming from? Why is this happening?'" 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."

Most recently, President Trump was criticized for blaming “both sides” after the Charlottesville violence; several weeks later, he signed a resolution passed by Congress condemning white supremacy. In the past, he has drawn fire for re-Tweeting messages from white supremacists, for his campaign calls for a “shutdown of Muslims entering the United States” and for his false accusation that Barack Obama was not born in the United States and was therefore ineligible to be president. The Trump administration has strongly contested accusations that Trump sympathizes with white supremacists.



Howard Zinn’s education philosophy drives the Teach Reconstruction project, education activists said. Photo: Avis Thomas-Lester for The Hechinger Report

Educators said learning about Reconstruction can help children understand the current racial conflicts in this country. [Statistics](#) from the Southern Poverty Law Center show that race-related attacks and membership in racist organizations have increased in recent months. 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 like “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, D.C. “I often hear students voice questions like ‘Why is no one stopping white supremacists?’ and ‘Why was this rally allowed?’”

Adam Sanchez, a Zinn Education organizer who is writing part of the Teach Reconstruction curriculum, said the lessons on the era often focus on 1865 to 1877 — from the end of the Civil War through the pull out of federal troops and resources from the South. However, many historians date the Reconstruction era from the beginning of the Civil War to 1900.

“Although most textbooks emphasize the role of Abraham Lincoln and Congress in ending slavery, what is often overlooked is that black people — both in the Northern abolitionist movement and in the South — played the most decisive role in winning freedom and civil rights for African-Americans, a powerful message to young blacks,” Sanchez said.

Before the 1960s, much of the history of Reconstruction that made it into mainstream textbooks was framed by a group of early 20th-century historians known as the Dunning School, who characterized the era as problematic, racked by corruption and crooked governments that came to power in the South once blacks were given the right to vote, said Sanchez.

“The textbooks of today do not parrot that anymore,” Sanchez said. “They give a different version of Reconstruction, but most people still don’t know about it. A lot of today’s teachers either grew up with teachers who taught that old-school version when historians had disparaged the period or just didn’t learn about it at all.”

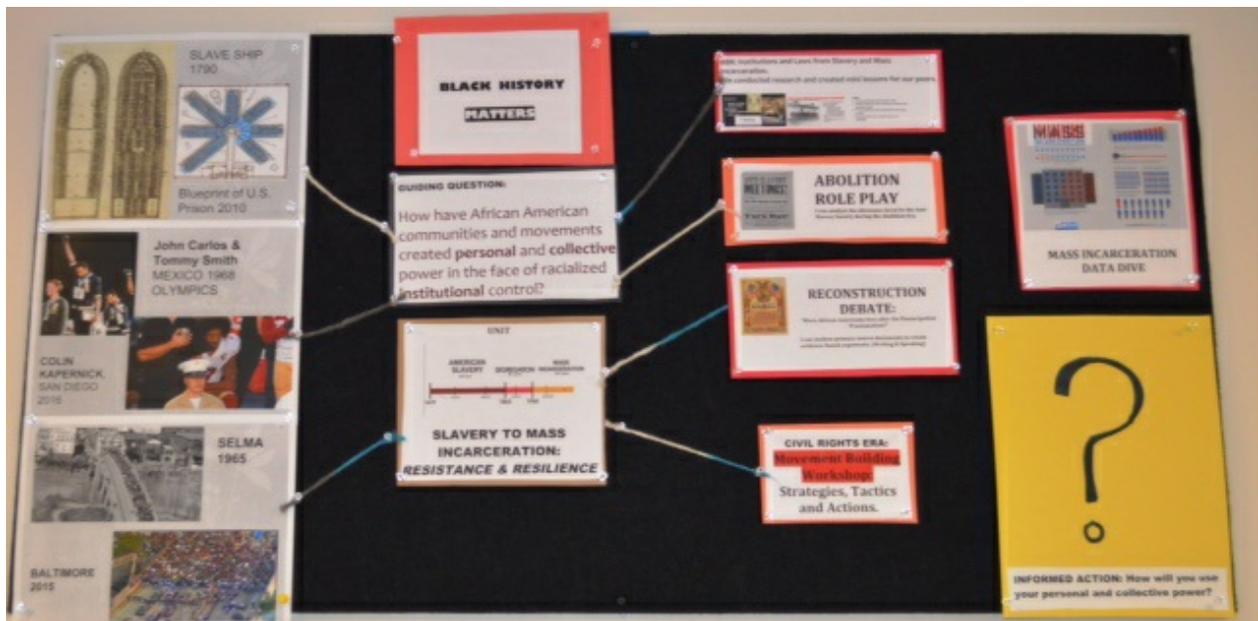
Racism has also been a factor in the era’s dismissal, he said.

“We live in a racist society and this was a time period when you had tremendous advancement among newly-freed African Americans in a flourishing democracy,” Sanchez said. “There are these amazing examples, like in Georgia’s Sea Islands, where black people created their own separatist democracy with their own congress, supreme court and militia to keep the former slave owners from coming back and taking back the land. There are these huge examples that are too often overlooked.”

But the era, which began with enormous strides towards equality, ended with those strides hobbled. Despite the best efforts of African-Americans and whites to make the Reconstruction-era changes a permanent part of the nation’s landscape, the advances fell to segregationists who used everything from violence and intimidation to laws and policies to oppress blacks, educators said.

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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, Sanchez said.



This board shows how Washington teacher Amrita Wassan will incorporate Reconstruction into her lessons at the Capital City Public Charter School in Washington, D.C. Photo: Rick Reinhard for The Hechinger Report

Even though the protests are not happening here, these kids don't live under a rock ...They see these protests. You hope to share something with the students that will help them understand and empathize."

Michigan teacher James Gorman on why teaching about Reconstruction is important

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 into 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 in the present by those who marched in Charlottesville, as well.

He also wants them 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 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."

Bigelow, who taught high school history in Portland, Oregon schools for 30 years, said he felt responsible for helping young people to understand the gravity of the period when he was teaching. His exposure to the era as a student had been "a watered-down version of 'Birth of a Nation,'" he said, referring to the 1915 silent film originally called "The Clansman" about the Civil War's aftermath. The film, which was heralded at the time, portrayed blacks as lazy and corrupt and glorified hooded racists. It drew massive protests from civil rights groups.

"I learned that Reconstruction was sort of an embarrassment, when bad government [prevailed], that it was kind of a mistake, so it was a period to kind of be avoided," Bigelow said.

He later learned the importance of — and truth about — the era.

"It was a period when the future of the U.S. was an open question. It was an incredibly hopeful time, as well," Bigelow said. "It was a period of black-white alliances that created public education, reformed labor law and made huge progress in making this country better. It needs to be taught because it was an important experiment in democracy. And, it needs to be taught because of the parallels of today."

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