People know some things about Reconstruction, many of them partially true. Here is what I think the common stock of knowledge looks like:

Reconstruction followed the Civil War and apparently lasted 12 years, since that’s when volume 1 of the US history textbook ends and volume 2 begins. It was obviously a tragedy that Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, and Andrew Johnson was terrible. Black people briefly held political power, a fact that used to be considered a horrible injustice by many white Americans but is now taken as an encouraging if foreshortened foreshadowing of the progress of the Civil Rights movement.

Some people know some of the particulars, although not in the context of time, of where they fit into the story. They know that the promise of 40 acres and a mule was made and rescinded along the way and that the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution appeared at some time in the process. People sometimes know what the Black Codes were and that Reconstruction ended with some kind of corrupt bargain in 1877. People think they know that afterwards Southern history was then pretty much put on hold until the 1960s. In general, Reconstruction used to be considered a failure because it happened at all and now it’s considered a failure because it did not go far enough.

One reason Reconstruction is hard to understand, even if you study it carefully, is that its many changes over a vast landscape and twelve years do not have many of the elements of a story. As soon as Lincoln is assassinated, the story line gets tangled. The
main characters seem to come and go. After a dramatic cameo as the villain, even Andrew Johnson seems to fade away and Thaddeus Stevens dies halfway through. The Radical Republicans, the carpetbaggers, the scalawags, despite their evocative nicknames, remain largely faceless and nameless. The story starts and then stops, each state with its own chronology. The ending is especially discouraging, a prolonged death scene for Reconstruction across one state after another until, at the end, soldiers disappear from the stage and shadowy Redeemers take their place.

This lack of a narrative arc is one of the reasons, I think, that people do not even think they know anything about Reconstruction. There’s no simple framework of the sort that people use to make sense of the Civil War—a turning point at Gettysburg, say, or a clean ending at Appomattox. There seems to have been largely chaos, sliced in different shapes for each Southern state. Our greatest book on the subject’s subtitle is “America’s Unfinished Revolution,” which intentionally raises the questions of when, how, and if that revolution might be finally be brought to fruition.

The challenge is clarifying Reconstruction without over-simplifying Reconstruction. We understand that the racial and political caricatures of Birth of a Nation and Gone With the Wind have betrayed us, but we don’t have another comprehensible story to put in its place.

Here’s one suggestion: let’s pull the camera way back at the outset to see the Civil War and Reconstruction in the broadest perspective. What did Abraham Lincoln and the Republican majority that sustained him think they were doing? They were trying to reconstitute and then regenerate the United States without slavery. And there is no story—and no real history—without conflict, so to understand the astounding course of
the war and Reconstruction we have to pay full attention to what the Republicans were up against: white Democrats who bitterly disagreed with almost everything Republicans did, white Southerners who fought desperately to stop them from start to finish, and black Americans who did all they could to seize the opportunities of the war and Reconstruction to make their own place in an America that had been remade.

Faced with these challenges, and adding more drama and complexities to the story, the Republicans repeatedly changed their strategies and tactics. They had to change, to keep their possibilities open, to advance their purpose as far and as fast as possible before they ran out of time, a reality that hung over every scene in the story. In the beginning, even before Lincoln’s election, the Republicans sought to contain and eventually remove the slaveholding power so that free institutions could flourish across the South and across the nation, so that the United States could be truly united in a way it had never been. Candidate Abraham Lincoln thought that process might take five generations. After secession, of course, new opportunities and necessities and threats led the Republicans to accelerate and widen their assaults on slavery, the possibility of failure looming over every step.

The Republicans first had to destroy the most fundamental threat posed by slaveholders—the dissolution of the Union—and they had to do that with military force. Then, to win the resulting military struggle, they had to undermine slavery and enlist enslaved men to become soldiers fighting for their own freedom. All along, they had to defeat the Democrats who sought to block the Republican path to recreating the Union without slavery. Abraham Lincoln’s great accomplishment was to hold the North together long enough to withstand the Confederacy. The Confederacy, for its part, had to
fight hard enough to exhaust the North but not so hard as to exhaust itself even as it watched slavery dissolve everywhere enslaved people had a chance to seize the opportunity to make themselves free.

After the slaveholders’ rebellion had been crushed the Republicans had to figure out to put the United States back together. That’s the process eventually called “reconstruction.” Just as no one foresaw a war of such duration and ferocity that it would destroy the largest and most powerful slave empire in the modern world, neither did anyone foresee the prolonged and tangled events that constitute part two of the great conflict at the heart of American history.

So that’s general outline. The trick is not to let the profound and unlikely outcomes of the war and Reconstruction—immediate emancipation and full legal citizenship of four million people held in slavery for more than two centuries—flatten all the events along the way. Those events could have led to starkly different outcomes at several critical junctures.

In fact, the key is seeing each critical moment in all its possibilities. To understand the story we cannot get ahead of the story.

To understand how the war led to a bold, even audacious, effort to reconstitute and regenerate the United States we need to tighten our focus on the key scenes. And those key scenes of the drama took place between July 1864 and July 1870. Before the first date, there is a real possibility that nothing like Reconstruction will happen; after the last date, six years later, the larger course of Reconstruction had been fixed. The events of the seven years following 1870 chronicle the struggles of a steadily decreasing number of states playing out to a common defeat born of violence and intimidation. They are the
somber aftermath after the climax of the story. In fact, the forty years following 1870 was defined by a long, determined, and systematic rolling back of Reconstruction on every front, culminating in new constitutions in every Southern state. It was not so much a Long Reconstruction as a Long Redemption.

The Civil War and Reconstruction were not the two separate stories we usually imagine, with entirely different sets and actors and plots. The story’s very center is where we often stop one story and start another: at Appomattox and Lincoln’s assassination. We must understand the war years as war, with full attention to war making and generalship and strategy. And then we must understand the five years following the war not as war’s aftermath but as war’s culmination. Without feeling the hot and bloody weight of the war, we cannot understand Reconstruction.

The great transformation of the United States brought by the end of slavery can only be understood one drama at a time, on its own terms, knowing what people at the time could have known and no more. How each episode happened, its exact configuration and timing, its exact sequence and location, set the scene for the next episode. Each defining event was, on its own, unlikely, the path to it circuitous. As in war, events in Reconstruction often took place in lurching form. Events did not float on the top of underlying forces of history, on ideologies and trends and themes, but defined history itself. Obstacles and opposition gave events their shape, enabled otherwise impossible outcomes. Without the resistance at every stage of this drama there could have been no culmination.

Let’s sketch the key events of the years between August 1864 and July 1870 to see what they might tell us.
At the beginning of the summer of 1864, no president of the United States had won a second term since Andrew Jackson, more than thirty years before, and nothing could be taken for granted. The Democrats of the North remained surprisingly strong for a party that had been branded as traitors and out of national office for four years. They sustained newspapers and officeholders and showed strength across the North outside of New England. They held about 45 percent of Northern voters. The Democrats published tracts and kept powerful speakers in the field, rousing the faithful and appealing to voters who might waver in their faith in Lincoln and his party. Though he had been removed from command by President Lincoln, the young and appealing George McClellan remained popular throughout the North and within the army.¹

Immediately after the Democrats had declared the war a failure news came from Sherman: “Atlanta is ours, and fairly won.” Moreover, the victories of Philip H. Sheridan over Jubal Early in September and October were especially important in the upcoming elections. Months before Sherman’s march introduced Americans to the systematic destruction of barns, mills, and fields, Sheridan’s burning of the Valley demonstrated a new resolve and a new willingness to undermine the material and spiritual resources of Confederate civilians. Just as important, Sheridan’s victories marked a triumph over the guerrillas who had bedeviled the Union forces in the Valley for years.

Watching all of this, in October, President Lincoln calculated the likely votes in the electoral college that would determine the presidency. One or two large states could change everything. Lincoln did not worry about merely winning the election of 1864. He knew he needed a moral victory for the enormously hard work that lay ahead. To achieve
that victory, he needed the two largest states in the Union—New York and Pennsylvania—and both were too close to call before the election.

After the months of campaigning, building upon years of constantly shifting sands of public opinion, the votes came in. Despite all the advantages the Republicans enjoyed, close to half of American voters voted against Abraham Lincoln in the most important election in the nation’s history. He received the same share of votes he had won in 1860. There was no evidence of a great national change of heart. Lincoln’s victory grew from a small margin in many counties, feverishly contested, amplified by the Electoral College—just as it was intended to do—and by the soldiers’ vote. Had there been a parliamentary system, Lincoln might not have withstood the crisis of the summer of 1864. A shift of 80,000 well-placed votes in certain key states would have thrown the election to McClellan.

The election of 1864 marked the fundamental turning point of the American Civil War and of the reconstruction that followed. Without that event, nothing else in the story would have been the same.

That is not to say that Lincoln’s reelection settled the future course of the nation, which remained remarkably open-ended. Lincoln declared in his second inaugural message that the presidential election of 1864 had been a mandate on emancipation, “the voice of the people now for the first time heard upon the question.” That was true, if remarkable: the United States had pursued the greatest transformation in its history without the opportunity for direct popular endorsement. The Republican candidates elected and reelected in 1860, 1861, 1862, and even 1863 had forthrightly opposed
slavery and the slave power, but they had never run on the basis of the immediate and uncompensated end of slavery.²

The main steps toward slavery’s destruction, the Emancipation Proclamation and the enlistment of newly freed enslaved men as soldiers had come from Lincoln, acting on his own as commander-in-chief under the war powers granted to the president. The strongest blows against slavery had necessarily come without electoral mandate or even legislative provision. All Republicans, including Lincoln himself, agreed that emancipation must be put on the permanent foundation of a constitutional amendment as soon as possible.

This brings to the next big event in Reconstruction, another event that occurred before the war was over. The Democrats had always wanted to negotiate an end to slavery and the war at the same time, allowing slaveholders to slow or qualify the course of emancipation. Republicans, pushed by hundreds of thousands of petitioners, many of them women and African American, knew they needed to preclude such possibilities before the war ended, when the wartime legal foundations of emancipation might be challenged by the courts or by Democratic members of Congress.

The Democrats bitterly resisted the Thirteenth Amendment. They claimed that the Constitution should not be altered, that the Founding Fathers were the wisest of men and that their handiwork should not be altered in the midst of a national crisis. More viscerally, many white Northerners expected that with the end of slavery black men would stream northward to compete for white jobs and, Democrats did not hesitate to say, white daughters and wives. By resisting the Republicans on the amendment the Democrats could champion themselves as the defenders of the white North. They would
also reestablish their place as the leading party in the South, where white men might be voting again soon.

But the Thirteenth Amendment did pass, of course, in January 1865, after a hair-raising series of bargains and negotiations. No matter how it was accomplished, the new amendment established the base line for everything else. And yet the war burned with savage force. The months embracing the campaign for Lincoln’s reelection and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment were also the months of the battle of the Crater, of the burning of the Valley in both Pennsylvania and Virginia, of Sherman’s march through Georgia and the Carolinas, of the horrifying winter in the trenches of Petersburg, of massive deaths in the prisoner of war camps North and South. What Americans would recall as the most brutal and inexcusable events of the war occurred not as anticlimax after Gettysburg or the Gettysburg Address but in what would prove to be the final year of the war. People went into Reconstruction still bleeding, ruins still smoking, enslaved people in the first days of whatever followed slavery.

By Appomattox, in April 1865, the central problem of the whole drama remained wide open. Appomattox settled very little, and much less than it seemed to have settled at the time. No one knew how the United States could be reconstituted without the slavery that had been there from the beginning of the nation, that had warped America’s history around itself and its power.

Lincoln hoped that with decisive and yet generous military victory the Thirteenth Amendment might be enough, the only change necessary to the Constitution he revered. In his speech two days after Lee’s surrender, Lincoln—to the surprise and disappointment of those looking for a speech boasting of victory—acknowledged the
centrality of this problem by talking about, of all things, Louisiana’s reentry to the Union.
Louisiana was the only state that by April 1865 had followed the steps he hoped every other Southern state would follow for state-by-state reconstruction, with 10 percent of the electorate taking an oath of allegiance to the United States, agreeing to accept emancipation, electing delegates to write a new constitution acknowledging those facts, and creating a new state government. Lincoln never accepted that the seceded states had actually left the Union; he always referred to them as “so-called seceded states.” Though the radicals in his party talked of “conquered territories” or “state suicide,” Lincoln considered them states that would come back into the Union as states.

That April 11 speech marked Lincoln’s first public mention of (limited) black suffrage and his support was almost a throwaway line. “I would myself prefer that it were now conferred upon the very intelligent, and on those who serve our cause as soldiers,” he said, as he argued for giving his plan for reconstruction in Louisiana a chance to succeed. That line encouraged John Wilkes Booth to assassinate President Lincoln three days later.³

Lincoln’s last speech—like his victory a few months earlier and the messy passage of the new amendment—was of its moment, a working-through of knotty issues that left equally knotty issues unresolved. The speech’s concluding line, and thus Abraham Lincoln’s last public utterance, pointed toward unfinished work rather than great accomplishment: “In the present situation, as the phrase goes, it may be my duty to make some new announcement to the people of the South. I am considering, and shall not fail to act, when satisfied that action will be proper.”

Weekly newspapers had no time to report Abraham Lincoln’s last speech before
they also had to report his assassination. Without thinking much about what he had actually said and done toward reconstructing the nation, people then and ever afterward dreamed that Abraham Lincoln would have been able to reunify the United States with his characteristic wisdom and justice. His election mandate, his popularity with his party, his political instincts, and his growing sense of justice for African Americans would surely have been great gifts to the nation. All that people of the time knew, however, was that even Abraham Lincoln had not told them what to do when the war had ended. Or he had told them and didn’t believe him.

The next defining episode is one that Americans think they know: Lincoln’s assassination and Andrew Johnson’s abrupt ascension to the presidency, a weak villain suddenly replacing a strong hero. The problem for the usual story, however, is that at the time no one saw it that way. In unusual agreement, both the Democrats and the Republicans thought the nation was fortunate to have Johnson’s leadership in such unfortunate times.

Andrew Johnson intended to follow the path laid out by Abraham Lincoln for reconstructing the nation and, as the boldest Union man of the entire South, seemed perfectly positioned to accomplish that reconstruction. Johnson, like Lincoln, denied that the “so-called Confederate” states had ever left the Union, despite their desperate efforts to do so. Johnson believed that it was his constitutional responsibility to find loyal men within each of the Southern states who would assume the responsibility for returning those states to the Union, acknowledging the end of slavery and the failure of secession. Like Lincoln, Johnson wanted to build a national party of white men of national loyalty
and good will who would help unify the nation. Lincoln’s assassination—did not seem, at the time, to define a new direction.⁴

The Republicans in Congress in 1865 occupied an anomalous position. They had never been more powerful, thanks to the large majorities they had won in the election of 1864, but they were not in session while Andrew Johnson oversaw the reunification of the United States. Hardly of one mind, and not even divided into clearly defined blocs, the Republicans struggled to determine what they should do when Congress reconvened in December. The Republicans would from this point on, throughout the years to come, play catch-up, trying to mend what they believed Johnson had broken, trying to regain the moment he had lost, trying to keep ahead of a defiant white South.

The Republicans in 1865 and 1866 faced competing needs. Though everyone wanted the Federal soldiers to return home, the Republicans needed troops to stay in the South to protect the freedpeople and to prevent the rise of the recent rebels to local and state power. Though everyone wanted the war to cease, the Republicans needed to delay formal reunification until the former Confederate states would acknowledge that they could not simply restore their former leaders to power. Doing so would make the South, now that slavery and its accompanying three-fifths clause had been destroyed, even stronger than before and even more unified against the Republicans. The Republicans did not have a plan they could agree upon for accomplishing these purposes and they did not have a president who accepted their fundamental premises.⁵

The Democrats had it easier. They knew exactly what they wanted: the quickest and least disruptive reunification of the nation possible, with the smallest change in the status of black people, and with former Democrats back in power. They, too, wanted a
national party—a position they had occupied until they tore themselves apart in 1860 and created a space for the rise of the regionally based Republicans—and they saw a short and direct road to that party.⁶

The Democrats also possessed a strength the Republicans did not: appeals to white racial loyalty. All the ink the Democrats spent on ridiculing, trivializing, and caricaturing black people was there for a cold-blooded purpose. The Democrats knew that the Republicans did not know what to say or do about black Americans. The Republicans had remained virtually silent in the election of 1864. Some Republicans wanted to create black suffrage, but others among them did not. The Democrats constantly warned that black voting lay behind every Republican plan. In fact, it did not—until it did. And here is how the next event suddenly happened.

Across the former Confederacy in the fall of 1865 voters elected men they knew and trusted to represent them in their state legislatures and in the United States Congress that would convene in December. And virtually all of those men had aided the Confederacy in some way, often as soldiers killing other Americans. Because of Johnson’s determination to put the nation back together as quickly as possible, most of those newly elected officials had received pardons from the president of the United States. They considered this only fitting, since they swore oaths that they accepted the demise of the Confederacy and the end of slavery.⁷

Republicans were livid at such arrogance or ignorance. In their eyes, any man who had supported the so-called Confederacy should automatically be disqualified from serving the United States. Only truly loyal men, those who had defied popular opinion to defend the Union, deserved positions of trust. The former Confederates who planned to
descend on Washington would support Johnson and the Democrats, preventing any chance of reunion based on justice.

And here is where the second goal of Reconstruction: the regeneration of the South, economically, legally, morally, and even spiritually. Merely defeating the Confederacy and ending slavery were not enough, they argued, to redeem the slaughter of the war, to justify the sacrifice, to punish the sin. Though slavery had been dismantled, they argued, its spirit lived on, a spirit one Republican congressman called “rebelism.” This is what made the radicals radical, whatever their position on confiscation of land or other issues; they demanded a radical change in the hearts and minds of their enemies.

Abraham Lincoln and the Republicans had thought that by killing slavery they would accomplish their purpose of truly unifying the nation. They thought that by removing the relatively small number of large and domineering slaveholders they would free the majority of Southern white men who had not owned slaves and who had little prospect of doing so. What Lincoln and the Republicans had not counted on was that the war welded white Southerners together in a way they had never unified before. Now, all white Southerners except in a few isolated parts of the region shared a blood bond they had never shared before, a bond forged in the sacrifice, suffering, and moments of triumph through four years of all-consuming war. The war had sometimes pulled white Southerners apart, but by its conclusion—and through the Reconstruction that followed—wartime experience and solidarity created a new obstacle to national reunification and regeneration as great as slavery itself. The Confederacy lived on as a shadow national identity, all the more powerful for being a shadow, without the burdens of governing or compromising, of levying taxes or running for election. It lived on as a fantasy that
became more fantastical as the actual war and actual sacrifice and internal resentment receded.

The intransigence of white Southerners drove reconstruction much farther than most Republicans had foreseen or desired. The Republicans were outraged that the former Confederates refused to acknowledge that they had been wrong on every front, all of their actions from secession on unjust and immoral. The Republicans believed that only true repentance by the former Confederates could create a lasting reunification, a moral regeneration of the South, a redefinition of loyalty. White Southerners must acknowledge that secession had been unconstitutional, a slaveholders’ rebellion rather than a principled revolution. The central purpose of the war could not be accomplished without that moral regeneration.

The Republicans had to fight this new, ghostly force with the crude tools of partisan politics. At every step, the Democrats and white Southerners charged them with hypocrisy and over-reaching, with selfish purpose behind an idealistic façade. The Republicans did in fact need to win to enact Reconstruction and did need Reconstruction to succeed for them to win again.

Ironically, this partisan need led Republicans to become far bolder in defending black Americans than they would have been otherwise. Their practice shaped their beliefs. To win, to justify their actions and to lay the ground for the necessary actions for them to win again, the Republicans acknowledged black contribution, black character, and black capacity, in ways no large group of powerful white Americans ever had before. Their actions shaped their words and then those words shaped their beliefs. The
Republicans grew more egalitarian as they had to fight for equality for their own purposes.

White Northerners, sometimes for far-sighted and even altruistic reasons, and sometimes for instrumental reasons that had little to do with black people as persons, and most often for reasons that combined the two rationales in ways that made it impossible to pull the two rationales apart, created a space into which black people could and did fill with their own purpose, risk, creativity, imagination, bravery, endurance, and spirit. There was no guarantee when Republicans opened those spaces that they would be filled by black Americans who had many reasons not to risk their lives and welfare to go to the Freedmen's Bureau to resist their former owners on wages or assault, not to bring their children to schools taught in damp church basements, not to break away from white churches to create their own, not to risk their lives by voting for the Republicans, not to create their own schools, not to establish newspapers and run for office.

And that black bravery and persistence is another key element in the story, the absence of which would have changed everything else that followed. Just as black initiative at Fort Monroe and in the United States Colored Troops change the war into a war against slavery, so did black initiative at public meetings, churches, and schools change Reconstruction. Because of black initiative, the Freedmen’s Bureau grew from a purely wartime relief measure into a critical element in every part of the South, creating enough legal, military, philanthropic, educational, and moral space for Reconstruction to get a toehold.

The Freedmen’s Bureau turned out to be the central connective element of Reconstruction. The Bureau, with limited power, living on borrowed time, vetoed and
resurrected, attacked from all sides, was the only thing that made Reconstruction matter for most black Americans, especially women. The Bureau was the ally to the missionary groups that helped black people create their own schools, that made at least some landowners think twice about shortchanging their tenants, that registered marriages from slavery and registered voters for constitutional conventions. For most people in the South, white and black, the Freedmen’s Bureau was the Reconstruction they could see. The Bureau lived from March 1865 to December 1869, the only real continuity in the evolution of Reconstruction.  

Our story usually focuses on Washington during this time, however, where the story was strangely distended and disjointed. As Andrew Johnson vetoed one bill after another, he and the Democrats talked of returning the Southern states to the Union and returning white men to power. As the Republicans overturned one veto after another, they talked of redeeming the blood spilled in the war and establishing justice for the freedmen. Each side became ever less likely to compromise, ever bolder in strategy and language, ever more contemptuous of their enemies.

Black Southerners had to navigate this shifting and treacherous landscape. The freedpeople struggled to make a living, gather their families, and find some kind of security in an unstable and unpredictable world. Speeches and vetoes in Washington turned into struggles in the courthouses and farmsteads of the South. Testimony and rumors about struggles in the postwar South fed the struggles in Washington. Urgent, broken signals flew along the telegraph lines and in newspaper columns of a nation that seemed out of control.
And this is how we explain the next surprising chapter in the story: the Fourteenth Amendment. That Amendment bore the marks of its moment of creation, of the black codes, of unrepentant Southern legislatures, of Johnson’s veto of the Civil Rights Bill. The Fourteenth Amendment divided as well as united Republicans, with some thinking it went too far and other thinking it did not go far enough, but the intransigence of Andrew Johnson and the white South unified the Republicans behind the necessity for the action.

The white South seemed incapable of, and uninterested in, instituting anything like order or justice. The Memphis and New Orleans riots helped mobilize support for Republicans who argued that only a reassertion of military power and the complete removal of the old leadership of the South could bring about a real change in the former Confederacy. Without Southern intransigence, without black codes, riots, the Ku Klux Klan, reelected Confederate leaders, and broken contracts with freedmen, there would have been no Fourteenth Amendment. By September, it had become clear that the Republicans would win almost every state in the North and that Reconstruction would be strengthened.

The United States remained deeply unsettled in April 1867, two years after Appomattox. The healing everyone hoped for had instead festered, the wounds of loss infected with accusations of betrayal. Northern Republicans attacked white Southerners for refusing to admit sin as well as defeat, while Northern Democrats attacked Republicans for refusing to accept the end of armed resistance by white Southerners as victory enough over the Confederacy. White Southerners raged at Northern Republicans for supposedly reneging on the terms of reunion that Ulysses S. Grant had offered at
Appomattox. Former masters alternately lectured, patronized, bargained with, and threatened the formerly enslaved people among whom they lived. Black Southerners were hopeful and yet wary of all white people, for they had seen loyalties and priorities shift many times over the years since 1860.10

Ironically, in fact, the false starts, abrupt endings, sudden reversals, and long delays of Reconstruction may have delivered the most that could have been delivered. The struggles against Reconstruction forced deeper change than seemed possible at the outset.

Just as white Southerners’ secession made emancipation possible, so did their resistance to basic civil rights for black people create the possibility for votes and office-holding for black people. Northern Democrats did their part, too, to move history in the direction opposite to what they sought, encouraging Andrew Johnson to believe that he could defy his own party and negate much of what the war had won. Black Southerners, as they had throughout the war and in war’s aftermath, took advantage of any opportunity, whether opened by either their friends or their enemies, to control their own fate. Reconstruction moved by counterpoint and reaction as well as by intention and fulfillment.

Part of the reason for Reconstruction’s halting story resulted from the Constitution itself. The scheduled elections that ensured that Abraham Lincoln could not be removed during the worst months of military failure and human loss also defined the rhythms of Reconstruction. The more than six months between the surrender and the reconvening of Congress gave Andrew Johnson constitutionally mandated space to do as he wished. State elections in different states across the North every year during
Reconstruction kept voters alert and legislators off-balance. The reliance on constitutional amendments to enact change in the South—the requirements for conventions to be called, delegates elected, and amendments ratified in the states—dragged out for years. Constitutional processes of disfranchisement and registration, oaths and testimony, demonstrated the democratic forms of Reconstruction and slowed progress at the same time.¹¹

And here’s the origin of the final part of the key story: the Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in February 1870, after the same kinds of hard struggles that faced the 13th and 14th Amendments. The 15th amendment emerged because many white Northerners did not want to create black suffrage in their own states. The only way to get black suffrage in the South was to write an amendment that did not have to win voter approval—just approval by Republican-dominated legislatures. This was another case of the key story playing itself out in an indirect way, amending the constitution so that the former slaveholding part of the nation would not control it going forward.¹²

By 1870, with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment and the readmission of the final four Southern states—Virginia, Mississippi, Texas, and Georgia—the fundamental changes of Reconstruction had been established. Federal troops occupied some former Confederate states for another seven years, Congress launched investigations into the Ku Klux Klan and put forward new civil rights acts, Republican governments held on in the face of relentless violence and resistance against black and white Republicans, but neither Congress nor the president would pay the price to force the white South to atone for slavery and secession.
What was won and lost in Reconstruction depends on where we start and stop the story. Measured from 1860, the accomplishments of 1870 could hardly be believed: the destruction of American slavery and the creation of universal male suffrage. Judged from the perspective of 1865, when Republicans called for economic as well as political revolution, Reconstruction seemed a disappointment. Judged from the perspective of the early twentieth century, when disfranchisement constitutions were dismantling the accomplishments of Reconstruction, the earlier gains seem cruelly ephemeral. If we extend the story to 1965, we see that the beachheads established by the 14th and 15th Amendments helped redefine American history. From the perspective of the early 21st century, we see just how deep the legacies of our improbable history of war and Reconstruction still run, the currents of hope and despair, accomplishment and failure coursing together.


11 See Harris, With Charity for All; Neely, The Union Divided; Michael Green, “Reconstructing the Nation, Reconstructing the Party: Postwar Republicans and the Evolution of a Party,” in Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller, eds., The Great Task
Remaining Before Us: Reconstruction as America’s Continuing Civil War (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 183-204.