

#1390 Tell Stories, Not Myths: Our Second Founding (Reconstruction)

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: [00:00:00] Welcome to this episode of the award-winning Best of the Left Podcast in which we shall learn about the often overlooked decade of reconstruction in the wake of the civil war. After hundreds of years of slavery, reconstruction was a brief moment of relative democracy and equality before the White power structure reasserted itself, and in state of the policies that would be known as Jim Crow laws, which would last another 80 years.

The clips today are from *Scene on Radio*, *The Majority Report*, and *Professor Buzzkill*.

The Second Revolution Part 1 - Scene on Radio - Air Date 2-19-20

BRENT MORRIS: [00:00:32] In Beaufort, or in the low country, there were about two hundred different plantations that were sold. And most of them were bought up by northerners, but a big chunk of that land was bought up by African-Americans, and that's sort of the seed that Victoria was talking about, this family land that was so important. And land was really what mattered in Reconstruction. Getting the vote was great, but land and education, I think, were sort of hand-in-hand. Education had allowed people to, in the past, to rise up through society. If you could read and write, then you could become a powerful person. But also land. The people that were the most powerful and rich in the old South had been the big landowners, and just their example, they were literate and they had land. It was something that the freedmen could aspire to, and they did.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:01:19] Land. Education. The right to vote and hold public office. For a time, it looked like these things would now become available to four million black people across the American South, who were freshly freed from chattel slavery. This made the years after 1865 an extraordinary time. Hopes were high, but these gains were hard-won and always under threat. After the defeat of the Confederacy, Lincoln's party, the Republicans, held firm control of Congress. The election of 1866 gave them a majority so big they could override vetoes by President Andrew Johnson. He was a Democrat from Tennessee and an unabashed white supremacist. He wanted to make up with the defeated South and move on. For a time, the Congress led a push to dramatically remake the country.

ERIC FONER: [00:02:13] Reconstruction is fundamentally a story about democracy. It's about who will have a role in American democracy going forward from the Civil War.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:02:24] Historian Eric Foner. He's widely considered the leading authority on Reconstruction.

ERIC FONER: [00:02:30] Will this be a biracial democracy where African-Americans for the first time really are given a voice in who rules in their society and their states? Or will they be put back into a position of subordination, not slaves anymore but certainly not equal in any way?

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:02:52] The Civil War didn't settle that fight, it made it possible to have it. At first, the Republican-controlled Congress tried to create a multiracial democracy. It passed the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, abolishing slavery, in 1865, then over the next few years, two more Amendments. The 14th granted citizenship to anyone born in the U.S. and guaranteed equal treatment under the law, regardless of race. The 15th declared voting rights could not be denied because of race. Eric Foner's newest book, about the passage of those three amendments, is titled *The Second Founding*.

ERIC FONER: [00:03:32] I use "second founding" because we talk about the founders, you know, from the American revolutionary era. Well, my argument is this really remade the Constitution. It wasn't just a series of little changes. It created a fundamentally new document. And if we want to, you know, as we should, admire James Madison and Hamilton and the original founders, we should also equally admire John Bingham and Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner, and those who rewrote the Constitution in order to try to bring this principle of equality into it.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:04:10] Those members of Congress were among the leaders of the Radical Republicans, as they were called – members of the party who, unlike Lincoln, were clear abolitionists before the Civil War. Their leader in the Senate was Charles Sumner, a Bostonian in his fifties and the Congress's most uncompromising defender of equal rights for black people. A decade before, in 1856, a South Carolina congressman had brutally beaten Sumner with a cane on the Senate floor, during a bitter debate about whether to admit Kansas as a free or slave state. Now, Sumner and his allies were in charge, and they pushed for what W.E.B. Du Bois would later call "abolition democracy." Over two days in February 1866, Sumner gave a four-hour speech, with Frederick Douglass seated in the crowded Senate gallery. Sumner was explicit in saying the country needed to go far beyond the first revolution.

CHARLES SUMNER: [00:05:09] Our fathers solemnly announced the Equal Rights of all men, and that government had no just foundation except in the consent of the governed. ... Looking at this Declaration now, it is chiefly memorable for the promises it made. Mighty words! ... Fit lesson for mankind! And now the moment has come when these vows must be fulfilled to the letter. In securing the Equal Rights of the freedman, and his participation in the Government which he is taxed to support, we shall perform the early promises of the Fathers....

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:05:44] Sumner said the nation also had to repay black people for their role in helping to win the Civil War.

CHARLES SUMNER: [00:05:51] ...as the condition of alliance and aid against the rebellion. Failure here is moral and political bankruptcy.

The Power of Frederick Douglass and the 2nd American Revolution w/ David Blight - The Majority Report w/ Sam Seder - Air Date 9-29-20

SAM SEDER - HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT: [00:06:18] Let's turn a little bit to Reconstruction. My understanding of Reconstruction came so much from your work and

from Eric Foner's, but the idea of it being the second American revolution as you call it, and in many respects I liken it to Yavneh for Judaism. Like the rabbinic Judaism that we practice today, that everybody perceives as Judaism is actually sort of like version two. And in many respects, the founding fathers that we have today were the ones who basically constructed the 14th amendment and 13th and 15th, but the 14th. What is the importance of coming to that understanding?

DR. DAVID BLIGHT: [00:07:03] Well first of all, I love the Jewish, or Hebraic prophetic analogy here cause it is the one Douglass used so much. The temple was destroyed. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed as the prophet said because it had to be. The people had become so corrupt, so hopelessly poisoned by their own venality and hubris and all the rest, the temple was going to be destroyed and they were going to go into exile and they may or may not find their way back. That's the great story of Exodus, right?

Well, Douglass will interpret the Civil War in many ways through that lens, not exclusively, but so did so many other Americans for that matter. The Civil War and Reconstruction is the destruction of the first American Republic, and you don't need Frederick Douglass to tell you that, I mean, he does tell you that a thousand times over, but Lincoln argued the same thing. What's the argument of the Gettysburg address? Well, that short, most well known American speech, if people just look at it. There's Lincoln standing in that cemetery and saying, "Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation," but he's saying that nation is being destroyed, right here. We're burying the results of that destruction, and we have to imagine a new one. He didn't have that all figured out yet, but he did actually use the word equality in that speech. He drew that off the Declaration of Independence.

Now Douglass and many others saw the civil war as this reckoning that destroyed that first slave holding Republic of 80 some years. It did it in horrible bloodshed, but they found a way to argue that that was necessary bloodshed. That's an easy thing to say, not an easy thing to reap and to do, but out of it came this responsibility, at least among the leadership of that Republican party that had been founded back in the 1850s, to resist the future of slavery. And they did. And they took responsibility, the leadership anyway, took responsibility for the freedom of these 4 million slaves and for answering the question, "now, who are they? What are they?"

The 13th amendment says before the war ever ends, slavery shall never exist. Any kind of involuntary servitude can never exist. The 14th amendment, the most important of all, especially with section one, is the equal protection clause. It's the quality before the law clause. It's the birthright citizenship clause. It's the equality clause of our constitution. And the 15th is of course it's the voting rights amendment, 1869, 1870, which didn't go as far as the radicals like Douglass would have wanted because it didn't prevent qualifications tests of all kinds, but there was another right to vote, at least for black men. This was a new constitution. This was defining the American Republic now in a wholly new way, a new inclusive way. It's saying it's being founded now on some degree of equality between the races, the ethnicities, the religions, and Douglass was right at the heart of this. This was Douglass' his whole argument about what this Armageddon had been all about. And for about four to five to six years, depending on where you're standing, they reinvented the United States.

But every great revolution, and it's a revolution - let's face it. There are different kinds of revolutions aren't there? But every revolution always foments a counter revolution. I mean, if it's important enough, there will be a reaction. We've seen this again and again and again. Well, what is Trumpism but in some ways, a counter-revolution against the Obama presidency and against liberalism and against so many of the great changes of the 1960s. Even the so-called Reagan revolution, which now gets viewed in sepia tones, the Reagan revolution was the revolution against the sixties. It was against civil rights. It was against feminism. It was against all the rights movements.

Anyway. The first great counter-revolution in American history was the White South's ability to revive under the reformed Democratic party and through the uses of terror and violence, the worst levels of it we've ever seen in our history. The ability of the White South to revive in the 1870s, to take back control of their state governments, what they'd call the Southern redemption, and then ultimately to defeat the Reconstruction governments and the Reconstruction laws and measures, and especially to defeat Black suffrage, Black voting, brought about eventually, essentially, an end it's a Reconstruction around 1877 and into the 1880s.

And it made possible, it didn't happen overnight by any means, but it made possible the evolution then of a system, of first defacto and then dejure, segregation of the races eventually into this elaborate system of Jim Crow laws, and an American system in effect of racial apartheid.

SAM SEDER - HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT: [00:13:00] That counter-revolution lasted well, I mean, it lasted in that form for decades.

DR. DAVID BLIGHT: [00:13:09] Yeah, 70 years or so, it depends on when you date its beginning. The real Jim Crow system, at least in the law, begins in the 1890s. The 1890s is the first overt disenfranchisement law passed by Mississippi, but by 1900, and then especially by 1910, all of the ex Confederate States have become completely Jim Crow societies, and so have other sections of the country, by the way, including in the North. And a part of this process all along has been extremely overt uses of discrimination and extremely overt uses of the denial of the right to vote, of voter fraud, and extremely brutal uses of terrorist violence.

SAM SEDER - HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT: [00:14:05] Just the other day we had Susan Mettler on who was talking about Wilmington, which I was not aware of, which was horrific.

DR. DAVID BLIGHT: [00:14:15] I just reviewed a new book on that by David Zucchino, it's coming out of the New York Review of Books—it's incredible. Yeah, it's a story Americans need to know better because it was a White supremacist coup d'état that took over the state of North Carolina, where an interracial coalition had held on, quite well thank you, in the 1890s and Black politicians were getting elected, especially in Eastern North Carolina around Wilmington for years. In fact, the only remaining Black Congressman in the United States at that point was from Wilmington, North Carolina. But the White supremacist in North Carolina got organized in the 1898 and ran a - and they were so overt compared to today's vote suppressors and White supremacists. What did our vote suppressors today were as

honest as they were back then. Although they're getting more and more on it, they're beginning to say out loud, the things they think.

The Second Revolution Part 2 - Scene on Radio - Air

Date 2-19-20

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:15:14] Looking back, maybe what's remarkable is that reconstruction happened at all and that it lasted as long as it did. Here's Eric Foner again,

ERIC FONER: [00:15:25] the abolition of slavery comes about through an unusual alliance, you might say, between the most downtrodden people in the country, the slaves themselves, some of their allies in the north, which Du Bois calls the abolition democracy, the Radical Republicans, and then northern capital, the richest people in the country who are also committed to the Republican Party, who do not want the country broken up. They weren't interested in civil war, but when the war broke out, they were absolutely adamant that the north had to win. And they came to be convinced, as Lincoln did, that the only way to win this war was to attack slavery.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:16:04] And for a few years, northern elites wanted to make sure Southern oligarchs didn't just re-enslave black people and go back to the status quo before the war. That would have made the bloody conflict pointless, and would have returned the country to the perpetual economic and political power struggle between north and south. But by the mid-1870s, it was clear chattel slavery was over and the Southern oligarchy had been stripped of much of its wealth and power. Foner says the rich men of the north and their Congressional representatives had gotten what they wanted most. They gave up on their alliance with the Radical Republicans and the newly freed black people in the South.

ERIC FONER: [00:16:48] By the 1870s you get a serious economic depression, which begins in 1873 and lasts to 1878. You get many northerners, particularly these capitalists, maybe, saying, OK, we've done enough now. You know, we've got to move on to other issues. Capital and labor, the relations between them in the north, is now on the agenda. Blacks have gotten their rights, they're in the Constitution, they're voting. Let's move on to other questions. And so the coalition fragments and the Republican Party becomes more and more the party of northern industrialists. And eventually northern capitalists kind of come to, you know, we can do business with the southern elite, merchants, planters. In a way they are like us, you know.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:17:38] In 1876, the presidential election is contested, and leaders of the two parties cut a backroom deal. The Republican, Rutherford B. Hayes, gets the presidency, and in return for the Democrats ending their challenge to Hayes, he agrees to pull the last federal troops out of the South. That same year in South Carolina, the elections for governor and the state legislature are also contested. When the federal government withdraws its troops and refuses to help settle the state's election dispute, Republicans in Columbia know it's over. The Republican governor resigns and the white supremacist Democrats take control of the state in the spring of 1877. Historian Bobby Donaldson.

BOBBY DONALDSON: [00:18:25] South Carolina's experiment was only made possible because you had a military force here providing protection and assistance to African-

Americans. And it is no irony, then, that when those military forces are withdrawn in April of 1877 is where you see, many people seeing the closing window, the drop of the curtain of Reconstruction.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:19:01] By the 1890s, the former Confederate states are rewriting their Constitutions again, using tools like poll taxes and unfair literacy tests to disenfranchise black voters. The Supreme Court, for decades, consistently interprets the new Constitutional amendments in ways that strip them of their intended purpose, to defend the voting rights and other civil rights of black people. By 1900, Jim Crow is in full force.

[Sound: Ambi, walking. Bobby Donaldson: That's a photograph of a woman named Mary McLeod Bethune, who was born during Reconstruction.]

As we're walking through the South Carolina statehouse, Bobby Donaldson reminds me of something.

Bobby Donaldson, walking: So you know this building is kind of a site of the movie, Birth of a Nation.

That flagrantly racist 1915 movie was set in South Carolina. It supposedly tells the story of Reconstruction and its righteous defeat by white supremacists—the reactionary movement known as Redemption. [Sound: Birth of a Nation score.] The silent film slanders black Reconstruction lawmakers. In one scene, a black state representative puts his bare feet on his desk during a House debate, while another eats fried chicken. This was the lie Americans were told far into the 20th century: that Reconstruction failed because black people were not ready or able to handle political power responsibly. Only in recent decades have historians created a new consensus that sets the record straight.

The great black scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, writing his epic book Black Reconstruction in the 1930s, summed up the story of Reconstruction this way: “The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery. ... Democracy died save in the hearts of black folk.”

KIDADA WILLIAMS: [00:20:58] I think that adequately describes part of what happened, but I think it's also important to recognize that for African-Americans, something significant still had changed. They didn't just sort of throw up their hands and say, OK. They recognize the difference between their enslavement and limited freedom after Redemption. And very few of them would choose to go back to slavery. And I think that tells us a lot about slavery and it tells us a lot about what they accomplished and what they still hoped to accomplish. Even in light of what happened with redemption.

Slavery, Race, and the Confederate Army - Professor Buzzkill History Podcast - Air Date 8-14-18

JOE COOHILL - HOST, PROFESSOR BUZZKILL HISTORY PODCAST: [00:21:41] Doctor Woodward, what happens after the war?

COLIN WOODWARD: [00:21:45] Well, what happens after the war is you have Reconstruction and you have this enormous backlash in the South against Republican efforts

to bring up the slaves economically and pass laws that will protect their civil rights. And the former Confederates are really in the vanguard of this effort against Reconstruction. If you look at the letters and diaries, a lot of the same guys who were prominent during the war are going to play a prominent role in Reconstruction. And, it's a complicated story. They try to reinstate slavery by other means. And for a guy like Nathan Bedford Forrest, this means starting the Ku Klux Klan in Tennessee. There are other prominent Confederates who become Klansmen. John B. Gordon from Georgia is another one. And these are guys, not so much Forrest, but Gordon, becomes a Senator. So he has a lot of political influence later.

So a lot of these guys are not, even if they're not able to run for national office, some of them do play a role in Reconstruction, but you do get a lot of Confederates just coming back into power.

But at the more local level with the Ku Klux Klan and groups like the Knights of the White Camilia, you have these smaller efforts to fight Reconstruction. And a part of that is violence and murder, also intimidation and fraud , fixing elections, throwing away Republican votes, intimidating people at the polls and things like that. And in a lot of the Southern States, especially the deep South States, it's pretty much a state of warfare still. It's not conventional armies, but it's guerrilla warfare, bushwhacking, things like that.

But as time goes on and Reconstruction goes on by the 1880s and 90s, you get the Confederate vanguard is dying off or they're getting too old to fight these battles. So you get a different type of white supremacy in the South, because the North eventually abandons Reconstruction because of the backlash and Southern violence against Republicans and whatever black/white coalitions there were in the South. So by the 1880s and 90s, you get something different from what existed in the antebellum South. And that is Jim Crow, which is a bunch of laws that are passed at the state level to separate white people and black people.

And this begins to happen in law and the state constitutions in the 1890s. And that's when you end up with the segregated streetcars, segregated schools, segregated drinking fountains eventually. So by the late 19th century, there are different men in power. You get a different generation of Southern politicians, but they're still racist, they're still talking about white supremacy, but they're using different tools to control the black population. One of them is Jim Crow and one of them is lynching. And that really is at its worst in the 1890s and early 1900s.

So they can't reinstate slavery. But there are all kinds of methods that they seize upon to make sure black people stay at the bottom rungs of society.

And even when you look at the justice system in the South , it's a very racist system, obviously. Things like convict leasing, arresting black people and throwing them in prison and hard labor for vagrancy laws or something relatively minor.

So by the late 19th century things change and that dovetails with the Lost Cause, which is venerating the Confederate leaders who've died off either a long time ago, like Robert E. Lee, or more recently, like Jefferson Davis. And the Lost Cause lasts well into the 20th century. Arguably it's never really died. Just like the pro-slavery argument.

But in the early 20th century, you get the monuments being erected in the South, Richmond being a prime example, but also other Southern States and Southern States that were not part of the Confederacy, which is an interesting thing to see.

JOE COOHILL - HOST, PROFESSOR BUZZKILL HISTORY PODCAST: [00:26:25] Amazing. Yeah. And do you think that perhaps the strength of attitudes towards slavery and attitudes towards race among Confederate soldiers -- who then of course become Confederate veterans and live for another 20 years -- do you think that helps make Jim Crow and segregation last so long?

COLIN WOODWARD: [00:26:44] Absolutely. When you look at how long slavery lasted in America, begins in the early 1600s and lasts until the mid-19th century. So this was a real revolution in American history. And historians debate issues of continuity and discontinuity. I'm sure you've dealt with those in your own work and everything.

But the Civil War, certainly a sea change in race relations. Really, there's no way that slavery can be reinstated after the war because the North will draw a line in the sand on certain things. Grant goes after the Ku Klux Klan, they're going to make sure that slavery isn't reinstated. I know there are ways around that. Slavery is certainly dead as a legal institution, economic institution, the way it was before the war. There's still a lot of racism in North and South, the South is where most of the slaves were, and people didn't want this change and they fought against this change. The South had lost a war, the bloodiest war we fought, and that puts them in an odd situation because of the South is really the only region of the country that has lost a war this badly. And you see this play out in Faulkner and literature and everything, and the yearning for the days before the war was lost and everything. And that gets wrapped up into the Lost Cause and kind of nostalgia for the old South.

But Jim Crow is unusual because that's not the way things were under slavery. You didn't have separation of the races in the way it would be in the late 19th and 20th century. And so you get what's called the "New South" and a society based on segregation. It's not a complete system. It's not like South Africa in the 20th century where you're literally building walls and keeping whole communities separate. But it is very effective and it's a sort of authoritarianism in the South, that if you break the law either white or Black, there can be serious consequences, more on the side of Black communities who have to be very careful what they say, what they do, who they're associating with.

And Jim Crow survives into the 1960s and arguably it doesn't really get dismantled seriously until the 1970s in a lot of parts of the South. And it never really happens completely. We're still seeing that played out: Little Rock just a few years ago ended a court case concerning segregation.

And eventually it comes more de facto than de jure, but yeah, certainly after the war they need to recast the South in a way that is acceptable to white supremacists, and eventually that I would say a softer version of racism in some ways than slavery, but it's still horrendous and takes a long time to dismantle that legally. So yeah, that's one of the things to bring it back around what makes the Civil War still relevant because...

JOE COOHILL - HOST, PROFESSOR BUZZKILL HISTORY PODCAST: [00:30:07] Yes, yes indeed.

COLIN WOODWARD: [00:30:08] ...you see this persistence of racial battles after the Civil War that we're still dealing with.

The Second Revolution Part 3 - Scene on Radio - Air

Date 2-19-20

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: [00:30:15] When I first started digging into this several years ago, it was deep for me too. First of all, Reconstruction is so important but so neglected. And then the backlash was, like, so heavy, that I kind of was like, what's the inspiring takeaway just in terms of trying to go forward? When I was learning about this from certain older scholars and just black people who knew some of this history, it kind of felt like the moral of the story was, Well, we had this glimpse of real democracy, but white folks always mess things up. Like, that's the moral. Like, hip-hop, dreadlocks, black neighborhoods, and Reconstruction. That's the point: White folks mess it up.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:31:08] Well....?

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: [00:31:10] Yeah, but the thing is, when you really confront how viciously white supremacy attacked real, emerging democracy after the Civil War...

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:31:18] Yeah. And I think it's really important for us white folks to understand this in some basic way, to understand this history. For one thing, there's still this lingering racist idea out there in the culture—and white folks who grew up in the South maybe kind of imbibed it with their mother's milk, but it goes way beyond the south: This idea that Reconstruction failed because it was a misguided project imposed by northern do-gooders and carpetbaggers, and black folks just weren't ready to govern, blah blah blah. That story. So we just really need to be clear about the real story. And I think we also need to take in the reality of this history so we can get over, more broadly, the glossy, really propagandistic version of American history that most of us have been fed. A friend of mine who's a southern historian, white guy, likes to say, we need to be clear about who we were, so we can see more clearly who we are.

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: [00:32:24] Right. And it's not like I knew better growing up. What I had was just no real story or reflection on Reconstruction at all. Like it didn't happen. So I really didn't realize how enduring that particular narrative has been. It's like it just doesn't go away.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:32:41] And I'm the same way. Reconstruction was not just a thing for me until far, far into my adulthood. But that narrative was the dominant one also among professional historians for many decades. It was called the Dunning School, named after a history professor at Columbia, by the way, in New York, not at the University of Alabama or someplace. Historians all over the country held to this consensus, almost the sort of Birth of a Nation story of Reconstruction, until people like Eric Foner and others, really picking up on the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, corrected the record just in the last few decades.

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: [00:33:26] So you have sort of the bullsh** narrative of the Civil War and the Lost Cause, and then as part of that you have this Dunning School thing. And I had heard and read folks like Dubois and Foner talk about the Dunning school and really lay waste to that version of Reconstruction. But I didn't realize that outside of the academy that

idea had really settled in the culture as common sense about Reconstruction. So it's partially for that reason, that among the many lessons from Reconstruction, there are two that I think are really important.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:34:03] Okay.

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: [00:34:04] The first one is, sometimes history creates conditions for people to push radical ideas of justice forward. Right? Enslaved people and abolitionists really pushed the Civil War toward emancipation. It wasn't about that when it started. And the end of the Civil War is actually the beginning of this whole new phase of the radical project. Reconstruction was this opportunity that got created for folks to govern really differently. So black people, including some former slaves, get elected to legislatures. Things start to change in major ways. I mean, really when you look at it, the real founding document of the United States, the Constitution, gets fundamentally altered.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:34:48] It does. And those were huge achievements, getting those Reconstruction amendments written into the Constitution. Briefly, some Black folks getting land, some universities get integrated. There were glimpses of what could be.

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: [00:35:03] And it took a coalition of folks with different positions in society to do that. The unlikely alliance that Foner discussed.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:35:12] But then there's the Backlash.

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: [00:35:14] Yeah. So I think the second big lesson that I'm thinking about based on this episode is something that might feel a little bit abstract, but it's, what does government really do? We talk a lot about who is in government, you know, or just what specific laws are. But I think what this episode makes us think about is how people at the top of the social order even understand the purpose of government to begin with.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:35:42] Hmm. Okay, which is bringing some echoes of earlier episodes in this series. So, ostensibly we've got this government of, by, and for the people. But what we keep seeing, it seems, is that the U.S. government's primary function, on the ground, turns out to be, more often than not, something else.

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: [00:36:05] Yeah, so I mean, just to say it, right? Wealthy white folks, and a lot of poor white folks who didn't like the changes that were happening with Reconstruction, they saw the government as something that existed to enrich and protect them. And when it stopped functioning that way for this brief period of time, they did whatever they had to do bring it back to what they thought it was supposed to do.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:36:29] And then there's almost a broader conspiracy to do that, because you have the U.S. Supreme Court, and the states, managing to find ways to squash the effectiveness of the 14th and 15th amendments for a long time. They went back to disenfranchising and disempowering black people far into the middle of the 20th century.

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: [00:36:54] Right. I mean, already, even with the 13th Amendment, you saw that there was this loophole in there from the start. It abolished slavery "except for the punishment of [a] crime." So that exception allows people who ran things in the south to go, essentially to go on enslaving folks. You could arrest them for something, using a bullshit** law like "vagrancy," which could mean walking down the road, minding your business, not

having a job or a place to live. You get arrested, then you get rented out to a plantation owner to work for nothing, in chains, and they break up your family. And all of that just continued the practice of using black people as a source of free labor and profit.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:37:35] And you can draw lines from that all the way to this day, with mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex, as people like Michelle Alexander and Ava Duvernay have done so powerfully.

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: [00:37:48] Yes. And then you have new forms of oppression arising in each subsequent era in addition to that, right? But again, thinking about the purpose of government, the reason why all of that is allowed to stand after Reconstruction is that, Reconstruction was like this radical experiment in political democracy, but the economic priorities were still running the show. It's still economic priorities that drove the reunion between the north and south. So you have the Civil War, and it's kinda like, Okay, well we had a spat. 600,000 people lost their lives. But now it's time to get back to business. Reconciliation for white folks, lynching and Jim Crow for Black folks.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:38:37] Yeah.

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: [00:38:37] [Sighs] And we haven't really dealt with it, man. It's funny. I once heard Reverend William Barber talking about forgiveness and grace, after the tragic murders in Charleston at the AME church.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:38:53] Yeah.

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: [00:38:54] Because as soon as something like that happens, there's microphones in front of black people's faces asking us if we forgive. And he basically said, yeah, you know, forgiveness is important. This whole idea of grace. But before you have grace you have to have acknowledgement. He also said, incidentally, that forgiveness should be about not allowing the evils of a system to be displaced onto one particular killer, either. So in that way, forgiveness could be profound because it could be about, you know, moving the indictment back onto the system—while, still, we've got to hold the person accountable, of course. But this whole of idea of grace, right? Before you have grace, you have to have acknowledgment.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:39:47] Yeah. And we are so far from any kind of adequate acknowledgment as a country and as a culture, white folks writ large. And that really brings us back to where we started, with David Walker and Lincoln, and their words about moral debt, and at least a strongly implied need for reparations.

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: [00:40:14] And I feel like when we talk about reparations, people act like the conversation started with H.R. 40, or Ta-nehisi Coates. But people were talking about that at the time, way back then. These ideas of redistribution and repair.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:40:33] They were. And this was new to me quite recently. There was a major proposal by a few of the Radical Republicans, in the 1860s, during the height of their power, which would have shifted not just political power but also economic power. Remember, at the end of the Civil War, Sherman's order which would have taken a slice of land seized from slaveholders along the Atlantic coast and granted that land to some freed people, 40 acres per family, and that order was rescinded, right? Well, a couple years later, in

1867, Thaddeus Stevens, the leader of the Radical Republicans in the House of Representatives, he proposed a much more massive program to do essentially the same thing. He wanted to confiscate all the land owned by slaveholders all across the South, and give that land to the four million freed black people in 40 acre allotments. Can you imagine if that had happened.

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: [00:41:34] Whoo. I mean, what it would have required to do that would have been, actually, transformative. And that's what black people were saying at the time, very clearly. They said it to Sherman and they were saying it to the Radical Republicans: We need land. To make a decent life, to support ourselves, to be independent. And on top of that, our labor has built the economy of the south, and actually the whole country, so let's not talk about fairness. We've more than earned that, and if we want to proceed on any kind of ethical grounds, we need to use our imagination and make this happen.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:42:06] And Stevens agreed and he wanted to do it, but the proposal didn't get widespread support even in the Republican Party, let alone from the southern Democrats or people like the president, Andrew Johnson. And the proposal died. In fact, here, let's play a clip from my interview with Eric Foner, the Reconstruction historian. Here's what he said about that.

ERIC FONER: [00:42:33] Even as radical as Reconstruction was, the idea of confiscating the property of one class of people and distributing it to another was more than most northern Republicans were willing to do. They believed in the sanctity of private property. What one might say about Reconstruction in this regard is that the political revolution was radical, really radical. The economic revolution did not go nearly as far.

CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA: [00:43:03] And listen to that language. 'They believed in the sanctity of private property.' That's the language of power. Private property is what reigned supreme, no matter what kind of crimes against humanity, what kind of violence and exploitation went into acquiring that property. It just seems like a very consistent theme in the history of America.

The Second Revolution Part 4 - Scene on Radio - Air

Date 2-19-20

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:43:25] With the radical Republicans temporarily in control Congress put the former Confederate States under martial law in 1867. It required those States to hold constitutional conventions with black people, fairly represented, and many former Confederate leaders banned from participation. Those new constitutions adopted the 13th amendment abolishing slavery and granted voting rights to black men.

The Congress also created the Freedmen's Bureau, which built thousands of schools and hospitals and helped freed people negotiate fair labor contracts.

KIDADA WILLIAMS: [00:44:04] I mean, it's absolutely revolutionary.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:44:07] Historian. Kidada Williams of Wayne State University. She talks about the roughly two thousand black men elected to office during Reconstruction, at the

local, state, and federal levels – most strikingly in places like South Carolina, where black people were the majority in the 1860s.

KIDADA WILLIAMS: [00:44:25] What you see for African-Americans in South Carolina is, when they are elected to state office, one of the biggest things they do is to make a move toward expanding democracy in their state. More people have access to government. More people have better representation by government. Government in places like South Carolina is doing more. It's doing things that today we take for granted. And African-Americans are behind this push.

[Sound: Outside, birds. Going inside, echoey. Woman: Hi, how are you? Bobby Donaldson: We'd like to see the upstairs gallery if that's possible?]

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:45:05] Bobby Donaldson and I walk into the South Carolina Statehouse, the domed capitol building, in Columbia. He's a professor of history here at the University of South Carolina. The state's Constitutional convention in 1868, ordered and overseen by the Federal Government, produced a new state blueprint that gave all men the right to vote regardless of race or property. The result: South Carolina's House of Representatives, seated in July 1868, looked like the state: It was majority black – 88 black members to 67 whites. Donaldson has led me to the House chamber.

BOBBY DONALDSON: [00:45:46] You can think about between 1868 and '77, this space being occupied by African-Americans, a cross-section, really. You had people who were natives of South Carolina who were holding elective office. And then you had some people who were transplants, or carpetbaggers, or people who came here, some because of the Civil War and Union forces, some who came because of opportunities. And here is where they governed. And here is where they helped to recreate the state of South Carolina.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:46:24] The new state Constitution mandated free public education for everyone, for the first time – including poor white people who had had no access to schooling. And it required that every public institution be open to everyone. The University of South Carolina was integrated. Most white students left when black students were admitted in 1873, so for the next four years, the student body was 90-percent black.

These dramatic changes were made by a majority black legislature, in South Carolina of all places. And those decisions were made in this building, the statehouse, that was a virtual shrine to white supremacy at the time – and, in some ways, still is. Remember, the Confederate battle flag flew on the Statehouse grounds until it was finally removed in 2015. And inside the Statehouse....

BOBBY DONALDSON: [00:47:20] For example, there's a statue of John C. Calhoun in the lobby.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:47:23] Calhoun, one of the nation's leading pro-slavery politicians during the first half of the 19th century and a vice president under Andrew Jackson. Calhoun called slavery "a positive good," and he wrote this: "There never has yet existed a wealthy and civilized society in which one portion of the community did not, in point of fact, live on the labor of the other." So, Bobby Donaldson says, think of those African American lawmakers, coming to work here in the 1860s and 70s.

BOBBY DONALDSON: [00:47:58] These people are governing in a space where they know, there is this very clear assumption that this will be a failure. And if these people don't sort of fail on their own, we will engineer it so that there's a failure.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:48:13] The 'we' who would engineer that failure was the state's white power structure. The white Southern backlash started right after the war and never let up. In 1865 and '66, most of the southern state legislatures passed "Black Codes." They banned black people from voting, denied them equal rights, and made them subject to vagrancy laws so they could be arrested practically at will. That was a major reason Congress saw the need to impose martial law and replace those white supremacist legislatures with Reconstruction governments. Military police suppressed the backlash somewhat, but never really stopped the violence by the newly founded Ku Klux Klan and similar groups. Including direct political violence.

BOBBY DONALDSON: [00:49:05] So, Benjamin Franklin Randolph comes to South Carolina as a chaplain for the Union Army. And he is elected a senator during the Reconstruction period. He is a very engaged and clear architect of the 1868 constitution.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:49:25] Benjamin Franklin Randolph was a free black man, a graduate of Oberlin, who'd been a school principal in Buffalo, New York. When he volunteered to serve the Union Army, he was assigned as chaplain to a black infantry unit that deployed to South Carolina in 1864. When the war ended Randolph decided to stay and he became a leader of Reconstruction efforts in the state.

BOBBY DONALDSON: [00:49:49] It is he who helps to push forward the policies about education. And it is he who is killed while traveling and campaigning in a place near Abbeville, South Carolina.

[Sound: ding, car door opens. ... birds...]

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:50:10] Bobby and I go to Randolph Cemetery. It's tucked along a frontage road next to the Interstate in Columbia. It's named for Benjamin Franklin Randolph and his tall obelisk is the largest marker in the cemetery. In October 1868, Randolph was traveling as a state senator and Republican party leader, campaigning for other candidates, when he changed trains at Hodges Station, 70 miles west of the capital.

BOBBY DONALDSON: [00:50:38] As he was on the rear of the train, and I'm not sure if he was just greeting people or actually speaking, is where he was shot and targeted by an assassin. Now, one of the important points about that incident is that that was not the only assassination in that window of time. It was not uncommon. And many people knew that they were jeopardizing their lives. He had come under threat before. And so he understood the dangers involved in that role in 1868.

[Music]

KIDADA WILLIAMS: [00:51:13] In the first election, in 1868, where African-Americans have access to the right to vote, African-American men have access to the right to vote, you see the beginnings of violence designed to stop them from voting and to stop them from serving in office. And that only increases in 1869 headed into the 1870 election.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:51:37] Historian Kidada Williams is author of the book, *They Left Great Marks On Me*, which looked at African American accounts of racial violence in the decades after emancipation.

KIDADA WILLIAMS: [00:51:47] And for the 1870 election, you see shocking levels of violence. And part of what has happened is that you've got the emergence of these sort of white terror groups conducting paramilitary campaigns. And they are targeting voters, they are targeting elected officials and their families.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:52:08] The Klan, the Knights of the White Camellia, the Red Shirts. In dozens of incidents across the South, white gangs show up to attack or intimidate black politicians and voters, to keep them from the polls. But that's just the violence tied directly to electoral politics. There's a broader terror campaign aimed at reversing the Second American Revolution.

There are ways in which black people were actually more vulnerable than they had been under slavery because they're no longer valuable property, right?

KIDADA WILLIAMS: [00:52:44] Exactly. What you don't see under slavery is masters killing their slaves all willy-nilly.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:52:50] With emancipation, that changes. Williams has researched the many thousands of individual attacks against black people during Reconstruction – by paramilitary groups, police, and just regular white citizens.

KIDADA WILLIAMS: [00:53:04] African Americans call these attacks, or these attackers, night riders. They wage war against black people's freedom. And this isn't hyperbole. What they do is, these heavily armed squads of white men surveil and stalk their African-American targets. They wait to catch them off guard, when they're with their wives, when they're with their kids, when they're in bed, and therefore unsuspecting and more vulnerable. They invade African-Americans' homes in the dark of night. They hold families hostage for hours at a time, where they rape, torture, mutilate, and murder them. No member of a household that was attacked was spared the violence that occurred.

JOHN BIEWEN: [00:53:51] There's no way to get an accurate count of these murders, but Kidada points to an estimate made in 1895 by the black statesman Robert Smalls of South Carolina. He said 53,000 black people were murdered in the South in the three decades after the Civil War. For a while, the U.S. government tried to counter this terror campaign. Ulysses Grant, the former Union general, was elected President in 1868 and served two terms. He was a Republican supporter of Reconstruction. He sent troops to several states to suppress Klan violence and protect black voters at the polls. But it wasn't enough, and the federal government's commitment didn't last. In 1873, the Colfax massacre in Louisiana: an armed white mob killed up to 150 black people after a disputed election for governor. And in South Carolina, white men killed dozens of black people in several towns during the 1876 election campaign. That election, 1876, would be the last under full-fledged Reconstruction.

Summary

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: [00:55:06] We've just heard clips today, starting with *Scene on Radio* in multiple parts, laying out some of the tent pole elements of

Reconstruction, starting with the birth, the unraveling, and finally, the giving way to Jim Crow. *The Majority Report* spoke with David Blight about Frederick Douglass' take on the death of the first republic and the birth of the second. And *Professor Buzzkill* highlighted how the backlash against Reconstruction took shape. That's what everyone heard, but members also heard a bonus clip from *Scene on Radio* with more of the details about the struggle to maintain Reconstruction in the face of a violent backlash movement in the South.

For non-members that bonus clip is linked in the show notes and is part of the transcript for today's episode, so you can still find it if you want to make the effort, but to hear that and all of our bonus content delivered seamlessly into your podcast feed, sign up to support the show at bestoftheleft.com/support, or request a financial hardship membership because we don't make a lack of funds a barrier to hearing more information, and every request is granted. No questions asked.

And now, we'll hear from you.

Experiment with Refer-o-Matic - Nick From California

New

VOICEMAILER: NICK FROM CALIFORNIA: [00:56:14] Hey, Jay!, it's Nick calling back to talk about the art that I earned by sharing the show. I shouldn't even say earned, it was too easy to say earned. I only really listen to podcasts and stuff obviously when I'm walking my son in the stroller or walking the dog at night, it's all car noises and distraction. But yeah, I actually did the Refer-o-Matic while I was just walking my son to the park, very casually on the phone. I recommend all of the listeners just do it and send it to your friends who you know would like it. And then honestly just keep it kind of handy cause like you say, you tell people about the show and then they're like, "uh, oh," and then they got to remember to look it up and they get home, but this, you just text them the link. You can even remember to do it later, and then they have it. Super easy.

And yeah, I got my Best of the Left art and I didn't want to give anything away because I think you have to be in the club in order to bask in its glory. So I didn't want to give anything away, but I will give a little spoiler. I had to choose between reminding myself that I was [redacted], or [redacted] I don't know, you may have to edit that out Jay!, I'm giving away trade secrets here. But you can decide if you want to harness your righteous indignation or focus on [redacted] in a beautiful way in either your home screen or your lock screen.

You're in fierce competition for my lock screen because my kids are one and a half and five, so they're at peak cute, but you are definitely my new home screen background to remind myself to take an activism moment if I can, every day. So I recommend everybody else refer their five friends so they can bask in the glory themselves.

Merry Christmas or happy holidays or whatever applies. Hope you get some time off. There's Levi on command to also chime in. Alright, bye.

Power and defining the marginalized - Pat from Chicago

VOICEMAILER: PAT FROM CHICAGO: [00:58:19] Hi, Jay, this is Pat from Chicago. I just wanted to say that I finally became a member after a couple of years of listening thanks to your recent encouragement. So best of luck in the continued efforts to make this show financially sustainable.

I wanted to call in, in light of the recent episodes and a theme that I've heard about how not necessarily solely from this show, but from some other media outlets, including more conservative and right-leaning outlets that I listen to, that identify this idea of power as something that we need to fight against.

And as a progressive, you know, we tend to identify economic power and corporate power and white supremacy, male supremacy, et cetera, as the primary form, the power along with other ways in which groups are marginalized.

But on the right, it seems like I actually hear similar language, but that the sources of the power that they identify are different, but that the language that they use is similar.

The sources of the power that they're identifying, rather than economic power, are cultural power, media institutions, and educational institutions like universities as the sources of these cultural power that they feel like are oppressive and alienating to them.

And while I feel like this is pretty much totally off base, and while I don't share their values, I think maybe there is more of an opportunity when you practice a type of empathy that you talked about a couple of episodes ago, to, rather than just talking about economic populism -- which is a phrase that I struggle with because of the way that it can be construed either positively or negatively, or it's not really definable as to what the ends of populism are -- but rather if we talk about marginalized groups and groups that lack economic and social power, but expanding the definition that we already naturally include so many of the identities that progressives would advocate for, and to more explicitly include rural folks within those marginalized identities.

And maybe by linking that rural versus urban split to the same power dynamics that apply to many other marginalized communities, we as progressives could more effectively build a type of bridge that somebody like Bernie Sanders was trying so hard to build during his campaign, but whom Biden as the result of this recent election so seems to have failed to do.

I don't know if this can be done ethically or even pragmatically, but philosophically it seems like it's worth exploring. I'd be interested to hear other people's thoughts. Keep up the good work. Thanks very much.

Final comments on the epic Refer-o-Matic program and why we should be messaging to rural America

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: [01:00:56] Thanks to all those who called into the voicemail line or wrote their messages to be played as "voicemails." If you would like to leave a comment or question of your own to be played on the show, you can record a message at (202) 999-3991 or write me a message to jay@bestoftheleft.com.

A huge thanks to Nick, obviously for singing the praises of the Refer-o-Matic. But he didn't stop there, sort of like how he tried to give away the game a little bit and I had to hold him back. He took it a step further beyond just leaving that message. He also wrote an ad for us and he told me what he thought it should sound like, which voice I should use. Here's that ad:

ANNOUNCER: [01:01:44] In a world in which there is high-quality Best of the Left art for your phone or tablet that will remind you of your progressive values and to take action, how can you stand to not have them? In far less time than it took me to write this email, I referred this show to five of my friends that I knew would like it. How are you not basking in the full glory of these images? After receiving them, I bumped the picture of my children in their Christmas pajamas to have this image in my background. Don't worry; my kids are still on my lock screen. But now, every time I look for an app I can be reminded to take progressive action. What are you waiting for? Give at least five people the best belated Christmas gift they will get this year: a link to seamlessly listen to Best of the Left. Plus, you'll get access to awesome art work not available for sale. Nick from California gives it five stars, would refer friends to the show with this again. Alan from Connecticut loved it so much he made his wife and kids refer five people before he gave them their Christmas gifts. Dave from Olympia, well, he still in his time loop and has no idea about any of this, but when he catches up he is going to love it. Come on, you can't let these three win! You've got to refer more than these dudes. Besides, think about how much more diverse and interesting calls and voicemail will be once you refer some of your friends to listen. So, refer at least five friends to Best of the Left today! Use the link in the notes or go to bestoftheleft.com/refer

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: [01:03:15] So, there you go. Obviously, I can't say it any more forcefully or eloquently than that. So, I'll just leave it there and obviously encourage you to go take part in that Refer-o-Matic cause you're not going to want to miss out on that artwork that Nick can't stop talking about.

I will give you one hint, though. Nick was trying to give some clues. The clue I will give you is that one of the two pieces of art that we created is a Jay Tomlinson original. It's a piece of art based on a photograph. And that photograph is an original of mine that we have turned into something greater than it was originally.

And I've got to say, I've never thought of myself as a particularly artistic person, you know, especially visual art. It has never been my skillset. The circumstances we found ourselves in at the end of last year and with the financial crunch and thinking, let's throw everything at the wall and see what we can get to stick and trying to build the audience and turning to the Refer-o-Matic for that. It was sort of that phenomenon that takes over when you are stuck in a situation. It's not quite desperation that takes over, but it's like finding something within you you didn't know was there because the circumstances demand it. That's what this artwork, I think, is, at least part of it. Amanda did one of them almost entirely on her own. I did half of the other one, and then she had to fix it up for me and make it better. But the idea was mine sort of to begin with; she just perfected it.

Now, secondly, today, just a quick response to Pat. I definitely like the idea. And I think Pat's onto something. Progressive policies almost always are, especially the economic ones, are designed to be universal on purpose so that there is no chance of anyone being disenfranchised. And usually what we're thinking of is the traditionally marginalized people

who were intentionally cut out of previous programs, thinking back to the New Deal. But rural communities in their own way have followed a very similar pattern. They get mistreated terribly by corporations and have very little political power or economic power to fight back. And there's a very deep strain of thought and political organizing that goes back a long way saying that there is no reason why rural communities should not be progressive. And so, I totally endorsed the idea of having that be part of our messaging. So, just as a for-instance, think back to the ongoing debate over the Post Office. It was the Republicans and free marketers who love the idea of privatizing the Post Office entirely who would be cutting off people who live too far out in rural America. And a private company who would be servicing that area wouldn't find it profitable. And so they may just not go to the end of the line. And so those people living far out there are the ones who would lose out. Whereas, the progressives are the ones who want a universal service that covers everyone no matter where they live. The free marketers dismissively tell rural America that hey, if you get cut off from mail, just use email. This is the 21st century. What are you getting mail for? And obviously the first thing to be pointed out is that, for instance, prescription drugs that currently get delivered by the Postal Service can't arrive by email. So, don't bring me that nonsense when obviously what you care about is making money for some private company and not figuring out how to bring services to everyone in the country. The whole point of the Post Office is that it binds everyone together, not binds the people who are close enough to be profitable together.

So, that's one of those things were the people who are farthest out in rural America are the least likely to be progressive minded. And yet those are the people we are fighting for when we say we need universal service to cover everyone. And that's before you even get to the discussion about lack of sufficient internet connectivity. They say, just use email. Again, rural America is the least connected areas of the country connected to the internet and have the hardest time connecting to email. And that's actually another program that progressives would love to have under municipal stewardship with guaranteed universal access. So yeah, I see no reason that we should be excluding rural communities in our messaging when we are promoting progressive ideas designed to help everyone, them included. That's the whole point.

Thanks again to everyone who has been signing up for memberships, giving gift memberships, making one-time donations, buying our merch, signing up for the Refer-o-Matic, of course, all to help keep the show going strong. As always, the show only exists because you all make it possible. Keep the comments coming in at (202) 999-3991 or by emailing me to jay@bestoftheleft.com.

That is going to be it for today. Thanks to everyone for listening. Thanks to Deon Clark and Erin Clayton for their research work for the show. Thanks to the Monosyllabic Transcriptionist Trio, Ben, Dan and Ken for their volunteer work helping to put our transcripts together and thanks to Amanda Hoffman for all of her work on our social media outlets, activism segments, graphic design, web mastering, occasional bonus show co-host and so much more. Thanks to those who support the show, obviously by becoming a member and so on. All of the ways to support the show can be found at bestoftheleft.com/support. For details on the show itself, including links to all of the sources and music used in this and every episode, all that information can always be found in the show notes, on the blog and likely right on the device you're using to listen. So, coming to you from far outside the conventional wisdom of Washington, DC, my name is Jay and this has been the Best of Left

podcast coming to you twice weekly thanks entirely to the members and donors to the show from bestoftheleft.com.