

Scene on Radio

The Second Revolution (Season 4, Episode 4): Transcript

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/s4-e4-the-second-revolution/>

John Biewen: A content warning: This episode includes descriptions of intense violence.

John Biewen: In 1829, the black American writer David Walker published his book, *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*.

David Walker [voiceover]: The whites have always been an unjust, jealous, unmerciful, avaricious and blood-thirsty set of beings, always seeking after power and authority....

John Biewen: Walker's *Appeal* was one of the most radical abolitionist statements in antebellum America. He condemned the people who called themselves white for their cruel commitment to enslaving black people, and he called on enslaved people to revolt against their masters. Walker also suggested white people deserved punishment from on high.

David Walker: I declare, it does appear to me, as though some nations think God is asleep, or that he made the Africans for nothing else but to dig their mines and work their farms, or they cannot believe history, sacred or profane. I ask

every man who has a heart, and is blessed with the privilege of believing—Is not God a God of justice to *all* his creatures?

[Music]

John Biewen: Other leading abolitionists of the 19th century, including Frederick Douglass and John Brown, voiced some version of this idea: that slavery violated God's law, or natural law, and white Americans would someday pay for this great sin. It took the cataclysm of the Civil War to bring a white American president to a similar view.

Abraham Lincoln [voiceover]: It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but....

John Biewen: Abraham Lincoln gave his Second Inaugural address on March 4th, 1865, as he started his new term as president. It was a little more than a month before the Confederate General Robert E. Lee would surrender at Appomattox, and only six weeks before Lincoln's assassination. In this very short speech, roughly five minutes long, Lincoln declared that "all knew" slavery was "the cause of the war." And with more than 600-thousand people dead, he implied that white America was reaping what it sowed.

Abraham Lincoln: Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

Ed Baptist: Lincoln is giving that speech at a moment when history had finally happened to white Americans. It had finally hit home.

John Biewen: Historian Ed Baptist.

Ed Baptist: And we could talk about, you know, him before that point, whether or not he was really committed to emancipation at any point up 'til the Second Inaugural. I think in the Second Inaugural, he's not only committed to emancipation, but he's assessing it and its implications, and the implications of the history of slavery and exploitation in the U.S., with an honesty that few white Americans have achieved since then. Because there is an implicit argument for reparations in that speech.

John Biewen: Hmm.

Ed Baptist: And I don't know of any other U.S. president since then who has accepted that logic.

[Music: Neveux, Escalade]

John Biewen: Chenjerai.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Hey John.

John Biewen: We've talked about Lincoln before *on Scene on Radio*, haven't we.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Oh, yeah. I think he came up a couple times in our Season 2 series, *Seeing White*.

John Biewen: And, to let folks behind the scenes a bit, you and I talked about this when we weren't recording, about how we would get into this episode with this Lincoln quote. And you wanted to make sure that we didn't give Lincoln too much credit for these enlightened remarks in his Second Inaugural speech.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. I'm just always the hater, right?

John Biewen: Hater.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Lincoln gives a speech condemning slavery, and still it's not enough. [laughter] This is the thing. It is a good speech. And it means something to me

that Lincoln finally came to see this, right, that white people in America had committed this tremendous crime by enslaving black people for centuries. But you know, it's like, Lincoln was racist for a lot of his life. And it took him a long time to come around, even to the point of just favoring emancipation. And I think that's what the David Walker quotes really make clear: people had been saying this for decades, including people talking directly to Lincoln. So Lincoln learned, and I like that he learned. But it's also a reminder to me that while white people are learning, black people are dying.

John Biewen: Mm. Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And then, when he finally comes out for emancipating enslaved people, what does he do, right, why does he do that? It winds up being a strategic thing that makes him do it, it's like a tactical war strategy. And also his idea was, essentially, we're gonna free black people and then send black people out of the country, to Central America or something like that.

John Biewen: Yeah. Colonization, as they called that kind of plan, which was fairly popular among white folks for decades in the nineteenth century. And when Lincoln expressed that idea to some black people in about 1862, it did not go over well. But in writing this inaugural speech just before his death a few years later, he seems to have grasped, in some real way, that the United States owed black people a huge moral debt. And in mainstream political thinking in the U.S., this was a radical view up until that moment, and now the president was saying it. He had not been a radical.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. Lincoln up to that point was the leader of a mainstream 19th century American political party, and he wasn't in the most progressive wing of that party. He had to be dragged into it. He was basically kind of like a Joe Biden of that time, if you want to look at it that way.

John Biewen: But the times, and a whole bunch of blood, had brought him to a point where he could make this statement. Here he is essentially agreeing with David Walker in declaring white Americans guilty. With the implicit message that the country needs to change for real, right? Really needs to turn the page. And this is why I thought it would make sense to use Lincoln's Second Inaugural as a taking-off point for this episode on the Reconstruction era, even though Lincoln himself was not going to live to play any part in Reconstruction.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, and I'm glad we're doing an episode on Reconstruction, because it was a crucial time if you wanna understand democracy in the U.S., even if you want to understand where we're at right now. Because it was really more radical and revolutionary than most people realize. We saw this dramatic expansion of democracy, at least temporarily.

John Biewen: And to give a taste of how radical the period was: Chenjerai, you taught for some years at a public university in South Carolina. A state which has long been known for, shall we say, "issues" around race and diversity, up to the present day.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. So, South Carolina, like the rest of the United States, is struggling with diversity. And at my university, it was like this huge problem. People were trying to, oh, how can we solve diversity, how can we diversify the student population? They're bringing in experts, consultants, all kinds of things, dialogues. So this is something I learned that threw me for a loop when I learned it. There was a time when the flagship public university in South Carolina had a student body that was overwhelmingly black. And it wasn't after the Civil Rights Movement in the Sixties and Seventies? It was in the 1870s, less than ten years after the Civil War. When I learned that I was like, yo, I think this really shows something that we get wrong about the progression of democracy in this country.

John Biewen: Right. That we just think it moves sort of steadily forward and upward.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, but nah.

John Biewen: Historians have called Reconstruction the Second Revolution, or the Second Founding.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah and I think that's appropriate. Because the people who were wielding power in the mid-1860s, some of them white, some of them black, really pushed the United States into new territory as a democracy, far beyond what the original founders did. I mean, at least they tried to.

[MUSIC: Theme]

John Biewen: This is Season Four of *Scene on Radio*, Episode 4 of our series, *The Land That Never Has Been Yet*. I'm John Biewen, producer and host of the show. That was Chenjerai Kumanyika, Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers, activist, artist, podcaster – he and I will talk more later after the episode. This time out: Reconstruction. Some say this period is more important for American democracy than the nation's founding. So why did the whole country—or anyway, the powerful people, south and north—why did they decide that the second revolution shouldn't be allowed to last?

[Ambi, outside, breeze, traffic in distance]

John Biewen: What's your name?

Victoria Smalls: Victoria Smalls.

John Biewen: Where exactly did you grow up?

Victoria Smalls: Right here on St. Helena Island. This is my home. And I'm proud to be a Gullah-Geechee girl...

John Biewen: We're in Beaufort, on the South Carolina coast. Standing on a lawn under huge live oaks and Spanish moss, at the historic Penn Center, where Victoria Smalls is Director of History, Art, and Culture. Penn Center was one of the first schools

for freed black people during and after the Civil War. At the moment, we're talking about Victoria's people, the Gullah-Geechee – an enclave of black people who worked on plantations along the southern Atlantic coast, both during slavery and as free people. They mostly grew rice, as their ancestors had done in west and central Africa. And their isolation on the coastal islands helped them preserve their African traditions.

Victoria Smalls: Our food ways, our oral histories, our folklore....

John Biewen: And yes, this is audio, we've gotta do the language thing.

Victoria Smalls: Yeah, so when I was growing up, it meant that you talked funny. And I had a very deep Gullah accent, which you cannot pick up on now, it's really sad, because you don't know where I'm from.

John Biewen: Can you do it?

Victoria Smalls [rough phonetic rendering]: I gladdy fa-see onna daday, hope-fa see onna sone. [Repeats second line.] Hope to see you soon. Yeah.

John Biewen: Beautiful.

John Biewen: Victoria has traced her family back to 1780 in this part of South Carolina.

Victoria Smalls: I know their names, and they all are coming from this island. One set of Smalls was coming from this island. And my second great grandmother was a runaway from Charleston -- her last name was Smalls -- as a

teenager. And I'm guessing, I'm only guessing that it was around 1861, 1862, when refugees started coming this way because of Union forces occupying the area.

[Music]

John Biewen: Even though South Carolina was deep in the Confederacy, the land we're now standing on was occupied by the Union as early as November, 1861, just months after the war started at Fort Sumter. The Union Navy seized the nearby harbor, Port Royal, because of its strategic importance. So during the war, this part of coastal South Carolina became a gathering place for recently enslaved people – some escaped from their plantations and managed to make it here, others found themselves free when their slaveholders fled Union forces. After the Confederacy's surrender in 1865, South Carolina, along with other places in the South, became a laboratory for a new American democracy.

Victoria Smalls: We were looking through our family records....

John Biewen: Victoria tells me about another document she found, this one in the records of the Freedmen's Bureau. That was the big federal agency that Congress created at the end of the Civil War to protect freed people and help them start new lives. The document is a bank application.

Victoria Smalls: My second great grandparents, Adam and Betsy Smalls, was opening a bank account with the Freedmen's Bank in downtown Beaufort on Bay Street. And...

John Biewen: When?

Victoria Smalls: 1869. Actually February 9, 1869, opened an account. And on this application it had his name, where he was born, where he was raised, where he is living. His occupation was a farmer. And the other thing, says, "Works for," which really struck me, and it said "Himself, on his own land." And that really, it's hot out here and I'm sweating outside, but I just got these goose bumps all over me just out of amazement that in 1869 he had his own land.

John Biewen: The Smallses' land did not come from Special Field Order 15, better known as the 40-acres-and-a-mule policy ordered by General William Tecumseh Sherman in early 1865. By the way, the order promised land but no mules. President Andrew Johnson rescinded Sherman's order after Lincoln's assassination. The government took back most of the land that had been confiscated and given to free black families, and gave it back to its previous white owners.

John Biewen, in scene: Do you know of any -- and you can help me with this, too....

John Biewen: Also with us at the Penn Center is Brent Morris, a historian at the University of South Carolina Beaufort, who's showing me around. He says Victoria

Smalls's ancestors, Adam and Betsy Smalls, got their land in a different way: When the Union Army occupied the Beaufort area, hundreds of slaveholding planters skedaddled – and then lost title to their lands because they couldn't return to make their tax payments without risking arrest.

Brent Morris: 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.

[Music: Kaada, things-back-home]

John Biewen: 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: 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: Historian Eric Foner. He's widely considered the leading authority on Reconstruction.

Eric Foner: 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: 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: 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: 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 [voiceover]: 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: Sumner said the nation also had to repay black people for their role in helping to win the Civil War.

Charles Sumner: ...as the condition of alliance and aid against the Rebellion. Failure here is moral and political bankruptcy.

[BREAK]

John Biewen: 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: I mean, it's absolutely revolutionary.

John Biewen: 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: 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: 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: 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: 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: For example, there's a statue of John C. Calhoun in the lobby.

John Biewen: 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: 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.

[Music]

John Biewen: 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: 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: 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: 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: 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: 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: 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: 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: 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: 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.

John Biewen: 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: Exactly. What you don't see under slavery is masters killing their slaves all willy-nilly.

John Biewen: 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: 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: 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.

John Biewen: 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: 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: 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: 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: 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: 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.

[Music]

John Biewen: 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.]

John Biewen: 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*.

John Biewen: 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: 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.

[Sound: John's phone rings]

John Biewen: Hey, Chenjerai.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Hey John. I mean, I couldn't wait to call you man, so. What do you think?

John Biewen: You know, what I keep noticing is, the more details I learn about U.S history, the more painful the reality is. Right?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Uh-hmm.

John Biewen: It's sort of become a recurring theme in my mind, almost a slogan: It's always worse than you thought.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, man. 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: Well....?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, but the thing is, when you really confront how viciously white supremacy attacked real, emerging democracy after the Civil War....

John Biewen: 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: 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: 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: 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: Okay.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: 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: 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: And it took a coalition of folks with different positions in society to do that. The unlikely alliance that Foner discussed.

John Biewen: But then there's the Backlash.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: 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: 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: 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: 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: 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 bullsh** 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: 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: 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: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: [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: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: 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: 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: 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: 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: 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: 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: 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: 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 story of America.

John Biewen: It seems like what we're learning is that if economic power is distributed in a profoundly unequal way, which has been true throughout most of U.S. history, then government will not serve the interests of everybody equally, or even close to equally. UNLESS, maybe, unless there's some urgent need in a given moment to protect the interests and the rights of poor and working people. Say, in a major crisis of some kind. Say, for example, I don't know, a Great Depression or something like that.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I'm glad you brought up the Great Depression, right? Because looking at how people organized for economic democracy before and through the Great Depression is really important. Because it's always been the job of people who are fighting for justice to create that kind of urgency.

John Biewen: Next time: Guess what. The New Deal. It was a big deal. But just how big, and how new, was it?

John Biewen: Our editor on the series is Loretta Williams. Music consulting and production help by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. Our theme song is The Underside of Power by Algiers. Other music by John Erik Kaada, Eric Neveux, and Lucas Biewen. Voiceovers this time by Michael Betts II and Scott Huler. Follow us on Facebook, and on Twitter -- @SceneonRadio. Chenjerai is @catchatweetdown. Thanks to North Carolina Public Radio-WUNC. *Scene on Radio* is distributed by PRX. The show comes to you from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.