



Middlebury

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Dear Class:

I am so looking forward to teaching *Reconstruction: The Unfinished Story* at Alumni College in August. I have such fond memories of Alumni Colleges past, and not just because of the subject matter of the course but also because of the opportunity to reconnect with so many old (yes, in every respect, myself included!) friends and former students. Thank you for signing up.

Reconstruction is indeed an unfinished story. Since the first, improvisational attempts to frame policies for reuniting the country and bringing freedom to the enslaved to our current struggles over how we remember the Civil War and its meaning, Reconstruction—its aspirations and its frustrations, its accomplishments and its setbacks—has been a presence in our national narrative. I do not presume to think that our class will settle questions that have loomed for generations. But I do hope that our study, which will trace Reconstruction from its beginnings during wartime down to our own present, will offer valuable lessons and will also remind us that the privilege of praising or condemning ought properly to be reserved for those who first at least attempt to understand. This is a story, after all, of imperfect human beings, imperfectly comprehending the world around them, knowing only what has been, not what will be (people pretty much like us). This is a story of an arc that continues to bend.

We'll start with the first plans for Reconstruction while the Civil War still raged on. We'll look in detail at how, after the war, under competing and often conflicting influences, policies emerged and why, after so much hope, within a generation, by the late 1890s, a new equilibrium, which very much resembled the old equilibrium, came into being. We will consider not only important political moments—elections, court decisions, congressional enactments—but also cultural forces—literature, architecture, and that radical new medium, film—that both shaped and limited possibilities. Finally, we will not avoid more recent examples of why the story of Reconstruction continues to unfold.

How even begin to offer a reading list? That's almost impossible. But I would suggest that, if possible, you take a look at the following: Kenneth M. Stampp's *The Era of Reconstruction*, though now almost 60 years old, is a classic. You need not read it all, but do read his introduction, which remains the best distillation, in readable prose, of the historiography of Reconstruction. Next, it is vitally important to hear from some of the major characters what each of them thought the Civil War was about. I hope you will peruse, with care, [Lincoln's Gettysburg Address](#). To that I would add several of Frederick Douglass's speeches, especially "[The Mission of the War](#)" and "[Oration in Memory of Lincoln](#)" and a brief excerpt from Jefferson Davis's *Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*. The best historian currently working in the Reconstruction field is David Blight, whose magisterial *Race and Reunion* carefully explains how and why the memory of the Civil War—what was thought to be worth remembering and thus, by implication, what should be forgotten—shaped, directed, and ultimately limited Reconstruction policy. A collection of Blight's essays, *Beyond the Battlefield*, may actually be a better place to start. Karen Cox's *No Common Ground* is an excellent book on recent controversies over monuments.

Finally—and consider this a “trigger warning”—one cannot hope to understand how a particular view of the Civil War and Reconstruction came to be fixed in the minds of white Americans without coming to grips with D. W. Griffith’s 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*. We’ll spend a fair amount of time discussing this monumental, and monumentally flawed, film. I have added at the end of this letter links to all of the readings mentioned here that are available online.

These are mere suggestions, and we will allude to all of these in the class. But range more widely as your own interests may dictate. And then come prepared for what I know will be a provocative, lively, and, I hope, also instructive class. It will be great to be together at Bread Loaf.

Sincerely,

John McCardell
President Emeritus and Professor of History Emeritus

Links to suggested readings/viewings

Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address (<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/gettysburg-address/>;

Jefferson Davis, *Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, v–viii; 47–57, 77–85, 114–120
(http://books.google.com/books?id=qdcBAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA14&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false)

Frederick Douglass, “Mission of the War” (<http://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1864-frederick-douglass-mission-war>)

Frederick Douglass, “Oration in Memory of Lincoln”
(<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=39>)

Blight’s *Beyond the Battlefield* is available in paperback. Recommended chapters include his introduction and epilogue, plus chapters 4–6, 9.

View *Birth of a Nation* via the following link (which contains the original score, an important component of the film):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZY-nKym1Jc>