

# Reconstructing the South: A Role Play

BY BILL BIGELOW

WHAT KIND OF COUNTRY is this going to be? This was the urgent question posed in the period immediately following the U.S. Civil War. When students learn about Reconstruction, if they learn about this period at all, too often they learn how the presidents and Congress battled over the answer to this question. Textbooks and curricula emphasize what was done *to* or *for* newly freed people, but usually not how they acted to define their own freedom. This role play asks students to imagine themselves as people who were formerly enslaved and to wrestle

with a number of issues about what they needed to ensure genuine “freedom”: ownership of land and what the land would be used for; the fate of Confederate leaders; voting rights; self-defense; and conditions placed on the former Confederate states prior to being allowed to return to the Union. The role play’s premise is that the end of the war presented people in our country with a key turning point, that there existed at this moment an opportunity to create a society with much greater equality and justice.

The students’ role begins: “And now the war is



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*A sketch by Jas. E. Taylor of a farmer plowing in South Carolina, published in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, Oct. 20, 1866.*

over. This is a joyous time. The horrors of slavery have ended. In millions of gestures, large and small, Black people in America resisted slavery from its very beginning in 1619. You won your freedom and the 13th Amendment to the Constitution ended slavery once and for all. All through the summer of 1865 there have been parades and celebrations. It's a time of unbelievable excitement, but also apprehension. What exactly does freedom mean? What kind of lives will you have now?"

Knowing how deeply segregated and unequal our country is today can make it seem that this was our destiny. As Howard Zinn often said, when we look only at what happened, it can make history seem inevitable. But history is full of choice points; there are always alternatives. Looking carefully at Reconstruction can alert students to some of the most significant could-have-beens in our country's history.

### Materials Needed:

- Copies of "Freedpeople" role for every student.
- Copies of "Reconstructing the South: Problems" for every student.

### Suggested Procedure:

**Note:** Please read the Zinn Education Project's statement, "[How to — and How Not to — Teach Role Plays](#)," before launching this, or any role play, in your classroom.

1. Of course, the more background on slavery and the Civil War students have, the better. Ask students, "Now that the Civil War is over and the Confederate leaders have surrendered, and the 13th Amendment has outlawed slavery, what do you think will happen to the people who had until just recently been enslaved?" Pause for students to think about and respond to this question, but don't turn this into a full discussion, as it's meant simply to get them thinking about the issues they will explore in more depth in the role play.
2. Distribute the "Freedpeople" role to every student in the class. Read it aloud with the class, pausing to make sure everyone understands the circumstances in which people find themselves.

One way to help students enter their role is by asking them to create a persona as a formerly enslaved individual and to write an interior monologue from this person's perspective. (See "Promoting Social Imagination Through Interior Monologues" at the Zinn Education Project for examples of how to help students write interior monologues.) If you choose to do this, brainstorm possible interior monologue perspectives with students and list these for students to see. Allow students to write for 10 minutes or so. The aim is not to complete a finished piece, but to get them to quickly enter another persona and to imagine this individual's hopes and concerns. Once students have finished writing—and it's fine if they stop mid-thought—ask students to pair up and to read their monologues to one another. Afterward, ask for volunteers to share a few interior monologues aloud with the rest of the class. Ask students to comment on what they appreciate about these pieces, and about which themes emerge from students' writing.

3. Distribute a copy to all students of "Reconstructing the South: Problems." Over the years, I have handled this in a number of different ways. If students are accustomed to doing homework, you can give these questions to students in advance of the class period where they will be discussed, and ask students to read and decide what they think is best, keeping in mind that they are attempting to consider these as people who were recently enslaved. Another option is to put students into small groups and have them attempt to reach agreement on each of the questions, and then to meet as a large group to talk through these problems. This has the advantage of students having thought about and discussed these prior to the large group meeting. The small-group work makes it more likely that once the large group convenes, every student will have something to say. The disadvantage is that it makes this a longer activity, and may feel repetitive, as each question gets discussed twice, once in the small group and once in the large. I've also simply given these questions to the full class to discuss and decide. Instructions from here on out presume this last option.

4. The structure of this role play is simple. All students are in the same role — attempting to represent people who have been recently freed from slavery. The premise of the role play is described in the student handout: “You are part of a delegation of African Americans who, up until recently, were enslaved. You are traveling to Washington, D.C., to demand legislation that will make sure that freedpeople become truly free and are able to advance socially, politically, educationally, and economically. Before you leave, there are a number of key questions that you must agree upon. These are difficult questions, and your answers to them could determine whether your future is one of progress or misery.”

Tell students that you will not be leading them in this activity — that, just as in the real historical moment, it was the people themselves, newly freed from slavery, who had to confront these difficult choices. Students will need not only to figure out what they think are the best answers to the questions posed in the handout, but they will also need to decide how they will discuss and resolve these. Review with students some of the ways that they might handle their conversations about these issues. They might choose one student to chair the entire proceedings. They might choose one student per question to chair the discussion. They might decide to have a system where one student raises a hand to speak and then calls on the next student who calls on the next student. Through the years, this last choice has been the one that has seemed to work best with a whole-group role play like this, but I still remember one class several years ago that selected a trusted student to call on people and lead the deliberations, and this student was magnificent. The important thing is that students feel that the process belongs to them. At the outset, I emphasize that they should discuss and decide on a process for decision-making prior to beginning their conversations. On occasion, these can become chaotic when students have not agreed on the process. Also, remind them to speak in the “I” or “we” voice, as people formerly held in slavery.

As students deliberate, my job is to take notes

on their conversations. I will be able to review these to plan teaching from this point forward but also I use these to read excerpts aloud to students so that they can appreciate themselves as intellectuals, struggling with big ideas. The first question focuses on the ownership of land. It’s key, of course. Here’s a sampling from one year’s 2nd-period class at Franklin High School in Portland, Oregon:

Alex: We did all the work. We worked so everyone else could live.

Eron: We need a new beginning. Somehow we need to grow as people. I think that we should own all the plantations. Well, not all. But it would bring a new wave of power to us.

Ilantha: We should be given the plantations. What would whites do with them? Where else would we live if we didn’t have the plantations?

Allen: I don’t think we should get the land. They’ve owned the land a long time. If there are 50 of us on a plantation, which one gets it? We should work for wages.

Britany: It’s their land. They owned it. During the time they held us, it was legal. They didn’t do anything illegal.

Karli: They paid for them in money, but we paid for them in work. We took care of them. We bought that land with our labor. It ought to be ours.

Wendi: I think we should think about what we would do if the roles were reversed. Think about what happened to the Indians, getting kicked off their land. Do we want to do that to the plantation owners? We have to think about this from their point of view.

Ultimately, in an 18 to 11 vote, this class decided not to demand ownership of the plantations. It’s not the conclusion that I had hoped they would arrive at, but that’s not the point.



No matter what decisions students reach, their discussions — and sometimes-heated arguments — lend themselves to rich follow-up, exploring fundamental questions about legality, ownership, justice, and race. And students' comments allow me to see where there are misunderstandings, as in Wendi's false equivalence of taking land from Native Americans and from plantation owners. [*Freedom's Unfinished Revolution* includes an excellent chapter exploring landownership following the Civil War, "The Promised Land," reproduced here beginning on page 10.]

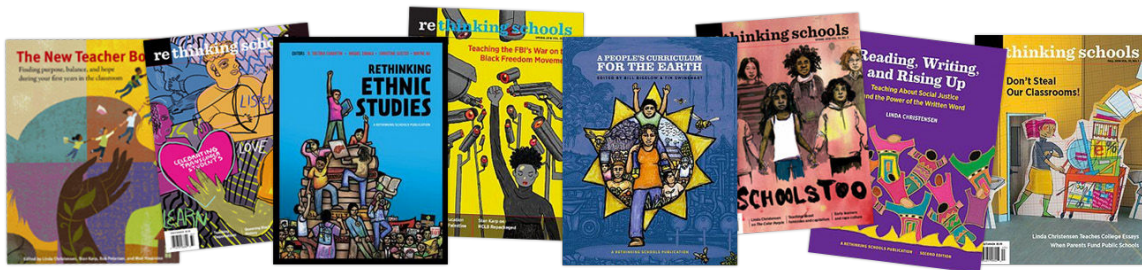
5. Depending on how students' conversation goes for the six questions, you might simply let them continue these until they have finished. Another alternative is to pause after each question to discuss students' arguments and to draw them back to their charge to demand policies that will advance them "socially, politically, educationally, and economically."
6. Following their deliberations, I ask students to choose at least three of the issues they discussed and to write about what they think happened in real life and why. I also ask students to reflect on the process of making decisions together: What difficulties did you have making decisions that freedpeople might also have? When were you successful in overcoming these difficulties? Kelly concluded her response paper: "These questions were hard to answer according to our role. You felt like you had to be realistic and honest about what could happen, but at the

same time you wanted to think big, and stand up for your full rights. I'll be interested to find out what really happened. . . . [The role play] gave us a better understanding for other people and a sense of empathy."

And that's where we want to leave students with this activity: eager to learn about "what really happened," how the actual human beings resolved these questions. I return to my notes on students' conversations about the six questions to plan my follow-up discussion on the role play. There are always gems, deserving to be explored further, like Eron's comment, while discussing the fifth question that asks, "How will the Black people be protected from the revenge of the defeated white soldiers and from the plantation owners?" Eron said: "We need to fight the system of our country. If we can't change that then there is no way to protect ourselves — we have to completely change the South."

Through engaging students in some of the essential questions that confronted people freed from slavery, students can begin to grasp how these questions are interrelated. It gives them a framework to evaluate different proposals for how the South would be "reconstructed" after the war. And as the "opening act" in students' study of Reconstruction, it establishes that the interests of freedpeople should be seen as paramount. ■

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# Freedpeople

**1865/1866:** And now the war is over. This is a joyous time. The horrors of slavery have ended. In millions of gestures, large and small, Black people in America resisted slavery from its very beginning in 1619. You won your freedom and the 13th Amendment to the Constitution ended slavery once and for all. All through the summer of 1865 there have been parades and celebrations. It's a time of unbelievable excitement, but also apprehension. What exactly does freedom mean? What kind of lives will you have now? True, you are free to leave the plantation. You are free to go North. Free to travel. Free to seek out lost family members who had been sold off. But you're also free to starve, free to be attacked by angry whites seeking revenge, free to be kicked out of your homes by defeated plantation owners.

Consider all the problems you face: For the last 250 years, enslaved Black people were robbed of their labor and their knowledge in order to make white people rich and now in "freedom" you own absolutely nothing. Even though you have lived your entire lives in the South, the shack you live in is owned by your former owner. Same with all the tools, work animals, and seed. Even the clothes you have on are owned by the family that enslaved you. Most important, you own no land. Without land

you will always be dependent, always forced to serve the property owners. You want to farm your own land, and grow food for your family.

And there are other problems: At least 90% of you are illiterate. Under slavery it was a crime to teach an enslaved person to read or write. Some learned anyway, but most had no opportunity. Most of you own no guns. Almost all firearms in the South are owned by former enslavers and the whites who fought for the Confederacy. (Remember, however, that the Union Army still occupies much of the South, and some Union soldiers used to be held in slavery, like you.) Also you have no political rights: You can't vote or hold office.

Long ago, your people were kidnapped in Africa, stuffed into the bellies of stinking slave ships, stripped of your language, dumped in a strange land, punished for practicing your religion, frequently separated from your family members, and forced to labor with a whip at your back. The wealth of this country, both South and North, is because of your labor, your skills, your knowledge. You've suffered too much — and whites have profited too much — for you to be forced to wander the countryside as beggars. This is not your idea of freedom.



*Freedpeople's school, ca 1890.*

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# Reconstructing the South: Problems

You are part of a delegation of African Americans who, up until recently, were enslaved. You are traveling to Washington, D.C., to demand legislation that will make sure that freedpeople become truly free and are able to advance socially, politically, educationally, and economically. Before you leave, there are a number of key questions that you must agree upon. These are difficult questions, and your answers to them could determine whether your future is one of progress or misery.

1. **SITUATION:** Right now, almost no formerly enslaved people in the South own any land. Legally, most of you don't even own the clothes you are wearing. All your lives you have lived and worked on plantations owned by wealthy whites. Some people argue that the legitimate owners of the Southern plantations are you, the freedpeople. They say that for almost 250 years, you are the ones who did all the work and made the plantations profitable — and that because of your sacrifices, rightfully the plantations should belong to you. And, remember, these white plantation owners are traitors. They began a war that killed more than 600,000 people. Why should they get to keep the land that you worked on all those years? Others say that this might be the moral thing to demand, but it would be politically unwise. Ultimately, it will be Northern politicians who will decide your fate. Remember, like Abraham Lincoln, most of these people were never abolitionists. And now that you are free, they will be reluctant to take away the property of other white people to give it to Black people. For one thing, they may worry that this would set an example for poor whites in the North to take over the property of rich whites. They, too, could say that the factories were built with their labor and they should own them. Northern politicians may also worry that if you owned the land, you might want to grow food instead of cotton, and this could have a negative impact on the Northern economy.

**QUESTION:** Now that the war is ended, who should own and control these plantations?

2. **QUESTION:** Would you be willing to promise the Northern politicians that, in exchange for acknowledging your right to the land, you would continue to grow cotton?

**ARGUMENTS:** Some of you argue that, of course, you have to give politicians this assurance, otherwise you'll get nothing from them. They argue: Look, we may not want to grow cotton, and we may not want to make promises to anyone, but we have to be realistic; these people care about Northern industries maintaining their supply of cheap cotton more than they care about you or your desires. It's better to get something than to get nothing. Others of you argue that to offer this promise is just to trade in one kind of slavery for another. What kind of freedom is it when you are forced to grow a crop you don't want to grow? Cotton is a "sorrow" crop, associated with slavery. You can't eat cotton and growing it makes you dependent on cotton dealers — all white — to market your product. And it makes you vulnerable to prices of cotton going up and down, something you have no control over. If it's your land, you should be able to grow what you want.

3. **SITUATION:** There are still lots of Confederate (Southern) military officers and political leaders at large in the South. True, the war is over. But these are the people who actively led the fight to keep Black people enslaved.



**QUESTION:** What do you propose should happen to these Confederate leaders?

**ARGUMENTS:** Some of you argue that the top leaders should be executed or at least imprisoned for the rest of their lives. They argue that these ex-Confederate leaders are guilty of mass murder because they led an illegal war — a war that killed more than 600,000 human beings and caused great suffering. These people also argue that not only do Confederate leaders deserve to be executed because of their role in the war, but more importantly they also pose the greatest danger to your freedom. These are the people who will be desperate to return to slavery days and they have the money and leadership capabilities to organize secret armies to push you back into slavery. Others argue that if you appear to want revenge, and go after the white leaders most popular with white people in the South that it will poison relations between Blacks and whites, and damage the long-term possibility for racial harmony. They argue that the best way to get white Southerners to rise up against you is to kill or imprison their leaders. They say that we need to put the war behind us, and that so long as you have rights and resources, you don't need to hurt anyone else.

4. **SITUATION:** Before the war, enslaved Blacks counted as 3/5 of a person in determining how many U.S. representatives a state was entitled to — even though, of course, Blacks held in slavery had no vote. Now that slavery has ended, Blacks will be counted as full people whether or not they are allowed to vote. Ironically, if people who were formerly enslaved *don't* vote, this could mean that the white-controlled South could become even more powerful.

**QUESTION:** Who should be allowed to vote in the new South? Everyone? Only formerly enslaved people? Only those who were loyal to the United States during the war? Women?

**ARGUMENTS:** This is a controversial and complicated issue: Some people say only those with land should vote, because they are the ones who have the most stake in society and they are the most stable people. Some argue that only people who can read should be able to vote, because otherwise people will not vote intelligently. Others say this sounds good, but if landownership or literacy were qualifications for voters, then people who would be able to vote would be mostly rich white people. Some argue that any Southerner who picked up arms against the U.S. government should not be allowed to vote — that these people proved that they were disloyal to the United States and should not now be rewarded with the vote. Besides, anyone who supported the Confederacy and slavery will now use their vote to work against your freedom. Others believe that if you try to deny the vote to all those who supported the Confederacy that would mean taking it away from most white Southerners, and this would make it seem like you were trying to impose a Black government on the South. Denied the vote, whites might turn to rebellion or terrorism and begin murdering Blacks. As you know, many of those who made up the abolition movement in the North were white women. They argue that now is the time to demand a Constitutional amendment that would give everyone the vote: white men, white women, Black men, Black women. Freedom and democracy are in the air, and this is the time to create a whole new society based on equality. Others say that if you demand the right for women to vote, this will make you look radical and foolish and no one will take you seriously. It will be seen as radical enough just demanding the vote for Black men, but to add women to the mix will doom your movement.

5. **SITUATION:** Most of the guns in the South are owned by whites. Many people who fought with the Confederacy still have their weapons from the war. Temporarily, the South is occupied by the Union army. Many white Southerners, probably most of them, would like nothing better than to return Black people to slavery. There has been talk of a new organization, called the Ku Klux Klan, designed to terrorize Blacks and their white supporters, and to restore white supremacist rule to the South.



**QUESTION:** How will the Black freedpeople be protected from the revenge of the defeated soldiers and from the plantation owners?

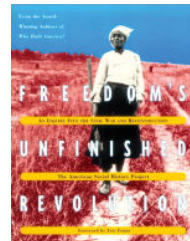
**ARGUMENTS:** One proposal would be to keep the Union army in the South, and perhaps to even bring in more troops. Some people argue that the Confederate army might not be able to defeat the Union army, but it *would* be able to defeat the newly freed Black people. Therefore the Union army will be needed for years. Others argue that the presence of Union soldiers will continue to anger white Southerners and some other solution must be found. Some argue that no Confederates should be allowed to own guns. Others counter that this would not be a solution and would continue to anger white Southerners. Some suggest that the Union army should arm Black people, so that they can defend themselves from possible attacks from whites. Others say that more guns in the South will just lead to more violence.

6. **QUESTION:** What conditions should be put on the Southern states before they are allowed to return to the Union?

**ARGUMENTS:** Some Northerners say that the Southern states never actually left the Union, so these states should be allowed back into the United States immediately. After all, didn't Lincoln wage the war based on the belief that secession was illegal? Others say this is ridiculous, the Southern states would just re-elect the rich racists who led the country to Civil War — the Southern states left the Union and organized a separate country, with a new constitution and president. The 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution ended slavery forever. However, if the South is allowed to re-enter the Union without any changes, what would stop them from passing laws that would bring back slavery under a different name? Here are some possibilities you might consider: Southern states can rejoin the Union after they ratify (approve) the 13th amendment abolishing slavery. Others say this isn't enough, that the Southern states need to create new state governments that are democratically elected by the people, including now-freed Black people. Others say that this is not the business of the federal (U.S.) government, that it's up to each state to decide who gets to vote or not. Some Northerners say that the South should be ruled as conquered territory for several more years. It's too early to even raise the question of allowing the former Confederate states back into the Union. What do you think?

# The Promised Land

This reading is Chapter 11 from [Freedom's Unfinished Revolution: An Inquiry into the Civil War and Reconstruction](#) (American Social History Project, 1996). We highly recommend the entire book for middle and high school classrooms. Reprint permission for this chapter was provided to the Zinn Education Project by The New Press. The discussion questions were prepared by Bill Bigelow. See "Freedom's Unfinished Revolution: Teaching a People's History of Reconstruction," at the Zinn Education Project, for a review focusing on the book's classroom uses.



## DOCUMENT ONE

We has a right to the land where we are located. For why? I tell you. Our wives, our children, our husbands, have been sold over and over again to purchase the lands we now locate upon; for that reason we have a divine right to the land....And then didn't we clear the land and raise the crops of corn, of cotton, of tobacco, of rice, of sugar, of everything? And then didn't...large cities in the north grow up on the cotton and the sugars and the rice that we made!...I say they have grown rich, and my people are poor. —Bayley Wyat, *an ex-slave protesting eviction of blacks from confiscated plantations in Virginia, 1866*

## DOCUMENT TWO

...as well may the Irish laborer claim New York City, because by his labor all the stores and residence there were constructed. Or claim our railroads because they labored on them with their shovels and wheelbarrows. —Elias Yulee, *a southern white lawyer, in response to Wyat's argument, 1866*

## "Uncle Sam Is Rich Enough to Give You All a Farm"

*Of the whole creation in the East or the West,  
The glorious Yankee nation is the greatest  
and the best.*

*Come along! don't be alarmed,  
Uncle Sam is rich enough to give you all a farm.*

With this song, Harriet Tubman greeted enslaved African Americans in South Carolina who were liberated during the Civil War by an all-black Union Army regiment. There was striking symbolism in the fact that Tubman, an ex-

slave, accompanied the Second South Carolina Volunteers in an assault against Confederate plantations in the lush rice fields of the Combahee River basin. In the decades before the Civil War, Tubman had led hundreds of slaves to freedom as a "conductor" for the Underground Railroad, a network of guides and safe houses on the route through which escaped slaves were escorted north to freedom.

The last line of Tubman's song echoes a recurring 19th-century American theme: that land is the birthright of every American. Uncle Sam is rich enough to give you all a farm. America was the land of opportunity, and opportunity meant

land. A family with land was independent, no longer subject to landowners or employers for economic survival.

On the farms envisioned by Tubman and other former slaves, there would be no place for cotton or sugar or tobacco or any other crop associated with slavery, gang labor, and white supervision. Like so many other 19th-century Americans, white and black, freedpeople wanted to work the land as self-sufficient farmers. Their “American Dream” was built around 40 acres and a mule many expected from the Freedmen’s Bureau, a few barnyard animals, and enough seed to plant greens, potatoes, and garden vegetables.

What was important was that they owned the land outright; that they were not farm laborers dependent on planters for work and wages, or tenants obligated to landlords; that they were not in debt to mortgage-holding banks, or to local merchants who extended credit for seed and supplies; that with hard work they could feed, house, and clothe their families. A farm might not make emancipated slaves rich, but it certainly would make them free and independent. Uncle Sam is

rich enough to give you all a farm. Should the United States take the land of the planters who waged war against the Union and give it to the ex-slaves? Was there any precedent for Uncle Sam confiscating land and redistributing it? Who, ultimately, would own this land? Who would work it, and on what terms? The answers to these questions were intricately tied to the politics of the South, its economy, its race relations, and the struggle of African Americans for freedom and equality.

Following the war, there was a decade of conflict in the South as ex-slaves, ex-slaveholders, poor whites, and various interested parties from the North struggled over the issues of land and labor. But questions like these were played out in a much larger historical context, both before and after the Civil War.

## The Debate over U.S. Land Policies

The debate over government land policy was not new. From the end of the American Revolution in the 1780s to the outbreak of the Civil War



National Anthropological Archive, Smithsonian Institution

**BATTLE OF THE LITTLE BIGHORN.** The debate over freedpeople’s right to land occurred in the same era as the United States government completed the confiscation of Indians lands. The loss of their homes and their forced removal to reservations provoked many Indians to war. This is part of a series of pictures drawn by the Sioux warrior Red Horse showing the last Indian victory, the 1876 Battle of the Little Bighorn. Red Horse recorded his memories of the battle five years later at the Cheyenne River Agency reservation.



in the 1860s, the federal government had accumulated millions of acres in land. Its landed wealth came as a result of conquest and swindle. The United States took—some would say grabbed or stole — millions of acres of western lands from Native Americans and Mexicans. As the government amassed vast new territories, southern slaveholders and northerners of many different interests struggled over who should get the land.

Federal land policies in the West created precedents, both positive and negative, for postwar land policies in the South. In the first half of the 19th century, the U.S. government established a pattern of confiscation and redistribution. It seized land from the Indian and Mexican nations and then gave much of it away to railroads, land speculators, and small cultivators. By 1860, as a result of public land sales on the open market, speculators owned 25 percent of the land in the states of Illinois and Iowa and 50 percent of the land in Minnesota.

In response to popular pressure, Congress made changes in federal land policy. In 1862, it passed the Homestead Act, granting 160 acres of federally owned territory in the West to individuals or families who paid a modest filing fee and who were willing to improve and live on the land for five years.

The act never created as many homesteads as expected. Most laborers could not afford even the small filing fee, let alone the money for the long trip west and farm equipment. Lumber and mining corporations, land speculators, and cattle companies took advantage of loopholes in the 1862 act to capture much more land than ever went to homesteaders.

But the biggest beneficiaries were the railroads. Between 1862 and 1890, Congress, state legislatures, and town councils distributed 180 million free acres to railroad companies to encourage construction of new lines. The free acreage was equivalent in size, for example, to the entire land mass of Texas and Oklahoma.

The federal government had confiscated millions of acres of western lands from nonwhites, Mexicans, and Indians, and redistributed it to railroads, corporate interests, and selected homesteaders. But, with rare exception, it would not confiscate the land of wealthy white Confederate planters and

redistribute it to poor blacks and whites. By the end of the Reconstruction era in 1877, federal land policies had done little to alter the unequal distribution of wealth in the old Confederacy and had done much to redistribute power and wealth to railroads and other large corporations in both the West and the South.

There was nothing inevitable about this outcome. Back in 1865, as the Civil War ended, federal land policy in the South was an open question. As described in chapters 6 and 7 in *Freedom's Unfinished Revolution*, Sherman's Field Order Number 15 raised expectations of land ownership among ex-slaves.

Those expectations seemed a step closer to reality in March 1865 when Congress passed the bill creating the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Land, known as the Freedmen's Bureau. The land provision of that bill stated that the Bureau would redistribute lands abandoned by Confederate planters by leasing 40-acre tracts to freedmen and "loyal white refugees." After three years the renter could purchase the land. Many ex-slaves saw the Freedmen's bill as a reaffirmation of Sherman's Field Order Number 15. But the bill did not

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*Who lost land in the West?  
Who got land? Who were the  
biggest winners and losers  
under the federal government's  
western land policies?*

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*"THE SENATORIAL ROUND-HOUSE." The federal government's most generous land program in the late 19th-century benefitted railroad companies. Thomas Nast commented on railroad lobbyists' control of the U.S. Senate in a July 10, 1886, cartoon.*

Harper's Weekly



empower the Freedmen's Bureau to conduct large-scale land confiscation. Obviously, it could not lease or sell land it did not have. In 1865, there were potentially one million eligible black and white families in the South but only 800,000 acres under bureau control; that amounts to less than an acre per household.

Rather than distribute land it didn't have, the bureau mainly supervised labor contracts. In the spring of 1865, military officials and Freedmen's Bureau agents in the occupied South feared that unless black labor was put to work, the economy of the South would collapse. Agents of the Freed-

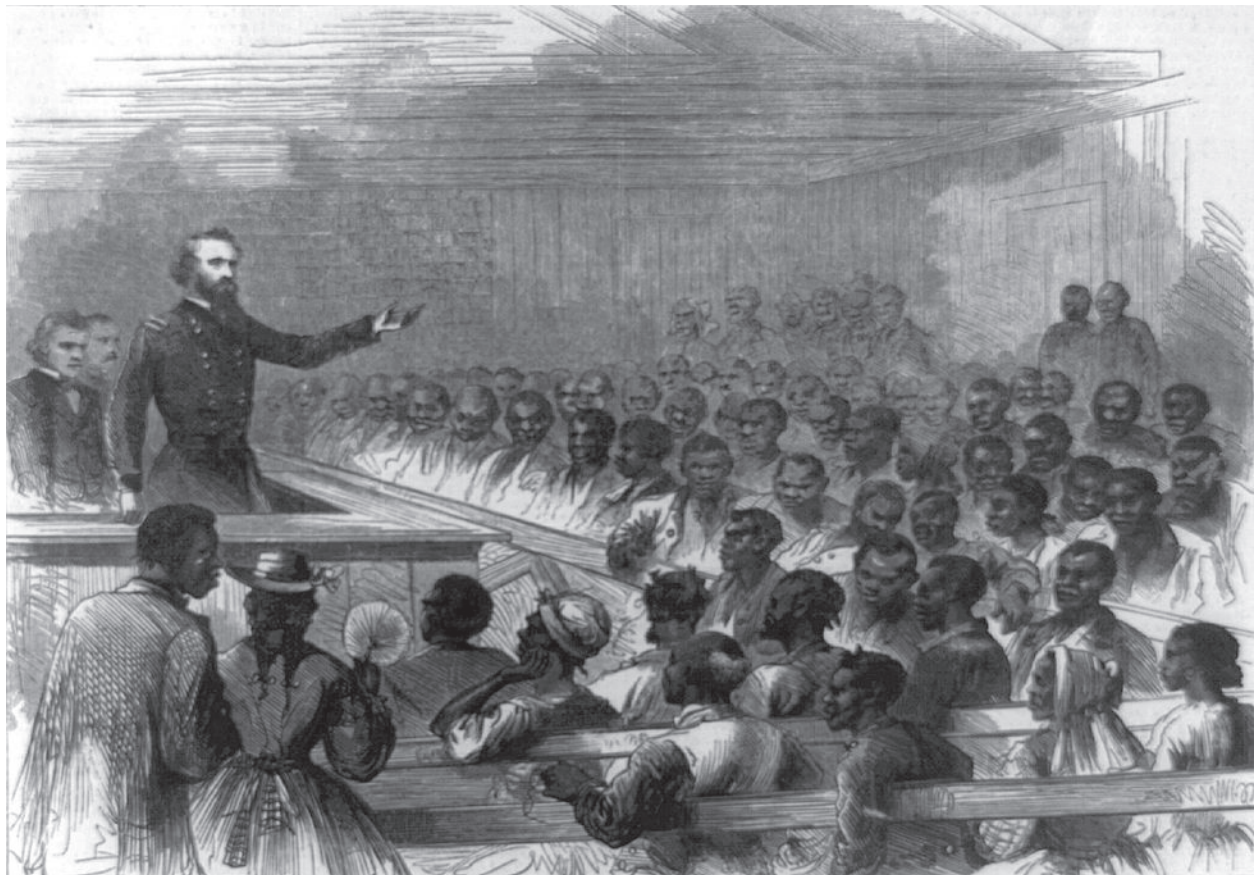
men's Bureau persuaded reluctant freedmen to sign labor contracts with ex-slaveholders. Without land, emancipated slaves had little choice. This put bureau agents in the uncomfortable position of encouraging, and later enforcing, contracts that put emancipated slaves back to work for their former masters.

President Andrew Johnson further dashed the hopes of freedmen for land. Less than two months after the war ended, he issued a sweeping amnesty and began issuing individual pardons granting planters and Confederate leaders full political rights and title to lands abandoned or confiscated during the war.

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*President Andrew Johnson  
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In 1866 President Johnson sent two generals on a southern inspection tour to gather complaints against the Freedmen's Bureau. The plan backfired: freedpeople repeatedly informed Joseph S. Fullerton (shown here meeting with residents of a North Carolina Black settlement) and John Steedman of their support for the bureau. Fullerton was unsympathetic to the aspirations of freedpeople for land. When he ran the Louisiana Freedmen's Bureau, he shut down a Black orphan asylum and sent the children to work for white masters, ordered the arrest of all New Orleans African Americans who did not have written proof of employment, and returned 62,000 acres of freedpeople's land to planters.

*In the following excerpt from the Congressional Record, Thaddeus Stevens makes the case for confiscation and redistribution of land in the South.*

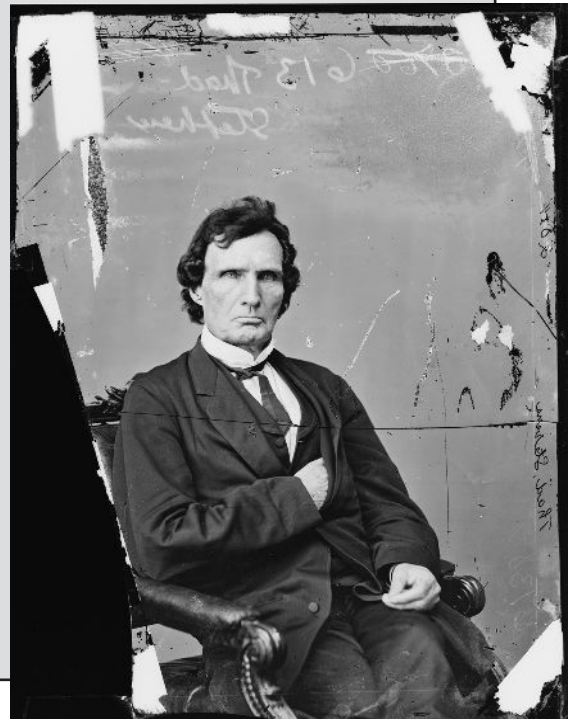
### DOCUMENT THREE

We especially insist that the property of the chief rebels should be seized and appropriated to the payment of the national debt, caused by the unjust and wicked war they instigated [started] . . . There are about 6,000,000 of freedmen in the South. The number of acres of land is 465,000,000. Of this those who own above 200 acres each number about 70,000 persons, holding in the aggregate — together with the states — about 394,000,000. By forfeiting the estates of the leading rebels the government would have 394,000,000 of acres besides their town property, and yet nine-tenths of the people would remain untouched. Divide the land into convenient farms. Give, if you please, 40 acres to each adult male freedman. Suppose there are 1,000,000 of them. That would require 40,000,000 acres, which deducted from 394,000,000 leaves 354,000,000 acres for sale. Divide it into suitable farms, and sell it to the highest bidders. I think it, including town property, would average at least \$10 per acre. That would produce \$3,540,000.

The whole fabric of southern society *must* be changed and never can it be done if this opportunity is lost. Without this, this government can never be, as it has never been, a true republic....How can republican institutions, free schools, free churches, free social intercourse exist in a mingled community of nabobs [men of wealth and high position] and serfs [tillers of the land]? If the South is ever made a safe republic let her lands be cultivated by the toil of...free labor....

Nothing is so likely to make a man a good citizen as to make him a freeholder [landholder]. Nothing will so multiply the production of the South as to divide it into small farms. Nothing will make men so industrious and moral as to let them feel that they are above want and are the owners of the soil which they till. ... No people will ever be republican in spirit and practice where a few own immense manors and the masses are landless. Small and independent landholders are the support and guardians of republican liberty.

—Excerpts from speeches by Radical Republican Congressman Thaddeus Stevens, 1865, as published in the Congressional Record



Thaddeus Stevens, between 1860 and 1875.

Library of Congress

## Thaddeus Stevens's Plan for Confiscation and Redistribution

Radical Republicans mobilized their party, the Congress, and the country against Johnson's Reconstruction plan. But on the issue of land confiscation and redistribution, the Radicals were hopelessly split.

Yet for a brief historical moment, Thaddeus Stevens, a leader of the Radical Republicans in the House of Representatives, stirred the political pot. He called for the massive confiscation of planter lands and their redistribution to ex-slaves and poor whites in 40-acre tracts. After such redistribution, he claimed, there would still be plenty of confiscated lands left over which the government could then put up for sale. With the receipts, the U.S. Treasury Department could pay off the Union war debt and finance pensions for Union veterans and the families of Union soldiers who died in the Civil War.

Stevens claimed that without land confiscation and redistribution, there was no basis for democracy in the South. Free institutions could not develop if a tiny elite continued to monopolize the land. "No people will ever be republican in spirit and practice," Stevens insisted, "where a few own immense manors [plantations] and the masses are landless." Under such conditions, economic necessity would force poor whites and ex-slaves to work the planters' land on the planters' terms, or starve. How could democracy endure when a few planters controlled the economic survival of the majority of southerners?

Stevens's bill never got out of committee and onto the floor of the House of Representatives for a vote.

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*What was Thaddeus Stevens's plan?  
What arguments did he make in favor of the plan?  
Why did it fail to pass Congress?*

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It died despite Stevens's considerable power, prestige, and persuasive skills, and despite the appeal to several large groups — freedmen, poor whites, Union veterans, and families of deceased soldiers. It died because Stevens's Radical allies, while supporting political and civil equality for African Americans, generally drew the line at property seizure and land redistribution.

The whole notion of property confiscation touched a raw nerve. Northern journals, including leading Republican publications like The New York

Times and the Nation, worried that the confiscation of property from the rich and its redistribution to the poor in the South might set a precedent for doing the same in the North. Might it not encourage industrial workers to seize the property of large northern corporations? The Nation warned that the "division of rich man's lands among the landless...would give a shock to our whole social and political system from which it could hardly recover without the loss of liberty."

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*Stevens claimed that without land confiscation and redistribution, there was no basis for democracy in the South.*

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The Republicans who controlled the Reconstruction governments in the South were just as divided over issues of land confiscation and distribution as were Republicans in the U.S. Congress.

After 1867, there was some talk of land confiscation and redistribution at the conventions that drafted new constitutions for the states seeking readmission to the Union under the Radical Republicans' plan of Reconstruction. But both supporters and opponents of land seizure knew that Congress, after killing the Stevens bill, would not readmit states with constitutions that provided for confiscation and redistribution of planter property. As a result, none of the new state constitutions addressed the issue of land confiscation.

The South Carolina legislature hoped that by taxing planter land at its true value, it could force much of it onto the market for sale. It created a Land Commission that purchased and then resold property by providing relatively easy terms for long-term payment. Other reconstructed states, however, did woefully little to provide land for ex-slaves and poor whites. Generally taking their cues from northern party members, southern Republicans — particularly white elected officeholders and even some free blacks — were unyielding in their opposition to any form of land confiscation and redistribution.

Among ex-slaves, however, the sentiment was widespread that government should give them access to land. But with the exception of South Carolina, ex-slaves could not mobilize enough votes among divided southern Republican legislators, let alone Democrats, to pass meaningful land legislation. Most freedpeople remained landless.



## DOCUMENT FOUR

[Land confiscation] is a question not of humanity, not of loyalty, but of fundamental relation of industry to capital; and sooner or later, if begun at the South, it will find its way into the cities of the North....An attempt to justify the confiscation of Southern land under the pretense of doing justice to the freedmen, strikes at the root of property rights in both sections. It concerns Massachusetts as much as Mississippi.  
—New York Times, July 9, 1867

## DOCUMENT FIVE

FREEDMAN: Sir, I want you to help me in a personal matter.

GENERAL: Where is your family?

FREEDMAN: On the Red River.

GENERAL: Have you not everything you want?

FREEDMAN: No sir.

GENERAL: You are free!

FREEDMAN: Yes, sir, you set me free, but you left me there.

GENERAL: What do you want?

FREEDMAN: I want some land; I am helpless; you do nothing for me but give me freedom.

GENERAL: Is not that enough?

FREEDMAN: It is enough for the present; but I cannot help myself unless I get some land; then I can take care of myself and my family; otherwise I cannot do it.

—Reported by the Joint Congressional Committee on Reconstruction, 1867



Library of Congress

A sketch by A.R. Waud of African Americans working in rice fields in Ogeechee, Georgia, 1867.



## Sharecropping

Most freedmen remained landless. Still, in a post-war economy where the demand for agricultural wage labor far outstripped the supply, freedmen had considerable bargaining power. Some struck, others slowed down cotton and rice production, and significant numbers refused to sign labor contracts. Planters and freedmen found themselves in a standoff. Neither side got what it wanted.

Most freedpeople didn't get 40 acres, let alone a mule. And most ex-slaveholders could not recruit and keep a cheap labor force of black contract labor because freedmen generally refused to work in gangs under white supervision on cotton, rice, and sugar plantations.

An Alabama newspaper that reflected the views of local planters, the *Selma Argus*, recognized that sharecropping was "an unwilling concession to the freedman's desire to become a proprietor...." In an editorial, the *Argus* commented that if African American farm labor was permitted to rent and

sharecrop, "the power to control him is gone."

Yet sharecropping was very different from land ownership. Sharecropping gave farmers an important measure of control over their work, yet still left them dependent on a landlord for land, and often seed, equipment, and credit.

Even so, during Radical Reconstruction, the system of sharecropping frequently worked to the advantage of the cropper and to the disadvantage of the landlord. That's

because local magistrates and justices of the peace who settled disputes between tenants and landlords tended to be Republicans. In fact, in many instances the local officials were African Americans. But with the end of Reconstruction, the Democratic party regained control of local governments and appointed magistrates and justices sympathetic to the old planting class. Public officials now allowed landlord-merchants to manipulate the payment of shares for seed and materials in ways that reduced croppers to a permanent state of debt, poverty, and dependence.

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*Most freedpeople didn't get 40 acres, let alone a mule.*

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### DOCUMENT SIX

You say that you have emancipated us. You have and I thank you for it. But what is your emancipation?

When the Israelites were emancipated they were told to go and borrow of their neighbors — borrow their coin, borrow their jewels, load themselves down with the means of subsistence; after they should go free in the land which the Lord God gave them. When the Russian serfs had their chains broken and were given their liberty, the government of Russia — aye the despotic government of Russia — gave to these poor emancipated serfs a few acres of land on which they could earn their bread.

When you turned us loose, you gave us no acres. You turned us loose to the sky, to the storm, to the whirlwind, and worst of all, you turned us loose to the wrath of our infuriated masters.

—Frederick Douglass, *summing up the failure of Reconstruction*

# Discussion Questions

1. How would Bayley Wyat have answered the first question in the “Reconstructing the South” role play, about who should own the land?
2. Contrast the quote from Elias Yulee with Bayley Wyat. Do they contradict each other?
3. The authors of “The Promised Land” ask, “Should the United States take the land of the planters who waged war against the Union and give it to the ex-slaves?” How did you answer that question in the “Reconstructing the South” role play?
4. The chapter points out that there was a precedent for the federal government taking land away from one group and distributing it to another. For example, millions of acres had been taken from Native Americans and given to railroads. Why, then, was the federal government reluctant to take land from white plantation owners and give it to people who had formerly been enslaved?
5. Why do you think President Andrew Johnson failed to support giving land to the formerly enslaved people in the South and instead gave title to lands that had been abandoned or confiscated during the Civil War back to former Confederate leaders?
6. What do you think of Thaddeus Stevens’s plan to confiscate and redistribute lands of the planter class in the former Confederacy?
7. Look at Document Three, excerpts from speeches by Thaddeus Stevens. What does he propose? Would Stevens have agreed with your actions in the “Reconstructing the South” role play?
8. Why does Stevens believe that “the whole fabric of Southern society must be changed . . .”? What would it mean to change the “whole fabric of Southern society”?

9. Who would favor Stevens's plan? Who would oppose it?
10. Why did Thaddeus Stevens's plan for confiscation and redistribution of plantation land not receive more support in Congress?
11. *The New York Times* argued in 1867 that if Southern land were confiscated from the former plantation owners and given to formerly enslaved people that this would strike "at the root of property rights in both sections" — the North and the South. Is that true? What is *The New York Times* worried about?
12. The chapter calls sharecropping a compromise. Was it a compromise or was it a defeat for freed-people?
13. Explain why you agree or disagree with Frederick Douglass's criticism in Document Six, when he says that, "when you [the federal government] turned us loose, you gave us no acres. You turned us loose to the sky, the storm, to the whirlwind, and worst of all, you turned us loose to the wrath of our infuriated masters."

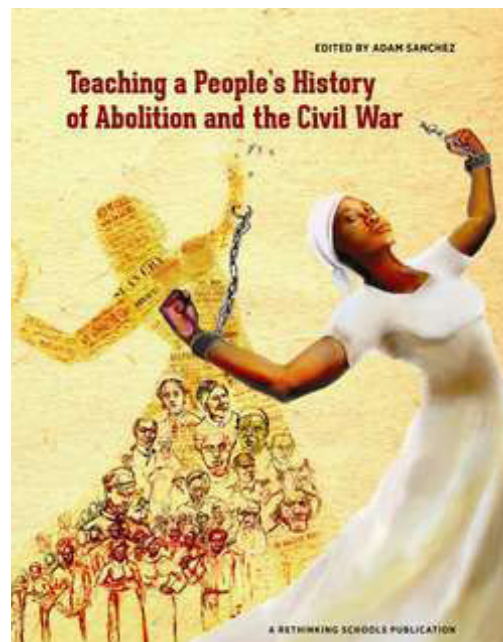
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