Chapter 15

**[THE BIG IDEA] What goals did Republican policymakers, ex-Confederates, and freedpeople pursue during Reconstruction? To what degree did each succeed?**

Hi, I’m Rebecca Edwards. I teach history at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York and I wrote chapters 15 through 22 of *America’s History*.

Americans often retell the Civil War as if it ended at Appomattox. In this story, both sides fought bravely, Lee surrendered gallantly, and we can feel good about the war because Lincoln, despite his tragic death, left the legacy of Emancipation.

But the war wasn’t over in 1865. A long, bitter struggle lay ahead. What did Union victory really mean? That was disputed in legislatures, through public opinion, and by ordinary people in the former Confederacy, who continued to fight not just with words, but with weapons.

During Reconstruction African Americans embarked on a struggle for citizenship. For them Union victory meant the promise of education, good jobs, and the right to protect their families, communities, and property. Ex-Confederates rejected those ambitions. They hated what they called “Negro rule” and worked to keep blacks subservient.

To a large degree, Republicans in Washington supported freedpeople’s rights. After a messy, politically costly struggle to sideline Andrew Johnson, Congress asserted federal citizenship and took the unheard-of step of enfranchising African American men. They tried to reshape the South in ways that would benefit both blacks and whites, especially those in poverty.

But white Northerners were hardly free of racial prejudice. When they talked about “reunion” they meant restoring their ties with former Confederates, not former slaves. Faced with white Southerners’ fierce, unyielding resistance to Reconstruction—including widespread violence and terror—Northerners eventually backed down. They found the prospect of long-term military occupation exhausting and unworkable. By the mid-1870s, Southern Democrats overthrew state governments and took control.

Reconstruction remains widely misunderstood. Though the North won the war, white Southerners to a large degree won the peace. By the early twentieth century, most white Americans—including professional historians--came to believe that Reconstruction had been a huge mistake. Over the past fifty years, scholars have disproven this old view, but we haven’t persuaded everybody. The fact that Reconstruction is still controversial shows just how much was at stake.