

Why My Students Weren't Surprised on January 6th

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On January 5th, 2021, I began my virtual eleventh grade U.S. History classes with hope and fervor. I was closely watching the Georgia Senate races. Regardless of one's political affiliation, showing students real life cases of people making history by overcoming insurmountable odds and becoming "the first" both energizes and motivates teachers. With all the examples of police brutality and lack of police accountability my students witnessed this summer around the country and in their own city, they were understandably cynical and did not believe that Reverend Raphael Warnock had a chance. The next day, Warnock was indeed declared a winner, and I could not wait to use his win as an example of how our vote matters.

We can make a difference no matter our ethnicity, age, education, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic background. The fact that the son of a mother who spent countless backbreaking hours picking cotton in rural Jim Crow Georgia was elected the first Black man from Georgia to the Senate would make even the most ardent critic a believer. The fact that this happened despite the then-president's baseless and racially motivated accusations of voter fraud, aimed (in particular) at large metropolitan areas with strong concentrations of African American voters, further enshrined my point that people who look like my primarily Black and Latinx students can make a change.

Instead, my hope turned to horror as I watched the invasion of the Capitol by Confederate flag-waving rioters chanting for the lynching of the vice president, trashing, looting, and defiling the site where historic legislations have been debated and passed—like the *Civil Rights Voting Act* of 1965, which enabled Raphael Warnock's victory. I wrestled with what I was going to say to my students on Thursday, the day after the insurrection. I prepared a lesson that first gave them a safe forum to express how they felt, to comfort them, to let them know that they were safe. I emphasized that the strength of our democratic republic relies on people like them who would not allow mob rule and political demagogues to deter them from voting or to discount the outcome of their vote. My current and former students who contacted me to discuss the events restored my hope. They may have been slightly confused that this happened in 2021, but unlike the mainstream media or the general American public,



REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

Supporters of President Donald Trump wave banners and symbols of white supremacy during clashes with Capitol police. An insurrectionist mob swarmed the U.S. Capitol Building on January 6, 2021, to contest the certification of the 2020 presidential election, in Washington, D.C.

my students were not left asking how this could happen in the United States of America.

Even though it is not a requirement in my curriculum, over the course of my 20-year teaching career, I have taught my students about events like Louisiana's 1873 Colfax Massacre, when the Ku Klux Klan refused to acknowledge a local Republican election victory, which had been delivered largely by the votes of newly freedmen. The Klan and white paramilitary groups murdered some 60 to 150 members of a Black state militia who had been defending the local courthouse and the Grant Parish regional government.

I have taught my students about North Carolina's 1898 Wilmington coup, the only instance in U.S. history where a legitimate government was overthrown by a white-supremacist revolt. In the past, I have taught my students about Florida's 1920 Ocoee massacre that took place when a Black man had the audacity to exercise his 15th Amendment right to vote, for which a white mob forced his entire town to pay the price in bloodshed.

In each of these cases, the local police either stood by and did nothing or joined with the white rioters. This is the America



The first African American senator and representatives—the 41st and 42nd Congress. Robert C. De Large, Jefferson H. Long, H.R. Revels, Benj. S. Turner, Josiah T. Walls, Joseph H. Rainey [i.e., Rainey], and R. Brown Elliot (Published by Currier & Ives, 1872.)

my forefathers inherited. This is the America in which my forefathers came of age. This is the America I make sure to also teach my students so that they not only take the threat of white supremacists seriously but also exercise their right to vote in order to change the laws that enable that threat. Perhaps if the public and members of law enforcement had learned about these events in social studies classes, white Americans would not be shaking their heads in disbelief and struggling to interpret the events we just experienced. I am not suggesting this be the only part of America’s history that is taught. I am simply insisting that this history can no longer be left out of our textbooks or curriculum.

One of the main responses from teachers who might read this essay will be based in the very real problem that teachers simply do not have the time. I argue that teaching with purpose is the remedy. For example, I use my unit on Reconstruction to not

only teach general concepts such as voter disenfranchisement, but to provide poignant examples that have lasting power and will motivate students to vote when they leave my classroom. Louisiana’s 1873 Colfax Massacre is one of the strongest examples in my teacher toolbox. After exploring the different aspects of congressional Reconstruction, we acknowledge the political advances Blacks made on the heels of the 15th Amendment by reviewing the 1872 lithograph by Currier and Ives (above), which depicts African American legislators who were elected to the 41st and 42nd Congress. We also read a short excerpt from Eric Foner’s article “Rooted in Reconstruction: The First Wave of Black Congressmen.”¹ Students discuss how and why the images and information in the texts challenge or reaffirm their previous assumptions about Black political participation during Reconstruction. I then have students examine portraits of Black senators currently serving in Congress along with a graph

that shows the decline of Black congressional membership since Reconstruction. The graph shows that by 1901, the number of African Americans serving in Congress *dropped* from 16 to 0.²

When my students demand an explanation for low Black political participation since Reconstruction, I not only describe the different methods of voter suppression such as the poll tax, grandfather clause, and literacy tests, but I let the story of the Colfax Massacre provide an additional answer. In class or for homework, students read excerpts from Danny Lewis’s “The 1873 Colfax Massacre Crippled the Reconstruction Era”³ for background information as well as primary source accounts from the *Colfax Massacre Reports Committee of 70 United States House of Representatives | 1874, 1875*.⁴ In small groups, students use the readings to construct a cause and effect timeline of the events leading up to the massacre. Using the documents they read throughout the lesson as a point of reference, students later participate in a paideia seminar with open-ended questions centered on asking whether the ideals expressed in 1776 in the Declaration of Independence were realized by 1876, and to what extent white supremacy and violence have shaped or hindered American democracy.

After experiencing the events of January 6th, I do plan on altering the lesson. The next time I teach my unit on Reconstruction, instead of ending with the paideia seminar, my students will construct a Venn diagram to better understand the similarities in the causes of both the 1873 Colfax Massacre and January 6th insurrection and then I’ll ask them to analyze the video footage and images of the Confederate flag on display in the Capitol as well as the makeshift gallows that was erected and displayed on the Mall.

We will read interviews and tweets from former president Trump in which he demanded the disenfranchisement of thousands of Black men and women from those metropolitan cities that cost him the election, and we’ll listen to the speech Trump’s political allies gave immediately before the attack on the Capitol encouraging the rioters to “march down to the Capitol” and “fight like hell.” We will read interviews from Black Capitol police officers describing the racial slurs and threats that were specifically directed towards them by the rioters during the seize.

I want my students to use what they learned from Reconstruction to assume a position in the current debate about whether what happened on January 6th is a reflection of who we are as a country. The events on January 6th demonstrate that we cannot continue telling our students that what happened “is not us,” because my forefathers who were brought here in 1619 would be the first to say that this has been a part of the America they knew too well. Yet we must comfort students by letting them know they have a role to play in preventing us from remaining in this state.

At the end of my revised lesson, I will also ask them to discuss the role they can play in pushing America to come closer to becoming a true democracy for all its citizens. We must

continue to teach about the events, people, and ideas that have made this country a beacon of hope for so many, but we must also be honest and explain how people outside and within have and continue to threaten its legacy. If not, the United States will continue to struggle with the underlying bigotry that fueled the events of January 6th and what we thought was an aberration might become a norm. 🌍

Notes

1. Eric Foner, “Rooted in Reconstruction: The First Wave of Black Congressmen,” *The Nation* (October 15, 2008), www.thenation.com/article/archive/rooted-reconstruction-first-wave-black-congressmen/.
2. “Black Officeholders in the South,” *Facing History and Ourselves*, www.facinghistory.org/reconstruction-era/black-officeholders-south;
3. Danny Lewis, “The 1873 Colfax Massacre Crippled the Reconstruction Era,” *Smithsonianmag.com* (April 13, 2016), www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/1873-colfax-massacre-crippled-reconstruction-180958746/.
4. *Colfax Massacre Reports Committee of 70 United States House of Representatives | 1874, 1875*, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/colfax-massacre-reports/>.



ALYSHA BUTLER-ARNOLD is a 20-year veteran social studies teacher. She currently teaches U.S. History and African American Studies for District of Columbia Public Schools. She graduated from Florida Atlantic University with a B.A. and M.A. in History with a special focus on African American women during Reconstruction. She was recognized as the 2019 History Teacher of the Year by the Daughters of the American Revolution for the District of Columbia and the 2019 Gilder Lehrman National History Teacher of the Year for her innovative lessons and civic-based student projects. In 2019, she was a D.C. Community Cornerstone Awardee.