
Transcript: Episode 1 (from 25:55-30:22)

[Episode 1: The Fight for a True Democracy - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)

Definitions:

- Amendments - changes to the Constitution
- Abolish - get rid of
- 14th Amendment - legally made Black Americans citizens
- Clause - law
- Federal - national government
- Legislation - laws
- Withdraw - take back
- Implement - put into effect
- Suppression - attempt to stop or reduce
- The Great Nadir - The Second Slavery

Nikole Hannah-Jones

And in the years that followed, after the Civil War ends, a very short period called Reconstruction began.

[Music]

You see the formerly enslaved pushing their white allies in Congress to start to change our founding documents and to actually resolve those contradictions that were baked in. They do this through getting amendments passed. And, of course, amendments are the way that we change our Constitution.

So, of course, the very first amendment that they have to pass is the 13th Amendment, which abolishes the institution of slavery. And what's interesting about that is this is actually the first time that the word slavery is mentioned in the Constitution, is in the amendment that finally abolishes it. They pass the 14th Amendment, and the 14th Amendment guarantees that all of the enslaved people will finally be citizens of the country of their birth. It also ensures for the first time that the laws cannot treat people differently based on their race. This is called the equal protection clause, and this clause will be used again and again, really all the way up until now, to guarantee that all Americans are treated as equal citizens.

And, finally, they pass the 15th Amendment, which probably is the most important amendment when we're considering what a democracy is supposed to be. The 15th Amendment guaranteed the right to vote no matter what your race is. Now, it didn't include women at that time, but it certainly set the stage, and it, for the first time, guaranteed that whether you were born a person who was enslaved, whether you were white or you were black, you had the right to exercise your vote in this democracy.

[Music]

Nikole Hannah-Jones

The only reason we saw all of these gains in the South was because there were federal troops there, and those federal troops were holding back the violence of white Southerners who were not interested in seeing these gains. This all changes with the presidential election of 1876. It was a contested election, and Rutherford B. Hayes is the Republican candidate. And remember, back then it was Republicans who were the progressive party, and they were the party of Lincoln that was working to pass all of this progressive legislation. But Rutherford B. Hayes really wants to win this election, and so he makes a deal with the Democrats in Congress that if they give him their electoral votes, he will withdraw the federal troops from the South and end Reconstruction. So he makes the deal, and the troops leave, and we immediately see white Southerners implement a campaign to force black people back into the position that they had been in before Reconstruction.

The suppression of black life over the next five decades would be so devastating that it would come to be known as the Great Nadir, the second slavery.

Fountain Hughes

Tell you the truth, when I think over today, I don't know how I'm living. I'm the oldest one that I know that's living. But still, I'm thankful to the Lord. Colored people is free. We ought to be awful thankful. If I thought that I'd ever be a slave again, I'd take a gun and just end it all right away, because you're nothing but a dog. You're not a thing but a dog.