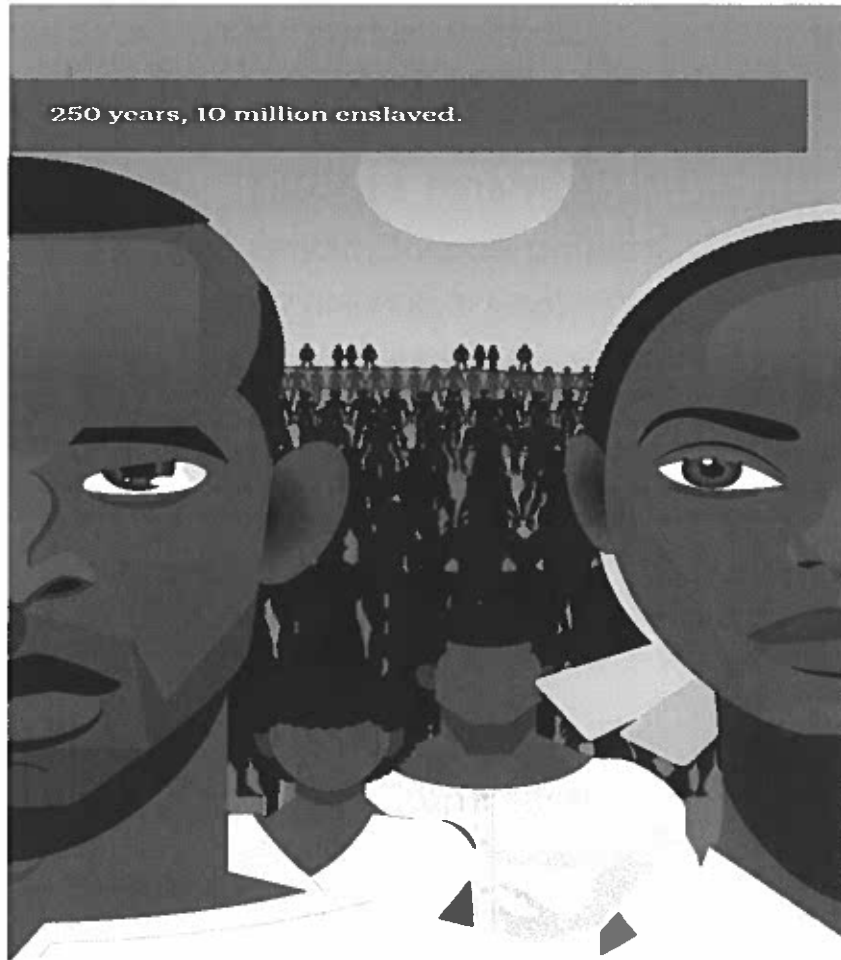


1619 Project Discussion Article Packet



Topic: Slavery and the American Dream

Thursday January 14, 2021

6:30 pm – 8:00 pm

Zoom ID: 823 648 5349

Password: 691353

Upcoming 1619 programs

February 11, 2021

Stealing Black Culture: Music

Zoom ID: 823 648 5349

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March 11, 2021

Stealing Black Culture: Sports

Zoom ID: 823 648 5349

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April 8, 2021

Slavery and Health Care

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May 13, 2021

Race and Civil Rights

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For more information

Contact: John Piche' at jpiche@heightslibrary.org

America Wasn't a Democracy, Until Black Americans Made It One

 [nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html)

By NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES

August 14,
2019

My dad always flew an American flag in our front yard. The blue paint on our two-story house was perennially chipping; the fence, or the rail by the stairs, or the front door, existed in a perpetual state of disrepair, but that flag always flew pristine. Our corner lot, which had been redlined by the federal government, was along the river that divided the black side from the white side of our Iowa town. At the edge of our lawn, high on an aluminum pole, soared the flag, which my dad would replace as soon as it showed the slightest tatter.

My dad was born into a family of sharecroppers on a white plantation in Greenwood, Miss., where black people bent over cotton from can't-see-in-the-morning to can't-see-at-night, just as their enslaved ancestors had done not long before. The Mississippi of my dad's youth was an apartheid state that subjugated its near-majority black population through breathtaking acts of violence. White residents in Mississippi lynched more black people than those in any other state in the country, and the white people in my dad's home county lynched more black residents than those in any other county in Mississippi, often for such "crimes" as entering a room occupied by white women, bumping into a white girl or trying to start a sharecroppers union. My dad's mother, like all the black people in Greenwood, could not vote, use the public library or find work other than toiling in the cotton fields or toiling in white people's houses. So in the 1940s, she packed up her few belongings and her three small children and joined the flood of black Southerners fleeing North. She got off the Illinois Central Railroad in Waterloo, Iowa, only to have her hopes of the mythical Promised Land shattered when she learned that Jim Crow did not end at the Mason-Dixon line.

Grandmama, as we called her, found a house in a segregated black neighborhood on the city's east side and then found the work that was considered black women's work no matter where black women lived — cleaning white people's houses. Dad, too, struggled to find promise in this land. In 1962, at age 17, he signed up for the Army. Like many young men, he joined in hopes of escaping poverty. But he went into the military for another reason as well, a reason common to black men: Dad hoped that if he served his country, his country might finally treat him as an American.

The Army did not end up being his way out. He was passed over for opportunities, his ambition stunted. He would be discharged under murky circumstances and then labor in a series of service jobs for the rest of his life. Like all the black men and women in my family,

he believed in hard work, but like all the black men and women in my family, no matter how hard he worked, he never got ahead.

So when I was young, that flag outside our home never made sense to me. How could this black man, having seen firsthand the way his country abused black Americans, how it refused to treat us as full citizens, proudly fly its banner? I didn't understand his patriotism. It deeply embarrassed me.

I had been taught, in school, through cultural osmosis, that the flag wasn't really ours, that our history as a people began with enslavement and that we had contributed little to this great nation. It seemed that the closest thing black Americans could have to cultural pride was to be found in our vague connection to Africa, a place we had never been. That my dad felt so much honor in being an American felt like a marker of his degradation, his acceptance of our subordination.

Like most young people, I thought I understood so much, when in fact I understood so little. My father knew exactly what he was doing when he raised that flag. He knew that our people's contributions to building the richest and most powerful nation in the world were indelible, that the United States simply would not exist without us.

In August 1619, just 12 years after the English settled Jamestown, Va., one year before the Puritans landed at Plymouth Rock and some 157 years before the English colonists even decided they wanted to form their own country, the Jamestown colonists bought 20 to 30 enslaved Africans from English pirates. The pirates had stolen them from a Portuguese slave ship that had forcibly taken them from what is now the country of Angola. Those men and women who came ashore on that August day were the beginning of American slavery. They were among the 12.5 million Africans who would be kidnapped from their homes and brought in chains across the Atlantic Ocean in the largest forced migration in human history until the Second World War. Almost two million did not survive the grueling journey, known as the Middle Passage.

Before the abolishment of the international slave trade, 400,000 enslaved Africans would be sold into America. Those individuals and their descendants transformed the lands to which they'd been brought into some of the most successful colonies in the British Empire. Through backbreaking labor, they cleared the land across the Southeast. They taught the colonists to grow rice. They grew and picked the cotton that at the height of slavery was the nation's most valuable commodity, accounting for half of all American exports and 66 percent of the world's supply. They built the plantations of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, sprawling properties that today attract thousands of visitors from across the globe captivated by the history of the world's greatest democracy. They laid the foundations of the White House and the Capitol, even placing with their unfree hands the Statue of Freedom atop the Capitol dome. They lugged the heavy wooden tracks of the railroads that crisscrossed the South and that helped take the cotton they picked to the

Northern textile mills, fueling the Industrial Revolution. They built vast fortunes for white people North and South — at one time, the second-richest man in the nation was a Rhode Island “slave trader.” Profits from black people’s stolen labor helped the young nation pay off its war debts and financed some of our most prestigious universities. It was the relentless buying, selling, insuring and financing of their bodies and the products of their labor that made Wall Street a thriving banking, insurance and trading sector and New York City the financial capital of the world.

But it would be historically inaccurate to reduce the contributions of black people to the vast material wealth created by our bondage. Black Americans have also been, and continue to be, foundational to the idea of American freedom. More than any other group in this country’s history, we have served, generation after generation, in an overlooked but vital role: it is we who have been the perfecters of this democracy.

The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie. Our Declaration of Independence, approved on July 4, 1776, proclaims that “all men are created equal” and “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” But the white men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of black people in their midst. “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” did not apply to fully one-fifth of the country. Yet despite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised to all, black Americans believed fervently in the American creed. Through centuries of black resistance and protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding ideals. And not only for ourselves — black rights struggles paved the way for every other rights struggle, including women’s and gay rights, immigrant and disability rights.

Without the idealistic, strenuous and patriotic efforts of black Americans, our democracy today would most likely look very different — it might not be a democracy at all.

The very first person to die for this country in the American Revolution was a black man who himself was not free. Crispus Attucks was a fugitive from slavery, yet he gave his life for a new nation in which his own people would not enjoy the liberties laid out in the Declaration for another century. In every war this nation has waged since that first one, black Americans have fought — today we are the most likely of all racial groups to serve in the United States military.

My father, one of those many black Americans who answered the call, knew what it would take me years to understand: that the year 1619 is as important to the American story as 1776. That black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation’s capital, are this nation’s true “founding fathers.” And that no people has a greater claim to that flag than us.

In June 1776, Thomas Jefferson sat at his portable writing desk in a rented room in Philadelphia and penned these words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." For the last 243 years, this fierce assertion of the fundamental and natural rights of humankind to freedom and self-governance has defined our global reputation as a land of liberty. As Jefferson composed his inspiring words, however, a teenage boy who would enjoy none of those rights and liberties waited nearby to serve at his master's beck and call. His name was Robert Hemings, and he was the half brother of Jefferson's wife, born to Martha Jefferson's father and a woman he owned. It was common for white enslavers to keep their half-black children in slavery. Jefferson had chosen Hemings, from among about 130 enslaved people that worked on the forced-labor camp he called Monticello, to accompany him to Philadelphia and ensure his every comfort as he drafted the text making the case for a new democratic republic based on the individual rights of men.

At the time, one-fifth of the population within the 13 colonies struggled under a brutal system of slavery unlike anything that had existed in the world before. Chattel slavery was not conditional but racial. It was heritable and permanent, not temporary, meaning generations of black people were born into it and passed their enslaved status onto their children. Enslaved people were not recognized as human beings but as property that could be mortgaged, traded, bought, sold, used as collateral, given as a gift and disposed of violently. Jefferson's fellow white colonists knew that black people were human beings, but they created a network of laws and customs, astounding for both their precision and cruelty, that ensured that enslaved people would never be treated as such. As the abolitionist William Goodell wrote in 1853, "If any thing founded on falsehood might be called a science, we might add the system of American slavery to the list of the strict sciences."

Enslaved people could not legally marry. They were barred from learning to read and restricted from meeting privately in groups. They had no claim to their own children, who could be bought, sold and traded away from them on auction blocks alongside furniture and cattle or behind storefronts that advertised "Negroes for Sale." Enslavers and the courts did not honor kinship ties to mothers, siblings, cousins. In most courts, they had no legal standing. Enslavers could rape or murder their property without legal consequence. Enslaved people could own nothing, will nothing and inherit nothing. They were legally tortured, including by those working for Jefferson himself. They could be worked to death, and often were, in order to produce the highest profits for the white people who owned them.

Yet in making the argument against Britain's tyranny, one of the colonists' favorite rhetorical devices was to claim that *they* were the slaves — to Britain. For this duplicity, they faced burning criticism both at home and abroad. As Samuel Johnson, an English writer and Tory

opposed to American independence, quipped, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?"

Conveniently left out of our founding mythology is the fact that one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery. By 1776, Britain had grown deeply conflicted over its role in the barbaric institution that had reshaped the Western Hemisphere. In London, there were growing calls to abolish the slave trade. This would have upended the economy of the colonies, in both the North and the South. The wealth and prominence that allowed Jefferson, at just 33, and the other founding fathers to believe they could successfully break off from one of the mightiest empires in the world came from the dizzying profits generated by chattel slavery. In other words, we may never have revolted against Britain if the founders had not understood that slavery empowered them to do so; nor if they had not believed that independence was required in order to ensure that slavery would continue. It is not incidental that 10 of this nation's first 12 presidents were enslavers, and some might argue that this nation was founded not as a democracy but as a slavocracy.

Jefferson and the other founders were keenly aware of this hypocrisy. And so in Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration of Independence, he tried to argue that it wasn't the colonists' fault. Instead, he blamed the king of England for forcing the institution of slavery on the unwilling colonists and called the trafficking in human beings a crime. Yet neither Jefferson nor most of the founders intended to abolish slavery, and in the end, they struck the passage.

There is no mention of slavery in the final Declaration of Independence. Similarly, 11 years later, when it came time to draft the Constitution, the framers carefully constructed a document that preserved and protected slavery without ever using the word. In the texts in which they were making the case for freedom to the world, they did not want to explicitly enshrine their hypocrisy, so they sought to hide it. The Constitution contains 84 clauses. Six deal directly with the enslaved and their enslavement, as the historian David Waldstreicher has written, and five more hold implications for slavery. The Constitution protected the "property" of those who enslaved black people, prohibited the federal government from intervening to end the importation of enslaved Africans for a term of 20 years, allowed Congress to mobilize the militia to put down insurrections by the enslaved and forced states that had outlawed slavery to turn over enslaved people who had run away seeking refuge. Like many others, the writer and abolitionist Samuel Bryan called out the deceit, saying of the Constitution, "The words are dark and ambiguous; such as no plain man of common sense would have used, [and] are evidently chosen to conceal from Europe, that in this enlightened country, the practice of slavery has its advocates among men in the highest stations."

With independence, the founding fathers could no longer blame slavery on Britain. The sin became this nation's own, and so, too, the need to cleanse it. The shameful paradox of

continuing chattel slavery in a nation founded on individual freedom, scholars today assert, led to a hardening of the racial caste system. This ideology, reinforced not just by laws but by racist science and literature, maintained that black people were subhuman, a belief that allowed white Americans to live with their betrayal. By the early 1800s, according to the legal historians Leland B. Ware, Robert J. Cottrol and Raymond T. Diamond, white Americans, whether they engaged in slavery or not, "had a considerable psychological as well as economic investment in the doctrine of black inferiority." While liberty was the inalienable right of the people who would be considered white, enslavement and subjugation became the natural station of people who had any discernible drop of "black" blood.

The Supreme Court enshrined this thinking in the law in its 1857 Dred Scott decision, ruling that black people, whether enslaved or free, came from a "slave" race. This made them inferior to white people and, therefore, incompatible with American democracy. Democracy was for citizens, and the "Negro race," the court ruled, was "a separate class of persons," which the founders had "not regarded as a portion of the people or citizens of the Government" and had "no rights which a white man was bound to respect." This belief, that black people were not merely enslaved but were a slave race, became the root of the endemic racism that we still cannot purge from this nation to this day. If black people could not ever be citizens, if they were a caste apart from all other humans, then they did not require the rights bestowed by the Constitution, and the "we" in the "We the People" was not a lie.

On Aug. 14, 1862, a mere five years after the nation's highest courts declared that no black person could be an American citizen, President Abraham Lincoln called a group of five esteemed free black men to the White House for a meeting. It was one of the few times that black people had ever been invited to the White House as guests. The Civil War had been raging for more than a year, and black abolitionists, who had been increasingly pressuring Lincoln to end slavery, must have felt a sense of great anticipation and pride.

The war was not going well for Lincoln. Britain was contemplating whether to intervene on the Confederacy's behalf, and Lincoln, unable to draw enough new white volunteers for the war, was forced to reconsider his opposition to allowing black Americans to fight for their own liberation. The president was weighing a proclamation that threatened to emancipate all enslaved people in the states that had seceded from the Union if the states did not end the rebellion. The proclamation would also allow the formerly enslaved to join the Union army and fight against their former "masters." But Lincoln worried about what the consequences of this radical step would be. Like many white Americans, he opposed slavery as a cruel system at odds with American ideals, but he also opposed black equality. He believed that free black people were a "troublesome presence" incompatible with a democracy intended only for white people. "Free them, and make them politically and socially our equals?" he had said four years earlier. "My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not."

That August day, as the men arrived at the White House, they were greeted by the towering Lincoln and a man named James Mitchell, who eight days before had been given the title of a newly created position called the commissioner of emigration. This was to be his first assignment. After exchanging a few niceties, Lincoln got right to it. He informed his guests that he had gotten Congress to appropriate funds to ship black people, once freed, to another country.

"Why should they leave this country? This is, perhaps, the first question for proper consideration," Lincoln told them. "You and we are different races. ... Your race suffer very greatly, many of them, by living among us, while ours suffer from your presence. In a word, we suffer on each side."

You can imagine the heavy silence in that room, as the weight of what the president said momentarily stole the breath of these five black men. It was 243 years to the month since the first of their ancestors had arrived on these shores, before Lincoln's family, long before most of the white people insisting that this was not their country. The Union had not entered the war to end slavery but to keep the South from splitting off, yet black men had signed up to fight. Enslaved people were fleeing their forced-labor camps, which we like to call plantations, trying to join the effort, serving as spies, sabotaging confederates, taking up arms for his cause as well as their own. And now Lincoln was blaming them for the war. "Although many men engaged on either side do not care for you one way or the other ... without the institution of slavery and the colored race as a basis, the war could not have an existence," the president told them. "It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated."

As Lincoln closed the remarks, Edward Thomas, the delegation's chairman, informed the president, perhaps curtly, that they would consult on his proposition. "Take your full time," Lincoln said. "No hurry at all."

Nearly three years after that White House meeting, Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox. By summer, the Civil War was over, and four million black Americans were suddenly free. Contrary to Lincoln's view, most were not inclined to leave, agreeing with the sentiment of a resolution against black colonization put forward at a convention of black leaders in New York some decades before: "This is our home, and this our country. Beneath its sod lie the bones of our fathers. ... Here we were born, and here we will die."

That the formerly enslaved did not take up Lincoln's offer to abandon these lands is an astounding testament to their belief in this nation's founding ideals. As W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, "Few men ever worshiped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries." Black Americans had long called for universal equality and believed, as the abolitionist Martin Delany said, "that God has made of one blood all the nations that dwell on the face of the earth." Liberated by war, then, they did not seek vengeance on their oppressors as Lincoln and so many other white Americans feared. They did the opposite. During this nation's brief period of Reconstruction, from 1865 to 1877,

formerly enslaved people zealously engaged with the democratic process. With federal troops tempering widespread white violence, black Southerners started branches of the Equal Rights League — one of the nation's first human rights organizations — to fight discrimination and organize voters; they headed in droves to the polls, where they placed other formerly enslaved people into seats that their enslavers had once held. The South, for the first time in the history of this country, began to resemble a democracy, with black Americans elected to local, state and federal offices. Some 16 black men served in Congress — including Hiram Revels of Mississippi, who became the first black man elected to the Senate. (Demonstrating just how brief this period would be, Revels, along with Blanche Bruce, would go from being the first black man elected to the last for nearly a hundred years, until Edward Brooke of Massachusetts took office in 1967.) More than 600 black men served in Southern state legislatures and hundreds more in local positions.

These black officials joined with white Republicans, some of whom came down from the North, to write the most egalitarian state constitutions the South had ever seen. They helped pass more equitable tax legislation and laws that prohibited discrimination in public transportation, accommodation and housing. Perhaps their biggest achievement was the establishment of that most democratic of American institutions: the public school. Public education effectively did not exist in the South before Reconstruction. The white elite sent their children to private schools, while poor white children went without an education. But newly freed black people, who had been prohibited from learning to read and write during slavery, were desperate for an education. So black legislators successfully pushed for a universal, state-funded system of schools — not just for their own children but for white children, too. Black legislators also helped pass the first compulsory education laws in the region. Southern children, black and white, were now required to attend schools like their Northern counterparts. Just five years into Reconstruction, every Southern state had enshrined the right to a public education for all children into its constitution. In some states, like Louisiana and South Carolina, small numbers of black and white children, briefly, attended schools together.

Led by black activists and a Republican Party pushed left by the blatant recalcitrance of white Southerners, the years directly after slavery saw the greatest expansion of human and civil rights this nation would ever see. In 1865, Congress passed the 13th Amendment, making the United States one of the last nations in the Americas to outlaw slavery. The following year, black Americans, exerting their new political power, pushed white legislators to pass the Civil Rights Act, the nation's first such law and one of the most expansive pieces of civil rights legislation Congress has ever passed. It codified black American citizenship for the first time, prohibited housing discrimination and gave all Americans the right to buy and inherit property, make and enforce contracts and seek redress from courts. In 1868, Congress ratified the 14th Amendment, ensuring citizenship to any person born in the United States. Today, thanks to this amendment, every child born here to a European, Asian, African, Latin American or Middle Eastern immigrant gains automatic citizenship. The 14th

Amendment also, for the first time, constitutionally guaranteed equal protection under the law. Ever since, nearly all other marginalized groups have used the 14th Amendment in their fights for equality (including the recent successful arguments before the Supreme Court on behalf of same-sex marriage). Finally, in 1870, Congress passed the 15th Amendment, guaranteeing the most critical aspect of democracy and citizenship — the right to vote — to all men regardless of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

For this fleeting moment known as Reconstruction, the majority in Congress seemed to embrace the idea that out of the ashes of the Civil War, we could create the multiracial democracy that black Americans envisioned even if our founding fathers did not.

But it would not last.

Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country, as does the belief, so well articulated by Lincoln, that black people are the obstacle to national unity. The many gains of Reconstruction were met with fierce white resistance throughout the South, including unthinkable violence against the formerly enslaved, wide-scale voter suppression, electoral fraud and even, in some extreme cases, the overthrow of democratically elected biracial governments. Faced with this unrest, the federal government decided that black people were the cause of the problem and that for unity's sake, it would leave the white South to its own devices. In 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes, in order to secure a compromise with Southern Democrats that would grant him the presidency in a contested election, agreed to pull federal troops from the South. With the troops gone, white Southerners quickly went about eradicating the gains of Reconstruction. The systemic white suppression of black life was so severe that this period between the 1880s and the 1920 and '30s became known as the Great Nadir, or the second slavery. Democracy would not return to the South for nearly a century.

White Southerners of all economic classes, on the other hand, thanks in significant part to the progressive policies and laws black people had championed, experienced substantial improvement in their lives even as they forced black people back into a quasi slavery. As Waters McIntosh, who had been enslaved in South Carolina, lamented, “It was the poor white man who was freed by the war, not the Negroes.”

Georgia pines flew past the windows of the Greyhound bus carrying Isaac Woodard home to Winnsboro, S.C. After serving four years in the Army in World War II, where Woodard had earned a battle star, he was given an honorable discharge earlier that day at Camp Gordon and was headed home to meet his wife. When the bus stopped at a small drugstore an hour outside Atlanta, Woodard got into a brief argument with the white driver after asking if he could use the restroom. About half an hour later, the driver stopped again and told Woodard to get off the bus. Crisp in his uniform, Woodard stepped from the stairs and saw the police waiting for him. Before he could speak, one of the officers struck him in his head with a billy club, beating him so badly that he fell unconscious. The blows to Woodard's

head were so severe that when he woke in a jail cell the next day, he could not see. The beating occurred just 4½ hours after his military discharge. At 26, Woodard would never see again.

There was nothing unusual about Woodard's horrific maiming. It was part of a wave of systemic violence deployed against black Americans after Reconstruction, in both the North and the South. As the egalitarian spirit of post-Civil War America evaporated under the desire for national reunification, black Americans, simply by existing, served as a problematic reminder of this nation's failings. White America dealt with this inconvenience by constructing a savagely enforced system of racial apartheid that excluded black people almost entirely from mainstream American life — a system so grotesque that Nazi Germany would later take inspiration from it for its own racist policies.

Despite the guarantees of equality in the 14th Amendment, the Supreme Court's landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896 declared that the racial segregation of black Americans was constitutional. With the blessing of the nation's highest court and no federal will to vindicate black rights, starting in the late 1800s, Southern states passed a series of laws and codes meant to make slavery's racial caste system permanent by denying black people political power, social equality and basic dignity. They passed literacy tests to keep black people from voting and created all-white primaries for elections. Black people were prohibited from serving on juries or testifying in court against a white person. South Carolina prohibited white and black textile workers from using the same doors. Oklahoma forced phone companies to segregate phone booths. Memphis had separate parking spaces for black and white drivers. Baltimore passed an ordinance outlawing black people from moving onto a block more than half white and white people from moving onto a block more than half black. Georgia made it illegal for black and white people to be buried next to one another in the same cemetery. Alabama barred black people from using public libraries that their own tax dollars were paying for. Black people were expected to jump off the sidewalk to let white people pass and call all white people by an honorific, though they received none no matter how old they were. In the North, white politicians implemented policies that segregated black people into slum neighborhoods and into inferior all-black schools, operated whites-only public pools and held white and "colored" days at the country fair, and white businesses regularly denied black people service, placing "Whites Only" signs in their windows. States like California joined Southern states in barring black people from marrying white people, while local school boards in Illinois and New Jersey mandated segregated schools for black and white children.

This caste system was maintained through wanton racial terrorism. And black veterans like Woodard, especially those with the audacity to wear their uniform, had since the Civil War been the target of a particular violence. This intensified during the two world wars because white people understood that once black men had gone abroad and experienced life outside the suffocating racial oppression of America, they were unlikely to quietly return to

their subjugation at home. As Senator James K. Vardaman of Mississippi said on the Senate floor during World War I, black servicemen returning to the South would “inevitably lead to disaster.” Giving a black man “military airs” and sending him to defend the flag would bring him “to the conclusion that his political rights must be respected.”

Many white Americans saw black men in the uniforms of America’s armed services not as patriotic but as exhibiting a dangerous pride. Hundreds of black veterans were beaten, maimed, shot and lynched. We like to call those who lived during World War II the Greatest Generation, but that allows us to ignore the fact that many of this generation fought for democracy abroad while brutally suppressing democracy for millions of American citizens. During the height of racial terror in this country, black Americans were not merely killed but castrated, burned alive and dismembered with their body parts displayed in storefronts. This violence was meant to terrify and control black people, but perhaps just as important, it served as a psychological balm for white supremacy: You would not treat human beings this way. The extremity of the violence was a symptom of the psychological mechanism necessary to absolve white Americans of their country’s original sin. To answer the question of how they could prize liberty abroad while simultaneously denying liberty to an entire race back home, white Americans resorted to the same racist ideology that Jefferson and the framers had used at the nation’s founding.

This ideology — that black people belonged to an inferior, subhuman race — did not simply disappear once slavery ended. If the formerly enslaved and their descendants became educated, if we thrived in the jobs white people did, if we excelled in the sciences and arts, then the entire justification for how this nation allowed slavery would collapse. Free black people posed a danger to the country’s idea of itself as exceptional; we held up the mirror in which the nation preferred not to peer. And so the inhumanity visited on black people by every generation of white America justified the inhumanity of the past.

Just as white Americans feared, World War II ignited what became black Americans’ second sustained effort to make democracy real. As the editorial board of the black newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier* wrote, “We wage a two-pronged attack against our enslavers at home and those abroad who will enslave us.” Woodard’s blinding is largely seen as one of the catalysts for the decades-long rebellion we have come to call the civil rights movement. But it is useful to pause and remember that this was the second mass movement for black civil rights, the first being Reconstruction. As the centennial of slavery’s end neared, black people were still seeking the rights they had fought for and won after the Civil War: the right to be treated equally by public institutions, which was guaranteed in 1866 with the Civil Rights Act; the right to be treated as full citizens before the law, which was guaranteed in 1868 by the 14th Amendment; and the right to vote, which was guaranteed in 1870 by the 15th Amendment. In response to black demands for these rights, white Americans strung them

from trees, beat them and dumped their bodies in muddy rivers, assassinated them in their front yards, firebombed them on buses, mauled them with dogs, peeled back their skin with fire hoses and murdered their children with explosives set off inside a church.

For the most part, black Americans fought back alone. Yet we never fought only for ourselves. The bloody freedom struggles of the civil rights movement laid the foundation for every other modern rights struggle. This nation's white founders set up a decidedly undemocratic Constitution that excluded women, Native Americans and black people, and did not provide the vote or equality for most Americans. But the laws born out of black resistance guarantee the franchise for all and ban discrimination based not just on race but on gender, nationality, religion and ability. It was the civil rights movement that led to the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which upended the racist immigration quota system intended to keep this country white. Because of black Americans, black and brown immigrants from across the globe are able to come to the United States and live in a country in which legal discrimination is no longer allowed. It is a truly American irony that some Asian-Americans, among the groups able to immigrate to the United States because of the black civil rights struggle, are now suing universities to end programs designed to help the descendants of the enslaved.

No one cherishes freedom more than those who have not had it. And to this day, black Americans, more than any other group, embrace the democratic ideals of a common good. We are the most likely to support programs like universal health care and a higher minimum wage, and to oppose programs that harm the most vulnerable. For instance, black Americans suffer the most from violent crime, yet we are the most opposed to capital punishment. Our unemployment rate is nearly twice that of white Americans, yet we are still the most likely of all groups to say this nation should take in refugees.

The truth is that as much democracy as this nation has today, it has been borne on the backs of black resistance. Our founding fathers may not have actually believed in the ideals they espoused, but black people did. As one scholar, Joe R. Feagin, put it, "Enslaved African-Americans have been among the foremost freedom-fighters this country has produced." For generations, we have believed in this country with a faith it did not deserve. Black people have seen the worst of America, yet, somehow, we still believe in its best.

They say our people were born on the water.

When it occurred, no one can say for certain. Perhaps it was in the second week, or the third, but surely by the fourth, when they had not seen their land or any land for so many days that they lost count. It was after fear had turned to despair, and despair to resignation, and resignation to an abiding understanding. The teal eternity of the Atlantic Ocean had severed them so completely from what had once been their home that it was as if nothing had ever existed before, as if everything and everyone they cherished had simply vanished

from the earth. They were no longer Mbundu or Akan or Fulani. These men and women from many different nations, all shackled together in the suffocating hull of the ship, they were one people now.

Just a few months earlier, they had families, and farms, and lives and dreams. They were free. They had names, of course, but their enslavers did not bother to record them. They had been made black by those people who believed that they were white, and where they were heading, black equaled "slave," and slavery in America required turning human beings into property by stripping them of every element that made them individuals. This process was called seasoning, in which people stolen from western and central Africa were forced, often through torture, to stop speaking their native tongues and practicing their native religions.

But as the sociologist Glenn Bracey wrote, "Out of the ashes of white denigration, we gave birth to ourselves." For as much as white people tried to pretend, black people were not chattel. And so the process of seasoning, instead of erasing identity, served an opposite purpose: In the void, we forged a new culture all our own.

Today, our very manner of speaking recalls the Creole languages that enslaved people innovated in order to communicate both with Africans speaking various dialects and the English-speaking people who enslaved them. Our style of dress, the extra flair, stems back to the desires of enslaved people — shorn of all individuality — to exert their own identity. Enslaved people would wear their hat in a jaunty manner or knot their head scarves intricately. Today's avant-garde nature of black hairstyles and fashion displays a vibrant reflection of enslaved people's determination to feel fully human through self-expression. The improvisational quality of black art and music comes from a culture that because of constant disruption could not cling to convention. Black naming practices, so often impugned by mainstream society, are themselves an act of resistance. Our last names belong to the white people who once owned us. That is why the insistence of many black Americans, particularly those most marginalized, to give our children names that we create, that are neither European nor from Africa, a place we have never been, is an act of self-determination. When the world listens to quintessential American music, it is our voice they hear. The sorrow songs we sang in the fields to soothe our physical pain and find hope in a freedom we did not expect to know until we died became American gospel. Amid the devastating violence and poverty of the Mississippi Delta, we birthed jazz and blues. And it was in the deeply impoverished and segregated neighborhoods where white Americans forced the descendants of the enslaved to live that teenagers too poor to buy instruments used old records to create a new music known as hip-hop.

Our speech and fashion and the drum of our music echoes Africa but is not African. Out of our unique isolation, both from our native cultures and from white America, we forged this nation's most significant original culture. In turn, "mainstream" society has coveted our style, our slang and our song, seeking to appropriate the one truly American culture as its own. As

Langston Hughes wrote in 1926, "They'll see how beautiful I am/And be ashamed —/I, too, am America."

For centuries, white Americans have been trying to solve the "Negro problem." They have dedicated thousands of pages to this endeavor. It is common, still, to point to rates of black poverty, out-of-wedlock births, crime and college attendance, as if these conditions in a country built on a racial caste system are not utterly predictable. But crucially, you cannot view those statistics while ignoring another: that black people were enslaved here longer than we have been free.

At 43, I am part of the first generation of black Americans in the history of the United States to be born into a society in which black people had full rights of citizenship. Black people suffered under slavery for 250 years; we have been legally "free" for just 50. Yet in that briefest of spans, despite continuing to face rampant discrimination, and despite there never having been a genuine effort to redress the wrongs of slavery and the century of racial apartheid that followed, black Americans have made astounding progress, not only for ourselves but also for all Americans.

What if America understood, finally, in this 400th year, that we have never been the problem but the solution?

When I was a child — I must have been in fifth or sixth grade — a teacher gave our class an assignment intended to celebrate the diversity of the great American melting pot. She instructed each of us to write a short report on our ancestral land and then draw that nation's flag. As she turned to write the assignment on the board, the other black girl in class locked eyes with me. Slavery had erased any connection we had to an African country, and even if we tried to claim the whole continent, there was no "African" flag. It was hard enough being one of two black kids in the class, and this assignment would just be another reminder of the distance between the white kids and us. In the end, I walked over to the globe near my teacher's desk, picked a random African country and claimed it as my own.

I wish, now, that I could go back to the younger me and tell her that her people's ancestry started here, on these lands, and to boldly, proudly, draw the stars and those stripes of the American flag.

We were told once, by virtue of our bondage, that we could never be American. But it was by virtue of our bondage that we became the most American of all.

Correction August 15, 2019

An earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to the signing of the Declaration of Independence. It was approved on July 4, 1776, not signed by Congress on that date. The article also misspelled the surname of a Revolutionary War-era writer. He was Samuel Bryan, not Byron.

An American Tragedy: The legacy of slavery lingers in our cities' ghettos

B [brookings.edu/articles/an-american-tragedy-the-legacy-of-slavery-lingers-in-our-cities-ghettos/](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/an-american-tragedy-the-legacy-of-slavery-lingers-in-our-cities-ghettos/)

Glenn C. Loury

December 2, 2

The United States of America, “a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,” began as a slave society. What can rightly be called the “original sin” slavery has left an indelible imprint on our nation’s soul. A terrible price had to be paid, in a tragic, calamitous civil war, before this new democracy could be rid of that most undemocratic institution. But for black Americans the end of slavery was just the beginning of our quest for democratic equality; another century would pass before the nation came fully to embrace that goal. Even now millions of Americans recognizably of African descent languish in societal backwaters. What does this say about our civic culture as we enter a new century?

The eminent Negro man of letters W. E. B. Du Bois predicted in 1903 that the issue of the 20th century would be “the problem of the color line.” He has been proven right. At mid-century the astute Swedish observer of American affairs, Gunnar Myrdal, reiterated the point, declaring the race problem to be our great national dilemma and fretting about the threat it posed to the success of our democratic experiment. Du Bois must have relished the irony of having a statue named Liberty oversee the arrival in New York’s harbor of millions of foreigners, “tempest tossed” and “yearning to breathe free,” even as black Southern peasants—not alien, just profoundly alienated—were kept unfree at the social margins. And Myrdal observed a racist ideology that openly questioned the Negro’s human worth survive our defeat of the Nazis and abate only when the Cold War rivalry made it intolerable that the “leader of the free world” should be seen to preside over a regime of racial subordination.

This sharp contrast between America’s lofty ideals, on the one hand, and the seemingly permanent second-class status of the Negroes, on the other, put the onus on the nation’s political elite to choose the nobility of their civic creed over the comfort of longstanding social arrangements. Ultimately they did so. Viewed in historic and cross-national perspective, the legal and political transformation of American race relations since World War II represents a remarkable achievement, powerfully confirming the virtue of our political institutions. Official segregation, which some southerners as late as 1960 were saying would live forever, is dead. The caste system of social domination enforced with open violence has been eradicated. Whereas two generations ago most Americans were indifferent or hostile to blacks’ demands for equal citizenship rights, now the ideal of equal opportunity is upheld by our laws and universally embraced in our politics. A large and stable black middle class has emerged, and black participation in the economic, political,

and cultural life of this country, at every level and in every venue, has expanded impressively. This is good news. In the final years of this traumatic, exhilarating century, it deserves to be celebrated.

Today's Race Problem

Nevertheless, as anyone even vaguely aware of the social conditions in contemporary America knows, we still face a "problem of the color line." The dream that race might some day become an insignificant category in our civic life now seems naively utopian. In cities across the country, and in rural areas of the Old South, the situation of the black underclass and, increasingly, of the black lower working classes is bad and getting worse. No well-informed person denies this, though there is debate over what can and should be done about it. Nor do serious people deny that the crime, drug addiction, family breakdown, unemployment, poor school performance, welfare dependency, and general decay in these communities constitute a blight on our society virtually unrivaled in scale and severity by anything to be found elsewhere in the industrial West.

What is sometimes denied, but what must be recognized is that this is, indeed, a race problem. The plight of the underclass is not rightly seen as another (albeit severe) instance of economic inequality, American style. These black ghetto dwellers are a people apart, susceptible to stereotyping, stigmatized for their cultural styles, isolated socially, experiencing an internalized sense of helplessness and despair, with limited access to communal networks of mutual assistance. Their purported criminality, sexual profligacy, and intellectual inadequacy are the frequent objects of public derision. In a word, they suffer a pariah status. It should not require enormous powers of perception to see how this degradation relates to the shameful history of black-white race relations in this country.

Moreover, there is a widening rift between blacks and whites who are not poor—a conflict of visions about the continuing importance of race in American life. Most blacks see race as still of fundamental importance; most whites (and also many Asians and Hispanics) think blacks are obsessed with race. This rift impedes the attainment of commonly shared, enthusiastically expressed civic ideals that might unite us across racial lines in efforts to grapple with our problems. The notion of the "beloved community"—where blacks and whites transcend their differences and cooperate in universal brotherhood to foster racial integration—has never achieved broad appeal. As sociologist William Julius Wilson stressed 20 years ago in his misunderstood classic, *The Declining Significance of Race*, the locus of racial conflict in our society has moved from the economic to the social and political spheres.

Indeed, standing at the end of the 20th century, one can almost see Du Bois's "problem of the color line" shifting before one's eyes. An historic transformation on race-related issues in the United States is taking place. Arguments about black progress are but one part of the broader endeavor to recast our national understanding of racial matters—an undertaking of

enormous importance. It has been a very long time since the civil rights movement constituted a force able to mold the nation's moral sensibilities. A struggle that succeeded brilliantly to win legal equality for blacks after a century of second-class citizenship has for the most part failed to win a national commitment toward eradicating the effects of this historical inheritance. The civil rights approach—petitioning the courts and the federal government for relief against the discriminatory treatment of private or state actors—reached its limit more than a decade ago. Deep improvement in the status of many blacks has taken place, even as the underclass has grown, and there seems to be no politically effective way of mobilizing a national assault on the remaining problems.

What is more, there has been profound demographic change in American society since the 1960s. During this period, nearly 20 million immigrants have arrived on our shores, mostly from non-European points of origin. Hispanics will soon be the nation's largest ethnic minority group. Asian-American college students and urban entrepreneurs are more numerous and more important in the country's economic and political life than ever before. This development is making obsolete the old black-white framework, though blacks must occupy a unique position in any discussion of the nation's ethnic history. But nowadays, as a political matter, to focus solely on the old tension between blacks and whites is to miss something of basic importance.

It is against this backdrop that statistical analyses of the status of African Americans are being conducted. Assessing how much or how little progress has taken place for blacks, and why, is one of the most fiercely contested empirical issues in the social sciences. For years, liberal advocates of blacks' interests tried to deny that meaningful change was occurring. That assessment has always had problems, in my view. In any event, it is no longer tenable. Now the dominant voices on this subject come from right of center. They seem decidedly unfriendly to black aspirations. With great fanfare, these conservatives declare the historic battle against racial caste to have been won. They go on to say that, but for the behavioral dysfunction of the black poor and the misguided demands for affirmative action from a race-obsessed black middle class, our "problem of the color line" could be put behind us. Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom, with their new book, *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible*, offer a prime example of this mode of assessment. This line of argument should not be permitted to shape our national understanding of these matters. Permit me briefly to say why.

Rooted in History

A social scientist of any sophistication recognizes that societies are not amalgams of unrelated individuals creating themselves anew—out of whole cloth, as it were—in each generation. A complex web of social connections and a long train of historical influences interact to form the opportunities and shape the outlooks of individuals. Of course, individual effort is important, as is native talent and sheer luck, for determining how well or poorly a person does in life. But social background, cultural affinities, and communal

influence are also of great significance. This is the grain of truth in the conservatives' insistence that cultural differences lie at the root of racial inequality in America. But the deeper truth is that, for some three centuries now, the communal experience of the slaves and their descendants has been shaped by political, social, and economic institutions that, by any measure, must be seen as oppressive. When we look at "underclass culture" in the American cities of today we are seeing a product of that oppressive history. It is morally obtuse and scientifically naive to say, in the face of the despair, violence, and self-destructive folly of these people, that "if they would get their acts together, like the poor Asian immigrants, then we would not have such a horrific problem in our cities."

The only decent response in the face of the "pathological" behavior of American history's losers is to conclude that, while we cannot change our ignoble past, we must not be indifferent to the contemporary suffering that is linked to that past. The self-limiting patterns of behavior among poor blacks "which some commentators are so quick to trot out" are a product, not of some alien cultural imposition upon a pristine Euro-American canvas, but, rather, of social, economic, and political practices deeply rooted in American history. We should not ignore the behavioral problems of the underclass, but we should discuss and react to them as if we were talking about our own children, neighbors, and friends. This is an American tragedy, to which we should respond as we might to an epidemic of teen suicide, adolescent drunken driving, or HIV infection among homosexual males—that is, by embracing, not demonizing, the victims.

The problem with talk about black culture, black crime, and black illegitimacy, as explanatory categories in the hands of the morally obtuse, is that it becomes an exculpatory device—a way of avoiding a discussion of mutual obligation. It is a distressing fact about contemporary American politics that simply to make this point is to risk being dismissed as an apologist for the inexcusable behavior of the poor. The deeper moral failing lies with those who, declaring "we have done all we can," would wash their hands of the poor.

It is morally and intellectually superficial in the extreme to begin and end one's argument with the observation that the problems of the underclass are due to their high rates of criminal behavior and out-of-wedlock births, and not to white racism. But this is what political discourse assessing the status of blacks has come to. The highly ideological character of racial debate in America makes nuance and complexity almost impossible to sustain. For while it may be true that the most debilitating impediments to advancement among the underclass derive from patterns of behavior that are self-limiting, it is also true that our history has dealt poor blacks a very bad hand. Yes, there must be change in these behaviors if progress is to be made. But a commitment of support will also be required from the broader society to help these folks help themselves.

The conservatives deny this. They rationalize the nasty, brutish, and short lives of a sizable minority of the black population as reflecting blacks' deficiencies, rather than revealing any flaw in "our way of life." Nowhere is the ideological character of this stance more clearly revealed than in the conservatives' celebration of immigrant success, over and against native black failure. That nonwhite immigrants succeed is taken as a vindication of the system; that blacks fail is said to be due entirely to their own inadequacies. This is obscenely ahistorical. Frankly, I remain optimistic about the prospect that black teenagers, given greater opportunity, might respond with better behavior. What makes me pessimistic about our future is the spectacle of politically influential American intellectuals grasping at these cultural arguments as reason to abandon or ignore their moral responsibilities to those who are least fortunate in our society.

Color Is Not Irrelevant

The debate over affirmative action has also become quite ideological in tone. I have been a critic of affirmative action policies for more than 15 years. I was among the first to stress how the use of racial preferences sheltered blacks from the challenge of competing on the merits in our society. I argued strenuously against the inclination of blacks to see affirmative action as a totem—a policy assumed to lie beyond the bounds of legitimate criticism, symbolizing the nation's commitment to "do the right thing" for black people. However, in the wake of a successful ballot initiative banning affirmative action in California, I now find it necessary to reiterate the old, and in my view still valid, arguments on behalf of explicit public efforts to reduce racial inequality.

The current campaign against "preferences" goes too far by turning what before Proposition 209 had been a reform movement into an abolitionists' crusade. In my view, race-based allocations of public contracts, explicit double standards in the workplace, and large disparities in the test scores of blacks and whites admitted to elite universities are unwise practices, deservedly under attack. But the U.S. Army's programs to commission more black officers, the public funding of efforts to bring blacks into science and engineering, and the goal of public universities to retain some racial diversity in their student bodies are all defensible practices that should be retained. The mere fact that these efforts take race into account should be not disqualifying.

Affirmative action, however prudently employed, can never be anything more than a marginal instrument for addressing the nation's unfinished racial business. But the proponents of colorblind policy who bill their crusade against "preferences" as the Second Coming of the civil rights movement display a ludicrous sense of misplaced priorities. They make a totem of ignoring race, even as the social isolation of the urban black poor reveals how important "color" continues to be in American society. Argument about the legality of the government's use of race only scratches the surface, because it fails to deal with the manifest significance of race in the private lives of Americans, black and white.

In the brave new dispensation, "color" is supposed to be irrelevant, yet everywhere we look in America, people are attending assiduously to race. The U.S. Census revealed that, among married people 25 to 34 years old in 1990, 70 percent of Asian women and 39 percent of Hispanic women, but only 2 percent of black women, had white husbands. Racially mixed church congregations are so rare that they make front-page news. So culturally isolated are black ghetto teens that linguists find their speech patterns to be converging across geographic distances, even as this emergent dialect grows increasingly dissimilar from the speech of poor whites living but a few miles away. Childless white couples travel to China in search of infants to adopt, while ghetto-born orphans go parentless. This is not to say that American society is irredeemably racist, but merely to illustrate how deeply imbedded in the social consciousness of our nation is the racial "otherness" of blacks. No accounts of contemporary race relations should minimize this fact. Yet that is precisely what the colorblind crusaders do.

Consider the commonsense observation that, in this country, an army where blacks are one-third of the enlisted personnel but only 3 percent of the officer corps is likely to function poorly. The U.S. army cares about the number of black captains because it needs to sustain effective cooperation among its personnel across racial lines. That the racial identities of captains and corporals sometimes matter to the smooth functioning of a military institution is a deep fact about our society that cannot be wished away.

But monitoring the number of blacks promoted to the rank of captain and formulating policies to increase that number are activities that inherently involve taking account of some individual's race. So radical critics of affirmative action must oppose this. Yet depending on how such activities are undertaken, they need not entail the promulgation of racial double standards, nor need they seem to declare, as a matter of official policy, that racial identity is a determinant of an individual's moral worth. As the military sociologist Charles Moskos is fond of pointing out, the Army is the only place in American society where large numbers of whites routinely take orders from blacks. So the irony is that the moral irrelevance of race, which the colorblind absolutists take as their highest principle, may be more evident to the members of the U.S. Army than elsewhere in our society precisely because the government has been allowed to use race in the conduct of its military personnel policies.