

150 Years After the American Civil War: The Struggle Continues. The Demise of Slavery Remains Unfulfilled in the 21st Century

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Revolutionary promise of the demise of slavery remains unfulfilled in the 21st century.

Confederate army forces retreated from Richmond, Virginia in early April 1865 in the face of advancing Union troops many of whom were Africans.

Soon the Union forces reached the last capital city of the secessionists. The Confederates set fire to large areas in the city but the African troops helped to restore order in the area.

This important historical anniversary in United States history is being recognized this year. Nonetheless, the conclusion of the Civil War which lasted from 1861-1865 represents the beginning of efforts to reconstruct the U.S. absent of slavery and national oppression, a quest that has still not been realized in 2015.

The Confederate military forces believed that if they abandoned Richmond they could continue the war against Lincoln but their cause was a lost one. Absent of a central focus and the demoralization of secessionist troops, they were doomed to disorganization without real reason to continue the fight.

Just a few days later the Confederates surrendered to Gen. Grant. The conclusion of the civil war saw the legal end of slavery with the passage of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution setting the stage for Reconstruction.

The Post Civil War Struggle for Reconstruction

Even with the passage of the 13th Amendment, the state governments established during the years of 1865-67 were dominated by former Confederates who passed black code laws that maintained white dominance and the denial of due process to African people. It was not until the elections of 1866 and the actions of the Radicals and their allies in Congress during 1867 was there some movement in regard to granting citizenship rights to Africans and organizing the South into military districts.

The-then President Andrew Johnson was outraged by the assumption of authority by Congress for Reconstruction. Later he barely escaped impeachment and fell from political grace by the end of 1867. By the time he left office at the end of 1868, Johnson had issued a general amnesty for the former Confederate leadership.

During this period the 14th Amendment to the Constitution was ratified granting citizenship rights to the former slaves and by 1869, the 15th Amendment gave voting rights to African

Americans. It was not until 1870 that the first African Americans entered the U.S. Congress being Joseph H. Rainey from South Carolina and Hiram Revels of Mississippi.

However, at the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865, the Ku Klux Klan was formed in Tennessee by Nathan Bedford Forrest, a former slave trader and Confederate General who was responsible for one of the most egregious atrocities of the war committed at Fort Pillow, where hundreds of enslaved and African troops as well as Union whites were massacred. The Klan organized openly in states throughout the South and battled the Reconstruction process.

Eventually in 1876, as a result of the disputed national presidential election, the federal government largely abandoned the Reconstruction policy. Although in several states including Tennessee, South Carolina and North Carolina, African Americans would continue to hold office through the 1880s and 1890s, by the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries the experiment in democracy was completely overthrown.

The federal government by 1877 had withdrawn their forces from the South prompting decades of reaction characterized by peonage, sharecropping, tenant farming, lynching and repressive laws. The failure of Reconstruction ushered in another century of national oppression.

Lynching became common throughout the South and many areas in the North. Thousands of African Americans were summarily beaten, tortured and killed.

Peonage, sharecropping, tenant farming and contract labor laws created conditions that were analogous to those that prevailed during slavery. In 1896, the Plessy vs. Ferguson Supreme Court decision had consolidated federal law in favor of legalized segregation.

It would take until 1954 for this decision to be reversed with specific reference to public education. A mass civil rights struggle beginning in December 1955 set the stage for a renewed effort to eradicate American apartheid.

The first federal law in support of equality since Reconstruction was passed in 1957 relating to the ability of the Justice Department to enforce voting rights. By 1960, students would take the lead through the sit-in movement and the freedom rides to militantly make a move toward the eradication of legalized segregation and universal suffrage.

The Continuing Relevance of the Civil War and Reconstruction

Today fifty years after the height of the African American national movement characterized by mass demonstrations, urban rebellions, prompting the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Black people are still not fully liberated. A renewed struggle against racism and national oppression emerged during 2014 in response to the heightening police repression and economic exploitation.

A century-and-a-half later we have the advantage of looking back at the historical developments of the Reconstruction and Civil Rights eras of African American history. At present the world capitalist system, headed by the U.S., is facing the worst crisis since the Great Depression.

Even though there have been monumental changes within the political and economic system within the U.S. and the world since the slave period, fundamentally the U.S. is still a class dominated society with the corporations and banks controlling all social institutions. The white-only signs have been removed but the barriers to social progress and genuine freedom have remained erected.

Even with a president of African descent, Barack Hussein Obama, police and other agents of the racist-capitalist state can kill the oppressed at will. Demands for the prosecution of cops who violate the rights of African Americans are routinely ignored.

Therefore, the contemporary phase of the struggle must be designed to overturn racism, national oppression and economic exploitation at its roots. A new system of relations between national groups emphasizing the right to self-determination and full equality has to come into existence if true liberation is to be achieved.

To wage such a campaign for total freedom the oppressed must be organized independently of the capitalist and imperialist dominated parties. Only a party of the working class and the oppressed can assure the eradication of injustice and class oppression.

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