

# Commemorating Juneteenth: The Continuing Unresolved Issues from the Civil War and the Thirteenth Amendment

After 145 years since the end of slavery, the African American national question is still a burning one

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*Author's Note: The following is the text of a speech delivered on June 19, 2010 on the 145th anniversary of Juneteenth. This address is being republished in honor of the 155<sup>th</sup> commemoration of Juneteenth in light of the resurgence of the anti-racist struggle in the United States and the international community. The event a decade ago was held at the offices of the Moratorium NOW! Coalition and the Michigan Emergency Committee Against War & Injustice (MECAWI) located in the Midtown District in Detroit.*

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Today is the 145th anniversary of Juneteenth, a national holiday for the African American people who spent nearly 250 years enslaved inside the British colonies of North America and the eventual United States of America. The holiday represents the struggle of African people to end slavery, legalized segregation, lynching, wage discrimination and all other forms of exploitation and national oppression.

In a declaration issued by the Union Army after the conclusion of the Civil War with specific reference to the state of Texas said that:

“The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a Proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor.” (U.S. Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger, June 19, 1865, Source: Texas State Library)

Why was this statement so significant since President Abraham Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation in August 1862 which became valid on January 1, 1863? (Celebrated as Emancipation Day)

The fact of the matter was that the ruling elites of the Confederacy were not about to abide by an executive order freeing their enslaved Africans from bondage. This was a proclamation that was imposed through the necessities of war in an effort to undermine the economic basis of Southern society and its way of life.

In 1860, Karl Marx wrote to Frederick Engels saying:

“In my opinion, the biggest things that are happening in the world today are on the one hand the movement of the slaves in America started by the death of John Brown, and on the other the movement of the serfs in Russia.” (Chronicles of Black Protest, Edited by Bradford Chambers, 1968, p. 107)

Even though the Abolitionist movement had been in existence for decades and the increasingly rebellious character of the slaves became a serious factor during the late 1850s, the ruling class in the North and the South were not prepared for the emancipation of four million Africans inside the United States. Although Lincoln had previously said that he was anti-slavery, his inaugural address in 1861 left much to be desired for the Abolitionists.

According to Bradford Chambers in his book “Chronicles of Black Protest”, Frederick Douglass, the anti-slavery agitator and journalist, believed strongly in the inevitable emancipation of African people in the United States. Douglass had freed himself from slavery and would eventually travel to Ireland during the 1840s where he would gain international support from the Irish national movement for the cause of emancipation within the United States.

However, in 1861, Chambers recounts that “Douglass’ confidence that emancipation would come about fell precipitously in the months following Lincoln’s election as President. Disenchantment began with the inaugural address. In that address Lincoln announced his intention to keep out of the affairs of states that permitted slavery, although he had previously opposed the extension of slavery in the new states being formed in the West.” (Chronicles of Black Protest, Chambers, p.108)

With further reference to Douglass’ attitude towards the Lincoln administration in early 1861, Chambers notes:

“In his disillusionment Douglass wrote in his Monthly that he planned to visit Haiti to consider it as a haven for black Americans. Haiti—the only place in the New World where black slaves had successfully revolted and formed their own country. Douglass was scheduled to sail on April 25, 1861. Then on April 12 Confederate guns fired on Fort Sumter, and the Civil War began.”

Chambers continues by pointing out that: “Douglass and other black leaders immediately began a campaign to convince Lincoln that, in Douglass’ words, ‘the Union could never prosper until the war assumed an antislavery attitude, and the Negro was enlisted on the loyal side.’ Nonetheless, Lincoln continued to avoid the Abolitionists’ demands to end slavery until the middle of 1862 when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation as a last ditch effort to coerce the South to surrender in light of the threat to free the enslaved Africans.

Nonetheless, it was the objective conditions on the battlefield, the pressure from Radical Republicans in Congress such as Charles Sumner of Massachusetts and Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, who along with Douglass and other abolitionists demanded that Lincoln issue the order to end slavery, as well as the international shift in the balance of forces between Britain, France and Russia that led to a blockade of cotton exports to Europe, that eventually forced the Lincoln administration to declare an end to slavery and to enlist Africans in the

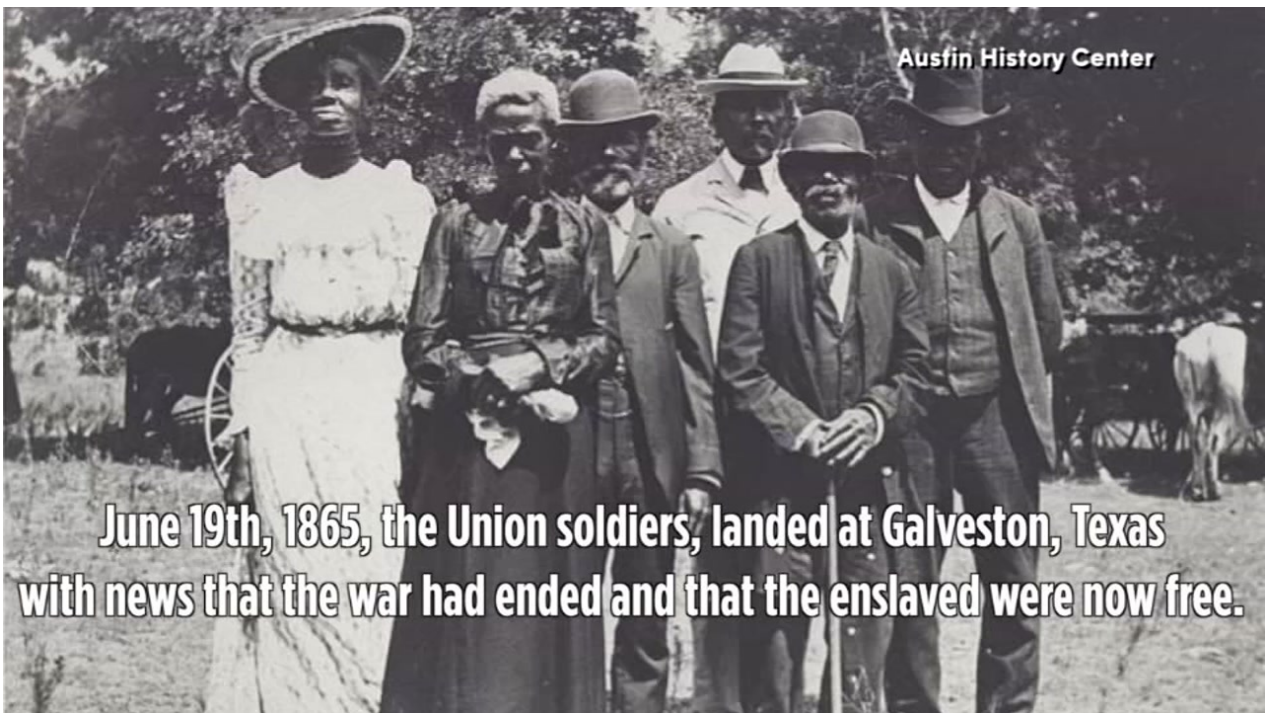
Union Army.

According to Chambers,

“Fully as important was the international objective. By adding as an aim of the Civil War the abolition of slavery, the Proclamation swung international opinion against the South and crushed its hope—a very real hope—that Great Britain and France would intervene on their behalf. Manufacturing interests in both these countries, deprived of cotton imports by the Union blockade of Southern ports, were urging their governments to declare in favor of the South. The Proclamation of Emancipation rallied the workers in Britain and France in defense of the North. Czar Alexander of Russia sent his fleet across the sea to anchor off the coast of New York, ready to do battle if England and France tried to break the blockade of the South.” (Chambers, p. 110)

### **The Thirteenth Amendment and the Status of African People**

Despite the Emancipation Proclamation, slavery did not end until the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1865. However, the Thirteenth Amendment would not resolve the national oppression of the African people in the United States. The question of the economic, social and political status of the former slaves and their free counterparts was not solved with the conclusion of the War.



African American photo and graphic commemorating Juneteenth

In many areas where slavery was the most profitable in the South, Africans constituted a majority or a substantial section of population groups in the counties and regions of various states. This was the situation in areas of Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, Tennessee, Louisiana and other states, where as a result of the systems of cotton and other agricultural commodities production, Africans outnumbered whites both slave owners and non-slave owners.

However, in Texas, where Maj. Gen. Granger’s order was declared some 145 years ago

today, the demographic situation was different than in many other areas of the South. W.E.B. DuBois, in his study entitled "Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward A History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880," says that

"Texas had, in 1860, 182,921 Negroes and 420,891 whites, thus putting this state among those where the Negro population was a decided minority, and white immigration destined greatly to increase the preponderance of the whites." (DuBois, p.552)

DuBois also notes that in Texas:

"The division of the planters and poor whites was less distinct in this state than in many others." As a result of the Mexican-American War and the seizure of Texas by the white settlers and the United States Government there was much of what DuBois described as "plenty of rich land and the poorest white men could get a start; this increased demand for labor." (DuBois, p.552)

The resistance to the emancipation of Africans was immediate and violent on the part of the Confederate soldiers and their supporters. DuBois recounts that:

"When the war neared its end, the Confederate troops in Texas got out of hand and began rebelling and looting. Towns like Houston were burned, and clothes and food of all sorts of goods stolen. The Texas Republican (newspaper) stressed 'the ruinous effect of freeing four million ignorant and helpless blacks,' and said that the people of the North would be glad to witness a return of slavery, because it would raise 'larger crops and a richer market for Yankee manufacturers.'" (DuBois, p.553)

This pattern of destruction and looting was repeated in other cities in the South including Richmond, Virginia, where Confederate troops sought to burn down the city when the Union Troops arrived with a sizeable regiment of Black soldiers who liberated the city in April 1865.

The passage of the Thirteenth Amendment was significant because it included a provision in Section II which declared: "Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation." The Radicals in Congress like Charles Sumner believed that this granted the power to enfranchise Africans. It must be kept in mind that at the end of the Civil War many of the southern states were under minority control with appointed military governors. The planters and their allies were adamantly against the granting of suffrage to the former slaves.

This controversy surrounding the interpretation of the Thirteenth Amendment would continue with the adoption of both the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution. There have been recent statements from politicians within the so-called Tea Party movement that have questioned the constitutionality of the Fourteenth Amendment as well as the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

DuBois in Black Reconstruction points to this important debate that took place within Congress in 1865. After the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, a Civil Rights Bill was introduced that was met with skepticism and opposition.

DuBois notes that:

“The Civil Rights Bill was taken up on December 13, but Sherman of Ohio reminded the Senate that there was scarcely a state in the Union that did not make distinctions on account of color, and wished, therefore, to postpone action until the Thirteenth Amendment had been adopted. Saulsbury of Maryland called it ‘an insane effort to elevate the African to the dignity of the white race’, and claimed that the Thirteenth Amendment would carry no such power as Sherman assumed.” (DuBois, p. 271)

## **U.S. History and the Right of Self-Determination of Oppressed Peoples**

Two recent political acts that have gained widespread publicity in the corporate media were the proclamation of Southern Heritage Month in the state of Virginia by Gov. Robert McDonnell in April 2010 and the subsequent opinion piece by Prof. Henry Louis Gates of Harvard who questioned the legitimacy of the demand for reparations among African Americans in the United States. In previous articles, “Confederate Heritage and Distortion of History” and “The Atlantic Slave Trade and the Rise of World Capitalism,” examined issues related to the responsibility for and the continuing social impact of slavery. (See [this](#))

These ideological attacks from the right to full democracy and self-determination for the African American people and other oppressed national groups in the United States are coming at a time of profound economic restructuring and imperialist military expansion around the world. The apartheid bills enacted in Arizona that legalized racial profiling and outlaws ethnic studies, much be viewed within the context of the rapidly shifting demographic composition of the U.S. and the need on the part of the capitalist class to maximize profits amid economic decline.

The Tea Party movement represents such an ideological offensive aimed at dividing and weakening the struggle of the nationally oppressed and the working class as a whole. Yet the mass outpouring on May Day of over one million people who said no to anti-immigrant bigotry and yes to jobs, full-employment and legalizations for all, far outweighs the efforts of racists and chauvinists elements backed by the capitalist class. The burgeoning unity of African Americans, Latino/as, Arab Americans, Asians and other oppressed groups will be a key element in building the people’s movement that is needed to abolish capitalism and imperialism.

Major historical events of the 19th century: the large-scale removal of the Native people, the Mexican-American War and the Civil War that abolished African slavery, still remain unresolved today. The Native people of Arizona have spoken out forcefully against the apartheid laws now being imposed that target the Mexican people whose land was stolen at the same time that Africans were being enslaved inside the United States.

In 2010, the current economic crisis has most profoundly affected the African American and Latino/as people. A recent study conducted by the Center for Responsible Lending indicates that Latino/as and African Americans have the highest foreclosure rates in the country. Both groups also have the highest unemployment rates in the U.S. labor market.

Compounding these economic realities, African American and Latino/as are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system with incarceration rates that far outstrip their numbers within the general population. These rates of imprisonment are

directly linked to racial profiling by law-enforcement and homeland security, which the passage of SB 1070 only reinforces. This is why efforts to pass such legislation in Michigan should be opposed by African Americans, Latino/as and all people of goodwill.

The struggle for genuine democracy and the right of self-determination for oppressed nations are principled questions within the socialist movement. V. I. Lenin, the leader and chief theoretician of the Russian Revolution, wrote his theses on “The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination” in early 1916 during World War I. Although the Bolshevik Party would not seize power until the following year in 1917, Lenin was adamant that both the struggle for full democracy and self-determination for oppressed nations were equally indispensable in the program of the revolutionary vanguard party.

Lenin said during this period:

“The socialist revolution is not a single act, it is not one battle on one front, but a whole epoch of acute class conflicts, a long series of battles on all fronts, i.e., on all questions of economics and politics, battles that can only end in the expropriation of the bourgeoisie. It would be a radical mistake to think that the struggle for democracy was capable of diverting the proletariat from the socialist revolution or of hiding, overshadowing it, etc. On the contrary, in the same way as there can be no victorious socialism that does not practice full democracy, so the proletariat cannot prepare for its victory over the bourgeoisie without an all-around, consistent and revolutionary struggle for democracy.” (Lenin, Selected Writings on National Liberation, Socialism and Imperialism, p. 111)

Lenin then goes on to state as well:

“It would be no less a mistake to remove one of the points of the democratic program, for example, the point on the self-determination of nations, on the grounds of it being ‘impracticable’ or ‘illusory’ under imperialism.... (Lenin, p. 111) Increased national oppression under imperialism does not mean that Social-Democracy should reject what the bourgeoisie call the ‘utopian’ struggle for the freedom of nations to secede but, on the contrary, it should make greater use of the conflicts that arise in this sphere, too, as grounds for mass action and for revolutionary attacks on the bourgeoisie.” (Lenin, p. 113)

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