

Many American historians refer to the institution of slavery as America's founding sin. There is no doubt that despite the Civil War and the much-delayed emancipation of slaves, the Black population has continued to fall behind in sharing America's progress and road to prosperity. This is so, despite the number of Black professionals, college graduates, who have, in the past few decades, entered the mainstream. Just watch television sometime without looking at the screen and you will not be able to distinguish the color of journalists, government officials, experts in a multiplicity of fields, and families in TV commercials.

But there is no doubt that the majority of our black citizens have a longer haul in accumulating family assets, such as home ownership, that has benefitted so many of the rest of us. Our inner cities struggle with problems of underemployment, food ghettos, and one-parent families, all traceable to punitive laws and bad cultural heritages.

But before our young college idealists launch into disdain for our slave-holding Founding Fathers, they need to understand something that made us a nation: compromise. Compromise is our founding sin, but one without which we would not have a country.

Consider the miracle of thirteen former British colonies, half of them heirs to a slave labor culture and the other half viscerally opposed to it, managing to create one nation out of such differences. These founders, such as Washington and Jefferson, shared most values and comparable educations with John Adams. They differed on slavery, but it is interesting to note that George Washington freed his slaves in his will, and Jefferson wrote brilliantly about equality, but was less stellar in practice. So how did the founders bridge this gap?

All of them, the educated southerners included, did not create this system; they inherited it. However, most believed that slavery would, over time, die off of its own weight. In the interim, they struck a compromise that neither side liked: counting slaves as two-thirds of a person rather than one whole voting male. The south would have liked them all counted for their benefit in Congressional seats and the northerners did not want them counted at all. Compromise resulted, without which they would not have had a government.

Compromise met the next challenge: the southern states wanting to expand into Mexico and the Caribbean and the northern states wanting to prevent this. The compromise was that lines were drawn where slavery was permitted and where it was not, as the country spread westward (Mason-Dixon line, for example). The country maintained an isolationist policy until after the emancipation permitted us to reengage the rest of the world.

The most obnoxious ruling of the Supreme Court, the law mandating that runaway slaves who fled to the north be returned to their masters (1850), was a compromise to mollify the south, outraged by a growing movement in the north toward ending slavery. That compromise did not last long. The south finally rebelled and tried to create a separate nation, one in which slavery (states' rights) would exist. President Abraham Lincoln responded by declaring the south in rebellion and the Civil War was fought to save the union.

Imagine how weak we would have been had we been two countries rather than one. However, more compromises were made, again and again, to mollify southern congressmen and senators, that deprived the emancipated Blacks from full rights. Lincoln's successor, President Andrew Johnson, did all he could to undo the emancipation process until stopped by an impeachment. But the damage to complete integration of Black citizens into the mainstream of American life lingered.

Today, we are beginning to mend. We are no longer pushing the problem, the injustices, under the carpet. We have an enlarging elite, educated, successful Black sector in our society and steps are being taken to address the needs of the rest. We need to cut the compromisers in the past some slack; they had no choice. But today we do have choice, and our better angels dictate them. Our children and their children will see the end of this founding sin.

685 words

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