

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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For those of us who grew up outside the continental USA and migrated here, the process of acculturation is a path that meanders more than follows a linear or even a logical pattern. It runs the spectrum from complete rejection of one's cultural heritage to outright refusal to participate in the national quilt made of several ethnic groups to form a harmonious whole, at least in principle.

For the average person, however, some aspects of American life are easy to catch. For example, Thanksgiving is espoused as a family celebration by immigrants and natives alike. One can arguably state a celebration centering on culinary feasting can be nothing but a no-brainer. Nonetheless, even those who don't exactly care about eating turkey still find the idea of sharing a meal among friends and family members appealing. It stands to reason that the notional construct of the family is so venerated that it's a universal human response.

Other aspects of American cultural life vary in their appeal. Halloween closely follows to Thanksgiving in popularity. Kids attending school get pulled into the hoopla of festooning a costume primarily and then going trick or treat. Parents find it hard not to give in to children's insistence on partaking in this celebration. The same can be said about the biggest holiday of the year, Christmas. This time of the year, another one is around the corner, July 4th. Macy's fireworks' display in the skyline of NY is a national event. Barbecues with friends and or family during the day have become a given.

On the other hand, some standard practices among the natives don't seem to attract the foreign-born so much. For college students born in America, becoming a member of a Greek fraternity, especially when one lives on campus, has a long, storied, and checkered past. However, it's not common for students who grew up outside the US to become fraternity/sorority members. Such purely Yankee tradition, in the purest sense of the term without any pejorative connotation, has unfortunately evolved along racial lines. Since they are private clubs, they have their own membership criteria. Black students who were not welcome in the white students' fraternities formed their own. This type of bonding tends to last over a lifetime. An immigrant does not quickly grasp the idea of membership in a Greek fraternity because it's such a peculiarly North American custom.

Certainly, there are countless examples one can find that follow this same trend. There are several historical events that illustrate this truism. This month of June has two bookends, sort of. It begins with the event in the Greenwood neighborhood of Oklahoma City, and there is Juneteenth toward the end of the month. They are both important but for opposite reasons. The latter is a celebration, while the former is a date of mourning. Each event warrants a particular analysis, but we will concentrate on the latter for today.

The choice is based on numerous reasons, not the least of which is the fact that even among American-born individuals, the events that occurred more than a century ago are not well known. In addition, in its very nature, the celebration evokes a kinship to the similarity of the subject, the common genesis of the struggle, and its symbolism. Like most seminal historical events, delving into the matter opens some sore wounds and unpleasant warts of the veneer of society. Juneteenth goes back to 1865 or, more precisely, June 19th, some two and half years after the Proclamation of Emancipation of slaves. That event occurred on September 22, 1862, during the Civil War. In that proclamation by President Lincoln, enslaved people in the Confederate States but not the Union States would be considered free once they crossed into a state of the Union and would be free to enroll in the Union Army. That Proclamation would be later associated with the end of slavery in the US inaccurately. It was meant to punish the Confederacy because slaves were a valued

commodity for the wealth they were generating. This decree did not liberate slaves in the Union, they would become free as per the 13th Amendment that became law of the land in December 1865, more than three years later. The similarity between our struggle and that of the slaves in America mirrors the constant battle, the spilling of blood, bartered in exchange for this most precious right: freedom.

The Civil War was an effort by the Union to prevent the dissolution of the country as its main reason. The Confederacy fought because it wanted to preserve the institution of slavery as it was an engine of economic growth for everybody but the slaves. Contrary to some revisionist interpretation of the conflict, Lincoln didn't fight against the Confederacy out of magnanimity and compassion for the slaves. Absolutely not. In his own words as cited by Nikole Hannah-Jones in an exegesis in *The NY Times* magazine in 2019 as part of *The 1619 PROJECT*, "You and we are different races.... Your race suffers very greatly, many of them, by living among us, while ours suffers from your presence. In a word, we suffer on each side..... It's better for us to be separate." To understand the mechanics of the events, think of present-day *Black Lives Matter*. Born out of repeated acts of wanton violence against innocent Black men in routine encounters with the police, it was considered a fringe movement made of radical elements, and mainstream America ignored it. However, as evidence keeps accumulating of the viciousness of police brutality, young people have been coalescing in significant numbers to make the hidebound mindset untenable. The same phenomenon took place but over a much longer period starting in colonial times and spilling over well into the middle of the 19th century and gathering more steam as other nations were ceasing this inhuman practice called slavery. On the one hand, the abolitionist movement and intermittent revolts by slaves were having an effect. People that had previously taken a rigid position defending the status quo have changed their minds. No better act can second that premise than the decision by Princeton University barely a few years ago to dissociate itself from its former president, who later became no less than the president of the USA: Woodrow Wilson. He had prevented Black students from attending the school during his tenure and instituted very strict segregation in the federal government during his presidency. This type of resume could have been ignored for very long but is now considered toxic. This is realpolitik.

A practical result of the Proclamation was the wholesale defection of slaves to join the ranks of the Union military. The victory came thanks to the help of the slaves. Lincoln didn't envision having a democracy that included ex-slaves. In this respect, he was no different from any number of liberators in South America who gained independence but didn't exactly care for the lot of the slaves. With the constant infusion of slave soldiers, the tide turned, but the Civil War would continue till Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox, Virginia, to Ulysses S. Grant on April 9, 1865.

Although Texas had lost as part of the Confederacy, it didn't abolish slavery. One would have to wait till June when a Union general, Gordon Granger, at the head of his troops, reached Galveston, Texas, to make the announcement. The celebration of Juneteenth began in earnest the following year, in 1866, and has grown in popularity gradually. Now due to a confluence of unfortunate events that have galvanized society, its symbolism has reached a critical mass of approval to the point that it is being elevated to the status of a paid holiday by different states, including NY.

We, descendants of the first nation in the New World to have broken free from slavery, are very concerned about these historical facts because our fate and that of our African descendant cousins living in America are entwined. If Lincoln had his way, all Blacks would have left America to establish roots elsewhere. An effort in that direction took place when some were sent to Haiti,

and later, there was even an idea by the US to occupy the Dominican Republic to further that policy, a matter that strained the relationship between Frederic Douglass and Charles Sumner. Certainly, Liberia became a nation based on the idea of freed slaves relocating elsewhere after having donated their labor for centuries and not receiving any bounty in return. Juneteenth, as a celebration of freedom, mirrors our own, and we should identify with it. In more ways than one, the freedom acquired by the slaves was not given to them, but they fought for it. Lincoln's army would have been defeated had he not chosen to allow slaves to become soldiers in his army, and they fought valiantly because it was an existential matter. He had to make that choice because not enough white men were volunteering to join or die for the cause of Negroes as many saw it. Lincoln's duplicitous role vis-à-vis the freedom of slaves is well documented.

Juneteenth is a reminder that with the abolition of slavery, Reconstruction was a feather in our cap as the South was transformed for the better with the passage of laws that made it mandatory for free public education, the 14th Amendment ensuring our children born of Black immigrants in this land are considered citizens with full rights, and even the 15th Amendment guaranteeing the right to vote. This ephemeral period ought to shine bright and make us wonder about our failure to do the same back home. Why didn't we make public education compulsory when we broke free from bondage? The more we look at the accomplishments of the former slaves during Reconstruction, the more we need to do an introspective search, and auto-critique of our own failings back home when we set out to build a state of free slaves. Juneteenth was the beacon of what was possible and what would later be accomplished. Nonetheless, that short period begat years of darkness to eviscerate us by any means necessary. We just happen to have that uncanny ability to survive.