



Slavery - The US perspective: From the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement

Dr Alan Sked

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Today I want to talk to you about the history of race and slavery in the USA. I will start at the beginning with the foundation of the Republic and try to get to the present, because unless you know the whole story, the various parts of it are pretty incomprehensible. The main point for you to take on board, however, is that race or racial hatred has been the serpent in the American Eden and that that serpent is still there.

Immigrants have traditionally done well in the USA, including those from Asia who are regarded as virtual whites. But blacks, it should be stressed, did not arrive in America as immigrants choosing to seek a new life there. They were taken there by force from Africa in horrendous conditions; many of them died en route; and many more died soon after their arrival, before the rest were branded and sold off to endure a life of slavery. Once slavery was abolished, after the failure of reconstruction, blacks were again subjected to social discrimination, economic hardship, legal apartheid, lynching and physical segregation into ghettos. It was not until the 1960s that a civil rights movement succeeded in winning legal equality for them, although even then every move was contested, every reform resented, and social acceptance still withheld by a white majority, now afraid of the results of all those years of segregation- in particular, the existence of a criminal underclass in the black ghettos. There has been considerable progress, of course, in the form of a large and growing black middle class. It is now also impossible to speak publicly of blacks using the racial vocabulary of yesteryear. Yet even today's large black middle-class resides in its own middle-class ghettos, collides with glass ceilings and usually lives a life apart from white America. The serpent of racism, therefore, still inhabits the American Eden. America is more a salad bowl than a melting pot and is hardly colour-blind. However, allow me to go back to the beginning.

Slavery was a huge problem for the founding fathers. In order to agree a constitution in 1787, concessions had to be made to the slave owners in the South. In particular, the slave trade was to be allowed to continue for twenty years; slaves would count as three-fifths of a free man for purposes of representation in the Lower House of Congress and in votes for the Electoral College in presidential elections; fugitive slaves were to be returned to their masters; and tariffs were prohibited on produce exported from the South. As in the King James edition of the New Testament, however, slavery itself was not mentioned in the constitution.

According to Lincoln and others this was because the founding fathers were ashamed of it and expected it to die out. Maybe. However, it most certainly did not die out. If there were 500,000 slaves in 1776 there were 4 million in 1860. Meanwhile the slave economy constituted a huge part of the US economy as a whole, producing America's most valuable exports-tobacco and cotton-and representing its greatest economic investment. It also conferred great political power on the South, enabling Jefferson, for example, to win the presidential election of 1800 and allowing the South to dominate the political system for most of the period before the Civil War.

Jefferson, of course was a racist, who believed blacks were inferior and ideally should be sent back to Africa. Like many other prominent presidents-Washington, Madison, Monroe and Jackson to name but a few-Jefferson was also a slave-owner and a rather cruel one at that. Abraham Lincoln did not own slaves, but he too was a racist who thought Africans were inferior and should be sent back to Africa. The Supreme Court, of course, was also racist and dominated by southerners and slaveholders before the Civil War. It held the same views of blacks that Andrew Jackson did, namely that they were simply chattels or property. Chief Justice Taney in the Dred Scott decision of 1857 laid down that 'emancipated or not?'. 'they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.' In fact, they could not be citizens of the United States.

I shall come to the Civil War in a moment, but allow me first to point out that in the North before 1860 only one per cent of the population was black but that it was subjected to huge discrimination. Despite the spread of anti-slavery sentiment, blacks were forced to attend their own schools and churches and even abolitionist societies preferred to have no black members. Northern racism appeared to increase as the century wore on. By 1860, five northern states had prohibited blacks from entering their territory, while democracy itself took on an increasingly racial definition. Between 1800 and 1860, for example, every free state, save Maine, that entered the Union, beginning with Ohio in 1803, restricted voting rights to white males. Among older states, even as property qualifications for whites faded, black political rights became more restricted. Thus, Pennsylvania, despite its flourishing black community in Philadelphia, eliminated black voting in 1837. Lincoln, in his political struggles in Illinois, argued to purely white audiences-blacks there could not vote. Little wonder that in order to win votes he said that blacks were inferior.

The Civil War when it came, was not fought to end slavery but to preserve the Union. This was threatened because Lincoln insisted that slavery should not spread to the territories. In fact there was no where it could spread to. Congress had rejected the idea of Kansas entering as a slave state and despite all the fuss and spilling of blood over Kansas between 1858 and 1860, according to the 1860 census, there were only two blacks to be found there. Where else was slavery to spread to? Still Lincoln's election campaign traumatised the South. His aim as president should have been to avoid war, but instead he refused to compromise, united the Upper and Deep South, taunted the Southerners and accepted a war for which he had no plans and no army. It took him five years to win at a cost equivalent to 13 million lives in today's terms-625,000 dead by 1865-more than all the dead of all of America's other wars put together. And for what? He reluctantly emancipated the southern slaves in 1863 so long as they fought for the North, having refused to do so beforehand. But those that did join the Union army were then paid less than white men, were put into segregated regiments and at first were refused permission to fight. When a delegation of blacks was invited to the White House, Lincoln asked them to arrange to ship their fellow blacks back to Africa. Before he was assassinated, in a meeting with Confederate leaders, he spoke of the evils of immediate emancipation and proposed delaying the emancipation of slaves for five years after the war. That did not happen, but certainly, he was prepared to be extremely indulgent towards rebels to secure the reunification of the United States. If only ten per cent of the population of a confederate state would agree take an oath of allegiance to the Union then they could draw up a new constitution and re-enter it. He even wanted to spend \$400,000 compensating slave-holders, something which his cabinet rejected. All this was premised on the assumption that as president, he alone had the power to pardon rebels and formulate reconstruction policy. Yet after his death his racist successor, Andrew Johnson, was challenged on this by a Radical Republican congress which asserted its exclusive right to admit new states to the Union and to lay down terms and conditions. When these involved accepting the Fourteenth Amendment and other legislation, the Southern states refused, leading to the First Reconstruction Act of 1867 which dissolved all southern governments save that of the state of Tennessee, and placed the South under military rule. This led to turmoil in the South, the introduction of Force Acts to protect blacks from the Klu Klux Klan and the Fifteenth Amendment forbidding states to deny blacks the vote. But radical reconstruction came to an end when in 1877 a contested presidential election (in which a Republican candidate won fewer votes than a Democratic one but was awarded the presidency anyway by a committee of the House of representatives--shades of 2000!-- indeed, Florida was one of the states whose result was contested!) led to a Compromise as a result of which federal troops were withdrawn from the South. Thereafter, the whole South fell to the 'Redeemers' or 'Bourbon Democrats', people who had learned nothing and forgotten nothing and who proceeded to restore white supremacy and make a legend of the 'lost cause' of the confederacy. That is not to say that the South did not change in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Bourbons did bring about a degree of economic modernisation and even allowed blacks to retain the vote. Many blacks

even developed black businesses-mainly for exclusively black customers-and the degree of literacy among blacks rose considerably thanks mainly to Jewish philanthropy. Still, the populist revolt in the late nineteenth century provoked a white backlash from Democrats who 'drew the color line' and introduced new constitutions throughout the South from the late 1880s, constitutions which brought poll-taxes, grandfather clauses and other methods of depriving blacks and poor whites of the vote. These Democrats now also introduced Jim Crow laws, which laid down 'separate but equal' legislation providing for separate schools, separate eating places, separate carriages or separate seating places on trains, buses etc for black and white. It was only now from c. 1890 that the South became a strictly and legally segregated society where blacks, if they refused to obey the rules, were ceremonially lynched, sometimes in groups before picnicking white families, who watched them being genitally mutilated first before being hanged or slowly roasted on a spit. Lynchings might be politically motivated but often a sexual inferiority complex was at work. Blacks were held to be sexually more primitive, better endowed, and a threat to white women. Any accusation therefore that a black was showing an interest in a white girl might bring sudden and terrible retribution. The obsession with genital mutilation was a signal of what forces were really at work.

For decades nothing was done to aid blacks. Reforming presidents like Woodrow Wilson or FDR offered no remedies. On the contrary, Wilson presided over the segregation of the federal bureaucracy which made blacks unemployed; and FDR, an honorary Georgian who needed Southern votes for his New Deal legislation, refused to sign an anti-lynching bill. Eleanor Roosevelt, however, was seen to mix with blacks and to be their friend and this, together with some meagre help through New Deal agencies encouraged poor blacks from 1936 to vote Democrat rather than Republican. But they had gained very little from the New Deal and often even queues at soup kitchens remained segregated. Professional blacks only turned Democrat after the second world war.

Meanwhile the Supreme Court had done nothing to strike down America's post-1890 system of apartheid. Nor had black political action helped change much. The Civil Rights cases of 1883 and Plessy versus Ferguson in 1896 saw the Supreme Court dismantle the protections given to blacks under the Fourteenth Amendment and uphold the Jim Crow laws. Meanwhile blacks were split over how radical to be politically with Booker T. Washington counselling self-improvement and hard work as a prelude to equality, while W.B. Du Bois advocated political action for immediate equal rights. Yet in 1913 the federal government separated the races not only in its offices but in its eating places and rest-rooms. Social Darwinism became the prevalent rationalisation of inequality with William Graham Sumner of Yale proclaiming that 'stateways cannot change folkways.' Blacks were pictured as inferior-lazy, immoral, improvident and criminal. Thomas Dixon's novels, *The Klansman* and *The Leopard's Spots* spelled this out while D. W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* painted a picture of the nation's history which depicted blacks as unfit for citizenship, far less equality. Blacks did fight back. In 1882 George Washington Williams published his *History of the Negro Race in America* to give a more objective view of black history and other black historians followed. In 1890 blacks from twenty-one states and the District of Columbia met in Chicago to organise the Afro-American League of the United States to call for better education, fairer trials, an end to lynching and the right to vote, while a group of black intellectuals led by Du Bois met at Niagra Falls, Ontario in 1905 to launch the Niagra Movement behind similar aims. But it was only after bloody race riots in the early years of the twentieth century that vital help was given by whites to the cause. Thus in 1909 the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People was set up, followed by the National Urban League in 1910. White lawyers now stood side by side with blacks before the Supreme Court (the grandfather's clause was declared unconstitutional in 1915) and boycotts, picketing and demonstrations began to have effects in selected northern communities.

World War One saw two developments: first, there was the start of a huge migration of blacks-perhaps half a million-from the South to northern cities such as Chicago, Pittsburgh and Cleveland. Many failed to find employment but many others did and won a higher standard of living than ever before. And while northern communities were not altogether friendly, opportunities for education and political self-respect were greater than ever before. Despite this, secondly, hopes for equality were dashed by the war. The US army was strictly segregated; all blacks who sought to join were rejected by the US marines and the US Air Force; while the navy relegated them to menial duties. Worse still, racial conflict broke out in many places during the war and before the Versailles Conference was over, America was experiencing the 'long hot summer'

of 1919. In the words of John Hope Franklin, 'Few Negro Americans could have anticipated the wholesale rejection they experienced at the conclusion of World War I. Returning Negro Soldiers were lynched by hanging or burning, even while still in military uniforms. The Klan warned Negroes that they must respect the rights of the white race 'in whose country they are permitted to reside.' Racial conflicts swept the country, and neither federal nor state governments seemed interested in effective intervention. One result was the spectacular growth in Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, which became the largest black secular group ever organised in the United States. Although few were really interested in settling in Africa-the proposed aim of the Association-hundreds of thousands of blacks now joined it as a protest.

Then came a decade of national prosperity but it brought few political changes for blacks. The 1930s and the New Deal did little for them either. Bread lines and soup kitchens were frequently segregated as were employment services; many New Deal agencies merely bowed to Jim Crow. The only sign of hope was that new labour groups like the CIO (the Congress of Industrial Organisations) encouraged by the support of the Wagner Labor Act, began to approach manpower resources as a whole and not simply in terms of race.

With the approach of World War Two many blacks were determined that the experience of the First World War should not be repeated. Thus in 1941 they threatened to march on Washington and forced FDR to issue an order prohibiting segregation in the defence industries. Political opposition to this was strong and noisy and the order was denounced by several state governors and skilfully evaded by certain manufacturers, but it was a significant milestone towards equality. On the other hand, the US armed forces remained segregated, although officer training was not. Largely, however, this only meant that some black regiments had white officers. In the final months of the war, though, there was a deliberate experiment which involved black and white troops fighting in the same units. With the success of this experiment and the victory over Nazi Germany the prospects for the desegregation of the armed forces became brighter.

Following World War Two the pressure for reform grew. In 1944 the Supreme Court ruled against segregation in inter-state transportation and in 1947 it declared the Democratic Party white primary unconstitutional. In 1947, too, the President's Committee on Civil Rights called for the 'elimination of segregation based on race, color, creed, or national origin, from American life'. In 1948 President Truman asked Congress to establish a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission. At the same time he took steps to eliminate segregation in the federal government and armed services.

Several factors now helped to push forward the drive towards Civil Rights. For a start the huge black migration north had started again during the Second World War, so that by 1965 about one third of America's black citizens lived in twelve metropolitan centres in the North and West. There, although there was often white hostility, they suffered no political disabilities and could acquire great political power. Their representatives, therefore, soon entered local legislatures, Congress and the judiciary. This also won them greater political respect.

Secondly, America's leadership in world affairs meant that in the struggle with Communism, and particularly in the competition to gain the respect of former European colonies, which had become newly independent third world states, America found that its diplomatic position was undermined as long as it was seen to practise racism at home while preaching equality and democracy abroad.

Finally, after World War Two, new organisations arose which helped fight for civil rights in the USA. These included the Congress of Racial Equality, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee. Those that already existed in the 1950s supported the action that led to the Supreme Court decision of 1954 to desegregate schools, while the newer ones pressed for wider civil rights legislation. In the South, meanwhile, political leaders bitterly resisted every advance: teachers and school administrators, university authorities, local 'white citizens' councils', not to mention the Klan, all

aided efforts to resist the changes demanded by desegregation. The result was an era of protest marches, lynchings and violence.

In 1954 the Supreme Court in *Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka* unanimously declared that segregated education violated the Fourteenth Amendment and in 1955 ordered all schools to be desegregated. 100 members of congress denounced the Court for abusing its judicial power and southern politicians competed to 'outnigger' each other; no blacks were allowed to attend white schools. The crunch seemed to come in 1957 when Eisenhower sent federal troops to enforce school desegregation in Little Rock in Arkansas, but the governor, there, shut down the public schools for two years and by the end of the 1950s only 1% of black students in the Deep South attended integrated schools. Eisenhower also got passed a Civil Rights Act in 1957 which set up a permanent Civil Rights Commission with investigatory powers, but in fact, like its successor of 1960, which slightly strengthened the powers concerned, it achieved very little. Ike himself did not believe that race relations were a proper subject for judicial action. What the 1957 confrontation over Little Rock made clear, however, was that voters in the North now overwhelmingly approved (by 90% no less!) the use of federal force in the South. Television, in fact, was to become the fourth great factor in sustaining the push for civil rights in post-1945 America.

Like Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy as president was extremely wary of civil rights as a political movement. It threatened to divide the nation, split the Democrats and subject Congress to long filibusters. So while he appointed an unprecedented number of blacks to high office, he also nominated Southern racists to federal judgeships. He remained aloof from federal legislation and it took two years before he issued a weak directive to desegregate federally financed housing. Yet the civil rights movement kept up the pressure. The Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) organised 'freedom rides' in the Deep South to desegregate bus terminals to show how interstate transport was still segregated. This led to violence against activists in Alabama and forced the Interstate Commerce Commission to act. Then in 1962 JFK was forced to initiate federal action against the University of Mississippi, which was refusing to enrol black veteran James Meredith. Racial clashes over this led to two deaths and hundreds of injuries. On Good Friday, 1963 Martin Luther King Jr. himself led a series of protests and sit-downs in Birmingham, Alabama, which led police chief Eugene 'Bull' Connors to attack demonstrators with cattle-prods, attack dogs and water cannon. The television coverage duly appalled the North. JFK negotiated a deal which led to better terms for blacks and ended the demonstrations. Governor George Wallace of Alabama was then forced to defer to federal authority when he attempted in June 1963 to prevent two black students entering the University of Alabama. Kennedy, now confronted by a national movement for 'Freedom Now' proclaimed that race was a moral issue. And to help him and others get the point, nearly 250,000 Americans marched on the Capitol on 28 August 1963. There Martin Luther King proclaimed that he had had a dream of brotherhood, freedom and justice when all men would be 'free at last'. JFK had now presented Congress with a comprehensive civil rights measure-but most members simply ignored it. Meanwhile, the head of the Memphis NCAAP was assassinated, a black church was bombed in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four little girls and opposition stymied civil rights legislation in Congress. After Kennedy's own assassination, however, Congress in July 1964 passed a Civil Rights Act outlawing segregation in schools, housing, and jobs, and ending black disenfranchisement. It created an Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC) to stop discrimination on grounds of race, religion, national origin or gender. LBJ as president, now also declared war on poverty and announced his Great Society programme. \$1 billion would be spent to end poverty and racial injustice. LBJ in 1964, like Kennedy in 1961 also mentioned the concept of 'affirmative action'. Originally this was meant to give blacks merely a fair share of jobs, but soon became a means to justify job quotas or even 'reverse discrimination' in the eyes of its critics. This was partly due to the number of complaints about segregation received by the EEOC, but really came about because the Nixon administration took up the concept, starting with the 'Philadelphia Plan' which was meant to end segregation in the construction industry there. This 'Plan' was backed by federal courts in 1971 and in *Griggs v Duke Power Co.* in the same year the Supreme Court unanimously approved Chief Justice Warren Burger's arguments that in the field of race and employment, results not intentions were what mattered and that group rights overrode individual ones. The Nixon administration, it should be said, although it opposed bussing to end segregation in schools, and proclaimed its devotion to law and order, did give greater powers to the EEOC to fight discrimination and spent extra billions to fight black poverty. By the time Nixon had left office, social security and welfare payments had doubled, federal expenditure on food stamps was \$5 billion in 1975 as compared with only \$36 million a decade earlier, while the number of

those eligible for food stamps had expanded from 633,000 to 20 million people. The EEOC had also grown. Its budget in 1968 had been \$13.2 million and it had employed 359 people. Four years later it employed 1,640 people and its budget had doubled.

Let me return for a moment, however to the 1960s. In 1964 CORE and the SNCC had led voting registration drives in the South (the Supreme Court in 1962 in *Baker v Carr* had insisted on one man one vote in all federal and state elections) concentrating on Mississippi, where a Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was set up which went to the Democratic Convention that year and led to that party agreeing that no state delegations in future could discriminate against blacks. Then in 1965 Martin Luther King began his own protest movement for voting rights with a march in Selma, Alabama. The aggressive reaction of the local county sheriff, Jim Clarke, televised as usual to horrified Northerners, then led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which expanded black suffrage and transformed Southern politics. It authorised federal examiners to register voters, suspended literary tests, and together with the 23rd. Amendment of 1964, which outlawed the poll-tax in federal elections and a 1966 Supreme Court decision abolishing it in all elections, boosted the number of black voters in the South by 1968 from 1 million to 3.1 million electors.

Voting rights, however, did not mean that blacks became equal members of society or felt equal members of society. Instead, frustration with white racism and the slow progress of civil rights meant that America saw annual race riots between 1965 and 1968. The awareness that poor blacks rather than rich whites were being drafted to fight an unpopular war in Vietnam also added fuel to the flames. So, too did, the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968. Altogether between 1964 and 1968, the riot toll would include 200 dead, 7,000 injured, 40,000 arrested and \$200 million worth of wrecked property. The Kerner Commission (officially the National Advisory Commission on National Disorders) blamed white racism for fostering 'an explosive mixture' of poverty, slum housing, poor education and police brutality and warned that America was becoming a nation of 'two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal'. It recommended the creation of two million new jobs, six million new units of public housing, an end to Northern de facto school segregation and funding for a national system of income supplementation. LBJ, however, did nothing. By now most white voters wanted money spent on the police. One reason for this was the emergence of the 'Black Power Movement' associated with Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown of the SNCC and the Black Panthers organised by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale who were involved in violent confrontations with the police and later figured in show trials. Along with 'Black Power', however, 'Black is beautiful' became another slogan designed to give blacks more self-respect.

Just before he was killed, Martin Luther King declared in one of his most famous and certainly his most poignant speech: 'I've been to the mountain top. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know that as a people we will get to the promised land.' To what extent has he been proved right?

Clearly there has been much improvement. In 1965 blacks had accounted for only 5 per cent of college enrolments; by 1990 that figure had reached 12 per cent. By 1990, too, some 46% of black workers held white collar jobs. A large and expanding black middle class has developed since the 1960s, there have been several prominent black politicians (today there is even the prospect of the first black president), and the language of race now reflects black equality. Yet, on the other hand, one third of all blacks in 1990 inhabited a world of inner-city slums, in which half the young people never finished high school and where unemployment hovered around 60%. Recessions in the mid-1970s and early 1980s hit unskilled black workers while technological change made even skilled ones unemployed. Welfare payments, meanwhile, lagged well behind the rising cost of living. Then came the influx of drugs-especially crack cocaine-to blight black lives even more. Children could earn \$100 a day as look-outs for drug dealers. Dealers could earn a fortune unavailable by any other means. Drugs and poverty both escalated urban violence. In the 1980s a young black male was six times more likely to be murdered than a young white one. Indeed, the most common cause of death among black males under the age of thirty-five was murder. More black males went to jail than university. The figures were and are horrendous. At the same time by 1988 63% of all births registered to young black females were illegitimate. Millions of these women, often scarcely older than children, were utterly dependent on welfare to survive. Moreover, the fathers concerned mainly deserted their children who were then left without male role models. America, as a result, has contained

and still does contain a black underclass which was (is) dependent either on the state or on crime. This led both to tough police crackdowns by the year 2000 in cities like New York as well as attempts under Clinton to change welfare into workfare. But who or what was responsible for the growth of this underclass? The debate continues. Should one blame the persistence of segregated housing and white racism? The breakdown of the black family? Class structures? Television, the cinema, rap music? What is cause and what is effect? What are symptoms rather than causes? Whatever the answers, there has been a backlash against the liberalism of the 1960s, especially in legal moves to limit affirmative action. By 1990 the Supreme Court had ruled that rights against discrimination applied only when employees were being hired, not afterwards; that racial employment patterns could not be held to prove the intent to discriminate; but that quota systems instituted to protect blacks could be challenged in the courts. Justice Scalia declared that race-consciousness had no part to play in the US constitution, while Justice O'Connor asserted that policies of affirmative action only helped make blacks feel inferior. Most blacks, it should be added, were probably never in favour of affirmative action in any case in the sense of reverse discrimination. But most did and do feel, quite rightly in my opinion, that their historic grievances should be recognised. This has led to calls for compensation to be paid for the evils of slavery and for many more monuments and museums to testify to the slave-age past. Blacks are also well aware that the rise and growth of Hispanic America may divert attention from that past and from their still present problems. Hurricane Katrina, after all, made them appear rather invisible to the federal government. All one can say, by way of a conclusion, is that they are unlikely to disappear from view quietly. One can only hope that their best period in US history is still to come.

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