

Jack Hiebner

HONR218X

### Slavery is Dead, but Far from Buried

“Fighting slavery” has a broader definition than I ever imagined. This course was entitled “Fighting Slavery,” which at first glance appeared to be straightforward; however, it was soon made clear that antislavery had myriad stipulations beyond just emancipation of blacks. More than two hundred years before the Emancipation Proclamation was signed and before the Thirteenth Amendment went into effect by abolishing slavery, the earliest black bondsmen actively fought their enslavement. Nearly two hundred years *after*—by which I mean present day—is slavery gone? This course demonstrated a comprehensive assessment of antislavery and the actors who embodied it, many of which are often ignored in brief histories of the peculiar institution. Especially unique was the inclusion of the testimonies of antislavery from slaves and freedmen themselves. That being said, this course fell short of completion of the discussion of antislavery. The legal institution of slavery in the United States is long dead, but despite that its curse has been prevalent in American society ever since. Until slavery is truly *buried*, the last stain of its devastation removed, it cannot be said that there is no more cause for antislavery. The United States has not yet reached that moment, though it has grown ever closer due to the inspiring, courageous efforts of historical antislavery activists as Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Since Reconstruction ended in 1877, antislavery actors including protesters, organizations, national government, and black leaders have fought ceaselessly against the most corrupt institution in our history, determined to subdue it forevermore.

Concerning the legal, national form of slavery of African-Americans that was the focus of the course, we left off with the Reconstruction era that lasted from the end of the Civil War until 1877. This period appeared to be a turning point for blacks in America, and in many ways it was significant. The Republican-controlled Congress of the time passed the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendment; the former asserted that all people born in the United States were citizens, the latter said that suffrage could not be denied someone on the basis of race.<sup>1</sup> Theoretically, these Amendments, along with the Thirteenth that abolished the institution, should have effectively destroyed slavery and promoted equality between blacks and whites throughout the country. “The black man in politics during Reconstruction, briefly, had the rostrum. He was visible. He could speak out; he could demonstrate what he wanted to be.”<sup>2</sup> In essence, the lasting gift of Reconstruction to the black man was hope, because nearly all else was soon stripped from him. The shortcomings of Reconstruction included the short lifespan of the Freedman’s Bureau, which was formed by Congress to assist former slaves in the transition to freedom, but unfortunately did not last.<sup>3</sup> With the return of freedmen to their former masters’ plantations for work as sharecroppers, the future of blacks looked very bleak. Though this course ended the discussion on a cliffhanger in 1877: would slavery return from the dead? The reality was that a variety of black and white actors would continue to intensely fight slavery for the next hundred years, and they deserve to be recognized for their valiant battle.

Despite slavery becoming illegal through national legislation, the black condition after Reconstruction hearkened back in eerie similarity. Even after emancipation, the societal standing of blacks in America was undeniably framed by the fact that they were once a people in

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Bell, ‘Fighting Slavery After Emancipation,’ HONR218X Lecture Series, 5 December, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> James C. Curtis and Lewis L. Gould, ed., *The Black Experience in America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970), 85.

<sup>3</sup> Bell, ‘Fighting Slavery After Emancipation.’

bondage.<sup>4</sup> The effects of slavery penetrated far deeper than status of freedom. After the reinstatement of Southern Democrats to Congress, former Confederates in elected positions used legislative powers to regain control of blacks in a more subtle context than slavery. It was through this supposedly legal outlet, the passing of Jim Crow legislation, that the racist South was able to force blacks to succumb to widespread segregation.<sup>5</sup> These laws passed by southern state and local governments were the onset of white supremacy which would prove just as detrimental as outright slavery. In fact, blacks now experienced true hate from whites, in addition to the state of subservience that hallmarked slavery. It is an unfortunate truth that as a result of slavery, in America there existed “a denial of the Negro’s selfhood and essential qualities as a human being.”<sup>6</sup>

Actors of antislavery existed in numbers just as great after Reconstruction as they did before, if not more. This was possible because the cause of black inequality slowly began to demand national attention. Though prolonged by individual figures of monumental stature, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., millions of black and white citizens fought slavery themselves. They existed as protesters, in cases such as the thousands who participated in the Montgomery bus boycott, MLK’s Prayer Pilgrimage, and the March on Washington. Protesters independent of such leadership were prevalent as well, especially in the case of the four black college students who refused to leave a white man’s diner when they weren’t served; these youths earned honorary recognition as the start of the sit-in movements across the South. Black and white citizens were extremely impactful by subscription to groups and organizations as well. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP), the Southern Christian

---

<sup>4</sup> Curtis, *The Black Experience*, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Ezra, ed., *Civil Rights Movement: People and Perspectives* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2009), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Curtis, *The Black Experience*, 4.

Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) each supplied vital forms of protest in effort to ameliorate the black condition.

In the earliest form of the African American Civil Rights Movement, the undoubted leader was Booker T. Washington. Considered the successor of famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass,<sup>7</sup> Washington was perhaps the last notable race leader to be born into slavery. Though Washington was flattered by the comparison, he said that Douglass, though the icon of liberation, was not prepared “to take up the equally difficult task of fitting the Negro for the opportunities and responsibilities of freedom.”<sup>8</sup> This was Washington’s calling.

The pillar of Washington’s advocacy for blacks was the importance of widespread education. Washington was resolved that the optimal way for the black man to be accepted by white society was to provide a service that was of usefulness to the world around him, specifically the South.<sup>9</sup> He began his quest for black education by founding the Tuskegee Institute in 1881, but it was not until his famous Atlanta Exposition Speech that his ideals reached the national spotlight, in 1895. In both an appeal to whites and blacks, Washington addressed the former when he asked them to encourage and aid blacks in educating themselves. By doing so, he assured whites that blacks would be empowered to “buy your surplus land, make blossom the waste places in your fields, and run your factories.”<sup>10</sup> Washington’s focus in education was on blacks learning “industrial” skills that they could put to use in fields that immediately demanded it, vocational training such as in agriculture and mechanics. He claimed,

---

<sup>7</sup> Emma Lou Thornbrough, ed., *Booker T. Washington* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), 50.

<sup>8</sup> Thornbrough, *Washington*, 51.

<sup>9</sup> John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., ed., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans, Sixth Edition* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1988), 244.

<sup>10</sup> Thornbrough, *Washington*, 35.

“The student shall be so educated that he shall be enabled to meet conditions as they exist *now*, in the part of the South where he lives....”<sup>11</sup>

It is demonstrated in this ideal that Washington’s foremost quality in antislavery sentiment was pragmatism. With practical thinking akin to Machiavelli, Washington did not waste time fantasizing about a world in which a black man could be the President of the United States. He asserted that the best way to create a solid foundation as a people was to assemble economic viability.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, he insisted that opportunities for this kind of advancement were more prevalent in the South. “Friction between the races will pass away in proportion as the black man,” stated Washington, “can produce something that the white man wants or respects in the commercial world.”<sup>13</sup> This mindset is so ardently antislavery because it undermines the very foundation that slavery was built upon; *free* black people could be of economic benefit.

Booker T. Washington was known for another tenet: harmony among the races by means of black acceptance to white political superiority. Though this ideal enraged many of his contemporaries, it demonstrated a gradual commitment to antislavery and race equality that echoes abolitionist ideals of men like William Lloyd Garrison. Despite the evil of slavery that he recognized, Washington displayed a level of forgiveness to southern whites that was impressive for a man who was once a slave himself. He had credibility, and perhaps this was why he had so much popular support. Washington is famous for saying to the whites of the South, “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”<sup>14</sup> This epitomizes his pragmatic desire for a symbiotic relationship between whites that might one day lead to equality. Washington did not want blacks to be

---

<sup>11</sup> Thornbrough, *Washington*, 38.

<sup>12</sup> Franklin, *From Slavery*, 246.

<sup>13</sup> Thornbrough, *Washington*, 44.

<sup>14</sup> Thornbrough, *Washington*, 35.

subservient to whites, but he also recognized that hate between races was not productive for anyone. It was this antislavery idea of mutual, harmonious living that would one day inspire a certain reverend from Atlanta named King, as well as irk a Ph. D. named Du Bois.

W. E. B. Du Bois, the first black man to receive a doctorate from Harvard, was household name when it came to black rights. Du Bois appeared to struggle throughout his life with the question of whether or not he was an American or a Negro.<sup>15</sup> A contemporary observer would obviously claim that he was both, but Du Bois read ore into it than that. As a co-founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Du Bois became characterized as one of the nation's prominent early black nationalists.<sup>16</sup> In total contrast to Booker T. Washington, Du Bois staunchly advocated for the equal rights of blacks. "Mr. Washington represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission,"<sup>17</sup> said Du Bois, reluctantly acknowledging that Washington's antislavery sentiment was flawed. Despite this difference, Du Bois, too, was reminiscent of his abolitionist predecessors like Benjamin Banneker, who assured Secretary of State Jefferson that God "endowed us all with the same faculties...."<sup>18</sup>

Du Bois demonstrated his antislavery policies in a fashion that was extensively used in the days of abolition: print. In addition to his founding of the NAACP, Du Bois was an accomplished writer of books and essays, all of which directly or indirectly promoted the elevation of blacks. He was explicit about his disapproval of Washington's foot-in-the-door policy regarding education and equality in his *Souls of Black Folk*.<sup>19</sup> An accomplished writer and

---

<sup>15</sup> Harold Bloom, *W. E. B. Du Bois* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2001), 106.

<sup>16</sup> Ezra, *Civil Rights*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Thornbrough, *Washington*, 124.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin Banneker, *Copy of a Letter from Benjamin Banneker to the Secretary of State, With His Answer* (1792), 4.

<sup>19</sup> Franklin, *From Slavery*, 249.

scholar, Du Bois had credibility as a man of vast intelligence that had always been pivotal to the black cause. Earning a Ph. D. from Harvard was an accomplishment that alone fought for the equality of blacks, as it is perhaps the clearest example of mental capability of blacks and equivalency to whites. Du Bois fought slavery by showing that if a black man could have the *mind* equal to a white, he should invariably be granted equal rights as well.

When considering the role of antislavery actors since Reconstruction, Martin Luther King, Jr. stood alone among the rest. Nobel Peace laureate, reverend, Ph. D., and above all supporter of equality, King had imprinted himself in history as Father of the Civil Rights Movement. He was often compared to Lincoln in terms of importance to the black race. King obviously made substantial contributions to the Civil Rights Movement in innumerable ways, but what he was known for was his advocating of nonviolent protest as fundamental in the quest for black equality.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, King emphasized an ideal of love for all races, between all races; but the responsibility began with the blacks' movement. His principles of nonviolence and love arise from inspirations such as Booker T. Washington, who said, "Let no man pull you so low as to make you hate him."<sup>21</sup> In addition, King referenced his synthesis of Gandhi's emphasis on nonviolence and Jesus's on love for one's neighbor.<sup>22</sup> Such role models are who inspired King to lead the protests he did, fighting slavery on several fronts at the same time. The first protest for which King received widespread recognition was the Montgomery bus boycott of 1856, in which King's Montgomery Improvement Association convinced all blacks in the city to abstain from public transport until they received respectful treatment on said buses.<sup>23</sup> This successful protest saw the outlawing of segregation on Montgomery public transit by the United States Supreme

---

<sup>20</sup> James A. Colaiaco, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Apostle of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1993), 7.

<sup>21</sup> Colaiaco, *King*, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Colaiaco, *King*, 25.

<sup>23</sup> Colaiaco, *King*, 10.

Court, and though it was not immediately well enforced, it demonstrated a tremendous victory for the cause of blacks.

The efforts of King culminated into other such nationally recognized events as his Birmingham imprisonment, the famous letter he wrote during his incarceration, and the March on Washington. Through simple speeches and massive nonviolent marches, King fought the stain of slavery and the travesty of black inequality on hundreds of occasions, culminating in arrests as well as steps toward legislation. Embracing Thoreau's concept of civil disobedience, King reasoned that he was completely just in disobeying the corrupt and unconstitutional Jim Crow laws that governed the South. King stated about his disobedience, "We do this not out of any disrespect for the law but out of the highest respect for the law."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," King ardently claims that "all segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality,"<sup>25</sup> hitting home the moral crux of civil rights. King illustrated himself to be the quintessential fighter of slavery; through active protest, passive writing, and lifelong devotion to the cause of equality, he made quantum leaps in antislavery.

No one in America today relishes the idea that the stain of slavery is permanently embedded in our culture, but it is. For this reason, the fight against slavery remains alive, even if its most harmful effects were eradicated by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Regardless of how extant slavery is today, the twentieth century was a critical period for the advancement of blacks and the opposition to slavery that should undeniably be studied in a detailed assessment of black slavery in America. Existing as protesters, organizations, and the quintessential advocates

---

<sup>24</sup> Colaiaco, *King*, 63.

<sup>25</sup> Colaiaco, *King*, 87.



that were Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Martin Luther King, Jr., actors engaged against slavery extended long past its supposed death, and saw to its more defined burial.