

The Delray Democrat

Juneteenth and the Unrealized Promise of “Absolute Equality”¹

The Editorial Board

President Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862, with an effective date of January 1, 1863. Enslaved Texans would not learn of their liberation for nearly two and a half years.

On June 19, 1865, a date subsequently known and celebrated as “Juneteenth,” Union General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas to notify the populace of the Proclamation. His soldiers circulated throughout town, reading “General Order No. 3,” which explained that henceforth there would exist “an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves.” Not surprisingly, spontaneous celebrations greeted this momentous news.

Official celebrations began the following year and initially involved church-centered gatherings, reflecting the jubilation and the solemnity of the occasion. Juneteenth celebrations spread from Texas throughout the United States and now include parties, picnics, and gatherings with family and friends. Juneteenth is an official holiday or day of observance in all states but Hawaii, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Efforts are ongoing to make Juneteenth a federal holiday.

Juneteenth is often compared to the Fourth of July, but the deliverance of an enslaved people from bondage is an even more momentous event than a colonial people’s declaration of severance from the mother country. Moreover, America’s independence has never been in doubt whereas the “absolute equality” promised in General Order No. 3 has never been achieved.

The Unrealized Promise of “Absolute Equality”

Since then, there have been brief periods when the formerly enslaved and their descendants were led to believe absolute equality *would be* forthcoming, that is, that they would be permitted to share in the rights enjoyed and celebrated by White America on July 4. Such hopes were always dashed, however.

The first such period was the Reconstruction Era that followed issuance of General Order No. 3 and the ratification of the “Civil War Amendments,” which ended slavery (*Thirteenth Amendment*); granted citizenship rights and equal protection of the law to anyone born in the United States (*Fourteenth Amendment*); and prohibited the states from denying or abridging the right of U.S. citizens to vote “based on race, color, or past servitude” (*Fifteenth Amendment*).

For a brief period, formerly enslaved people were elected to local, state, and national offices (at one point, 15% of the office holders in the South were Black, a higher percentage than in 1990).

¹ *The Delray Democrat*, June 2021, p.1.

Neither the Reconstruction Era nor its advances were long-lived.

The backlash was swift and sustained, launching a century of terrorism and oppression. Paramilitary groups of heavily armed Civil War veterans attacked Republican officeholders and suppressed the Black vote through violence and intimidation. Democrats ran nakedly racist races, winning elections by framing the choice as between [“‘white supremacy’ or ‘Negro rule.’”](#) If that sounds familiar, it’s because the modern Republican Party took lessons from the post–Civil War Democratic Party. Mitch McConnell always brags he’s a student of history.

Having regained control of the reins of government, they passed “Jim Crow” laws and constitutional amendments that effectively disenfranchised most Blacks. (The clause in Florida’s Constitution that was revised by Amendment 4 dates from that era.)

They legalized segregation, and the U.S. Supreme Court did nothing, holding in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that segregation was constitutional so long as the separate facilities were “equal” in quality. It took over 60 years for the Court to rule that “separate but equal” is unconstitutional as applied to education. Even then, *Brown v. Board of Education*, did not explicitly overrule *Plessy*, failing to address segregation in other contexts.

Brown also had limited impact on school segregation because towns across the South created inexpensive private schools to keep Whites from having to attend integrated schools. According to a 2020 [study](#) by the National Center for Education Statistics’ National Assessment of Educational Progress, Black children are “five times as likely as white children to attend schools that are highly segregated by race and ethnicity” and more than twice as likely to attend “high-poverty schools.”

It took another decade after *Brown* before Congress dismantled legalized segregation with the passage of Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Southern officials reaped political advantage attacking these laws as intrusions on states’ sovereignty and Civil Rights protesters as “lawbreakers” because of the civil disobedience tactics used to demand their rights. Of course the real criminals were the racist officials who defied federal laws and beat and murdered peaceful protestors.

Nixon’s “Law and Order” campaign and Southern Strategy began the process of turning the “Solid South” from Democratic to Republican. “The War on Drugs,” launched by Nixon and expanded under Reagan, has been so disproportionately applied to people of color that it is more appropriately titled “The War on Black People”: as Noam Chomsky once commented, “if you’ve been fighting, and losing, a war for 40 years, the stated purpose is not the real purpose.”

The final era of dashed hopes began with the election of Barack Obama, which led to the ridiculous claim that we had become a “colorblind” society. What actually happened is that the election unleashed an unapologetic racism not seen since the heyday of Bull Connor and George Wallace, one that is still polluting our discourse today through the septic tank that is Donald Trump. And absolute equality? Well, that’s like the football Lucy keeps pulling away. But like Charlie Brown, we must keep believing.

So we celebrate Juneteenth with the same mixture of jubilation and solemnity that attended the earliest celebrations, for we are as far as ever from that day when, as Bob Marley sang, “The color of a man’s skin is of no greater significance than the color of his eyes.”