

H A R L A N   R I C H A R D S

February 4, 2018

The Legacy of Slavery in the United States  
(In Honor of Black History Month)

I want to talk about slavery and the impact it still has on our society. However, I am not a "guilty white man" and do not accept responsibility for how blacks were treated under slavery. Nor do I think we have to give preferential treatment to blacks in the 21st century just because their ancestors were treated badly over 150 years ago.

There is an old adage that absolute power corrupts absolutely. When it comes to slavery, that is very true. Slavery in the southern states existed from the time this nation was inhabited by Europeans until the Civil War ended it in 1865. During that time, millions of Africans were forcefully brought to this country and owned by descendants of Europeans. There were a few free blacks but for the most part if you were black in the south, you were a slave. There many stories about free blacks who were kidnaped and sold into slavery.

The conditions the majority of slaves lived under were appalling. I have been reading stories told by ex-slaves which had been collected by the federal government during the Great Depression. The tales recount the brutality and cruelty of the slave owners and overseers. The standard punishment for any infraction was 39 lashes with a whip. This would tear the flesh off a slave and render him or her unfit to work for days. There were numerous instances of slaves being literally whipped to death as an example to other slaves. In fact, it was legal to kill slaves. Presumably, people believed slave owners would not needlessly kill their slaves because they were too valuable to waste.

At some of the worst plantations slaves were not provided with clothing, being required to live (and work) naked year around. Food was corn meal and occasionally bacon, given out in quantities barely adequate to keep slaves from starving to death. Slaves had a set quota of work they had to perform and were whipped if they didn't meet the quota. When picking cotton, they had to meet the minimum required amount but if they exceeded it, they were expected to continue picking the same amount or face punishment.

Slaves were accused of being ignorant and incapable of learning anything. However, the reality is that slaves mostly put on an act, pretending to be too stupid or inept to properly perform a task. The overseer would then assign them somewhere else. The intentional creation of lowered expectations saved slaves from being worked too hard (sometimes to death). In reality, slaves were as smart as white people but there were laws prohibiting them from being educated.

Slave owners often used their female slaves for sex. Thomas Jefferson is the most well-known person to have owned slaves and kept one as his mistress. Recent genetic testing has proven that Mr. Jefferson's white descendants have the same DNA as the descendants of his black mistress. Some slave owners treated their mixed race offspring as they did all their other slaves. But others acknowledged them as their children and sent them to northern states for education and freed them. The female slaves, of course, had no choice in the matter. If their master chose to have sex with them, they had no choice but to comply.

When the controversy over removing the statues of southern civil war heroes came up, I agreed they should be removed - but only because they lost the war. But after all the reading I've done on slavery in the U.S., I have a better reason for removing those statues. The men who were honored by those statues received that honor because they fought and killed U.S. citizens for the right to continue torturing and killing slaves. It is shameful, it is reprehensible and it is a legacy that still remains firmly embedded in the hearts and minds of white supremacists.

Many problems in certain segments of current Black American society can be traced back to slavery and the Jim Crow south. For centuries, blacks were crushed and beaten down. They developed an identity independent of, and in opposition to, the dominant white culture. It is not surprising that there are many vestiges of that distrust of mainstream society. What many blacks fail to realize is that things are different now. For those who are willing to adopt the values, norms and mores of mainstream society, they can prosper and achieve the American Dream. This is a case where your reality is as you perceive it to be. If a black person believes that he can succeed, he will. If he believes that it's not possible to succeed, that the deck is stacked against him because he's black, he will make choices in his life that will create a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure.

Corporate America needs qualified, educated blacks in the work force. It does not need high school dropouts, drug dealers or gangsters. Far too often, black youth chooses the latter instead of the former and then blames mainstream society for the outcome of their lives.

In prison I see the difference daily. Those who want education and a good job, do what's needed to achieve that. Others choose to watch TV and play dominoes while complaining about how they can't get a break because they are black.

Hopefully, in another generation, inequality between people of different skin tones will be erased.

Hopefully, anachronisms like Donald Trump (the president who doesn't want immigrants from shithole countries, i.e., black-majority countries) will fade from our collective consciousness.

Hopefully, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream will become a reality for everyone.