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Juneteenth and the Second American Revolution

Last Thursday, US President Joe Biden signed legislation establishing June 19, “Juneteenth,” as a federal holiday to commemorate the end of slavery in the United States. The law, passed with overwhelming support from both capitalist parties, went into effect immediately. The holiday was first officially marked on Friday, since June 19 itself came on a weekend.

The final emancipation of slaves, the culmination of the Civil War—what historians have aptly called the Second American Revolution—cost the lives of more than 350,000 Union soldiers. The destruction of the slave oligarchy in the US South was an event of immensely progressive significance, not just for American, but for world history.



Emancipation Day celebration in Richmond, Virginia, ca. 1905.(Image Credit: Wikipedia/Public Domain)

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Amidst the endless media commentary on the official marking of the holiday, however, there is no serious historical examination, either of the emancipation of the slaves in 1865 or its revolutionary implications for the present.

Juneteenth celebrates the date in 1865 when enslaved black people in Texas learned that they had been freed. This came over two months after the surrender of Confederate forces by Robert E. Lee to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House in far away Virginia and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln a few days later by the racist southern sympathizer, John Wilkes Booth, in Washington D.C. In a legal sense, the slaves' freedom had come earlier still, through the Emancipation Proclamation, which liberated slaves in rebel-controlled territory and went into effect on January 1, 1863. The Thirteenth Amendment, which was passed by Congress on January 31, 1865, and ratified by the states in December, abolished slavery everywhere in the American union.

The masters attempted to keep slaves in the dark about all of this. But on the morning of June 19, 1865, Union Major General Gordon Granger arrived at Galveston, Texas, to take command of more than 2,000 union troops, with the aim of enforcing the emancipation of Texas' enslaved population and ensuring a peaceful transition of power from the slavocracy to the federal government. With his announcement of General Order No. 3, Granger dissolved slavery in the last Confederate state where it remained effective.

The order read:

The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor.

With these matter-of-fact words the Union general crystallized the revolutionary content of the Civil War—the destruction of an entire social order and the freeing of the slaves—but also the stark reality of the *new* order. Four million workers were no longer the property of others, yes, but they had no property of their own either. They were now free to sell their labor power, perhaps to their former masters.

Notwithstanding its limitations, the former slaves in Galveston celebrated Granger's announcement. The end of slavery at the point of Union bayonets was an enormous advance, and the slaves knew it. These "freedmen," as they were called, did not sneer at the Civil War or Lincoln as the contemporary peddlers of racist politics do. On June 19, 1866, one year after the announcement, the freedmen organized the first of what became the annual celebration of "Jubilee Day," now commonly known as Juneteenth. Later, the holiday moved out of rural east Texas with the sons and daughters of the slaves as they went from country to city, and from sharecropping to wage labor.

None of these issues are even broached in the commentary on the significance of Juneteenth. In a political climate obsessed with racial identity, the occasion of Juneteenth has been usurped to advance racist interpretations of the holiday.

New York Times columnist Jamelle Bouie summed up the conceptions that are being promoted around Juneteenth in a column published one year ago, "Why Juneteenth matters." According to Bouie, "It was black Americans who delivered on Lincoln's promise of 'a new birth of freedom.'" He writes, "Neither Abraham Lincoln nor the Republican Party freed the slaves... Who freed the slaves? The slaves freed the slaves." Bouie's article was aimed to buttress Nikole Hannah-Jones' claim, made in her lead essay of the discredited 1619 Project, that black Americans "fought alone" in their struggle for emancipation and civil rights.

A more recent comment on the same theme came on Friday in the *Atlantic*, in an article from Daina Ramey Berry, chair of the history department at the University of Texas at Austin, entitled "The truth about Black freedom." Responding to the question, "What is the meaning of Juneteenth?" Berry answers by diminishing the importance of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment. She argues that "self-liberated" black people "continuously claimed their freedom, in every historical moment, always preceding and precipitating movements by governments, institutions, and corporations."

The claim that the slaves "freed themselves" makes the history of the Civil War incomprehensible. If slaves were able to simply free themselves, why did they not do so in, say, 1750, rather than 1863–1865? Why was the Civil War necessary at all? Do Berry and Bouie believe the old "Lost Cause" myth that the Civil War was a mistaken struggle

waged between “brothers,” to which slavery was only tangentially related? And, if the slaves freed themselves, why was it necessary for General Granger to enter Galveston with an army, some two months after Appomattox, to “deliver the news,” as Bouie absurdly puts it?

To claim that slaves freed themselves diminishes the horrors of the system of chattel slavery itself, which was upheld with a staggering level of violence. The abolition of this system required a civil war that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands, until, as Lincoln put it in his Second Inaugural Address, “every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword.”

In reality, the defeat of the wealthiest and most powerful slaveholding class on the planet was inconceivable without the victory of Lincoln at the head of a political party that called for the destruction of human bondage. Lincoln’s victory, and the threat it posed to slavery, was indeed the reason why the southern states seceded, as was spelled out in their secession resolutions and the Confederate constitution. Even more crucially, the victory of the Union would have been inconceivable without mass support in the North, the endurance of the Union army, the resistance of slaves in the South, and even the opposition of slaveless whites to secession, as historian Victoria Bynum and others have shown. And it was Lincoln’s Proclamation, as Marx explained at the time, that gave the conflict definite social revolutionary character.

Like those alive during the Civil War, we live in a time of irreconcilable conflict. A similar number of American workers died from COVID-19 in one year as Union and Confederate soldiers died over four years of bloody conflict. Meanwhile, the stock markets continue to break records and the rich have seen their wealth skyrocket.

Terrified of the explosion it is conjuring, the American ruling class fears the past nearly as much as the present. The essential purpose of the current campaign for the re-writing of American history is to replace the dynamics of class and class conflict—the slave system was, in the end, a system of labor exploitation—with a racial interpretation that does not permit “whites” to have been anything other than oppressors of “blacks.” In this “new narrative,” the role of Lincoln, along with white Union soldiers, must be diminished or written out.

The emancipation of the slaves in the Civil War, like the American Revolution of 1776, deserves to be celebrated. But the conscious workers in the United States, and the world over, must not allow the revolutionary significance of the emancipation of four million slaves to be usurped for the defense of capitalism.

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