

Juneteenth 2019: The US Must Repair Historic and Current Racism

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On this Juneteenth, we must confront the impacts of racism dating back to the founding of the United States with the slave trade of Black people brought from Africa, Jim Crow segregation, and policies that continue to this day that cause wealth inequality, disinvestment in Black communities, police violence, mass incarceration, and white nationalist violence.

A pre-eminent African historian, Basil Davidson, credits the initiation of the African slave trade to Columbus. The first license granted to send enslaved Africans to the Caribbean was issued in 1501, during Columbus's rule in the Indies. Davidson labels Columbus the "father of the slave trade." African slavery is as old as the European colonization of North America.

History of Juneteenth in the Context of the Legacy of US Racism

The nation typically celebrates Emancipation Day, January 1, as the end of slavery, when Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Then what is Juneteenth? Juneteenth, Freedom Day, commemorates the true end of legalized slavery in the United States. It dates back to June 19, 1865, when Union soldiers came to Galveston, Texas and announced that all slaves were free and the Civil War had come to an end. This was two and a half years after President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. There were 250,000 slaves in Texas and 4 million throughout the United States when the war came to an end and slaves were freed.

Emancipation was followed by the period of Reconstruction, during the term of President Andrew Johnson. The Johnson administration prioritized the return of the southern states to the Union and looked away while new southern state legislatures passed restrictive "Black Codes" modeled after slave laws designed to force Black people into labor for minor violations of law and restrict the freedom of former slaves. There was a backlash against these racist laws and in 1868, the Civil Rights Act became the first major bill to become law overriding a presidential veto. In February 1869, Congress approved the 15th Amendment which guaranteed that a citizen's right to vote would not be denied "on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Black people began to run and win elected office putting in place a series of progressive policies including the first state-funded public school systems in the South, more equitable taxation, and laws against racial discrimination in public transport and accommodations, until Jim Crow segregation was consolidated toward the end of the 19th century. While 20 Black people served in the US House and two in the US Senate between 1870 and 1901, none were elected until one in 1929. A few more served in the House until after passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

The racist backlash to this progress led by the Ku Klux Klan used violence to stop Black voters and forcibly overthrow Reconstruction state governments. The slogan of these Democratic Party “Redeemers” was White Supremacy. The era of Jim Crow segregation began, lynching Black people became a tactic of terror, and vagrancy laws were enacted across the south to force Black people into unpaid labor. This continued until the Civil Rights era which culminated in desegregation court decisions and Civil Rights laws in the 1950s and 60s.

But, racist policies still continue. Black people in the United States are [6.4 times more likely than whites](#) to be incarcerated, suffer an unemployment rate that is [consistently twice as high](#) as white unemployment and can expect to die 3.5 years sooner than a white person.

In 1968, the Kerner Commission Report concluded: “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one Black, one white—separate and unequal.” It called for a sweeping set of reforms totaling some \$80 billion. The federal government continued funding the Vietnam War instead and, beginning with the Nixon administration’s “war on drugs,” used arrests and mass incarceration to control Black communities.

According to the [Economic Policy Institute](#), fifty years after the Kerner Commission, Black workers still make only 82.5 cents on every dollar earned by white workers, and African Americans are 2.5 times as likely to be in poverty as whites. A [recent study found](#) that the median White family now has 41 times more wealth than the median Black family and 22 times more wealth than the median Latinx family. Incarceration of African Americans tripled after 1980 and is currently more than six times the white incarceration rate.

From the first slave ship to the current racist economic, criminal justice and other policies, racism has created unequal opportunity and devastation in Black communities. The US needs a new approach to the economy that prioritizes racial equality as part of economic security for people of all races.

Race-conscious Programs to Remedy Race-conscious Injuries

Five hundred years of racial oppression requires the United States to face up to its history and correct historic and current injustices. The United States must enact HR 40, the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act, to develop remedies for the impact of slavery and subsequent racial discrimination on Black people.

Even before a reparations program is developed, we can begin immediately repairing the damage by strengthening the enforcement of civil rights and anti-discrimination laws. We must take affirmative action to reverse the growing race and resegregation of housing and schools and to dismantle how systems of oppression manifest in the school-to-jailhouse pipeline track and in the proliferation of test-driven charter schools.

We must take power from racists who discriminate and exclude Black and other people of color by empowering racially- oppressed communities to practice self-determination through collective community ownership and control of public housing, schools, police, and businesses. Empowerment means democratic community control so that the masses of racially-oppressed people benefit, not merely a more “representative” professional-managerial class that simply replaces the white professional-managerial class in soaking up most of the funding in salaries, grants, and contracts.

Dr. King said in his “I Have a Dream” speech:

“It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked “insufficient funds.” But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check — a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.”

King’s speech at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was a call to implement the demands of the march, which amounted to an Economic Bill of Rights to jobs, income, housing, health care, and education. King and the other leaders of the march envisioned these the fulfillment of these economic rights as a down-payment on the promissory note that King referenced.

Special attention must be given to the criminal justice system. Communities must be empowered with ‘community control of police’ so the epidemic of racist police violence can be ended. The federal government must take action against police misconduct. Every step in the criminal justice process including arrest, prosecution, sentencing, and incarceration shows prejudice against people of color. We must end the war on drugs which disproportionately targets Black people by enacting legal adult use of marijuana, decriminalization of other drugs and harm reduction policies based on public health and treatment on request. Drug use is a health problem and should not be treated as a criminal problem. The drug war has been the engine of criminal justice racism and mass incarceration of Black people.

My campaign is calling for an Economic Bill of Rights as part of the [Ecosocialist Green New Deal](#). This will provide universal programs for economic security for all but with a race-conscious emphasis on ending discrimination. This Bill of Rights would guarantee all people the rights of a living-wage job, an income above poverty, decent housing, comprehensive health care, a good education, and freedom from discrimination.

The Black freedom movement—including some of its leaders, Martin Luther King Jr., A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin —urged us to move “from civil rights to human rights.” With the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the 1966 Freedom Budget, and the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign, they demanded the implementation of FDR’s 1944 Economic Bill of Rights in a way that ended racial discrimination in education, employment, and housing. By linking racial justice to economic justice for all, we can build a majoritarian interracial movement of working people that can win these reforms. The Democrats have failed to do it for 75 years. The Greens will do it.

Finally, we must take federal action against white nationalist terrorism which President Trump has encouraged with his racist dog-whistling and incitements to violence. Actions must be taken to ensure that members of racist groups are prevented from making racist violent actions.

On this Juneteenth, we need more than anything else to demand an entirely new way of thinking about social, racial and economic issues. The US economy must prioritize economic security and racial equality. We must confront racism in the neglect of communities of color.

Police enforcement and the criminal justice system, and many sectors of the US economy including healthcare, banking, housing, education, and employment must be re-made to put in place democratic control of these institutions, the fruit of which will be racial justice because self-determinant people will finally be in the driver's seat. The United States needs to commit to undoing the damage of 500 years of racist policies and systems.

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