

Proclamation Reclamation

"That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom...."

The Emancipation Proclamation was delivered by Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States, on September 22, 1862. The country was given 68 days to prepare to release the slaves. Lincoln obviously had become an optimist!

News of this proclamation, which was to have abolished slavery in those states that had seceded from the nation, traveled relatively slowly across the land especially when we compare it to how quickly news travels today. However, not too unlike today, adoption and acceptance of the law took far longer. And, sometimes that adoption requires a test of wills and force. Is that unlike what we find today?

This decree, made in September 1862, reached Texas, a place that some might still consider a strange and foreign land, on the 19th day of June in 1865, the day we refer to as Juneteenth Day. A belated Happy Juneteenth Day to you! It took 2.75 years or 1,001 days for word to get to the Texas slaves that they had been freed. Could you imagine waiting that long to learn that you'd won the lottery?

When most of us think about the institution of slavery, there are few other examples in human history as devastating to a group of people. Have conditions for people of color improved in this country since then? Yes. Are we free? Are we now at the point where, when legislation is enacted, that the people readily accept it and behave accordingly? I don't have a response to that question that is based on research and facts. My response is shrouded in emotion brought on by the events of the last few years.

Immediately after the Emancipation Proclamation, many Blacks were elected to public office. The masses proclaimed it was a new Day. Some of the proclamations were jubilant; others were filled with angst; and still others took it as a threat to their way of life and a call to action to reclaim what they believed were their God-given rights. Thus, that new day led to new ways of doing things and new laws that brought us to the Jim Crow era that lasted for decades. We

found ourselves in the midst of the 20th century growing weary of the oppression and we, the people, again asked the question, “Lord, how long?”

Being a person of color in this country gives us opportunities to rejoice. But at times, we can be brought to our knees. It is at those times that we find ourselves asking the question, what manner of man is this? At each of these nadirs, voices cry out in despair. The result? Someone from the masses, a common man, emerges to uplift, inspire, and lead the masses – not by choice but by calling.

This is precisely what happened during the Jim Crow Era. The most lauded leader to rise out of the masses in response to their cry was Martin Luther King, Jr. Martin’s words and the works of countless others took us through the Civil Rights Era. Martin was killed for answering the call. It was a set back but still we marched on and, after decades of making steady progress, a man of color, Barack Obama, our 44th president, was elected to lead these United States. The masses rejoiced and again proclaimed a new day.

Some say we have entered a new era, the Post-racial America era. My response to that? Oh how quickly we, the seemingly eternally oppressed, forgive. We desperately want to believe that we will be treated fairly, respectfully, and equally. Lest we forget, history is bound to repeat itself. And when it does, the furor, the ferocity with which it does, is more covert, more complex, and more devastating.

Where are we now? Think Sanford, Florida. Think Ferguson, Missouri. Cleveland, Ohio. New York City. Baltimore. Charleston, South Carolina. Sobering, isn’t it? In this day and time, there is no delay in communicating and displaying the injustices done to us. Technology has made it almost instantaneous. However, to get a credible and sustainable solution to the travesties we are witnessing today seems to take as long as it did for Moses to heed God’s word to lead his people to the Promise Land.

We are entering a new era. I don’t know what to call it. All I know is that we cannot sit idly by and allow a system – a system akin to guerilla warfare - take away all we have worked so hard to achieve. We cannot expect that a man such as Abraham Lincoln or Lyndon B. Johnson will decide to take charge of the situation and, with the stroke of a pen, deliver us from this evil. We cannot believe that anyone will willingly take on the system alone and risk losing his or her life for our cause.

No. The communities in which we live must join together and commit to developing sustainable and systematic approaches to combat the complexity of the injustices to which we

are subjugated. We need our communities of common men and women to find their voices and to speak out against each and every injustice we hear, we see, we experience. We need to lift up those who are called, not necessarily those who self anoint, but those who are **called** to lead and make sure they have what they need to lead because it will be a heavy burden to bear. And then, we need our leaders to unselfishly, unwaveringly, intelligently, empathetically, and compassionately, with integrity, morality, and dignity take us to where we, as a people, as a nation, need to be. A place where there *is* justice for all. A place where we put resources into providing education for our citizens so that they may thrive, not just get by.

When I think about the meaning of Juneteenth at *this point* in this country's history, I believe that it should be a day of reflection as well as a day of inspiration and motivation. It should be a day when we, as a people, remember the past and recognize what it means for the present. It is time for us to unite, to lift up and to support those who are willing to work for *all* humankind, to make this place a better place so that our sons and daughters find comfort in knowing that they will have the opportunity to live and thrive and experience a much brighter future. We should do this without hesitation or fear because President Lincoln has promised us that

“...the Executive Government of the United States...will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.”

The Proclamation was made in 1862 to be enacted on January 1, 1863. Word got to Texas in 1865. Things travel faster now than they did in the 19th century. We have been oppressed and downtrodden in this country since the 17th century. We say we want to be free. Now is the time. We have means. Let us unite and get it done. Reclaim our emancipation.

Tuajuanda C. Jordan
President, St. Mary's College of Maryland
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