

# We Can't Deny Our History

## Can It Guide Us to Become Anti-Racist ?

By Jim Goodman

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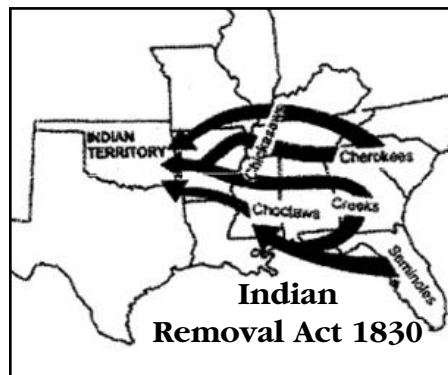
It really shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone that, as much as we had hoped for it, the election of our first Black president did not bring us into a post-racial America. 400 years of institutionalized racism did not end on November 4, 2008. Actually our national penchant for racism goes back much further. The American colonists had been practicing racism against the Indigenous of Turtle Island since 1492. From its beginning, America was built on racism and theft, the losing of land, labor and lives.

### My Family History

Growing up on the farm my grandfather bought in 1889 in Wisconsin, I heard stories about the Indians, that, in the 1890's, still spent their winters in the woods by the farm. Whether it was just a story, I'm not sure, but the thought of his visiting them, sitting around their fire while their ponies foraged in the woods, caused my father to wonder. If earlier in the century, if genocide hadn't been the official government policy, if the survivors hadn't been forced into reservations, if they had been treated fairly, if treaties were honored, what might things look like today?

Of course that's just speculation. Because genocide was the policy, land theft and disregard for treaties started with the first Europeans in the Americas 500 years ago and still continues today.

I'm told my great-grandfather walked 80 miles to enlist in one of Wisconsin infantry regiments during the Civil War. Another story of rural Wisconsin's ties to race issues. If he did, was it because as an Irish immi-



grant 12 years off the boat, he felt allegiance to his new country, or did he have abolitionist leaning? My father talked fondly of the skilled Round Barn Builders, descendants of the African-Americans that came to our part of Wisconsin in the mid-1800s via the Underground Railroad.

All these stories, I suppose, gave my father a different perspective on the Indians driven out after the treaties were broken and the Black Americans who were seen by many, but not my father, as "The Other". For my father, they were neighbors, a perspective he passed on. I knew little of early Wisconsin, save that of the Northern Europeans, who immigrated to Wisconsin. I knew my mother's family changed their name from the Irish O' Henry to Henry when they got off the boat in New York. And I knew that Irish immigrants, like the many groups that followed: the Italians, Asians, South Europeans were, for most part unwelcome, other than for the cheap labor they provided or their usefulness as "Cannon Fodder" in the Civil War.

When we moved to South-Side of Chicago in 1963 for four years, I became part of a neighborhood in transition. Families that looked like

mine were moving to the suburbs as Families of Color moved in. I just wanted to be accepted. One of my best friends was a Mexican-American, some were Black. But peer pressure from the white kids let me know early on that in order to be accepted, I needed to respect the proper social order. There were folks that looked like me and folks that didn't. In the eyes of my peers, the complex history that was passed on to me in rural Wisconsin was in need of a re-write.

It wasn't until after we moved back to Wisconsin, listening to Dick Gregory on the radio, that I began to understand the reasons for the real and justified anger of Black Americans. A year later in 1970, Gil Scott-Heron's Whitey on the Moon, again, painfully showed how little attention was paid to racial injustice. There was so much we didn't know or didn't even think about. America was and still is a brutal place if you are the wrong color. We have to acknowledge that as part of our history and eliminate those injustices once and for all.

### Land of the Free for Rich Whites

The "Land of the Free" was to most, not a welcoming place. Indians were driven out. Africans were welcomed only as property and most immigrants only as workers. If one happened to be rich and white that was a different story, a fact that continues - rich white men are really the only ones that are truly free in America. The Constitution enshrined slavery and it clearly defined that Africans, as well as, Indians were less than human - they were not created equal. *Continued on pg. 19*

It seems that pitting poor whites against everyone else was instrumental for the rich white men to get even richer, amass more property, fulfill the mandate of Manifest Destiny and build a national economy off the labor and suffering of enslaved people.

### Prior to Civil War US Economy Dependent on Slave Labor

Prior to the Civil War the economic value of enslaved people was greater than the assessed value of all the real estate in the Southern States. Northern banks loaned money accepting slaves as collateral. The economy of the North was dependent on the South for sugar, tobacco and especially cotton for the Northern textile mills. England's textile industry relied on Southern cotton and certainly the British Empire's position as the most powerful nation on Earth was in large part, beholden to the labor of American slaves.

The labor force in the textile mills of New England consisted mostly of women paid half of what men were. While British Mills, in addition to women, relied on child labor well into the 19th Century. They were factories that Charles Dickens called: "The Dark Satanic Mills." The immortality of American slavery hung over the entire world.

The institution of slavery depended not just on greed and violence of slave owners, but the greed of those whose profits depended on the continuance of slavery be they Presidents or bankers but also those, who for whatever reason, saw Black people or any people of color as lesser. Slavery and racism grew out of imperialism and colonization. It was celebrated by Kipling in his poem: "The White Man's Burden" and still, that mentality of colonial-



Slavery Became the U.S. Economic Engine

source: 1st-art-gallery.com

ism continues wherever the powerful want to take what is not theirs. In these times as we wake up, almost daily, to the murder of another Black man, as protesters fill the streets, we are again reminded that the 2008 Election really didn't change things. Racism has always been there and perhaps it took the election of an openly, proud racist president to finally wake us up.

### Today's History in the Making

Yes, "Black Lives Matter" and to counter it with "All Lives Matter" is an insult. All Lives cannot matter until Black Lives are finally put on equal footing with White Lives. Black Lives have never mattered in the scheme of American greatness. Native Lives never mattered, Women Lives, Muslim Lives, Asian Lives - all lesser. Remember, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, images showed White people "finding" food while Black people were "looting" food even though in both cases the food came from similarly closed and flooded grocery stores.

Now that the statues of Confederate soldiers and imperialist colonizers are seen as symbols of oppression, only asks the question. Why did it

take us White folks so long to see it and admit it? Most Confederate statues were placed long after the Civil War, not so much to honor the Confederates depicted, but perhaps more so as a warning for Black folk to respect the Institution of Jim Crow - America's System of Apartheid.

Black Americans were brutalized and systematically looted for 400 years. The people in Indian Country, also had their lives, lands and environment brutalized for over 500 years. The racism continues with the looting of the Indigenous of Central and South America. Is it any wonder they are beyond angry? Armed white militias and militarized police forces are not the answer. I think it's time for us White folks to shut up, listen and ask how we can repair the damage we have done to so many people for generations.

As citizens, we are going to have to listen to each other. We are going to have to reform our politics, our ways of relating to each other and our understanding our history. "Hate is too big of a burden to bear."