



## Juneteenth—It's Always Right to Celebrate Freedom

by Dr. Charles Taylor

*This is a speech I gave during the 2004 St. Louis, MO's Juneteenth Celebration. It was an honor to address this group and it felt like a homecoming for me.*

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Good morning. It's a pleasure for me to join this distinguished roundtable as we take a look back at emancipation and then relate that history to contemporary times. I'd also like to applaud the Missouri Black Caucus for taking the leadership in passing legislation to make this day one of observance in my home state. Although I've lived in Wisconsin for over 20 years, I was born and raised down the road in Cape Girardeau and Missouri is still my home. It's always good to come home. I'd like to start out by just giving you a brief overview of what Juneteenth is all about.

### **What is Juneteenth?**

Juneteenth or June 19, 1865, is considered the date when the last slaves in America were freed. Although the rumors of freedom were widespread prior to this, actual emancipation did not come until General Gordon Granger rode into Galveston, Texas and issued General Orders No. 3, on June 19, almost two and a half years after President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

The reason that Texan slaves were the last to know they were free was because, during the Civil War, Texas did not experience any significant invasion by Union forces. Although the Union army made several attempts to invade Texas, they were stopped by Confederate troops. As a result, slavery in Texas continued to thrive. Because slavery in Texas experienced such a minor interruption in its operation, many slave owners from other slave-holding states, including Missouri slave owners, brought their slaves to Texas to wait out the war. News of the emancipation was suppressed due to the overwhelming influence of the slave owners.

Many people ask BUT DIDN'T THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION FREE THE ENSLAVED? The proclamation only applied to those slaveholding states that were in rebellion against the union. Needless to say, the proclamation was ignored by those states that seceded from the Union. It did not apply to those slave-holding states that did not rebel against the Union. So slaveholding states like Missouri, Delaware and Maryland weren't bound by the emancipation. As a result about 800,000 slaves were unaffected by the provisions of the proclamation. It would take a civil war to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution to formally outlaw slavery in the United States.

To understand the significance of Juneteenth, one must understand the unique slave experience that blacks endured in the United States.



## Juneteenth—It's Always Right to Celebrate Freedom

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### **Voyage Over**

Most blacks were brought to America in slave ships, shackled in chains, stacked like sardines in the ship's hull. It wasn't like getting on the Love Boat or those fancy luxury cruise ships we see advertised on TV. It's no joke that Africans became the seafood for thousands of sharks that followed the slave ships. And people wonder why so many blacks don't like being in the water today. Ships that were packed tightly provided less than eighteen inches between the ceiling and floor, not enough space to sit up.

In the darkness beneath the deck, Africans were forced to lay in sickening stench filled with waste, disease, body lice and rodents for up to twelve weeks. Often the dead weren't removed for days and the seawater turned the decomposing bodies soup-like, creating an unbelievably horrible and suffocating odor. Describing what it was like to be in this "floating coffin", an ex-slave wrote:

"I was soon put down under the decks and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat...I now wished for the last friend, death to relieve me," (Olaudah Equiano, 1789).

Olaudah's experience was all too typical. The journey from Africa to America for millions of Africans, turned out to be a death voyage. They cried out in different African tongues, but their prayers went unanswered. Their tears were met with the lash and for many, no doubt, hope died inside forever. They never saw their homeland, Africa again.

The slave ships almost always carried more Africans than the cramped space would allow, as it was expected that not everyone would survive the trip. The voyage tested Africans physical and spiritual well being. The slave voyage was a trip in which you either lost your faith or you gained it. The moment you were forced on that ship, your life was forever changed. No one can ever really describe the impact of this horrendous crime against African people.

### **Unimaginable Profits**

People often wonder how the slave trade could have lasted for over 300 years. One major reason was the enormous profits it generated. We're talking unimaginable wealth that was created from slave labor. During one 10-year period (1783-1793) Liverpool was the chief English center of trade. Nearly 1,000 ships left its harbor and were employed in the trafficking of slaves.

Now 1,000 ships is a lot, even by today's standards, but keep in mind this was just one harbor. These ships carried over 300,000 slaves for a total value of over 15 million pounds which is equivalent to about



## Juneteenth—It's Always Right to Celebrate Freedom

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\$27,000,000. After expenses their net return was well over 20 million dollars. 20 million dollars is a lot today. Imagine what it was worth 200 years ago.

When you multiply that by several hundreds of other sea ports which were also engaged in slaving, and then multiply that times 300 years, you begin to get an idea of the magnitude of slave trading. As a result of these outrageous profits, a number of European wars were fought over control of the slave trade. So profitable was this trade, that England's navy, its industrial revolution, even the financing of its empire can be directly attributed to the sale of Africans.

What you had was free labor and free land. When slave owners used up either, they just moved on. That's like me owning all of the property and people in this room. I could force all of you on the threat of death to build me more buildings, roads, you name it without paying you a cent and the wealth I accumulated off your labor could buy me more land and more slaves.

America benefited greatly from this free labor. This country's southern economy was virtually dependent upon black slave labor. The flour mills, sugar mills, cotton presses, textile industries, the banks we use today all have their roots from the capital gained on the backs of black slave labor. So when black leaders were demanding retribution in the 60s telling America that "you owe us," you now have a clearer understanding of why this notion of reparations struck such a responsive chord among the black masses.

People often say, well slavery was just accepted back then. The truth is, Europeans who engaged in the slave trade had options. They could have set up a Fair Labor Commission. They could have gone to Africa and contracted for workers and paid them livable wages. They could have done that. Slavery was a deliberate choice.

There's an excellent book by John Wesley, the religious founder of the Methodist church. His book is entitled, *THOUGHTS UPON SLAVERY 1703-1791*. Wesley wanted to find out for himself facts about the countries Africans came from, what type of people they were, how they were brought to America and how they were treated once they got here.

In his book he concludes that Africans were a gentle people and were adverse to war. He claimed, from Senegal to all regions of the Gold Coast, their land was well cultivated and produced vast quantities of rice and other grains, plenty of fruit and roots, oil and fish in great abundance. He said their livestock was plentiful and well fed. In his book, Wesley says you'll find that African Kings and governors took care of their people and according to Wesley; there were no beggars among them.



## Juneteenth—It's Always Right to Celebrate Freedom

by Dr. Charles Taylor

Wesley says it was solely from a desire of financial gain that Europeans first undertook to seize Africans and he called lies the notion that Europeans engaged in slavery for any other reason. He said Europeans corrupted Africans with liquor, weapons and cheap goods. Perhaps the worst corruption Africans fell prey to, was making war upon each other and then selling the prisoners of war to the Europeans. (Wesley, 1778)

### Indentured Servants

Although slavery became state-sanctioned later, when blacks arrived in the U.S. in a Dutch warship in 1619, they came not as slaves but as indentured servants. They had a lot in common with white indentured servants. At some point that commonality was deliberately destroyed. It's important to note, there was a brief period in our history where class differences were more significant than race differences.

That's an important lesson. You see the system and laws that were established for white servitude provided the apparatus for black slavery. For example a plantation pass system had already been set up for white indentured servants. There was sexual exploitation of white indentured women; there were whipping posts, branding irons, overseers, and so on.

All of these things were tried out and perfected on white folks before they were ever used on black folks. Just imagine if poor whites and blacks could have united back then. We'd have a different America today. Although there was a deliberate strategy to make sure that black and white indentures didn't unite, there was also a practical problem with white indentures escaping their servitude and simply relocating and melting into the population.

Black indentures were unable to do that. Laws were eventually passed to make blacks, servants for life. These laws were passed, in part, because of the large number of escaped white indentures. Soon the servants for life policy changed to slaves for life, and then slavery was made hereditary so that neither black adults nor their children could escape from being a slave. Then through an elaborate set of laws (known as black codes or slave codes) all legal rights were removed from black people until legally, blacks became property.

As property (chattel) blacks were sold, bartered, rented, deeded, used as collateral and treated worse than farm animals. Their marriages held no legal standing, so their families were not recognized. Families could be broken up and sold at the whim of the slave owner and children were routinely snatched from their mother's arms and sold.

Quoting from my book:



## Juneteenth—It's Always Right to Celebrate Freedom

by Dr. Charles Taylor

“At the auction, I’ve seen them sell a family. Maybe one man would buy the mammy, another buy the pappy, and another buy all the children or maybe just one, like that. I’ve seen them cry like they were at a funeral when they were parted. They had to drag them away.” –James Brown, ex-slave. (Taylor, 2002).

Once the indentured system gave way to black slavery, white skin privileges became the law of the land. No matter how low a white person was on the economic scale or regardless of the crimes that person committed, his or her white skin made him better off than blacks. So there was no incentive for poor whites to fight for black rights or emancipation, when to do so would undermine their own privileged status.

Slavery was by its very nature a brutal and evil institution. Minor infractions cost the slave a severe beating; those caught reading or writing were often put to death. Slaves who rebelled were turned over to a professional slave breaker, whose job was to transform the slave into a docile, obedient worker. Through mutilation, torture and every conceivable degradation, the slave was forced to comply. Slaves were hunted, raped, bred like animals and lynched without remorse. Perhaps the words of Frederick Douglass, who escaped slavery, says it best:

"We have worked without wages; we have lived without hope, wept without sympathy and bled without mercy..."

### **The Meaning of Juneteenth—Freedom**

When General George Granger rode into Gavelston, Texas, the record says you could see the dust from the soldiers’ horses as they were approaching. One can imagine the joy in the hearts of our enslaved ancestors. The record tells us when they heard the news of freedom, they alternately sang, danced and prayed. There was much rejoicing and jubilation that their life long prayers had finally been answered. Many of the slaves left their masters immediately upon being freed, in search of family members, economic opportunities or simply because they could. They left with nothing but the clothes on their backs and hope in their hearts. Oh, freedom!

"When my oldest brother heard we were free, he gave a whoop, ran, and jumped a high fence, and told mammy good-bye. Then he grabbed me up and hugged and kissed me and said, "Brother is gone, don't expect you'll ever see me any more." I don't know where he went, but I never did see him again."--Susan Ross (Taylor, 2002)

I hope we can appreciate this moment-the first Juneteenth celebration because blacks were emerging from a long dark night. Coming out of this experience affected blacks in profound ways. There was this



## Juneteenth—It's Always Right to Celebrate Freedom

by Dr. Charles Taylor

great promise that for the first time since they had been in this land, the U.S. constitution would protect them. Blacks had optimism for the future. They were looking forward to becoming U.S. citizens.

Many freedmen gave themselves new names. County courthouses were overcrowded as blacks applied for licenses to legalize their marriages. Emancipation allowed ex-slaves the right to assemble and openly worship as they saw fit. As a result, a number of social and community organizations were formed, many originating from the church.

Freedom implied that for the first time, United States laws protected the rights of blacks. There was a run on educational primers as freed men and women sought the education that had for so long been denied them. The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, commonly known as the Freedman's Bureau, was founded by Congress in March 1865 to provide relief services for former slaves.

Schools were established and joined churches as centers of the newly freed communities. The promise of emancipation gave freed men and women optimism for the future; few realized slavery's bitter legacy was just beginning to unfold and that equality was to remain an elusive dream. Oh, freedom!

At the beginning of Reconstruction, the period immediately following the end of the Civil War, rumors were rampant that every freedman would be given forty acres and a mule. Ex-slaves petitioned for land and with federal troops stationed throughout the South to protect their rights, looked forward to participating in American society as free citizens. In some cases ex-slaves were successful in obtaining land. Land grants by Congress allowed several states to establish black colleges.

The optimism was short-lived however, and soon replaced by a betrayal so soul-shattering, blacks questioned whether the United States was serious about granting them their freedom. Ex-slaves found for the most part, that despite the Freedman's Bureau, they were left to fend for themselves. The abject poverty and the racism that maintained it prohibited any hope for assimilation into American society.

In Texas, the editor of the Harrison Flag newspaper denounced as "treasonable" the sale of land to blacks. The Texas Homestead Act, passed during Reconstruction, granted up to 160 acres of free land to white persons only. The Texas legislature in 1866 passed a new set of black codes that attempted to reverse the limited gains blacks had been granted.

Ex-slaves entered freedom under the worst possible conditions. Most were turned loose penniless and homeless, with only the clothes on their back. Ex-slaves were, as Frederick Douglass said "free, without roofs to cover them, or bread to eat, or land to cultivate, and as a consequence died in such numbers as to awaken the hope of their enemies that they would soon disappear." They received no 40 acres and a mule; they were freed without an economic base to make emancipation real.



## Juneteenth—It's Always Right to Celebrate Freedom

by Dr. Charles Taylor

In the state of Texas, many white Texans disdained black freedom and this utter contempt guaranteed the price of freedom for many would be unaffordable. The sharecropping system that emerged in Texas and all over the Deep South kept many blacks from starving, but had little to distinguish it from the slave life blacks thought they had escaped. This was the other side of emancipation, where high expectations gave way to heart-crushing disillusionment.

By 1877, the end of Reconstruction, the North had abandoned black Americans to the will of southern whites, who through violence, racial discrimination and Jim Crow laws succeeded in disenfranchising them, resulting in more than 100 years of oppression. It's not surprising that blacks turned to the only institution that gave them hope--the church.

### Church

Dr. Jordan Paul says: When you come to the end of all the light that you know and you are about to step off into darkness, FAITH is knowing one of two things will happen:

“There will be something solid in the darkness for you to stand on, or you will be taught how to fly.”  
Faith was all that blacks had to sustain them and the church was their rock.

From the establishment of the first black church in America, throughout slavery and beyond, the church has been the foundation of the black community. During the horrific days of slavery it provided relief and nourishment for the soul with its promise of a better life after death.

The church gave the slave dignity and assured him he was equal in the eyes of God. Despite his earthly condition he was loved and valued as a child of God; no matter how difficult his burden became or unbearable his suffering was, Jesus, who too suffered, prepared a place of rest for him when his time was up on earth. It was this religious faith that sustained the slave and enabled him to endure his bondage.

The slave owner was able to observe a glimpse of this faith as he heard the incredible music that seemed to come out of the slave's soul while toiling in the field. If the slave owner had ventured into a slave church, his strong defense of slavery would no doubt have been weakened.

He would have seen the people he considered inferior and sub-human without the defensive masks they wore in the fields; in their churches, enslaved men and women displayed a dignity and stateliness that survived the slave owner's dehumanizing oppression.



## Juneteenth—It's Always Right to Celebrate Freedom

by Dr. Charles Taylor

The church was more than a safe house. It served as a launching pad for black leadership and was involved early on in working for liberation. Many free blacks in northern churches participated in the Underground Railroad, raised money for freedmen after the Civil War, and helped keep the black community in tact.

Much of the music that was created in the black church that we call spirituals today were freedom songs with coded messages that signaled slave escapes. Steal away, steal away to Jesus; or swing low sweet chariot all had double meanings for the enslaved. There is a long and rich emancipatory tradition in the black church.

Nearly every slave rebellion was planned in the black church. Nat Turner was a minister and Harriet Tubman called Moses by her people, worked through the church to bring over 300 people to freedom in the north and Canada. So did Denmark Vesey and Gabriel Presser.

The black church has a history of activism. The importance of the black church then and now cannot be overstated. Even today at 11:00 am on Sundays, you'll find nearly 2/3 of black America in church. It's no accident that Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson and a host of other civil rights leaders got their start through the black church.

Therefore it is not surprising the black church has always played a pivotal role in keeping alive the meaning of Juneteenth. Religion has always been at the root of the observance of this holiday, which is ironic, considering it is a holiday born out of an institution so far removed from Christian ideals--slavery.

It's important to note that religious observances by the slaves were at the sole discretion of slave masters, who permitted its practice as long as it didn't threaten the institution of slavery. On many plantations, enslaved blacks went to church with their masters and almost every sermon ended with: Slave-obey your Master! During periods of slave rebellions, religious services were outlawed and in many localities slave codes prohibited such services. As a result blacks had to sneak and hold secret services.

The black church soon became known as the invisible institution during slavery. As you might imagine, the sermons in the invisible church were a lot different than those preached in the Master's church. The invisible institution created a protective shelter against the hostile white world. The church was the only way to safely release the emotions that filled the enslaved-the anger of bondage; the emotions of sorrow; of joy; of hope. The preacher was highly respected because he could give voice to the yearnings and fears of his people. Many slaves truly believed that God would intervene and reveal the gospel of truth to whites that slavery was wrong and that it would end.





## Juneteenth—It's Always Right to Celebrate Freedom

by Dr. Charles Taylor

### The Legacy of Slavery

The fact that it took a Civil War to forcibly put an end to slavery left a bitter legacy that continues to divide American society. Slavery so bankrupted slave owners' sense of right and wrong that they were willing to die to defend that lifestyle. A slave-holding minority morally corrupted a nation, and this legacy still haunts the country.

According to historian John Hope Franklin, "the Founding Fathers, by allowing slavery, set the stage for every succeeding generation of Americans to apologize, compromise and temporize on those principles of liberty that were supposed to be the very foundation of our system of government and way of life... that is why this nation tolerated and indeed, nurtured the cultivation of racism that has been as insidious as it has been pervasive."

Professor Franklin asks, "how could the colonists make [such] distinctions in their revolutionary philosophy? They either meant that all men were created equal or they did not mean it at all. They either meant that every person was entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, or they did not mean it at all...Patrick Henry, who had cried, 'Give me liberty or give me death', admitted that slavery was 'repugnant to humanity', but [obviously] not terribly repugnant, for he continued to hold blacks in bondage. So did George Washington and Thomas Jefferson ..."

They knew better. They knew that black folk worked from dawn to dusk making this country strong. They knew when Paul Revere rode through the countryside waking up people; he woke up black minutemen as well. When George Washington crossed the Delaware River, blacks were in the boat with him. Blacks have marched in every war. When they signed the declaration of independence blacks were not included. When they wrote the constitution, they said black lives were worth only 3/5 of a white person's life. They knew better.

Every institution at the slave-holder's disposal, including the church was used to justify slavery and oppress black people. Instead of the slave-owner being considered inhumane, the people he enslaved were. This legacy of racism must not be taken lightly. John Hope Franklin aptly put it when he wrote that "slavery weakened America's moral authority."

It's amazing that despite living under the most inhumane conditions known to humankind, blacks contributed everything from agricultural inventions, to medical breakthroughs, to music. Enslaved artisans crafted incredible sculptures, designed beautiful buildings and helped build a nation. Blacks preserved a culture and succeeded in passing down a legacy of music, language, food, religion and a



## Juneteenth—It's Always Right to Celebrate Freedom

by Dr. Charles Taylor

lesson in survival. We'll never know how many scientists, engineers, doctors and artists were lost on the trip over on the slave ships or after they arrived.

Perhaps the greatest sin that slavery created was racism. There is a great book by a researcher by the name of Snowden called, BEFORE COLOR PREJUDICE. Snowden found that:

1. The ancients did not fall into the error of biological racism
2. Black skin color was not a sign of inferiority
3. The Greeks and Romans did not establish color as an obstacle to integration in society and
4. Ancient society was one that despite all of its faults, never made skin color the basis for judging a person.

It wasn't until the slave trade that skin color became the basis for discrimination. The identification of slavery with black skin encouraged the racist idea of white supremacy.

### **White Allies**

Having said that, slavery taught America another lesson, one that it too often ignores. Blacks and whites worked together to create an anti-slavery movement that ultimately succeeded. Later they fought and died together to force an end to slavery. Blacks and whites have worked throughout the nation's history for social justice. This lesson of cooperation must never be forgotten. Without white allies slavery would not have ended when it did.

The majority of whites in the north or south did not own slaves. The Quakers and white abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison spoke out forcefully against slavery. They supported the more than 50 black anti-slavery groups formed by free blacks in the north. It was this active opposition to slavery by blacks and whites that forced this nation into a show down over the questions of slavery.

### **Civil Rights Era**

I want to move next to the civil rights era. The seeds for the modern civil rights era were planted much earlier than the 1960s. After WWII when black soldiers returned home after fighting in a war to stop Nazi aggression, they returned home to face segregation, racism, and a repressive period many thought would change, especially after they had risked their lives in the war.



## **Juneteenth—It's Always Right to Celebrate Freedom**

by Dr. Charles Taylor

Thousands of blacks that had been hired in northern factories to support the war effort were fired and replaced by returning white GIs. The GI Bill of Rights and similar legislation built the suburbs, provided educational opportunities for white veterans, built highways, new homes and new industries but did little to benefit black GIs who fought so valiantly overseas for a freedom that proved elusive at home.

Having tasted freedom overseas, many black soldiers returned to civilian life determined to make America live up to its promise of equal opportunity for all. Many northern blacks were also determined to hang on to the few gains they had managed to obtain. So the black community was ripe for challenging the status quo.

The two decades following WWII were economic boom periods for America. The war had left the U.S. the world's premiere military and economic power. The Marshall Plan which pumped billions of dollars into the European economy allowed America to rebuild that continent and gain unprecedented economic and military footholds. Internally, former war factories began mass producing domestic products for consumers and as I mentioned earlier, favorable congressional legislation helped create the present white middle class as we know it.

Instead of benefiting from this enormous wealth, the masses of black Americans found themselves once again destitute. Keep in mind that prior to Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954, the 1886 Plessy vs. Ferguson decision that established the doctrine of separate but equal, was the law of the land. When Plessy was overturned, it now became legally possible for blacks to challenge segregation all over the country.

The 60s saw a resurgence in Black resistance and represented a real search I think for power and community control. The movement caused blacks to look inward for a while and that was a good thing because it ushered in a belief in ourselves. But the 60s were incomplete because we did not realize Dr. King's dream of creating the beloved community.

### **What Lessons Did We Learn?**

We've gone from enslavement to freedom but we haven't reached economic freedom. Today America is now a nation so racially complicated that we have a black secretary of state, while black males are still racially profiled all in the same historical moment. Blacks will never be the majority in this country so we must form coalitions with other interested groups. Ultimately we must help build a world where the power, the resources and the cultural practices are shared. Like our ancestors, we must keep hope alive. We've overcome the physical bondage of slavery, but we've yet to appreciate the spiritual significance of that experience.



## **Juneteenth—It's Always Right to Celebrate Freedom**

by Dr. Charles Taylor

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

There are no magical solutions. What's required is hard work. We get involved in our homes, in our schools, in our cities and we work for a society that places human rights over property rights.

There is too little public investment in job creation or healthcare and too much public investment in corrections. There is too little investment in drug treatment and too much in punishment for drug use. In all most every area in which blacks have needs, there is too little public investment.

If we are ever to achieve a measure of racial equality in the obtaining of services, the governments at every level must adopt public policies to root out inequalities based on race. Race still determines how we are treated and what type of life we'll have. Race matters still in residential segregation, unequal loan policies, differential police stops, divergent medical care and schooling, variation in criminal sentencing and disparate administration of the death penalty. But Juneteenth teaches us that when you combine faith with action, that great things are still possible. And that we must never forget those who came before us—millions of our ancestors whose ribs became ladders for us to climb into the positions that we occupy today.

Race still matters. According to Bill Clinton, the challenge of our past remains the challenge of our future: Will we be one nation, one people, with one common destiny -- or not? Will we all come together, or come apart? That's why we must celebrate Juneteenth and begin a national dialogue about slavery so someday we can heal the wounds of our troubled past.

Thank you.