

Confessing The Truth About Slavery in the United States

Psalm 32

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Stories are what death thinks he puts an end to. He can't understand that they end in him, but they don't end with him. Ursula LeGuin

In 1959, the Texas Division of Children of the Confederacy placed a plaque in our state capitol building. In addition to pledging themselves to pure ideals and honoring the confederate veterans of the civil war, the “children of the south,” as they called themselves, committed to “study and teach the truths of history, (One of the most important of which is that the war between the states was not a rebellion, nor was its underlying cause to sustain slavery).”

To study and teach the truths of history.

History. The story of who we are, why we are the way we are, and how we got here.

The *truths* of history. The truthful story. The story that tells the truth about who we are, why, and how we got here.

This past January, the State Preservation Board, which includes Governor Gregg Abbott, Lt. Governor Dan Patrick, and Speaker Dennis Bonnen, voted unanimously to remove the plaque. Soon after, without ceremony, a state employee removed it.

Some Texans were pleased when the Preservation Board ordered the plaque removed. Other Texans were angered. Different people tell different stories about the south, the war, and slavery. Different people disagree on the truth.

In the current legislative session, Representative Ron Reynolds, from Missouri City, Texas, is advocating for the passage of two resolutions. One resolution calls on the State of Texas to replace the Children of the Confederacy plaque that it removed with a new plaque that acknowledges the reality of convict leasing in Texas. The other resolution calls on Texas to create a legislative panel to “examine the treatment of victims of the convict leasing system, the extent to which the State of Texas supported the system, and the lingering negative effects of the system.”

Representative Reynolds isn't debating whether the civil war was about slavery. He's going after something far deeper and more profound in our national psyche—the story that tells Americans and the world that the civil war ended slavery in the United States, a story that many accept as the truth.

But is it? Did the civil war end slavery in the United States? How truthful is that story?

Douglas Blackmon won the Pulitzer Prize for his book, *Slavery by Another Name, The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*.

It's one of the most disturbing books I've ever read, because until I read it, I naively accepted the truth that white Americans stopped enslaving black Americans with the end of the civil war.

I knew that racism persisted. I knew that all kinds of political, economic, legal, and social injustices persisted. I knew that white people continued to inflict horrible violence on black people in their effort to control them. But I didn't know that widespread slavery persisted.

Blackmon describes in great detail how white business owners, working closely with white local law enforcement and state legislatures, developed the "convict leasing system" that Representative Reynolds now wants Texas to acknowledge and further examine.

Through this well-coordinated system, local white sheriffs all over the south arrested scores of black people, primarily men but also women, for a host of ill-defined crimes like vagrancy. The local white judge or justice of the peace quickly found the accused guilty, and imposed a sizeable fine that the accused, now a convict, couldn't pay. A white landowner, coal mine operator, pine forest harvester, turpentine processor, steel mill owner, sugar cane plantation owner, or other business owner, purchased the black convict's debt from the county, thereby taking possession of the black person.

White people possessed black people, and had the legal right to work black people in the field, the mine, the factory, or the forest, until the white people determined the black people's debt was paid. The white people could charge the black convict-worker expenses like food and board, thus perpetuating the debt indefinitely.

White people had the legal right to use any means necessary to make the black prisoners work for them, or to punish them for breaking the rules that white people set. White people found whipping to be the simplest and most effective way to get black people to work and obey. It was a common and standard practice for white people to whip their black prisoners long after the civil war ended.

White state legislators didn't require white people who possessed black people to uphold any minimal safety or living standards. The death toll for black people caught in this system was high, especially in Alabama's coal mines and the sugar plantations in Texas.

People touring turpentine processing plants in the Alabama pine forests reported seeing scores of black men working under the scorching sun, surrounded by white men with rifles. All the black men were naked, emaciated, and sick-looking. This was in 1900.

What was this reality other than slavery?

It was slavery. Slavery by another name: convict-leasing.

Here in Austin, convicts leased out for their labor built our state capitol building. Black men whom white men arrested, convicted, imprisoned, and used for free labor.

What was this system other than slavery?

And let's not let the northern white people off the hook. Black and white people from the south sent continuous detailed accounts of slavery's persistence to the Federal government in Washington, and far more often than not, the Federal government ignored or suppressed these accounts, for the sake of economic and political expediency, and because of white racism.

It was racist white people all over America—north, south, east, and west—who enabled white Americans in the south to continue enslaving black Americans up until the beginning of World War II.

Think about that for a moment.

I used to think the timespan between the ending of slavery and the beginning of the civil rights movement in the late 50s was about 100 years. But it wasn't. It was only about 20 years. Just over 20 years separate Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and the whole civil rights and black liberation movement from white people enslaving black people. Just a little bit more than the timespan that separates us from 9-11. It's not that long.

I applaud Representative Reynolds for challenging the conventional truth about our nation, the civil war, and slavery, by lifting up the story of convict-leasing system, the story of slavery persisting in our nation long after the civil war.

The suppression of the truth about slavery's persistence in the United States greatly distorts the truth about who we are as a nation today, why we are who we are, and how we got here. Especially as it relates to racism, racial injustice, and racial inequality.

An examination and a full accounting of the truth about slavery's persistence in the United States, until about 80 years ago, would clarify some truths about who we are as a nation today, why we are who we are, and how we got here.

Again, I applaud Representative Reynolds, an African-American man, for insisting on this examination and full accounting, for insisting on a more truthful telling of our story.

Part of me wishes a white legislator had insisted on telling a more truthful story about slavery in our nation. It's white people who've done the most to suppress the truth, and it's white people who must examine and give a more truthful account of our nation's story.

It's white people who must confess certain truths about racism and slavery—that the slavery white people forced upon black people was more horrific, violent, and inhumane than we want to admit, that white people enslaved black people for a lot longer than we want to admit, and that the lingering negative effects are more pronounced than we want to admit.

Psalm 32 reads, while I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long...Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.

I hope and pray a significant number of white people support Representative Reynolds' resolutions, that a significant number of white people say, yes, it's time to examine our story, and it's time to confess our transgressions against black people, and against God.