



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on July 23, 2021

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The Real History of “Juneteenth” and Emancipation

Just two days before the anniversary date, President Joe Biden signed legislation making the observation of Juneteenth (June 19) yet another federal holiday, with paid time off for federal workers, effective immediately. The new holiday — officially called Juneteenth National Independence Day — was passed by the House of Representatives with only 14 dissenting votes, and in the Senate by a voice vote. It purports to commemorate the end of slavery in the United States.



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While Biden signed the bill, it seemed that Vice President Kamala Harris — who has some black African ancestry from her father, who was a citizen of Jamaica — was the central figure in the signing ceremony. “As we establish Juneteenth as our newest national holiday, let us be clear about what happened on June 19, 1865, the day we call Juneteenth. They [slaves in Galveston, Texas] learned they were free.”

Biden added that the day was “a day in which we remember the moral stain, the terrible toll that slavery took on the country, and continues to take.” He argued that great nations “don’t ignore their most painful moments. We come to terms with the mistakes we’ve made,” and this causes healing.

Not all federal government employees had the observance off — this year, at least. The U.S. Postal Service operated on a normal schedule, noting that it is “not possible to cease the operations of the Postal Service to accommodate an observance over the next 24-48 hours,” and that closing “without providing appropriate time” would simply lead to service disruptions. In other words, next year, expect your mail to be delayed while federal employees celebrate “Juneteenth National Independence Day.”

Still, most federal employees did get the day off this year — on Friday, June 18, since June 19 fell on a Saturday. So did many students at schools not already out for summer break, and at some colleges across the country.

The impetus for the passage of the bill seems to have been the unfortunate death of George Floyd while being arrested by Minneapolis police officers, after allegedly passing a counterfeit \$20 bill.

The Origins of Juneteenth

American slavery did *not* become illegal on June 19, 1865. That was accomplished by the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, enacted in December of that year. So, what is Juneteenth all about then?

Juneteenth, as a day to mark the “end” of slavery in the United States, has always been a puzzle. What happened on that date was that General Gordon Granger led his Union troops to Galveston, Texas, and announced that the Civil War was over and the slaves were now free. He based his announcement on an executive order issued by President Abraham Lincoln, popularly known as the Emancipation



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Proclamation, which had been in effect since January 1, 1863.

In what was known as General Order Number Three, Granger said, “The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor.”

When General Granger arrived in Galveston, the slaves there were apparently unaware of Lincoln’s executive order. Since slaveowners considered themselves living in the Confederate States of America, in which Lincoln was not president, they had mostly ignored the order until federal troops implemented it by force. Historian Lonnie Bunch told National Public Radio in 2013 that he considered the Emancipation Proclamation important in bringing about the demise of slavery because it began a “creeping process of emancipation.”

Following Granger’s announcement, some ex-slaves simply continued to work on their former masters’ farms for wages. Many became — along with poor whites in the economically destitute South — sharecroppers, in which a portion of their crops was used as a substitute for rent payments (money was quite scarce in the post-Civil War South). Most probably fled the farm on which they had been enslaved, taking employment elsewhere — if they could get it — or facing perilous economic conditions that fell upon the entire South after the war.

But at least they were free, and that was certainly something to celebrate.

As former slaves and their descendants spread out across the South, they would spread the story of General Granger’s telling them on June 19 that they were free, leading to the unofficial celebration of the end of their slavery on June 19. Combining the two words led to the term “June-teenth.” The day was celebrated with church picnics, speeches, and reminiscences. Felix Haywood, a former slave, recalled years later, “Everybody went wild. We all felt like heroes ... just like that, we were free.”

Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation

Lincoln’s issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation has contributed greatly to a misunderstanding of why the war was fought, and what actually ended slavery in America. It is commonly believed today, contrary to the historical evidence, that the North and South simply lined up and fought a four-year war to settle the issue of slavery, with Union soldiers fighting a grand crusade to end slavery and Confederate soldiers ready to die to “keep their slaves.”

Slavery was certainly a major contributing factor to causing the secession of seven of the Southern states, but to say the war was fought to end slavery, or to defend it, is just not true. Other factors contributed to the secession of these seven states, including tariffs that largely benefited the Northern states to the detriment of states in the South. Northern states had, more than once, threatened secession early in the country’s history, mostly due to resentment over the outsized influence of Virginia. At that time, no one suggested there should be a civil war to force New England states back into the Union if they had seceded.

Later, in the 1830s, when South Carolina declared it would refuse to collect the tariff and President Andrew Jackson asked Congress for authority to use force to make sure this principal source of federal revenue was collected, war loomed, and slavery was not even an issue.



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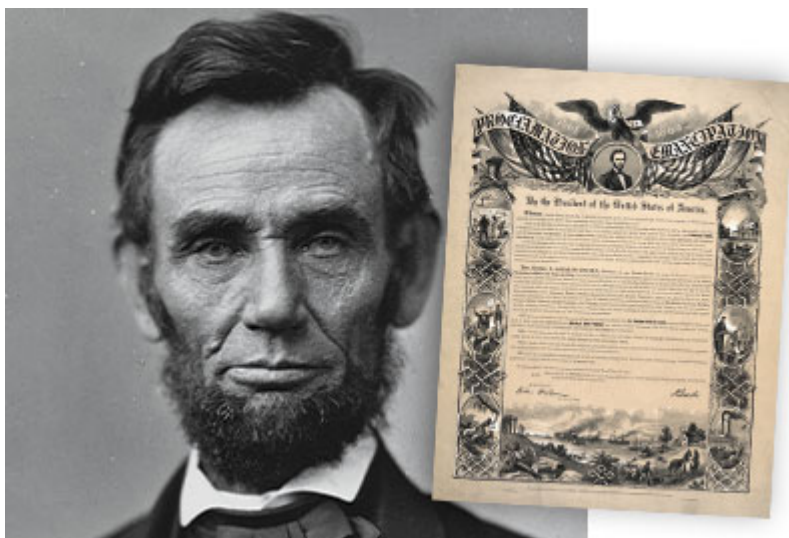
In short, secession was not only a Southern threat, and slavery was not the only issue in dispute between North and South.

But after South Carolina seceded on December 20, 1860, following the election of Lincoln, there ensued weeks of negotiations, during which time Lincoln said he had no intention of doing anything about slavery in the states that had left the Union. Congress later voted that slavery was *not* the issue of the war — they simply wanted the seceded states to return to the fold.

After the Confederate States took Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor by force, Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to enforce federal laws (essentially the collection of the tariff). *Lincoln did not call for an invasion of the South to free the slaves.* Had he done so, he most likely would have touched off riots in the North. At the very least, he would have had far fewer enlistments than he had. Most men put on the blue Union uniforms believing that the dissolution of the Union would lead foreign powers to be more likely to prey upon the United States. While most probably did not like slavery, few took up arms thinking the war was an anti-slavery crusade.

When Lincoln issued his call for volunteers, more slave states were still in the Union than were out — so it really strains credibility to think that the war was initiated to “free the slaves.” As it was, Lincoln’s call for a military invasion of seven states by the federal government led to the secession of four more states that had previously rejected the notion of secession. Three more states almost joined them.

When the war dragged on for several months, with the Confederates winning more battles than they lost, it began to look as though the Confederate States of America would become an independent nation. By the fall of 1862, France and Great Britain were poised to recognize that new nation. Lincoln, in desperation, issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Had Lincoln told the British that they should not recognize the Confederacy because the Confederate States were leaving the Union and had no right to do so, the Brits probably would have laughed, considering what the British colonies in America had done in 1776. “Serves you right,” might have been the British response.



Know your history: While many believe that Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation ended legal slavery in America, the truth is that it did not free a single slave, as presidents cannot make law with executive orders. The 13th Amendment, ratified more than two years later, actually ended the ugly institution.

But if Lincoln had freed slaves throughout the country, that would have included slave states that were still in the Union. This could have precipitated the exodus of those states, and desertions from the



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Union army. So, he “threaded the needle,” so to speak. He ordered slaves freed in states over which he had no control, while leaving them enslaved in states wherein he did have control. Even if Lincoln’s order had been legal, it freed no slaves.

Nevertheless, it was enough to keep Britain and France out of the war, especially after Union forces were able to repel the attempted invasion of the North by forces under the command of General Robert E. Lee in September of 1862 at Antietam Creek near Sharpsburg, Maryland.

Slavery and the Civil War

Despite the internal contradictions of the Emancipation Proclamation, it has led many today to believe that the Civil War was fought to end slavery, and slavery was ended by it.

It has also slandered the hundreds of thousands of Confederate soldiers who fought in the war, with many of their own descendants damning them for supposedly fighting to keep human beings in bondage. The reality is that only a tiny minority of Confederate soldiers even owned slaves.

So why did they fight? To stop an invading army, of course. Early in the war, some Union soldiers asked a captured Confederate soldier why he was fighting. He answered, “Because you are here.” In other words, had there not been Union soldiers there to fight, there would have been no Confederate soldiers, and no war.

This is not to address the issue of whether the war was justified on either side, but a blunt statement of fact. Confederate soldiers fought to defend their homeland from invasion. It is ludicrous to think that 15,000 men charged across the field at Gettysburg in “Pickett’s Charge” thinking, “I am doing this to keep my slaves.” As noted above, hardly any of them even owned slaves.

If the Emancipation Proclamation is not what ended slavery in the United States, and the war was not fought to end it, then what did end slavery? The truth is, while the war was not fought to end slavery, it did indirectly result in that institution’s demise. In early 1865, the Confederate Congress voted to formally accept the enlistment of slaves into the Confederate Army, with a promise of emancipation. Once that was done, slavery was a mortally wounded institution.

The legal end of slavery was a result of the 13th Amendment, ratified on December 6, 1865, months after Juneteenth. If any date were to be used to celebrate the end of slavery in America, that should be it.

The passage of the 13th Amendment also helps answer the question of whether the war was fought to end slavery — i.e., if that were the case, then why was a constitutional amendment even necessary? The obvious answer is that the war was *not* fought to end or defend slavery, but it certainly influenced the enactment of the 13th Amendment, which did end slavery.

Regardless of why slavery is no longer legal, we can celebrate that it no longer exists in America. But we should likewise reject the multitudes of myths about its demise, myths created and perpetuated to advance certain agendas rather than to present an accurate historical picture.

The passage of the Juneteenth law, creating yet another federal holiday, well illustrates the problem. Democrats supported it, hoping it would shore up their support among black Americans. Republicans mostly joined in, fearing that if they did not, they would be tarred as bigots among that same group. And so it goes.

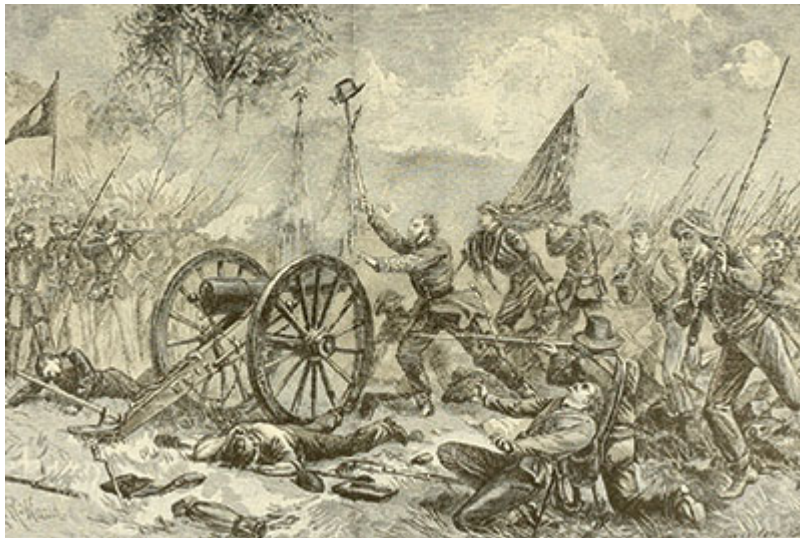


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Two “Independence Days”?

Fourteen members of the House of Representatives — all Republicans — voted against creating “Juneteenth National Independence Day.” Some of the 14 explained their reasoning. Representative Ronny Jackson of Texas told *USA Today*, “We have enough federal holidays right now.” Montana Representative Matt Rosendale said shortly before the vote, “This is an effort by the Left to create a day out of whole cloth to celebrate identity politics as part of its larger efforts to make Critical Race Theory the reigning ideology of our country. Since I believe in treating everyone equally, regardless of race, and that we should be focused on what unites us rather than our differences, I will vote no.”



Not about slavery: Pickett’s Charge, when 15,000 Confederates surged across the battlefield at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, is perhaps the decisive moment of the Civil War. While average Confederate soldiers such as these brave men have been condemned for supposedly fighting to keep their slaves, very few of them had slaves. It is also unlikely that any of them propelled themselves forward into a hail of bullets and cannon fire so others could keep slaves.

Perhaps Representatives Chip Roy of Texas and Thomas Massie of Kentucky offered the best reason for voting against Juneteenth National Independence Day. Roy said, “Juneteenth should be commemorated as the expression of the realization of the end of slavery in the United States, and I commend those who worked for its passage.” He added, “I could not vote for this bill, however, because the holiday should not be called ‘Juneteenth National Independence Day.’ This name needlessly divides our nation on a matter that should instead bring us together by creating a separate Independence Day based on the color of one’s skin.”

Massie expressed similar sentiments: “I fully support creating a day to celebrate the abolition of slavery, a dark portion of our nation’s history. However, naming this day ‘national independence day’ will create confusion and push Americans to pick one of those two days as their independence day based on their racial identity. Why can’t we name this ‘emancipation day’ and come together as Americans and celebrate that day together as Americans?”

Both Massie and Roy will likely be proven right in their predictions. Next year, we can look for many “progressive” communities deciding to emphasize “Juneteenth National Independence Day” over the day we celebrate our national independence from the British Empire — July 4. After all, with the Left



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pushing the idea that America began not on that day, but rather in 1619 when the first black Africans came to Virginia, celebrating Independence Day on the Fourth of July will be cast as yet another example of “white privilege” and the oppression of “people of color.”

Certainly, the end of slavery in the United States (the country where the movement to abolish slavery actually originated) is something to celebrate. But it should not detract from the great principles of liberty enshrined in our Declaration of Independence, which led to greater freedom for all Americans.

While adding yet another federal holiday to the calendar will hit the taxpayers in the pocketbook — by paying federal workers to be off from work — the concerns of Roy and Massie are more important.

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