

“Do Abolitionists Owe Reparations?” --from *The Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 2019

By Jay Winik

More than a century and a half after the ratification of the 13th Amendment, slavery is a hot issue in the Democratic presidential campaign. “We need a national, full-blown conversation about reparations,” says Sen. Elizabeth Warren. “I believe this country needs to address the original sin of slavery,” adds former Housing Secretary Julián Castro. Sen. Kamala Harris says the idea of reparations “means different things to different people,” and to her it means “we need to study the effects of generations of discrimination and institutional racism.”

We know of the horrific treatment slaves endured at the hands of their masters. We know, too, how the slaves came to America. Slaves were “tightpacked” like sardines on ships, in stifling heat and mildewy dungeons, forced to endure suffocating filth and intolerable smells, often from their own urine and excrement. Many were brutally secured by locks (“spoonways”), manacles, chains or head rings. To sleep, they had to lie on top of each other; to calm pangs of hunger—often they were barely fed—they were provided sticks to gnaw on.

As the ex-slave Equiano once wrote, “the shrieks . . . of the dying, rendered a scene of horror almost inconceivable.” So horrible was the Middle Passage that captured slaves frequently tried to hurl themselves into the sea, or commit suicide by banging their heads against the ship. It wasn’t uncommon for slave owners to force slaves to eat by breaking their teeth because they would not open their mouths. Their wretched situation was aggravated by disease: dysentery, smallpox and sometimes simple dehydration killed them. Slavery remains a hideous, indelible stain on American history.

But the persistent, systematic efforts of those who fought against slavery are too frequently overlooked. It simply wasn’t the case that all Americans blithely countenanced slavery. Many insisted that America was haunted by the paradox of being a republic built upon an inherently undemocratic foundation.

Slavery flourished especially in the South, where it was tragically woven into the fabric of society. But in 1780 Pennsylvania enacted the New World’s first gradual abolition law, and in 1783 Massachusetts’ highest court abolished bondage, boldly declaring it null and void. Other Northern states followed suit. Vermont and New Hampshire each set slavery on the path of extinction. Quietly in the beginning, then more noisily over the course of time, the ferment over slavery grew. Antislavery advocates forcefully called for freedom for people of all colors. As the great preacher and abolitionist John Wesley put it, slavery was “the execrable sum of all villainies.”

At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, the New York Manumission Society delivered an abolition petition. Then the Quakers declared in 1790 that slavery was “a national sin,” predicting a “national calamity.” In Federalist 42, Madison wrote that slavery was a “barbarism of modern policy.”

Almost lost to history is Congress’s February 1790 acceptance of two antislavery petitions that effectively questioned whether representative government could continue intact in a nation founded on the “evil of slavery.” The Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery filed a more expansive petition seeking to abolish slavery itself. This petition bore the imprimatur of Benjamin Franklin, the best-known statesman of his era.

Franklin was then a dying man, racked by pain and barely able to walk. Yet he was an almost mythical figure, the unabashed enemy of evil and tyranny. Thus, when a South Carolina delegate once argued slaves are property, akin to sheep, Franklin shot back: “There is some difference. . . . Sheep will never make any insurrections.” Sadly, even then Southerners threatened disunion if the antislavery measures passed. That was the challenge faced by the Founders.

Is the failure to abolish slavery in the founding era a *carte blanche* indictment against America? In the context of the day, as historian Bernard Bailyn has pointed out, what’s striking isn’t that they didn’t get rid of slavery, but that so much was done to contain it. Had Americans in the North and Northwest insisted on abolition everywhere, the U.S. might have been stillborn. But as slavery advocates soon found out, the abolitionist cause became a national and international movement. The symbol of this campaign, which started in Britain and migrated to the U.S., poignantly consisted of a chained black man on bended knee asking: “Am I not a man and a brother?”

The issue of slavery in America was finally settled by the Civil War, at the cost of 620,000 lives. That too is a legacy worth remembering, and it returns us to the question of reparations. The idea is fraught with difficulties. Would we exempt residents of Pennsylvania, Vermont, New Hampshire and Massachusetts? Should descendants of the Quakers or those who fought for the Union have to pay? What about those who can claim Franklin as an ancestor?

Perhaps most important, reparations run counter to the spirit of the innumerable abolitionists who for many decades tirelessly gave their blood, sweat and tears in behalf of their brethren.