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## GENERATIONS LATER - HAS ONCE-REMOTE PROMISE OF FREEDOM BEEN FULFILLED?

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Emancipation began with a flickering promise, burned intensely for a few years during Reconstruction, and then smoldered for a century. Equality and justice have come into view for most African-Americans only in the past two generations. For many descendants of slavery, those essential rights of a free people are still hard to see.

Any kind of emancipation seemed a remote possibility in 1860, for slavery had never been stronger in the United States. Cotton was the great global commodity, virtually monopolized by the South, and enslaved people made profits for their owners in the wheat fields of Virginia and in the tobacco and iron factories of Richmond. The people held as property in the South were worth more than all the railroads and factories of the North combined.

While most other slave societies in the Western Hemisphere gradually moved toward freedom in the 19th Century, the American South moved toward the permanence of slavery. Of all the slave powers -- including the giants of Brazil and Cuba -- only the South fought a war to protect the rights of a government based on slavery. As a result of that war, nowhere else did slavery end so suddenly, so completely, and with so little compensation for former slaveholders.

Immediate emancipation was not a war aim of the United States in 1861. Its leaders could not imagine how such a thing might be possible and they explicitly denied that ending slavery was a goal of the war against secession.

Former Slaves Provided War Lift But the role of slavery in sustaining the Confederacy through humbling victories over the Union, and the role of slaves themselves in pressing freedom on Federal forces as they rushed to the Union camps at every opportunity, compelled and empowered Abraham Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. That proclamation said nothing about life beyond the end of slavery, nothing about citizenship or a "fair chance in the race of life," as Lincoln described the American dream.

The nearly 200,000 African-Americans who came into the war as soldiers, most of whom had been recently enslaved, transformed the struggle. The addition of those men, greater in number than all the forces at Gettysburg, allowed the Union to build its advantage in manpower without pushing reluctant Northern whites into the draft. The danger of pushing was revealed in massive riots in New York City in July, 1863, days after Gettysburg.

With the promise of freedom unexpectedly won in war, abolitionists and the relatively small number of men who came to be called the Radical Republicans imagined a black American freedom based on the same basis as white American freedom: property, citizenship, equality before the law, and dignity. They worked to create a reconstruction of the South in which those ideals would become reality. When President Lincoln was assassinated, any unarticulated plans he had for Reconstruction died with him.

In the meantime, the most important victory in the Civil War came in the lives of Southern black people. Despite the generations of poverty, injustice, and violence that lay before them, the end of slavery meant the end of the slave trade, of families ripped apart. The end of slavery meant that, finally, some labor of black people would benefit themselves and those they cared for. The end of slavery meant that churches and schools could anchor black communities. The end of slavery, in short, meant the first worldly hope 4 million African-Americans ever knew.

Civil War Ended Slavery Slavery in the United States would not have ended for generations without the Civil War. In a still-unified nation, the South would have continued to flourish economically, its enslaved population put to effective use in coal mines, steel mills, and railroad building. After secession, an independent Confederate States of America would certainly have found itself stigmatized as time passed, but South Africa, which adopted many of its strategies of racial management from the post-war American South, created enormous wealth and privilege for its white population throughout the 20th Century and beyond.

If former slaves had been permitted to construct enduring political power, if they had gone before juries and judges with a chance of fair treatment, if they had been granted homesteads to serve as a first step toward economic freedom, then Reconstruction could be hailed as a turning point in world history equal to any revolution.

Those things did not happen, however. The white South resisted and the white North gave in. African-Americans struggled for generations to secure the promise of the Emancipation Proclamation, however, and the civil rights struggle picked up after World War II where Reconstruction had ended four generations earlier. It fought against many kinds of discrimination openly sanctioned by the government. It was only as a result of those struggles that black Americans have finally experienced anything like fairness from their states and their nation.

From that perspective, we are living less than half a century after the end of Reconstruction. It is little wonder that the promises of emancipation are just beginning to be fulfilled.