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| **RACE IN THE US** |

**Article : From the Civil War to desegregation**

There will never be an acceptable explanation for what happened between Michael Brown and Darren Wilson in Ferguson but we will never fully grasp why the stage was set for such an encounter unless we know American history. Connecting the dots between the past and the present helps us to see the origins of our current national debate – about race, police misconduct, white supremacy, white privilege, inequality, incarceration and the unfinished equal rights agenda.

**The pendulum**

The history of people of African descent in America – which is to say the history of America – is a pendulum of progress and setbacks, of resilience and retaliation, of protest and backlash. There have been allies and there have been opponents. There have been demagogues, who would divide Americans on the basis of colour and class, and visionaries who would seek to lead us to common ground.

The quest for “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” has been an American aspiration since the Declaration of Independence, but black Americans, Native Americans and women were not at the table in 1776. Forty of the 56 signers owned other people.

Bas du formulaire

Haut du formulaire

For 246 years – from 1619, when 20 Africans were forced into indentured servitude in Jamestown, Virginia, until the end of the Civil War in 1865 – most people of African descent in America were enslaved. Those who had purchased or otherwise been granted their freedom lived a precarious, circumscribed existence.

By 1850, enslaved Americans, who were listed in their owners’ inventory ledgers alongside cattle and farm equipment, were worth $1.3bn or one-fifth of the nation’s wealth. When the first shot of the Civil War was fired at Fort Sumter in April 1861, the value of that human collateral exceeded $3bn and was worth more than the nation’s banks, railroads, mills and factories combined.

Immediately after the Civil War, during the hopeful, but brief period of Reconstruction, black people were finally recognised as citizens with rights. But just as quickly as **the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments** abolished slavery, provided equal protection under the law and granted black men the right to vote, Reconstruction ended with segregation.

When federal troops abandoned their posts in the South after the Compromise of 1877, the defeated Confederates regrouped as the **Ku Klux Klan** andthe Knights of the White Camellia. They regained control of their workforce, not by owning them, but by circumscribing their lives through terror, violence and voter suppression.

In Louisiana, the number of registered black voters plummeted from 130,334 in 1896 to 5,320 in 1898. Fraudulent voting schemes pushed black elected officials from state legislatures and from Congress. During the late 19th century, there were 20 black members of Congress . When North Carolina’s George Henry White left in 1901, there would not be another until 1928, when Oscar DePriest was elected in Chicago. For virtually the first half of the 20th century the 15th Amendment had no value for blacks in the former Confederate states, where they were denied the right to vote through the cynical artifice of **poll taxes, literacy tests and grandfather clauses**.

**Jim Crow laws** obliterated Reconstruction wins and codified racially based discrimination. …Those who got too uppity were lynched, firebombed in their homes and chased from land they owned.

In 1954, **the Supreme Court’s Brown v Board of Education** decision struck down so-called separate but equal doctrine established by **Plessy v Ferguson** and mandated that American schools be racially integrated.

For a time, it seemed that American schools might be integrated, but that pendulum soon began to move in the other direction as all-white academies opened. Today, most Americans are enlightened enough not to oppose interracial marriage and are much more tolerant than their grandparents and great-grandparents, but American public schools in most areas are more segregated than ever. …

**A nation of contradictions**

“Racial ignorance is a prison from which there is no escape because there are no doors,” Toni Morrison said at Portland State in 1975 . “And there are old, old men and old, old women who need to believe in their racism…They are in prisons of their own construction. But you must know the truth. That you are free.” ….

We have come to this place because a generation of activists who lived through the **Freedom Rides**, the march on Selma and the traumas and triumphs of the **Civil Rights Movement** are determined that they will not have the gains they made trampled upon.

Michael Brown’s corpse on the scorching pavement on August 9, 2014 forced America to pay attention just as Emmett Till’s bloated body grabbed the nation in the summer of 1955. Americans of good will could no longer retreat into their comfort zones and pretend that there were not consequences for us all. Michael Brown and all the others who died before him and who have died since made it impossible for us to look away. And that has changed everything.

https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2015/8/15/know-your-history-understanding-racism-in-the-us