

Tea Party and '12 Years a Slave'

Exclusive: Some on the Right like to compare the Affordable Care Act to slavery, apparently to get under the skin of Barack Obama, the first African-American president. But the glib talking point also reveals a callous disregard for slavery's evils, which popular culture is finally addressing, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

"Twelve Years a Slave," a movie based on the 1853 autobiography of Solomon Northup, a free black man who was kidnapped into slavery in 1841, is a powerful antidote to the Tea Party's poisonous nostalgia for the era of "states' rights" and "nullificationism," which became code words for protecting the "liberty" of Southern whites to own African-Americans.

The movie, directed by Steve McQueen and starring Chiwetel Ejiofor as Northup, reveals how lofty phrases about "freedom" often meant their opposite as Southern politicians developed an Orwellian skill for weaving noble-sounding "principles" into a cloak for covering up the unjustifiable.

And, for too many generations, it worked. Americans have romanticized the antebellum South, seeing it through the rosy haze of "Gone with the Wind" or learning from school history books that most slave-owners were kindly and paternalistic masters. Even today many Americans tell themselves that slavery wasn't all that bad. To burnish their pride in the never-to-be-criticized USA, they whitewash one of the nation's greatest crimes, the enslavement of millions of people based on the color of their skin.

"Twelve Years a Slave" offers a counterpoint to this slavery apologia, carrying you back into a time and place that is still recognizable as America though arguably as crazy and surreal as any scene from "Alice in Wonderland."

Though not explicitly a political film, "Twelve Years a Slave" lays bare the cruel and dehumanizing system that twisted the morality and the psychology of an entire region. There is a matter-of-fact disquiet in the everyday madness as whites convince themselves that their financial well-being and their elevated place in society depend on the routine degradation of blacks.

Whites exercise total control over the fate of their "property," whipping slaves who fall short in their work, lynching those who aren't submissive enough, making them dance for the amusement of their owners, requiring black girls and women to submit to the lust of white men – giving proof to the old adage that

power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

What "Twelve Years a Slave" lacks is a sense of catharsis where the bad guys get their comeuppance. In this case, the only satisfaction is that Northrup is one of the rare cases in which a kidnapped black is returned to freedom and to his family. For a more vindictive sense of justice, you have to watch last year's fantastical "Django Unchained" in which the white slaveholders are annihilated and their Candyland plantation goes up in flames in a stylized made-for-Hollywood shoot-out and bloodletting.

Instead, "Twelve Years a Slave" ends with an unrequited desire for justice, but that was the historical reality. Indeed, many whites still resist the historical judgment on the evils of slavery.

Nursing a Grievance

Yes, the South lost the Civil War but many white Southerners still see themselves as the real victims of what they call the "War of Northern Aggression." It was the innocent Southern whites who were somehow put upon by the North simply because of their principled commitment to "states' rights," "strict construction" and "nullificationism," fancy-sounding concepts that conveniently had been invented by slave-owning Southern politicians.

The failure of Reconstruction in the 1870s and the extension of white supremacy via Jim Crow laws over the next century contributed to this whitewashing of the history of slavery, as the focus shifted to the supposed violation of white rights during Reconstruction when blacks were allowed to vote and hold office and Northern "carpetbaggers" interfered with Southern ways.

Though I grew up in Massachusetts, I was not immune from getting a heavy dose of the romanticized version of the antebellum South and a long list of Southern grievances from the Civil War and Reconstruction, both from Hollywood movies and my grade-school history books of the 1960s.

I recall how revelatory the multipart series, "Roots," was for me and many other Americans when it aired in 1977. For the first time, many white Americans got a taste of slavery's reality from kidnapping people in West Africa, through the brutal ocean crossing, to the dehumanizing process of selling human beings into slavery, to the rapes and whippings, to the systematic crushing of the human will to be free.

However, many American whites, especially in the South but also in parts of the North, continue to internalize the old myths about white supremacy and the justice of the Confederate cause. They resent the demographic shifts in the United States, away from a white-dominated society to one that is more racially

and ethnically diverse. To protect their privileges, they are comfortable with Republican machinations to suppress the votes of black and brown Americans, in order to exaggerate the value of white votes.

In the South, many whites still nurse those grievances from the federal government's ending of slavery through the Civil War in the 1860s and the federal outlawing of segregation in the 1960s. Rather than feel shame over the cruel history of slavery and segregation, many Southern whites feel resentment at what they see as their own persecution.

Especially through the rise of the Tea Party a largely Southern-based movement although with significant support in pockets of the North and West the old excuses for racist repression are back in vogue: "states' rights," "nullificationism," "strict construction," even threats of secession as right-wing governors refer to their states as the "sovereign state of "

Distorting the History

To justify these theories pulled out of the dark history of slavery, the Tea Party and their strategists have relied on a historically revisionist version of the Constitution, distorting what the Framers were doing with the founding document.

The Constitution was drafted and pushed to ratification by Federalists the likes of George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison (in this earlier phase of his career) and Gouverneur Morris (who authored the famous Preamble). The chief goal of these Framers, as they met in secret in Philadelphia in 1787, was to consolidate power in the central government. They were reacting to the disastrous experience of the Articles of Confederation, which had made the states "sovereign" and "independent" and left the federal government as not even a government but a "league of friendship."

By contrast, the Constitution gave the federal government broad powers to "provide for the common Defense and general Welfare of the United States" and afforded Congress the authority to enact legislation to carry out that sweeping mandate. Acts of Congress were deemed the supreme law of the land and federal courts were given the power to strike down state laws.

Though the Federalists made compromises with Southern slave-owning states to win ratification (implicitly accepting the South's institution of slavery), it was soon clear to opponents of the Constitution the Anti-Federalists that this new national governing structure could be the death knell for slavery, as the North gained population and accumulated political power.

That's why slavery-defending Virginians, such as George Mason and Patrick Henry,

fought so hard against ratification. For instance, Henry warned his fellow Virginian slave owners that if the Constitution were ratified, eventually federal authorities would move against slavery. "They'll free your niggers!" Henry predicted.

The Anti-Federalists lost their fight against the Constitution in 1788, but they didn't go away. Instead, they organized behind the charismatic figure of Thomas Jefferson, who had been in France during the drafting of the Constitution but returned in 1789 and began developing his extra-constitutional theories of "nullificationism," the idea that individual states could reject federal laws, and even "secession," the right of states to opt out of the Union.

The Southern Success

Jefferson, whose personal wealth derived from his Monticello plantation with some 100 slaves, also mounted a vicious and effective propaganda campaign to undermine the Federalists, especially President Washington's Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton and President John Adams. Many of the Federalists, including Hamilton and Adams, were abolitionists who staunchly opposed slavery.

Amid the complexities of creating America's new and unprecedented governing structure and navigating the treacherous straits of geopolitics in those early years the Federalists made their share of mistakes, which were exploited by Jefferson and his Republican-Democrats. In 1800, Jefferson prevailed over President Adams, winning the presidency because Southern slave states were allowed to count their slaves as three-fifths of a person for the purpose of representation.

Though Jefferson had devised the theory of "strict constructionism" that the federal government should only have powers explicitly mentioned in the Constitution, ignoring the phrase about providing for the "common Defense and general Welfare" he abandoned his revisionist theory as unworkable when he became president.

Indeed, President Jefferson exercised more federal power than even Alexander Hamilton had advocated when Jefferson acquired the Louisiana Territories and imposed a trade embargo against European countries. But Jefferson and his successors, fellow Virginians James Madison (in this later phase of his career) and James Monroe, still promoted Jefferson's revisionist interpretation of the Constitution, with the slave South touting the Jeffersonian theories of "states' rights."

By the time the Virginia Dynasty ended in 1825, Jefferson's protection of Southern slave interests had opened western states to slavery and had created a

new industry for his native Virginia, the breeding and selling of slaves to the more fertile regions of Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. The rising price of slaves boosted the net worth of Jefferson and his fellow slaveholders, but the expansion of slavery also put the United States on a collision course with the Civil War. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Rethinking Thomas Jefferson.](#)"]

All this history is relevant again as the Tea Party and the Right dust off the old Jeffersonian canards about "states' rights," "strict construction," "nullificationism," and even "secession." Along with that has come a new trivializing of the historic crime of slavery by likening it to the individual mandate to obtain health insurance in the Affordable Care Act.

A number of right-wingers have claimed that Obamacare is [the worst law in America since slavery](#), an absurd but glib comparison that rightists may think cleverly throws the issue of slavery into the face of Barack Obama, the first African-American president. But the comparison also suggests that the speakers don't really regard slavery as all that bad, much like how mundane comparisons using Hitler are offensive to Jews and others who consider the Holocaust another one of history's worst crimes.

Perhaps, anyone who thinks it's appropriate to put Obamacare and slavery in the same sentence should be required to go watch what slavery was like, as portrayed convincingly in "Twelve Years a Slave."

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

The Neocons' Iraq War Mess

The neocons are rewriting more Iraq War history, arguing that if only President Obama had stayed the course on an open-ended U.S. military occupation, the regional situation would be a lot better. But the truth is that it was their invasion of Iraq that set loose the chaos, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

By Paul R. Pillar

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki of Iraq is in Washington this week, getting away for a moment from the violent mess in his home country. An acceleration of bombings over the past few months has put the killing in Iraq on a pace that if continued for the rest of this year will match or surpass the high level seen in 2008, when an earlier round of civil war was raging there.

The upsurge of violence in Iraq has generated surprisingly little new policy debate in Washington. That's probably a good thing, because there is little that the United States can do, or should try to do, about it anyway.

If it is generally accepted that the United States ended its Iraq misadventure nearly two years ago and that there is no political basis for trying to reverse that ending, that is a good thing. At least, it is good as long as we do not lose sight of the principal long-term lessons of what we are witnessing, including the futility of trying to inject democracy through the barrel of a gun and how the overthrow of even nefarious dictators is not sufficient to open the door to justice and tranquility.

Several related reasons probably account for why those who might be expected to stir again this particular pot are not doing so. There are distractions nearby in the Middle East, of course, especially in Syria, about which there has been much effort at pot-stirring back here in Washington. The Syria issue has been soaking up most of the pro-interventionist sentiment lately. That is part of a larger pattern in which those who exhibit such sentiment most strongly are comfortable whacking one target at a time and then moving on to something else (which is part of why the expedition in Afghanistan was given insufficient attention for years while Iraq was the favored target).

They do not recognize the Pottery Barn rule, and they are more interested in slaying dragons than in repairing crockery. Besides, the Iraq War is such an unpleasant memory, and has been demonstrating for years why the invasion was such a colossal mistake, that most of those who favored the invasion would rather not dwell on it.

Another factor, which sets Syria apart from Iraq in many minds, concerns the regional sectarian line-up. Much of the sentiment in favor of doing more for the Syrian opposition is fueled by the idea that the Assad regime is an ally of Iran and that anything associated with Iran should be actively opposed. That is a crude and unproductive way to frame thinking about the Middle East, but it does unfortunately frame much such thinking.

Maliki, as a Shiite leader who has cuddled up to Iran, is not by that thinking seen worth going to bat for with much vigor, even when terrorists are conducting serial car-bombing in his cities' streets. Maliki is, however, accepted as a

legitimate leader and interlocutor who may be around for some time. (He faces re-election in April.)

Here an interesting comparison and contrast is with Egypt. Maliki has acted in at least as much an authoritarian manner, and has ridden roughshod at least as much over his opponents, as Mohamed Morsi ever did during his one-year tenure as president of Egypt. Yet no one seems to be anticipating a military coup against Maliki.

The main reason, of course, is that Iraq, where the U.S. occupation authority disbanded the mostly Sunni-led military years ago, has no military establishment with anything like the political and economic clout that the one in Egypt has. But there also does not seem to be any of the kind of American sentiment that, if an Iraqi coup were somehow in the cards, would condone such a coup in the way the coup in Egypt has been condoned.

We are seeing the effects of another crude but prevalent way of framing thinking about Middle Eastern conflicts: that Islamists are bad guys and secularists are the good guys. In Egypt, the president was the Islamist; in Iraq the prime minister is more secular than the fanatics who are detonating the car bombs.

Meanwhile Maliki is doing some of his own framing, particularly in blaming trouble in his country on mayhem being exported from Syria and in asking for more U.S. military aid to deal with that kind of security problem on its border. This is a warped view of what underlies the violence in Iraq. Some of the trouble is going across that border west to east, but more of it has moved east to west.

The most extreme of the major participants in the Syrian civil war is the group calling itself the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, which arose during the Iraqi civil war and only later moved into the action in Syria. Maliki should be told he needs to spend less time trying to be a player in other peoples' wars and devote more attention to reconciliation and inclusiveness in his own country.

Although American pro-interventionists have been taking mostly a "been there, done that" attitude toward Iraq, expect to hear more recriminations about how if only the United States had stayed the course the place would not be such a mess today. Maybe Maliki's visit will rekindle some such talk.

Don't believe the talk; the depth of the divisions and weakness of the political culture, and the resulting problems in Iraq that would have defied solution by any expeditionary force, are too apparent to deny.

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