WHY WE NEED BLACK HISTORY MONTH:
The Bicentennial of America's Largest Slave Rebellion

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—Daniel Rasmussen, author of *American Uprising:*
The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt

If heads on poles were symbols of control, they were also symbols
of the ritual violence that was the constant underlying element of Louisiana society.

—Daniel Rasmussen

It is a truism that immigrant labor built this great country. It was the Chinese, the Irish, the Poles, and the Hispanics who did and still do the most grueling wage and piece labor. Homesteading was also taxing and all consuming, but these men and women were their own bosses as they freely chose to make new lives for themselves on the frontier.

The lives of the Chinese workers were especially grim. They were discriminated against and sometimes murdered with impunity, but when progress was slow on building the transcontinental railway from the west, Chinese—initially thought to be too frail—were hired to do the blasting and digging. They introduced innovative excavation techniques brought from their home country.

Earning one dollar a day (one third of what the whites made), the Chinese worked efficiently in the extreme cold and heat. The project was two years behind schedule when the Chinese joined the labor force, but due to their hard work it was finished seven years early. (Their descendants are now the best students in nation's classrooms.) On the last day before joining the two lines in Utah, Chinese and Irish crews laid a record 10 miles of track. The large Central Pacific labor force was eventually 80 percent Chinese and 10 percent Irish.

We often forget that the largest number of immigrants did not choose to come to this country and they were never paid for their work. In 1810 nearly one third of the population of the southern states (1.1 million) was African slaves. By 1860 their portion had increased to one half as their numbers rose to 3.2 million.

As historian Daniel Rasmussen states: “Slavery built New Orleans, slavery built the south, slavery built much of the economic wealth that today we see in America.” He also reminds us that cotton was America’s largest export even in the 1930s.

I grew up in Medford, Oregon, the “Pear Capital of the World” and home of Harry & David Orchards. I was the only local kid who would work in 100+ degree weather for 15 cents a box, so my fellow pickers were a few itinerant white families and Mexicans on the Bracero program. (In April 1964 over 400,000 of them were suddenly illegal, but all that work that only they would do still needed to be done.) Just as slave labor transformed the fields of the South, so did Hispanic workers make possible the cornucopia of Pacific Northwest fruit and Southwest lettuce, tomatoes, strawberries, and melons.

The sugar plantations of Louisiana were veritable death camps for African workers, who made up 75 percent of the population. The average life span of a cane cutter was five years. Unlike slaves elsewhere in the South, sugar workers did not reproduce well enough to replace themselves, so the owners simply bought more and more slaves. By 1820 New Orleans had become the largest slave market in America and it played a pivotal role in tripling the number of slaves in the Southern States.

Writing about the Cuban sugar plantations in his book *Sugar is Made with Blood*, historian Robert Paquette states that “it was cheaper to work field slaves to death in five years and replace them by purchase than to see to their long-term maintenance and reproduction.” Historian Roderick McDonald reports that in Jamaica the sugar cultivators “died faster than they bore progeny.”

Most of us take the meaning of “sold south” or “sold down the river” as slaves being auctioned off to just any Southern farmer. What it actually meant was being sent to the sugar plantations of Louisiana. As historian Daniel Rasmussen states: “Nowhere in America was slavery as exploitative or were profits as high. [Sugar was considered “white gold.] Slaves worked longer hours, faced more brutal punishments, and lived shorter lives than any other slave society in North America.”

Carolyn Moncel of New Orleans tells the sad story of her great grandmother Flora who drowned herself and four of her five children. Moncel writes that “in our family we don't see her desperate act as sad; we view it with respect. In her mind taking her own life seemed to be the only way to regain power. She made sure that her owner lost something of value with her absence.”

Rasmussen describes French sugar king Jean Noël Destrehan surveying his black workers every morning dressed in “holland trousers, white silk stockings, and yellow Moroccan slippers.” His African mistress would offer “him a morning Madeira and a pipe to refresh him.”

Rasmussen quotes that Destrehan’s belief that without chattel slavery “sugar cultivation would cease, the improvements of a century be destroyed, and the great river

would resume its empire over the ruined fields." Destrehan admitted that only Africans could survive the "deleterious moisture and a degree of heat intolerable to whites." Perhaps the dry Southern Oregon summers were the reason I could stand the heat, but my compatriots still did not join me in the pear orchards.

Given their brutal conditions it is no wonder that the African cane cutters around New Orleans rose up on January 8, 1811. The rebels had planned well: their masters would be hung over from their all-night Carnival parties; the American army was in Baton Rouge fighting the Spaniards; and recent heavy rain and knee-deep mud would prevent the movement of artillery.

Louisiana was not yet a state and French and Spanish culture dominated the scene. A French activist had been arrested for speaking out about human equality, and documents from the French Revolution were found among the rebels' possessions. As Rasmussen explains: "These slaves were politically aware. They were sophisticated and they knew what they were doing."

Upwards of 500 Africans, armed with cane knives and muskets captured from plantation armories, marched on New Orleans, now defended by only 68 troops. Had it not been for the lucky escape of planter Manuel Andry, the black rebels may well have succeeded. Andry's farm was the first one attacked and he managed to flee across the Mississippi and was able raise a force of well-armed plantation owners. They attacked the rebels from the rear and routed them, leaving 40-60 dead on the field and suffering no casualties. In the end only two whites were killed, one of them Andry's son.

A vicious campaign of retaliation then began. The rebel leader Charles Deslondes was a mulatto slave driver for Manuel Andry, and he was in charge of managing his master's workers. The planter militia hunted him down in the swamps, and they, as Rasmussen describes it, "shot him in both thighs, chopped off his limbs, and then burned him alive."

About 100 rebel corpses were then decapitated and their heads were displayed on poles all along the River Road northwest of New Orleans. Some might say that the Africans had it coming and that this was just par for the course in a violent frontier society. However, 21 American newspapers reprinted an editorial in the Louisiana *Courier* condemning the beheadings as excessive and barbaric: "Civilized man ought to remember well his standing, and never let himself sink down to the level of savage." Far less savage but unjust were the mock trials in which blacks were forced to rat on each other under threat of torture and/or death. In the end 18 rebels were hung on evidence of coerced confessions.

Until Gandhi appeared in the 20th Century no one believed that people could gain their freedom without the force of arms. After being viciously attacked in the streets, some Martin Luther King's advisers proposed that they respond in kind. King was just as resolute as Gandhi in their commitment to a Jain/Hindu/Buddhist ethics of nonviolence.

The late 20th Century saw at least 20 successful nonviolent revolutions and now, incredibly enough, the same techniques may succeed even against Arab dictatorships.

It is a hopeful sign that Barack Obama could be elected president in a country with such a violent racial past. Pollsters were worried that even though people said they would vote for Obama, a residual racism would show its true colors in the secrecy of the ballot box.

Although Tea Party leaders deny that they are racists, it is still a fact that only one percent of their numbers are African Americans. (The leaders' rhetoric about Muslims is vicious and bigoted.) A CBS poll showed that 52 percent of Tea Party supporters believe that America has done too much for its African Americans. (Only 26 percent of the general population agrees with this.) More troubling, however, are the many rally signs that have strong racist overtones (for example, a white-face Obama socialist). The same general suspicion and hatred of the Other that drove white men mutilate the bodies of their slaves continues to be demonstrated against blacks and Muslims today.

American officials, Louisiana planters, and their descendants made sure that most of us would not know anything about the largest slave uprising in American history. This historical amnesia continues today, as, for example, Mississippi Governor Haley Barber glosses over the racism in his own past. It was also troubling that when the Constitution was read at the beginning of the 112th Congress, the sections on justifying slavery were conveniently omitted.

I categorically reject the proposal that Black History Month be abolished, for the same reason I eschew the idea that labor unions are obsolete. I personally would like to see much more focus on immigrant history and institute Asian, Irish, and Polish history months as well. To paraphrase a well-worn but important warning from the late Harvard philosopher George Santayana: Those who forget history are doomed to repeat the worst parts of it.

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