

The Frontier

Part Two: Racism and Slavery

by Bill Herbst

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The infinite expansion and unlimited opportunity of the frontier have played a central role in both the history and the mythology of America. Fundamentally, expansion meant economic gain through land and resources. In the 19th century, that had two separate dimensions — the westward movement of both individuals and corporations. America was a country that offered people the opportunity to leave behind an unhappy or unsuccessful past and, with sufficient courage, pluck, and hard work, the possibility of carving a new life out of the “wilderness.” These stories were enshrined in 20th-century entertainment as the settler-based Little House on the Prairie and the Lone Cowboy/Wild West mythologies. In reality, however, those sentimental stories of individuals and families were dwarfed by the immense fortunes garnered by large businesses through massive development in agriculture, mining, cattle, and railroads.

But all that occurred with a dark shadow. The underbelly of the frontier was suffused with America’s twin original sins: *racism* and *slavery*.

The idea of America as a great “melting pot” has an egalitarian idealism, but the fact is that our country and culture were based predominantly on the heritage of English and western European stock — specifically, white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Jews and Catholics were less welcome, along with anyone — whether indigenous native or immigrant — whose skin color was a darker shade, whether black, brown, yellow or red (to use those very crude but common designations).

The recent resurgence of White Supremacy in America should surprise no one, since — in a very real sense — America was founded by people who were utterly convinced of the superiority of the white race and who believed fervently in both racism and slavery as necessary foundations of civilization. The ideal of “equality” set forth in the Declaration of Independence applied to white land-owning males, but didn’t extend past that. Inferior races and all women were excluded.

This is not, of course, a new phenomenon. Racism and slavery go back to the very beginnings of civilization. They are particularly extreme manifestations of the Us-versus-Them dynamic so central to our biological/neural hard-wiring. We

love “us” and don’t give a crap about “Them.” In our social interactions with other members of our species, whoever we define as “Us” is regarded as authentic, correct, valid, and typically superior. “We” are human and deserving of love, respect, kindness, and generosity. Those we consider “Them” are inferior and deserve nothing. We need not be kind to them. Any cruelty we mete out to them is justified; their suffering at our hands is basically meaningless to us.

Considered from the largest perspective, Us-versus-Them has two opposite ultimates. At one end, “Us” is only myself, or, more likely, me and those select individuals I love personally, such as family and friends. Everyone and everything else that lives is “Them.” In that instance, my care and concern are severely limited, reserved entirely for a very small group. At the other end, “Us” includes all living beings — human and otherwise — while “Them” shrinks to nothing. That condition is akin to the Buddhist realization of universal compassion.

In reality, the evaluative criteria for determining Us and Them are probably fluid and changing rather than fixed and permanent. Depending on the situation, our assessments of inclusion and exclusion may vary, sometimes dramatically. In the world we live in, I’d guess that the self-centered and exclusionary condition is much more common than open-hearted universality, both historically and currently. But those are topics for other commentaries. My subject here is the American frontier and its connection to how we’ve treated other human beings.

Unlike many countries and cultures where land, space, and resources were clearly limited, the frontier allowed Americans a unique luxury — open vistas of new possibilities. The frontier was not, however, pristine wilderness. Americans may have regarded it that way, but the beckoning territory beyond our borders was never purely a paradise of nature. It was occupied by varied indigenous native populations, which we mistakenly termed “Indians.”

To colonize the continent for white, Anglo-Saxon Americans, we had to remove the indigenous native people. Much of that gruesome work was achieved in the 15th and 16th centuries by European diseases against which natives had no resistance, such as influenza, smallpox, cholera, and malaria, which decimated the native populations. Whole cultures vanished. By the 17th and 18th centuries, those Indians who survived were dealt with harshly. We wanted the land, so we took it, one way or another. If we couldn’t move the Indians further west, we simply exterminated them. The Jacksonian period of the 1820s was particularly brutal. Although some white Americans were sympathetic to the plight of native people, majority opinion considered them primitive savages. Genocide may not have been a consistent, formal policy, but it was preferable to assimilation or peaceful co-existence.

A subset of racism was slavery. Many of America’s founding fathers were slave-owners, and the trade in slaves was an economic and social institution that thrived from before the American Revolution through the Civil War. More has

been written about the Civil War than any other event in American history. Every conceivable perspective has been explored, and I need not repeat much of that here. The point I want to make, however, is that it took America a very long time to come to terms with slavery. We were among the last nations to outlaw ownership of other humans for economic gain through forced labor. The frontier played a significant role in that delay. The seemingly unlimited expanse of territory and the cultural mindset that accompanied it acted as a safety valve for America's unresolved social conflicts. Westward growth allowed America to postpone the day of reckoning.

As long as America could keep acquiring more land on the continent — through theft (from the Indians), purchase (buying the vast Louisiana territory from the French and Alaska from the Russians), or conquest (as spoils of the Mexican War) — the thorny problem of slavery could be kept simmering on the back burner without boiling over. Abolitionist sentiment grew significantly in the early 19th century, but mostly in the North. The South had built an agrarian economy (cotton was king) that depended on black slavery, and those privileged Southerners who had become wealthy weren't about to give up their meal ticket. The westward movement of white Americans provided the necessary buffer to avoid, or at least postpone, a violent confrontation. The fact that we were achieving that westward migration through what amounted to systematic genocide of native people was only a minor concern. We — meaning white, Anglo-Saxon Americans — were the superior culture, the pinnacle of civilization, and Indians didn't matter. The only good Indian was, well, you know...

By the mid-19th century, however, the frontier had become a lightning rod, a serious bone of contention in the power struggle between political factions of the pro-slavery South and anti-slavery North. The issue became starkly defined: As territories joined the union, would they be admitted as free or slave states?

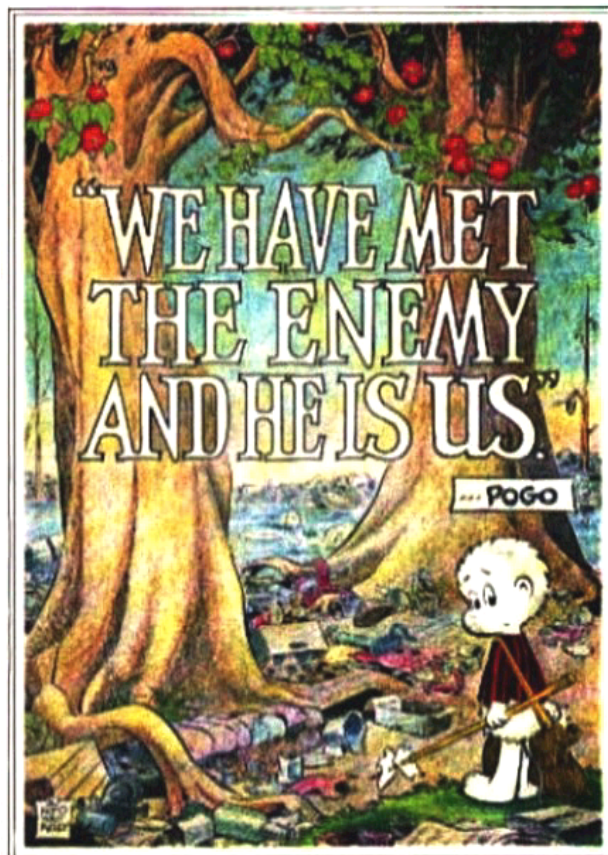
Initially, the American Civil War — officially termed afterwards by the federal government as "The War of the Rebellion" — was about preservation of the Union. The secession of the Confederacy had to be quashed if the great experiment of American democracy were to continue. By the end of the Civil War, though, abolishing slavery had emerged as the necessary legal precondition for re-uniting the country.

And so, chattel slavery was outlawed. But racism continued. Although Reconstruction freed the slaves, it was a dismal failure at transforming the Us-versus-Them calculus. If anything, the Civil War hardened the racist attitudes of many Americans. Within 20 years of Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox, the South rose again through Jim Crow laws, segregation, and the Ku Klux Klan. Turned out that the Lost Cause wasn't lost at all. After the continental frontier closed at the end of the 19th century, whereupon America turned its efforts toward global empire — the new frontier — chattel slavery transformed into wage slavery. Racism continued within America.

Fear of and hatred toward “the Other” runs very deep in the human psyche. The Boogeyman lurks in the shadows and chases us in our nightmares. Cowboys versus Indians morphs into Americans versus Hawaiians, Cubans, and Philipinos; Americans versus Koreans; Americans versus Vietnamese; Americans versus Hondurans, Guatemalans, Panamanians, and Grenadians; Americans versus Afghanis; Americans versus Iraqis, and Americans versus Iranians (again). All these conflicts contain the barely-encrypted signature of racism in action.

We cannot rid ourselves of the Boogeyman, the malevolent creature who lurks in the shadows and torments us in our nightmares. With sufficient inner work and mindful reflection, however, we might recognize that the Boogeyman of our dreams is an aspect of ourselves.

Walt Kelly’s now-famous phrase — **“We have met the enemy and he is us”** — an ironic twist parodying American Commodore Oliver Perry’s cryptic message during the War of 1812 after a naval battle against a British squadron on Lake Erie (*“We have met the enemy, and they are ours”*), was first published in Kelly’s Pogo comic strip on the Inaugural Earth Day in 1970. Its use there referred to human responsibility for environmental pollution, but the ironic truth of the phrase applies equally well to so many of humanity’s other predicaments, including racism.



The current political and cultural backlash of “populism” — meaning exclusionary nationalism — that is surging through America and the world is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it’s the age-old game of using propaganda to redefine the rules for determining Us-versus-Them: Create false narratives to turn the people against each other, thus insuring that we will not turn on our real masters. Immigrants and asylum-seekers fleeing violence in their own Central American countries are not the enemy. No, I’m not lobbying for open borders, just compassion and fair treatment.

The frontier, once a symbol of unlimited expansion, has now been inverted into the Border Wall. But that’s a con. Moving America even further away from ideals of equality to the equivalent of a closed and gated community would serve only the privileged, and even then merely for awhile. Tribalism would be sanctified and further entrenched (which is the direction social media and marketing algorithms are leading us). The Haves would become even more convinced of their innate superiority and disdain for the Have Nots. Racism would harden into a kind of spiritual atherosclerosis setting up the inevitable heart attack that would kill us.

Inner Work is the slow road to freedom from enslavement to Us-versus-Them, a path that has been trodden by millions of human beings seeking fuller open-heartedness. It is not a discipline to be undertaken lightly or on a part-time basis. We are not likely to achieve liberation by embracing love and acceptance in a church, synagogue, or mosque once a week, or even daily, but then practice fear, hate, and indifference the rest of the time. That’s religion as an insurance policy for social acceptance, not spiritual work on oneself.

Maturity does not come cheap. Changing the world means changing ourselves, one person at a time.