



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on June 17, 2023

Juneteenth: What Is It All About?

The newest federal holiday, “Juneteenth,” is observed this year on the actual date of June Nineteenth — Juneteenth being the combination of those two words. As with most federal holidays, in order to give federal employees a three-day weekend, it would have been observed on Monday anyway.

So, what is Juneteenth all about?

When I first heard of Juneteenth, while working at a summer job during my college days, I presumed that since it had something to do with the end of slavery in the United States, it must have been the date the 13th Amendment — which ended legal slavery in the country — was ratified. Later, I was perplexed, as I read that the 13th Amendment was made part of the U.S. Constitution in December of 1865.



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In reality, Juneteenth had very little to do with the end of legal slavery in America, so the question then became, Why celebrate it in June, rather than in December?

The answer seems to be, as it is with so much in today’s world — whether it be nominations to the Supreme Court, the names of sports teams, or even pictures on boxes of pancake mix — that politics is in play: Democrats want to pander to black voters, and Republicans are generally afraid to call them on it, fearing they will just be accused of being racists and “white supremacists.”

President Joe Biden signed into law the observation of “Juneteenth” (June 19) as an official holiday of the United States two days before the date in 2021, making 2022 the first year that the holiday was fully observed across the country. John Adams said, after the adoption of the resolution of independence in 1776, that America’s independence would be celebrated with bonfires and fireworks. We can expect this holiday to be celebrated in the upcoming years with politically-inspired denunciations of American as a racist country.

In addition to historical inaccuracy, the new holiday has several other problems, perhaps chief of which is its official name of Juneteenth National Independence Day. Republican Representative Thomas Massie of Kentucky was one of only 14 members of the House of Representatives to vote against the new holiday, and he explained his principal objection: “Naming this day ‘national independence day’ will create confusion and push Americans to pick one of those two days as their independence day based on their racial identity. Why can’t we name this ‘emancipation day’ and come together as Americans?”

Representative Chip Roy (R) of Texas expressed it similarly. “This name [of national independence day] needlessly divides our nation on a matter that should bring us together by creating a separate



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Independence Day.”

This answers Massie’s question very well — the purpose of the name is not to unite the country, but rather to sow division. After all, its genesis was during the Civil War, a time of our greatest division as a country.

The Emancipation Proclamation of President Abraham Lincoln during that war is what has caused the confusion as to when slavery came to an end in the United States. It is commonly believed today, contrary to the historical evidence, that the North and South simply lined up and fought a four-year war to settle the issue of slavery, with Union soldiers fighting a grand crusade to end slavery and Confederate soldiers ready to die to keep their slaves.

In reality, the war was fought over the question of whether a state had a legal right to secede and leave the Union. Both Lincoln and Congress explicitly said early in the conflict that the war was not being fought to end slavery, but rather to keep the Southern states from leaving the Union. When Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to enforce the tariff in the South, he did not call for an invasion to free any slaves. When Lincoln issued his call for volunteers, which led to the Civil War, more states where slavery was legal were still in the Union than were out.

So why do so many people — probably a majority — believe that the war was fought to end slavery?

When the war dragged on for several months, with the Confederates winning more battles than they lost, it began to look as though the Confederate States of America would become an independent nation. By the fall of 1862, Great Britain (and France) were poised to recognize the new nation. In desperation, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation to prevent that possibility.

But had he proclaimed the freedom of slaves in states that were still in the Union — Missouri, Maryland, and Kentucky (Delaware was technically a “slave” state, but there were so few slaves there that slavery was not much of an issue) — those states might very well have seceded, as well. So Lincoln “threaded the needle,” so to speak. He ordered slaves freed in states that did not recognize his executive authority (i.e., the Confederacy), while leaving them enslaved in those states that recognized him as their president.

Even if Lincoln’s executive order had been legal — which it was not — it would have freed no one. Presidents cannot make law with executive orders — that is the province of Congress.

But even with its dubious constitutionality, it was enough to keep Britain and France out of the War, since they did not want to be seen as supporting slavery.

Despite these historical facts, many today believe that the Civil War was fought to abolish slavery and that Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation completed that objective. (The absurdity that the war was fought to end slavery should be clearly seen by the Emancipation Proclamation itself. After all, if the war was being waged, from the beginning, to end slavery, why issue the Emancipation Proclamation a year and a half into the war? Had the end of slavery been the objective, why didn’t Lincoln issue his Emancipation Proclamation along with his call for volunteers?) This falsehood, that the war began as a crusade against slavery and that Confederate soldiers were fighting to keep the slave system intact, has slandered the hundreds of thousands of Confederate soldiers who fought in the war, many of whose own descendants damned them for supposedly fighting to keep human beings in bondage. The reality is that only a tiny minority of soldiers had any slaves at all.

Simply put, the war was fought when federal troops invaded the South. One can argue who had the high



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moral ground, but that is just the fact of the matter.

If Lincoln had no legal authority to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, and the war was not fought to end slavery, then just what did end it?

The legal end of slavery was a result of the 13th Amendment, ratified on December 6, 1865, months after June 19, 1865 — the date now celebrated in American law as Juneteenth National Independence Day.

So what did happen on June 19, 1865? That was the day that General Gordon Granger led his Union troops into Galveston, Texas, and announced that the Civil War was now over and the slaves were free, basing his decree on the executive order known as the Emancipation Proclamation.

When Granger arrived in Galveston, the slaves there were apparently unaware of Lincoln's executive order. Slave owners living in the Confederate States of America, in which Lincoln was not recognized as president, had mostly ignored the order until federal troops implemented it by force.

Following Granger's announcement, some ex-slaves continued working on the farms of their former masters, only now for wages, or for room and board. Many eventually became — along with poor whites in the economically devastated postwar South — "sharecroppers," in which a portion of the their crops was used as a substitute for rent payments (money being exceptionally scarce in the former Confederate States). Most probably fled the farm on which they had been enslaved, taking employment elsewhere — if they could find it. The truth of the matter is that many blacks, and whites, in the South simply died of malnutrition in the aftermath of the war.

But at least they were free, and that is no doubt something to celebrate. As former slaves and their descendants spread out across the South, they would spread the story of General Granger's proclamation on June 19. Combining the two words led to the term Juneteenth. The day was celebrated with church picnics, speeches, and reminiscences.

Certainly the end of slavery in the United States is something to celebrate. But it should not detract from the great principles of liberty enshrined in our Declaration of Independence, which made the freeing of American slaves even possible, and has led to greater freedom for all Americans.

Hopefully, the celebration of Juneteenth will not lead to any de-emphasis on America's Independence Day on the Fourth of July.



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