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Returning to freedom

National Underground Railroad Essay Contest

Progress—it has created America. In only one-hundred years, this country has accomplished the seemingly impossible: it has given man the ability to touch the sky, reach the moon, and destroy entire countries with the minuscule atom. Yet, 148 years since America's legal abolition of slavery it continues to thrive, not only within under developed countries, but within our borders. Therefore it is necessary to ask, has America realized true progress, have the nations of the world, as a whole, reached a greater stance a hundred years later? Throughout the world, slavery exists in many forms, from the Los Angeles girl forced into prostitution to the child soldier in Uganda, and while each form of enslavement provides a challenge, it also provides a hope that America can redeem itself from its shameful past and unbelievable present. The Underground Railroad and the American abolitionist movement of the nineteenth century offer essential and pertinent lessons including the use of economic strategy, the ability to unite for a common cause,

and the importance of effective laws whose implementation into the current anti-slavery movement could mean a realization of true progress—when human beings treat each other as more than mere property, and when a mere profiteer of human flesh can become a true moral human being.

While, for many, the modern existence of slavery is incomprehensible, the history and inequity of slavery has, over the century, become increasingly exposed and brought to awareness. One of the most legendary accounts of slavery was the use of African American slaves throughout America's formative years. From the 1500s-1800s America prospered off of the exploitation of unpaid, forced human labor. By the 1860s the population of slaves in America escalated from 700,000 in 1790 to 4 million, and with it increased our country's psychological, social and economic dependence on the disgusting institution of servitude. Previous to the Civil War, southern states claimed cotton as their King, for this lucrative cash crop had become the basis of southern economy. Although, if one was to look closer at this economic system it was not only cotton that America depended on; it was slavery. Slaves provided cheap, profitable labor, yet the cost of this economic prosperity was great—in exchange for a monetary reward, America betrayed the ideal it was founded on: Freedom.

Why then had America abandoned the principle which it had readily fought and died for during the Revolutionary War? The reasons extend endlessly into the social, political, economic and religious realms; however, the three words which penetrate the core reasons of all forms of slavery are “supply and demand”. Slave traders demanded a way to make money, the farmers demanded cheap labor to farm their large cotton plantations, the northern industrialists demanded cotton for their textile mills and the

people demanded clothes to wear. Not only did slaves “supply” the needs of cotton dependent America, but also of White-America’s psyche. For regardless of one’s social, economic, and educational status, being white guaranteed that one could be superior to another entity—the African American. Many poor Caucasians, while unable to afford slaves, advocated slavery; it provided them with a psychological sense of supremacy. These dependencies manifested themselves into established traditions so much that slavery became merely another part of daily life. However, there remained those who challenged this deep-rooted practice.

In America the nineteenth century marked an age of increased awareness concerning the inequities of slavery and the formation of a movement which sought to end it—the abolitionist movement. This movement sought to end the enslavement of African Americans; some of the preeminent abolitionists included; Fredrick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, Harriet Tubman, and many others. These people sought to end slavery and injustice, and now we are called to take up their legacy and bring to full circle the movement they initiated for us. One of the greatest examples that they left for us to learn from was the Underground Railroad. It was not a literal rail-road, but operated as a road does, leading the traveler from one place to another: from captivity to freedom. This network of escape routes created to aid runaway slaves, proved the ingenuity, power and persistence of human morality. Through the Underground Railroad 40,000 to 100,000 slaves were freed; moreover its long term effect brought about the end of legal slavery, for the success of the Underground Railroad helped spread abolitionist feelings in the North. Additionally, it increased sectional tensions, convincing pro-slavery southerners of their northern counterpart’s determination to demolish the

institution that sustained them, eventually leading up to the Civil War and the ratification of the 13th Amendment.

“The End to Slavery” are four words which seem inadequate to describe their profound meaning. To end slavery is not merely to shut down a business but to return to the enslaved their natural rights which our nation stands for: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The Underground Railroad attested to the ability of Americans, both black and white, to unite and defeat injustice, and passed on the torch of sovereignty to contemporary society. Bob Herbert of the New York Times wrote that “Slavery, like the past, as Faulkner reminded us, is not dead. It’s not even past. It’s not something that you can wish away.” However, by remembering the lessons from the past, lessons taught through example by the Underground Railroad, we have the opportunity to end slavery; not through throwing pennies into an empty well, but by taking action and finally concluding the atrocious chapter of human history known as slavery. These important lessons include the importance of each individual’s commitment and ability to unite towards a common purpose, as well as utilizing that unity to end the perpetuation of the supply and demand that drives the slave economy.

The incomprehensibility of contemporary slavery derives not only from its seeming confinement within aged sepia-colored photographs, but also from the numbers and statistics regarding this egregious transgression. Today, a human can be bought at the average price of \$90 USD, while during the mid-nineteenth century a slave was sold for around \$40,000 in today’s currency. Not only that, but according to Freedom Center statistics there are, “27 million people in slavery today... [there are] more people in slavery today than at any other time in human history.” One would think that after the

inauguration of the first African-American president that America and the world would have left slavery within museums and history books, but the unfortunate reality is that we have not. While the slave trade is illegal in many countries, the implementation of the law is ineffective. What use is a law if it is not followed? Therefore, this is when society as a whole must look into the past to remember how slavery was once defeated. If America could defeat legal slavery through the then illegal Underground Railroad, then we can undeniably defeat illegal slavery with unity, law and economic strategy.

One of the greatest differences between slavery in the nineteenth-century and twenty-first-century is its exposure; the existence of slavery was once undebated and common knowledge; however, today many people are hesitant to believe that slavery is still present and are even less likely to believe the sheer number of people who are sold at the price of designer jeans. Consequently, the first step to end slavery today would be to expose it as not a distant past, but a current and stark reality. One of the forerunners of the American abolitionist movement in the nineteenth-century, Fredrick Douglass, once said “I expose slavery in this country, because to expose it is to kill it. Slavery is one of those monsters of darkness to whom the light of truth is death.” The Underground Railroad worked as a series of grassroots organizations, for it operated directly with its surrounding community. While abolitionists and “conductors” of the railroad worked undercover, the Underground Railroad was connected with the nation’s push for emancipation by allowing ex-slaves, like Douglass, to expose the horrors of slavery. Utilizing modern communication methods, grassroots organizations can connect with larger organizations, such as Amnesty International and the UN, which will educate others that slavery still exists. Grassroots Organizations play an important role because

they allow people an undeviating encounter with what slavery is and provides them with a way to unite and end it.

In a UNODC report on human trafficking, Executive Director of UNODC, Mr. Costa, stated that “many governments are still in denial. There is even neglect when it comes to either reporting on, or prosecuting cases of human trafficking.” Therefore, in addition to informing and uniting the common public against the atrocities of slavery, we must force governments out of denial and compel them to effectively enforce anti-trafficking laws. One of the greatest challenges which the antebellum abolitionists overcame was convincing people and governments of the evils of slavery; the next step for us to take is to remind all people, especially people in power, that the end to slavery is not to merely outlaw it but to eradicate it through carrying out those laws. In America, one of the first steps needed to end the slave trade at home is bipartisan effort. Both the left wing feminists and the right wing evangelicals should urge our government to be active within contemporary slavery hot-spots in America, such as Los Angeles and New York City.

While as many as 17,500 people are trafficked into the United States a year, the majority of human trafficking and slavery occur across Asia and Eastern Europe. To end this, society must look again into the lessons learned from the success of the Underground Railroad. While the operations of the Underground Railroad were confined within American soil, it reminds leaders of any country that in order to end the perpetration of slavery one must eliminate it from its roots: supply and demand. Modern day slavery is still a business, very similar to its nineteenth-century predecessor; however, now the most common form of human trafficking (79%) is sexual exploitation,

rather than agricultural labor. Nicholas D. Kristof, an Op-Ed columnist for the *New York Times* and recipient of two Pulitzer prizes, has done extensive exploration into the sex-slave trade, writing that “Sexual slavery is like any other business: raise the operating costs, create a risk of jail, and the human traffickers will quite sensibly shift to some other trade.” One notices a parallelism between this and the earlier form of slavery. For a while the South was still dependent on slavery; the North had “out-sourced” slaves with factories and immigrants, thus the North had cut off its chain of supply and demand for slaves. We must lower demand for the goods and services of modern-day slaves, or make them less appealing. Therefore, to cripple the economics of sex trafficking, authorities need to focus on the most lucrative “sale” of the sex trade—virgins. The \$500 or \$1,000 payments for young virgins are central to the profitability of the brothels and are responsible for bringing in the youngest girls. Therefore, it is essential to strike slavery at its economic core once more. For once brothel owners and slave owners find the risks outweigh the gains then they will switch to a more secure and lucrative business.

The “question” of slavery remains for all of society not a question but an urgent problem statement that cannot be debated as human nature, but as a remediable human transgression. Applying the lessons of unity, effective understanding of law, economics and the importance of exposing the inequities of slavery, taught by the Underground Railroad and the early Abolitionist movement, can end this crime against humanity and against the American ideal of freedom. We can finally say the pledge of allegiance and truly believe in its words of “one Nation...with Liberty and Justice for all.”

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