

Amendment lets wait until the Secretary is done with the report. This motion is not about patient care. This is about election year politics, and I urge all my colleagues to vote "no."

# THE SKELETON IN THE CLOSET

HON. JOHN CONYERS, JR.

OF MICHIGAN

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, November 14, 2000

Mr. CONYERS. Mr. Speaker, the following is an article which appeared in the November 2, 2000 edition of *The New York Review of Books*, which considers the differences among African-Americans and historians as to how slavery should be most accurately remembered.

Its author, George M. Fredrickson has observed that there is indecision among African-Americans as to how slavery should be remembered, which is brought about because some believe that the best course of action is not to act at all, in other words to forget it. They wish to simply neglect any detailed recollection of slavery because the pain of its memory is too difficult to bear. But others are convinced that everything about this peculiar institution should be brought to light. To them it seems the better course of action to emulate the strategy of the one ethnic group in the twentieth century, that was severely persecuted, but who remained determined not only to discuss their persecution, but to document and publicly display it by way of museums and oral histories and confirm for all time the incredible atrocities to which they were subjected.

Over the last six years, there has been an amazing outpouring of literature and research concerning the enslavement of African people in the United States and it appears that there is still more to come. In the article that follows, it is made clear that the perspective of the historian often affected his work and made the relationship between the slaves and the slavemaster a matter of his, the historian's, subjective interpretation. It also showed how many of the attitudes that buttressed the institution of slavery lived beyond the reconstruction era and persisted not only into the post reconstruction era but into modern times. Because of the growing number of legislators who are becoming attracted to this subject and the unresolved questions that swirl around it, this essay and other materials that it references continue to illuminate this terrible part of American history. Of growing concern is the challenge that this new information may help us in a constructive way to move forward as a nation that honors diversity rather than leading to finger pointing and accusations that will divide us further. There is a growing hope that the spotlight of truth can lead to constructive solutions and a new appreciation of the significance of a diversity which is uniquely American.

THE SKELETON IN THE CLOSET

(By George M. Fredrickson)

1.

One hundred and thirty-five years after its abolition, slavery is still the skeleton in the American closet. Among the African-American descendants of its victims there is a difference of opinion about whether the memory of it should be suppressed as unpleasant

and dispiriting or commemorated in the ways that Jews remember the Holocaust. There is no national museum of slavery and any attempt to establish one would be controversial. In 1995 black employees of the Library of Congress successfully objected to an exhibition of photographs and texts describing the slave experience, because they found it demoralizing. But other African-Americans have called for a public acknowledgment of slavery as a national crime against blacks, comparable to the Holocaust as a crime against Jews, and some have asked that reparations be paid to them on the grounds that they still suffer from its legacy. Most whites, especially those whose ancestors arrived in the United States after the emancipation of the slaves and settled outside the South, do not see why they should accept any responsibility for what history has done to African-Americans. Recently, however, the National Park Service has begun a systematic review of exhibits at Civil War battlefields to make visitors aware of how central slavery and race were to the conflict.

Professional historians have not shared the public's ambivalence about remembering slavery. Since the publication of Kenneth Stampp's *The Peculiar Institution* in 1956 and Stanley Elkins's *Slavery* in 1959, the liveliest and most creative work in American historical studies has been devoted to slavery and the closely related field of black-white relations before the twentieth century. In the 1970s, there was a veritable explosion of large and important books about slavery in the Old South. But no consensus emerged about the essential character of anti-bellum slavery. What was common to all this work was a reaction against Stanley Elkins's view that slavery devastated its victims psychologically, to such an extent that it left them powerless to resist their masters' authority or even to think and behave independently. If slaves were now endowed with "agency" and a measure of dignity, the historians of the Seventies differed on the sources and extent of the cultural "breathing space" that slaves were now accorded. For Herbert Gutman, it was the presence among slaves of closely knit nuclear and extended families; for John Blassingame, it was the distinctive communal culture that emanated from the slave quarters; for Eugene Genovese, it was the ability to maneuver within an ethos of plantation paternalism that imposed obligations on both masters and slaves.

Clearly there was a difference of opinion between Blassingame and Gutman, on one hand, and Genovese on the other, about how much autonomy the slaves possessed. Genovese conceded a "cultural hegemony" to the slaveholders that the others refused to acknowledge. But even Genovese celebrated "the world that the slaves made" within the interstices of the paternalistic world that the slaveholders had made. At the very least, slaves had their own conceptions of the duties owed to them by their masters, which were often in conflict with what the masters were in fact willing to concede. Although all the interpretations found that conflict was integral to the master-slave relationship, the emphasis on the cultural creativity and survival skills of the slaves tended to draw attention away from the most brutal and violent aspects of the regime—such as the frequent and often sadistic use of the lash and the forced dissolution by sale of many thousands of the two-parent families discovered by Gutman.

There was also a tendency to deemphasize physical, as opposed to cultural, resistance by slaves. Relatively little was said about rebellion or the planning of rebellion, running away, or sabotaging the operation of the plantation. From the literature of the 1970s

and 1980s, one might be tempted to draw the conclusion that slaves accommodated themselves fairly well to their circumstances and, if not actually contented, found ways to avoid being miserable. Out of fashion was the view of Kenneth Stampp and other neo-abolitionist historians of the post-World War II period that the heart of the story was white brutality and black discontent, with the latter expressing itself in as much physical resistance as was possible given the realities of white power. Interpretations of slavery since the 1970s have tended to follow Genovese's paternalism model when characterizing the masters or analyzing the master-slave relationship and the Blassingame-Gutman emphasis on communal cultural autonomy when probing the consciousness of the slaves. Tension between the cultural-hegemony and cultural-autonomy models has been the basis of most disagreements.

Beginning around 1990, however, a little-noticed countertrend to both culturalist approaches began to emerge. The work of Michael Tadman on the slave trade, Norrece T. Jones on slave control, and Wilma King on slave children brought back to the center of attention the most brutal and horrifying aspects of life under the slaveholders' regime. Tadman presented extensive documentation to show that the buying and selling of slaves was so central to the system that it reduces any concept of slaveholder paternalism to the realm of propaganda and self-delusion. "Slaveholder priorities and attitudes suggest, instead, a system based more crudely on arbitrary power, distrust, and fear," he wrote.

What kind of paternalist, one might ask, would routinely sell those for whom he had assumed patriarchal responsibility? Building on Gutman's discovery of strong family ties, Jones maintained that the threat of family breakup was the principal means that slaveholders used to keep slaves sufficiently obedient and under control to carry out the work of the plantation. There was no paternalistic bargain, according to Jones, only the callous exercise of the powers of ownership, applied often enough to make the threat to it credible and intimidating. Like Jones, Wilma King likens the master-slave relationship to a state of war, in which both parties to the conflict use all the resources they possess and any means, fair or foul, to defeat the enemy. She compared slave children to the victims of war, denied a true childhood by heavy labor requirements, abusive treatment, and the strong possibility that they would be permanently separated from one or both parents at a relatively early age. She presented evidence to show that slave children were small for their ages, suffered from ill health, and had high death rates. The neo-abolitionist view of slavery as a chamber of horrors seemed to be re-emerging, and the horror was all the greater because of the acknowledgment forced by the scholarship of the Seventies that slaves had strong family ties. What was now being emphasized was the lack of respect that many, possibly most, slaveholders had for those ties.

A recent book that eschews theorizing about the essential nature of slavery but can be read as providing support for the revisionists who would bring the darker side of slavery into sharper relief is *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* by John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger. This relentlessly empirical study avoids taking issue with other historians except to the extent that it puts quotation marks around "paternalist." It has little or nothing to say about slave culture and community. Its principal sources are not the many published narratives of escaped slaves, such as the ones now made available by the Library of America, but

rather newspaper accounts, legal records, and the advertisements that describe runaways and offer a reward for their return.

The latter sources are especially useful because they contain candid descriptions of lacerated backs, branded faces, and other physical evidence of cruel treatment. Few runaways actually made it to freedom in the North. Most remained in relatively close proximity to their masters' plantations and were eventually recaptured. It was generally young men who absconded, but they did so in huge numbers. Few plantations of any size failed to experience significant absenteeism. Franklin and Schweninger are unable to determine "the exact number of runaways," but conclude very conservatively that there had to have been more than 50,000 a year. Slaves run off for a variety of motives—to avoid being sold or because they wanted to be sold away from a harsh master, to avoid family dissolution or to find kin from whom they had already been separated, to avoid severe whipping or as a response to it. The picture that emerges from the many vivid accounts of individual acts of desertion is of an inhumane system that bears no resemblance to the mythical South of benevolent masters and contented slaves. It is even hard to reconcile with the more sophisticated view that most slaveholders conformed to a paternalistic ethic that earned a conditional acquiescence from many of their slaves.

The masters found in this book are cruel and insensitive and the slaves openly rebellious. Although it rarely brought freedom, the mode of resistance described in *Runaway Slaves* could have positive results for the deserters. In some cases, they successfully made their return contingent on better conditions, or at least avoidance of punishment. In other words, running away could be a kind of labor action, the closest approximation to a strike that was possible under the circumstances. Very well written, filled with engrossing narrative, and exploiting valuable sources that the historians of slave culture and consciousness have tended to neglect, *Runaway Slaves* is a major work of history.

## 2.

But of course most slaves did not run away and some plantations did not have serious problems of desertion. Franklin and Schweninger might therefore be exposing only one side of a complex reality. The deep discontent of the deserters is obvious, but was their attitude typical or exceptional? To answer this question, it would be helpful to have direct testimony from slaves who stayed as well as those who fled. There are two principal sources of slave testimony—the published narratives from the nineteenth century, some of which have been collected by William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates for the Library of America, and the interviews with elderly ex-slaves conducted in the 1930s by WPA writers. Selections from the interview are now available in a book-audio set, published in conjunction with the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution. Reading these books and listening to the tapes conveys, if nothing else, a sense of how diversely slaves could be treated and how variously they could respond to their circumstances. The narratives written by fugitives stress, as might be expected, the abuse and oppression from which their authors have fled. But the WPA interview include some that convey nostalgia for kindly or honorable masters and suggest that paternalism could, in some instances, be an ethical code as well as a rationalization for servitude.

One could conclude therefore that some masters were genuine paternalists who made their slaves grateful that their owners were

among the decent ones (unlike, for example, the owner of a neighboring plantation who had a reputation for cruelty), while others were ruthless exploiters who treated their human property simply as tools of their own greed and ambition. Both bodies of sources have built-in biases that detract from their authority, as Franklin and Schweninger suggest in explaining why they made little use of them: "Suffice it to say that many of the persons who inhabit the pages of recent studies are either far removed in time and space from the South they describe, or, due to conventions, or the purpose of a diary, are less than candid in their observations."

An earlier generation of historians considered the kind of narratives collected by Andrews and Gates unreliable because they had allegedly been ghostwritten and embellished by white abolitionists for purposes of anti-slavery propaganda. Recent research, however, had established the authenticity of most of them. Original claims for their authorship and the existence of many of the people and events they describe have been verified. But how representative of the slave population in general were the life experiences and attitudes of these literary fugitives? They had to be literate to write their stories, and 95 percent of the slaves were unable to read and write. Four of the six accounts of escapes from the South to the North presented in *Slave Narratives*—those of Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, and William and Ellen Craft—feature fugitives who had white fathers. Two of them—Henry Bibb and Ellen Craft—were so light-skinned that they were able to pass for white.

Mulattos may have been a substantial minority of the slave population of the Old South, but literate, light-skinned mulattos were rare. It is nevertheless telling evidence of the callousness of Southern slaveholders that most of the children they sired with slave women were unacknowledged and kept in servitude, rather than being emancipated by their fathers, as was more likely to be the case in other slave societies. To attain freedom, the fugitives of mixed race had to use their degree of whiteness or access to education (which allowed them to forge documents) as devices for deceiving their pursuers. Upon arrival in the North, their value to the abolitionists came partly from the pathos that could be generated among color-conscious Northerners by the thought that someone who looked white or almost white could be a slave, especially if she were a beautiful young woman at the mercy of a lustful master. But the sexual exploitation of slave women of any pigmentation was a harsh reality, as the narrative of Harriet Jacobs, who sent to extraordinary lengths to avoid the embraces of her owner, clearly illustrates.

The testimony collected by WPA interviewers in the 1930s suffers from very different and perhaps more severe limitations. Most of it, including much of what is included in *Remembering Slavery*, the recent selection edited by Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller, comes from those born in slavery but emancipated as children. Very few of them experienced slavery as adults and those who did were into their nineties by the time they were interviewed. Seventy- or eighty-year-old memories are notoriously fallible and can be distorted as a result of what may have happened more recently. Some of those who had lived through the era of lynching and Jim Crow segregation might view their experience as children who had not yet experienced the worst of slavery with a certain amount of nostalgia.

In most cases, moreover, the interviewers were Southern whites, and blacks at the height of the segregation era in the South

would have been reluctant to express their true feelings about how their inquisitors' forebears had treated them. One would therefore expect the oral testimony to make servitude seem more benign than it actually was. But despite these inherent biases, there is in fact much evidence in *Remembering Slavery* to support the view that slavery was legalized brutality. Whipping, it is clear, was virtually omnipresent. Helplessly watching a parent being severely flogged was etched in the memory of many of the interviewees, and a surprisingly large number had been whipped themselves by masters or overseers, despite their tender ages. Sam Kilgore was exceptional in having a master who never whipped his slaves, but "Marster had a method of keepin' de cullud fo'ks in line. If one of dem do somethin' not right to dem he say: 'Don't go to wo'k tomorrow Ise 'spec de nigger driver am a-comin' pass an' Ise gwine to sell youse.'"

Whether discipline was obtained by constant use of the lash, by the threat of sale for any misbehavior, or both, the system revealed here is one that relied on fear and coercion rather than on any sense of a patriarch's responsibility to his dependents. There is also evidence in *Remembering Slavery* of what today would be considered the most flagrant kind of child abuse. Her mistress beat Henrietta King, an eight- or nine-year-old accused of stealing a piece of candy, while her head was secured under the leg of a rocking chair. "I guess dey must of whupped me near an hour wid dat rocker leg a-pressin' down on my haid," she recalled. As a result of the pressure, her face and mouth were permanently and severely disfigured.

In the light of such evidence, it is not readily apparent why Ira Berlin's introduction affirms that a paternalistic ethic prevailed among slaveholders. He it really true in most cases that "the incorporation of slaves into what planters called their 'family, black and white,' enhanced the slaveholders' sense of responsibility for their slaves and encouraged the owners to improve the material conditions of plantation life"? Material conditions did improve during the nineteenth century, but an alternative explanation is available: slaves were valuable property that was appreciating in value. In the light of their financial interest in healthy, marketable slaves, the real questions might be why conditions on the plantations were often so harsh. A slave scarred by whipping depreciated in value, but whippings persisted; slave children were an appreciating asset; but, if Wilma King is correct, they were generally unhealthy and undernourished. (An image from more than one account in *Remembering Slavery* is that of slave children being fed at a trough like pigs.)

Paternalism in one sense of the word may be a byproduct of vast difference in power. Those who present no conceivable threat to one's security, status, or wealth may be treated with condescending and playful affection. It is clear from some of the recollections in *Remembering Slavery* that attractive slave children could become human pets of their masters and mistresses. Mature slaves who "played Sambo" could also arouse feelings of indulgence and receive special treatment. But the possession of great power over other human beings can also provoke irrational cruelty. The other side of the coin of paternalism in this psychological sense is sadism.

Berlin is on stronger ground when he notes that "the paternalist ideology provided slaveholders with a powerful justification for their systematic appropriation of the slaves' labor." But the racism that made it possible to consider blacks as subhuman was another possible justification. The two could be synthesized in the notion that blacks were perpetual children and had to be treated as such

no matter what their actual ages. But if this was the dominant view it did not prevent a substantial amount of child abuse.

3.

Slave children are the subjects of Marie Jenkins Schwartz's *Born in Bondage*. It covers much of the same ground as Wilma King's *Stolen Childhood*, but in its effort to understand the master-slave relationship it leans toward the paternalism model more than toward the "state-of-war" analogy invoked by King and Norrece Jones. Consequently it presents a somewhat less horrific impression of what it meant to grow up on a slave plantation. It acknowledges the possibility of sale for adolescent slaves, noting that approximately 10 percent of them were sold from the upper to lower South between 1820 and 1860. But in claiming that "the risk of separation from families through sale was relatively low for very young children," it disregards the frequent sale of men without their wives and young children or of women with infants without their husbands that is acknowledged elsewhere in the book. Schwartz's conclusion that "slaves throughout the South worried about being sold" seems like an understatement in the light of what Norrece Jones has revealed about how masters manipulated intense fears of family separation to maintain discipline.

The conception of paternalism found in *Born in Bondage* is set forth in terms very close to those employed by Eugene Genovese. "The paternalistic bargain that slaveholders and slaves struck," Schwartz writes, "required each to give something to the other. Slaves displayed loyalty to their owners, at least outwardly, and slaveholders rewarded this with better treatment." She concedes that "the paternalistic attitude of owners was not the same thing as real benevolence" and that the slaves, aware of its self-serving nature, obeyed masters and mistresses "without internalizing the owner's understanding of class and race." But playing the prescribed deferential roles made life easier and must have become second nature for some. Children were quick to see the benefit of pleasing their owners, and the sheer presence of large numbers of children on most plantations was one factor encouraging a paternalistic ethos.

Putting aside the unresolved question of whether sincere and durable "paternalistic bargains" were normal or exceptional in slave governance, Schwartz makes the original and useful point that there was an inherent conflict between such paternalism (to whatever extent it may have existed) and the efforts of slaves to maintain a family life of their own. To the degree that masters took direct responsibility for slave children they undermined the authority of the parents and the unity of the slave family. But how likely in fact were slave owners to play such a role in the raising of slave children? Little evidence of this kind of attentiveness appears in the written and oral narratives. Accounts of slave children running about naked or in rags, being fed at troughs, or put to work at a very early age run counter to the impression of slaveholders acting in loco parentis. Although it offers some significant new insights, *Born in Bondage* should not displace Wilma King's *Stolen Childhood* and be taken as the definitive last word on growing up under slavery. Rather the two books should be read together as revealing different aspects of a complex reality.

Perhaps the time has come to get beyond the debate between the two schools of thought about the nature of antebellum slavery—the seemingly unresolvable disagreement over whether it can best be understood as resting on a "paternalistic bargain" be-

tween masters and slaves or simply on the application of force and fear in the service of economic gain. The reality reflected in the slave narratives and other primary sources is of great variation in plantation regimes. What proportion might be classified as paternalist and what proportion was based simply on "arbitrary power, distrust, and fear" cannot be quantified; it is a question that can be answered only on the basis of general impressions that will differ, depending on which sources are deemed representative and which anomalous. The side that a historian supports might be determined more by ideology or theoretical approach than by a careful weighing of the evidence.

It also seems possible that many slaveholders could fancy themselves as paternalists and act in ways that were totally at odds with their self-image. Walter Johnson's book on the slave market, *Soul by Soul*, in effect transcends the dichotomy by showing that a culture of paternalism and a commitment to commercialism were not incompatible. He also undermines another persistent and contentious either/or of Southern historiography, one that also involves the status of paternalism as ideology and social ethos. This is the question of whether "race" (inequality based on pigmentation) or "class" (stratification based on pre-modern conceptions of honor and gentility) was central to the culture and social order of the Old South.

Johnson takes us inside the New Orleans slave market, the largest and busiest in the South, and discovers that the buyers and sellers of slaves could easily mix the language and values associated with paternalism and commercialism. Unlike later historians, they saw no conflict between their needs for status and sound business practice. "I consider Negroes too high at this time," one slave owner told another, "but there are some very much allied to mine both by blood and inter-marriage that I may be induced from feeling to buy, and I have one vacant improved plantation, and could work more hands with advantage." Clearly the purchasers of slaves liked to think that they were doing a favor to those they acquired. They could buy themselves "a paternalist fantasy in the slave market" when they made a purchase that seemed to accord with the wishes of the person being bought, despite the fact that it could also be justified on strictly economic grounds. But, Johnson comments, "the proslavery construction of slave-market 'paternalism' was highly unstable: it threatened to collapse at any moment beneath the weight of its own absurdity. One could go to the market and buy slaves to rescue them from the market, but it was patently obvious . . . that the market in people was what had in the first place caused the problems that slave-buying paternalists claimed to resolve."

Paternalism, Johnson concludes, was "a way of imagining, describing, and justifying slavery rather than a direct reflection of underlying social relations." It was therefore "portable" and could "turn up in the most unlikely places—in slaveholders' letters describing their own benign intentions as they went to the slave market." Paternalism was an illusion but one that was essential to the self-respect of many slaveholders, just as hardheaded commercial behavior was essential to their economic prosperity and social pretensions. As portrayed by Johnson, the slaves were not taken in by paternalistic rhetoric. But they could influence their own destiny in the slave market by the way they presented themselves: "The history of the antebellum South is the history of two million slave sales. But alongside the chronicle of oppressions must be set down a history of negotiations and subversions." Slaves

brought to market could subvert their sale to undesirable purchasers by feigning illness or acting unruly and uncooperative, or, putting on a different mask, encourage their purchase by masters who had a reputation for good treatment or who already possessed some of their kinfolk. This form of black "agency" might be considered less decisive or heroic than the running away described by Franklin and Schweninger, but "these differences between possible sales had the salience of survival itself."

On the question of whether slavery and the Old South should be characterized by race or by class domination, Johnson suggests that both were present and that it is impossible to distinguish between them in their day-to-day manifestations. He advances the original and potentially controversial argument that to be truly "white" in the Old South one had to own slaves. Buying a first slave therefore brought racial status as well as a new class position. I would qualify the argument by limiting its application to "black belt" or plantation areas where a substantial majority of whites actually owned slaves. In the Southern backcountry and uplands, where nonslaveholding yeomen farmers predominated, the social "whiteness" of anyone who was not black or Indian was beyond question, and it was even possible to regard slaveholding itself as compromising whiteness by creating too much intimacy between the races.

Johnson also contends that differences in pigmentation were a major element in the expectations that purchasers had about the use they could make of the slaves they bought. Dark-skinned slaves were considered healthier and better suited to field labor. Male slaves who were light-skinned but not too light were thought to be good candidates for training in skilled trades. Very light-skinned males were difficult to sell, however, because of the fear that they could escape by passing for white (as Henry Bibb's narrative well exemplifies). Very light-complexioned females, on the other hand, brought high prices as "fancy women" or concubines. This was a color and class hierarchy more often associated with Latin America and the Caribbean than with America's characteristic two-category, white-over-black pattern of race relations. But Johnson argues that the physical aspect of the classification of slaves into different occupational groups was highly subjective and that observers described the pigmentation of slaves differently depending on what use they intended to make of them.

To some extent this was undoubtedly true. But it defies common sense to claim without qualification that "the racialized meaning of [a slave's body], the color assigned to it and the weight given to its various physical features in describing it, depended up the examiner rather than the examined." It is a useful postmodern insight that race and color are, to a considerable extent, "social constructions." But surely the differences between very light and very dark skin was a physical fact that had an independent effect on the evaluations being made. Except for this one instance, however, Johnson's discussion of the social and cultural construction of reality by whites and blacks in the slave market does not do violence to the inescapable external realities that limited the options and influenced the behavior of the buyers, the sellers, and the sold. By beginning the process of undermining and transcending the sharp dichotomies between paternalism and commercialism, and between race and class—on which historians of the Old South have been fixated for so long—Johnson has advanced the study of African-American slavery to a higher level.