

The Curse of Slavery: A Reflection on Lives Lost and Futures Denied

Introduction: My personal view

Setting up the stage of the discussion. I am totally horrified by slavery as a concept, and by its terrible role in US history both by the loss of human lives it caused and by the damage it did to US society ripples of which still reverberate today. Tragic end of Austin Metcalf's life prompted me to revisit the history of slavery in US, and its devastating consequences.

Slavery, including taking humans as hostages, was condemned by most civilized societies throughout world history, at least as a concept, with some exceptions. In me personally this condemnation is multiplied many times over by my religion and its absolute non-negotiable position against slavery and hostage-taking in today's world. The ancient world is, well, ancient, and we all graduated from it a long time ago...

MAIN SECTION

Background

Slavery, as an institution and a concept, remains one of the greatest tragedies in American history. The sheer inhumanity of owning another person, and the societal and generational scars it left behind, are staggering. Though many civilizations historically practiced slavery, the United States—founded on ideals of liberty—allowed it to flourish, particularly in the Southern colonies. The legacy of this contradiction continues to shape American society today.

Beginning of Slavery in America

Since focus here is US: slavery and loss of human lives, let's start with some history.

The first African slaves were brought to the American colonies in 1619. Though initially small in number, slavery expanded significantly in the 18th century as the plantation economy grew. By 1700, there were about 28,000 enslaved people in a population of 250,000 (~11%). By 1750, enslaved people numbered around 145,000 in a population of 1.17 million (~12%).

The 1790 census recorded about 700,000 enslaved individuals—18% of the population. By 1860, that number had grown to 4 million, representing 13% of a total population of roughly 31 million. The institution had become deeply entrenched, especially in the Southern economy and culture. The North, on the other hand, gradually abolished slavery by the mid-19th century.

Loss of Human Lives

Slavery's most direct toll in human life was the Civil War. Fundamentally rooted in the issue of slavery, the war resulted in an estimated 620,000 to 750,000 deaths—about 2% of the U.S. population at the time. Union forces lost over 330,000 men to combat and disease; the Confederacy suffered similarly.

Beyond battlefield losses, millions of enslaved individuals lived short, brutal lives. Mortality rates during the Middle Passage were often between 15–30%. On plantations, poor conditions and violence led to shortened life expectancy, especially among children. These lives, though often unrecorded, were part of slavery's devastating cost.

A Nation Without Slavery: A Reflection

Had slavery never taken root in America, the nation would be fundamentally different. Importantly, the Civil War—and its toll—would not have occurred, and National unity would develop earlier and more solidly.

Economically, the South would industrialize more rapidly without relying on enslaved labor. A broader base of small farms and businesses would emerge, and innovation in agriculture would accelerate, driven by the need for paid labor efficiency. Importantly, the absence of slavery would create significant demand for labor, which would be filled by local population as well as by immigration from Europe and other parts of the world. This would expand the workforce while blending various cultures into a “homogeneous” US-based “western world” culture.

Socially and racially, America would experience less division, and race relations would evolve more like ethnic relations among immigrant groups with non-conflicting and compatible cultures. Prejudice could have still exist, but without the legal and violent structures of slavery and segregation – a curse of slavery.

The nation would enjoy a clearer moral standing, not marred by slavery, on the world stage. A consistent application of its founding ideals from the start would shape a different identity—one more cohesive, just, and forward-looking.

Slavery’s absence wouldn’t have meant a perfect society—conflicts and challenges due to differences between people would remain—but it would spare America its greatest contradiction due to presence of slaves forcefully implanted into its population.

It’s a thought experiment that underscores how deeply slavery shaped the nation’s trajectory. In imagining this alternate America, I cannot help but draw wistful comparisons to many European and other countries where the population is more homogeneous and cultural identity more stable. While not free of challenges, such societies often exhibit greater social harmony, cohesion, and a sense of shared values. I strongly believe that, in the absence of the racial fractures imposed by slavery and its carriers – slaveowners, the United States would achieve a similar kind of societal balance—where differences exist, but are not magnified by racial incompatibilities and conflicts brought in by slavery!

Closing Thought

And perhaps Austin Metcalf would be still alive. The echoes of slavery are not confined to history books or old photographs, they live in our tragedies. When someone’s life is taken in an act of race-flavored hate, the thread can often be traced back—through decades of racial hierarchy, violence, and inequality—all the way to slavery’s foundation. In a world where America rejected slavery from the start, we would have built not only a more united and prosperous country, but also a safer and more just one. Lives like Austin Metcalf’s might not have been cut short. The cost of slavery is not only in the past—it is paid, painfully and unjustly, still today.