

Race, Class and the Benign Neglect of Poor Whites

At the founding of the nation, the Constitution gave birth to a set of twins, one black, and one white, both of whom were spanked into life by politicians—the Fathers of the Constitution.

In 1998 speaking of the efficacy of his Initiative on Race, President Bill Clinton emphasized that “race” in America was “enshrined in the United States Constitution.” His point was that, given the more than 200-year history of slavery and Jim Crow, the Initiative on Race was not a “quick-fix.”

While slavery in the United States came to a bloody end in 1865, that ugly, black twin of Race lives on and has stained the American flag—and leaves its smutty fingerprints across the fair face of the nation.

President Clinton’s reference was pointing to the fact that the U.S. Constitution provided that blacks were only three-fifths of a person, thereby barring them from the American political process.

Clearly, this was directed exclusively to the black twin—the Color Line. But as quietly as it is kept, that other twin, the White One, represents the Class Line. From the date of its birth, the white twin has been closeted out of sight like a bastard baby born in a preacher’s family, but it is fully alive, muffled and restrained in a remote corner of the political delivery room of the United States.

The class line in the United States is based on economic wealth, which transcends and includes both the color line and the class line; and with wealth comes power and political influence.

The United States has denied the existence of the economic class lines as vociferously as they have denied the existence of the color line. But their denials are on a collision course with the blunt history of this nation. In short, the class line exists within the white population.

I join with jubilation those that wrap themselves in the luscious fold of the Flag of the United States and point with pride to the fact that the headdress of the President of the United States is not a Crown but rather a baseball cap (which might be worn backwards if he’s campaigning in a “colored neighborhood.”). But, that “man on the street” headdress of America’s Commander and Chief does not erase the heavy indelible lines that categorize the different economic groups in the United States based on wealth which are certified in the records of the U.S. Census Bureau and the Internal Revenue Service.

The universally recognized slogan of “We the people” touches a patriotic chord in Americans across the country, transcending race, creed, and color. It is a rallying cry of national unity around the *Star Spangle Banner*.

Nevertheless, framed against the backdrop of the history of the United States, according to the record, the “We” in “we the people” has never been universally and equally applied to all of the people. After writing off blacks as noted above, the “We” in reference to whites was still restrictive and selective. As a matter of fact, for white males all were denied the right to vote except wealthy white males with property; and all white women regardless to wealth or property were denied the right to vote. In short, in a frontal clash with the economic ruling class (where the economic and political interest of the two groups run in opposite directions), the skin color “white” has no meaning or traction.

From the adoption of the U.S. Constitution in 1787, it was approximately fifty years later before the “property” restriction was removed, and all white males were given full political status in the “We the people.” It was another ninety years before white women in the United States earned the right to vote. So at this point looking back to the birth of the Constitution, enshrined in that historic document were racism, political discrimination against white males, and political and sexual discrimination against white women.

The reader should keep in mind that these discriminatory restrictions and practices were “White on White” and that blacks in the United States had nothing to do with it. Therefore until 1830, white non-

slave owners were virtually white “niggers.” The only basic difference was, in a dark room with slaves, the color white was visible.

They were useless: white appendages on the margins of a white society, politically powerless, economically poverty stricken, and socially ignored. They were driven off their land by the metastasizing expansion of the slaveholder’s plantations and were forced to try and sell their labor in a market in competition with the “free labor” of slaves. It must be kept in mind that when the property requirements to vote were dropped, it did not remove that yawning gap between the rich slaveholders and the bone-crushing poverty of white non-slave holders.

Behind the facade of banjo playing, buck-dancing antics, of so-called happy slaves, as portrayed by the slaveholders, the threat and the fact of runaway slaves was a costly and ever-present problem for slaveholders. The saga of Sojourner Truth is an historic testimony to that fact.

To staunch that leakage of runaway slaves, slaveholders hired poor whites as slave catchers to track down, capture and return runaway slaves to the plantation.

During that period a slave by the name Dread Scott escaped and ended up in the free state of Illinois, but he was captured and brought back to the plantation. Dread Scott was able to sue in court on the basis that once in a free state, he was fully free.

Without going into all of the legalities of the case, the United States Supreme Court ruled in 1857 against Dread Scott declaring, “A black man has no rights that a white man is bound to respect.”

Since slavery in the United States, from its inception, has been a profitable enterprise, businessmen have rallied to defend and expand it, and politicians, not all, have been willing handmaidens. The Dread Scott decision gave a powerful economic and political boost to the slave owners because it meant that wherever and whenever slaves ran away, the highest court in the land said that they did not earn their freedom—and therefore could be captured and brought back to the plantation.

The other plus for the plantation owner was that the Dread Scott decision seemed to be another “perk” for the theory of white supremacy over blacks. It allowed slave owners to emphasize to the nation that each white person was a member of that big, white family of White Supremacy.

And while this mantel of white supremacy did not put a single biscuit on the table of poor non-slave-owning white folk, it served to caress their egos, switched their political focus and distort their political perspectives and perceptions.

In the late 1850s, Hinton Rowan Helper, a new kind of abolitionist, unsheathed his sword, declared unconditional war against the slaveholders, and exhorted poverty-stricken non-slave-owning whites to join with slaves in a revolt against the *slavocracy*. The complete plan and motivation for Helper’s actions are spelled out in his book, *The Impending Crisis for the South* (1857). Helper was a loyal son of the South, in which he grew up and loved. His lineage and ancestry went back 200 years. The insightful Helper saw the South as a mighty oak tree with its roots severed; watched it leaf after leaf, twig after twig and limb after limb wither and die as a result of that “peculiar institution” of slavery in the United States.

Helper harbored an exquisite concern and sympathy for the non-slave-holding whites whose living conditions (except for the whip and the hangman’s rope) closely tracked that of the slaves. In his book, Helper charges that the economic and commercial downward plunge of the South are directly responsible for the sordid conditions of non-slave-holding whites who had nothing to do with the introduction nor the perpetuation of slavery.

Historians, writing on this period of slavery in the United States, note that Hinton Helper was not the first white man from the South to oppose the southern system of slavery, but that Hinton Helper was the only one to base his case on an objective economic comparison between Free States and Slave States.

Hinton Helper made it clear that he would not re-plow the ground already tilled by the classical abolitionists such as Frederick Douglas, Wendell Philip and Lloyd Garrison, along with others who dealt with the moral and religious implications in the context of chattel slavery.

Instead, Helper chose the down-to-earth secular approach of economics because he believed deeply that such an approach would make sense to some of the better heads of the slaveholders. But most of all, Helper's firm opinion was that his facts and statistics from government records would make it crystal clear to the bedraggled and exploited non-slave-holding whites that not only was slavery not in their interest—but it was the fundamental cause of their dehumanizing plight.

To prove his point, Helper launched a comprehensive statistical comparison in the field of economics, commerce, finance between the Free States and Slave States. Directly below is an example:

Free States total - 1850

<u>Real-Personal Property</u>	<u>Revenue</u>	<u>Expenditure</u>
\$4,102,172,108	\$18,725,211	\$17,076,723

Slave States total - 1850

<u>Real-Personal Property</u>	<u>Revenue</u>	<u>Expenditure</u>
\$2,936,090,737	\$8,343,715	\$2,936,090,737

The details and statistics on this point can be found in his book entitled, *The Impending Crisis of the Soul—How To Meet It* (1857) by Hinton Helper. It is available in public libraries.

In every other such comparison made in his book, the Slave States tailgates the Free States.

In his book Helper makes a comparison between each individual state. Here, I am showing a comparison only of the total results from all of the Free States to the total results of all of the Slave States in the specified categories.

In his speeches across the South, and in his book, Helper pointed out that the Slave States had a colony-like relationship with the Free States. Being a loyal son of the South, Helper was embarrassed and angered by the South's slavish dependency on the manufactured products of the Free States.

Since the economy of chattel slavery choked and smothered the opportunity for entrepreneurial risk-taking ventures, the backbone of commercial development through the free market system was broken. Therefore setting aside slaves and cotton, everything else had to be purchased from the Free States.

Following are comparisons and quotes that support this point:

"In 1790, when the first census was taken, New York contained 340,100 inhabitants. At the same time the population of Virginia was 748,308, being more than twice the number of New York. Just sixty years afterwards, as we have seen from the census of 1850, New York had a population of 3,097,394; while that of Virginia was only 1,421,661, being less than half the number of New York.

"In 1791 the exports of New York amounted to \$2,505 465; the exports of Virginia amounted to \$3,130 865. In 1852 the exports of New York amounted to \$87,484.456; the exports of Virginia, during the same year amounted to only \$2,724,657. In 1790, the imports of New York and Virginia were almost equal; in 1853 the imports of New York amounted to the enormous sum of \$178,270,999; with those of Virginia, for the same period, amounted to the pitiful sum of only \$399,004. In 1850, the product of manufacturers, mining and mechanic arts in New York amounted to \$237,537,249; those of Virginia amounted to only \$29,705,387. At the taking of the last census, the value of real and personal

property in Virginia, including Negroes was \$391,646,438; that of New York, exclusive of any monetary valuation of human beings, was \$1,080,309,216."

In August, 1856 the real and personal estate assessed in the City of New York amounted in valuation to \$511,740,491, showing that New York City alone was worth far more than the whole State of Virginia.

On the results of the above comparisons of New York and Virginia, Helper quotes Virginia's Governor Wise as saying, "It may be painful, but nevertheless profitable to recur occasionally to the history of the past the records of former days show that a period not very remote, Virginia stood preeminently the first commercial State in the Union. At the period of the War of Independence, the commerce of Virginia was four times larger than that of New York."

I have quoted extensively from Helper's book *The Impending Crisis* to show the detailed scrutiny to which he examined the subject and to call your attention to the bottom line: the results of the comparison. The pitiful, tailgate position of Virginia to New York in the above comparison is a faithful representation of each Slave State in comparison with each Free State.

As I mentioned earlier, Helper believed that a potential prosperous South was dying from the suffocating, stranglehold of the plantation slave owners and in its free-fall into an economic black hole, the non-slave holding whites were being dragged in behind them.

Following are comparisons that support this point:

Public Schools of the Free States - 1850

<u>All States</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Teachers</u>	<u>Pupils</u>
Total:	62,433	72,621	2,769,001

Public Schools of the Slave States - 1850

<u>All States</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Teachers</u>	<u>Pupils</u>
Total	18,507	19,307	581,861

Libraries other than private in the Free States - 1850

<u>All States</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Volumes</u>
Total	14,911	8,888

Libraries other than private in the Slave States - 1850

<u>All States</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Volumes</u>
Total	695	649,547

Newspapers and Periodicals Published in the Free States - 1850

<u>All States</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Copies printed annually</u>
Total	1,790	834,146,281

Newspapers and Periodicals Published in the Slave States - 1850

<u>All States</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Copies printed annually</u>
Total	704	81,038,698

Illiterate white adults in the Free States - 1850

<u>All States</u>	<u>Native</u>	<u>Foreign</u>	<u>Total</u>
	248,726	178,790	422,515

Illiterate white adults in the Slave States - 1850

<u>All States</u>	<u>Native</u>	<u>Foreign</u>	<u>Total</u>
	498,026	19,856	512,882

Please note: Helper points out in his book, what is obvious in the above comparison, approximately 150,000 foreigners and immigrants came to the Free States because of job opportunities, which did not exist in competitions with slaves. When you factor this in, the widespread illiteracy of poor whites is laid bare and magnified.

The subjects categorized in the comparisons above constitute the engine house, the control room for the evolution, development and the dissemination of education, intellectual prowess, and culture throughout a society.

In this "Land of the Free and Home of the Brave," blacks were barred from all of this by law and the lynch mob, but white folk had the "Inalienable Right" but did not have the means; and the rich slave owners and their politicians Did Not Give a Damn. The record and comparisons above proves that point.

According to Helper, slave owners sent their children to schools in England, top schools in the Free States, or hired Yankee teachers from the Free States to come down and tutor their children in the slave owners' mansions situated on their plantations; that was "Home School" for the "rich" white folk's kids.

But what about the children of the poor non-slave owning whites (the majority of the white population in the Slave States)? They all were members of that great society of WHITE SUPREMACY.

It could not have been a "color" thing. It had the pungent stench of a "Class" thing, but I will not use that term, without quoting, because I don't want to be accused of advocating "class warfare" in the United States.

Recently, when a Democrat, in opposing Bush's Tax Cut, stated that the tax cut would benefit a small group of rich folk at the top of the economy and ignore that multitude of millions of hardworking people at the lower end of the economy, (the majority of whom are white), President Bush went on national television and charged that this person was advocating "Class Warfare" in this country.

Why the benign neglect of poor white folk and their children? I will repeat the answer stated above: the *slavocracy* just did not "give a damn." This is a truth that slave owners agreed must be hidden from non-slave owning whites at all cost. In the early days of this country, there were incidents where white indentured servant and black slaves were getting together to break for freedom. The *slavocracy* and the politicians were always wary of the potential of poor whites and slaves getting together.

Their most effective device to prevent that was the idea of White Supremacy. It was a psychological leveler; and since the people in question were all white, slave-owners were home free. All they had to do was to provide situations in which their whiteness showed their advantage over blacks. And that was easy to walk up and for no reason kick a nigger in the ass simply because you could. Authorities would stage public lynching, advertise it, and urge poor whites to bring Box Lunches while watching the show. This process provided whites an illusionary "high." The more dehumanizing blacks were treated, the more "supreme" poor whites felt.

The bottom line here is for the slave owners; it cost them nothing because through the device of White Supremacy, they kept in line the poorest, most illiterate, and the most obedient white population in this country at that time. Some of the scars of that era are visible today.

Today, when blacks speakers mention the "legacy of slavery," there are those who exhibit the facial expression and some times verbalize the thought that: "Here it comes again, the cry of black victimization." Now while I don't want to engage in the art of "shock and awe," I am interested in the detailed socio-economic status of the white people who are living in official poverty in Appalachia, and the small towns and backwoods of the former Slave States. I would like to see an impartial research team established to conduct such a statistical study and then do the same kind of a study on the conditions of black people at the alley level of the nation's black ghettos.

Then give this information to a different group of impartial researchers whose task is to pick out the "white folk" from the "niggers." The clear challenge of that task indicates the historical grip of the "legacy of slavery" on poor white folk in the United States today. If you strip away Color, it is indistinguishable from that of blacks in the Nation's Naked Cities.

In the rarely discussed category of poor whites in the United States, there are strong parallels to history's yesterdays and today's now.

In those days, the slave owners had an exquisite psychological gimmick that poor whites bought into; they were full-fledged members of the family of "White Supremacy."

It should be understood that white supremacy, in the United States is defined by race. It cannot exist in a lily-white setting. The status requires that you are better than somebody...to have some body to look down on. White Supremacy is an identity affiliation syndrome. It is not my intention to give nor leave the impression that poor whites of the slave states were brainless, gutless hillbillies; nothing can be further from the truth, nor from my intention. Poor non-slave owning white folk in the Slave States were victims of the same system that held blacks in bondage.

When the grave economic issues threatening white workers, their families, and the poor are clear and are not muddled by slavery and race, "the little white man" (a phrase of George Wallace, meaning the common man) can take on the most powerful people in the country and the "alleged" pro-white U S government. Throughout the history of the country, the power holders of the nation have relied first on the issue of race (it is a cheap, psychological sugar pill) to keep white folk in line and not have dealt with their economic and health insurance problems. But, if white folk develop an immunity to that "sugar pill" and begin to demand real solutions to their problems, the brass knuckles come out—and it does

not matter how "white" you are. And, the history of the United States is replete with examples of such situations.

At the end of President Woodrow Wilson's World War I, retraining soldiers was voted a bonus in 1924. Essentially it was a government bond with payment due in 1945. A high percentage of those veterans were among the massive millions of unemployed during the depression of the 1930s and needed help then. In the meantime, industry had received its "bonus" through the passage of the Hawley-Smoot Tariff Bill. The veterans demanded the same treatment as industry. A movement of the soldiers was developed to demand premature payment of the deferred bonus voted by Congress. They called themselves the "Bonus Army."

Here were men who had faced death in the bloody trenches on Flanders Field, stopped the Kaiser army at the Marne, waged hand-to-hand battle at Chateau Therat in defense of their country. Yet back home they and their families are caught in the quagmire of joblessness and poverty; the President of the United States, Herbert Hoover, lambasted them as "hoodlums, ex-convicts and communists," but the "bonus army" continued to grow.

By the end of June, the bonus marchers numbered more than 20,000 men, women, and children. After the Senate killed a House Bill for veteran relief, President Hoover ordered the Secretary of War to "surround the affected area and clear it without delay." Army Chief of Staff (at that time) Douglas MacArthur thought that this multitude of unemployed, hungry men, women and children were trying to "overthrow the government." According to the record, assisted by his aids, Major Dwight D. Eisenhower, Major George S. Patton Jr. and Douglas Mac Arthur led army troops and cavalry in an advance on veterans marching on Pennsylvania Avenue with tear gas, naked bayonets, and swords drawn. Hundreds were injured, and a baby was killed.

Fearful that the state might look too oppressive, President Hoover sent a command to MacArthur not to pursue the bonus marchers across the Anacostia River. The main encampment of the bonus marchers was called *Hooverville*.

Mac Arthur ignored Hoover's message and led troops into *Hooverville*. They burned it to the ground, injured more, and drove the remainder of veterans out of the nation's capitol. The Bonus Army was crushed, and the movement dead.

Now, in World War I, the military establishment was so pro-white that a black was not good enough to fight and die side-by-side with whites. During World War I, blacks fought side-by-side with the French.

I am pointing to the high public value put on whites by American institutions. But that value is contingent; it is not permanent nor constant. It applies only in specific situations.

The people that Mac Arthur ordered the Cavalry to tear gas and use fixed bayonets to drive off Pennsylvania Avenue were white. The men, women, and children in Hooverville, that was burned to the ground, were white. Did Mac Arthur know this or could it be that he just did not give a damn? On one day, the American military have whites sitting on an ivory tower—and the next day *Hooverville* is burned to the ground. White men, women and their children are running like scared rabbits chased by the U S Cavalry with fixed bayonets and tear gas. What did the white folk do wrong?

During the *slavocracy*, poor whites were caught in the quagmire of slavery, race, white Supremacy, and illiteracy with an oligarchy of plantation owners who called the shots only for their own interest.

As regards to the "bonus marches of the early 1930s, the issues were clear-cut—no racial gimmicks; white unemployed veterans, who had fallen on hard times due to the nationwide economic crash, were petitioning their government for help

Today the pro-white thing is to be opposed to all welfare and safety net programs; they are considered to be "black issues." So the average white is reluctant to break with his white peers and go out and do the "black thing." Do you smell "identity association?"

The identity association based on race has been a Godsend for the *slavocracy* of yesteryear and today for corporations; but politicians are riding “shotgun” for the corporations today. It is a built-in lightning rod that thwarts, frustrates and quenches the public expression of the deep discontent of white people regarding their dehumanizing economic problems. Moreover, it blocks the possibility of forming coalitions with blacks who would constitute a legitimate “coalition of the willing.”

Therefore the *slavocracy*, then and the giant corporations now, cling to the same philosophy: Black is Black and White is White and Never the Twain Shall Meet.

The entire *slavocracy* according to historians was staggered and infuriated by this attack, but it could not discredit the economic basis upon which Hinton Helper challenged this system of slavery. But historians say that perhaps the most blasphemous and unforgivable act of Hinton Helper was that he was the only white man to call upon non-slave holding whites to join with slaves to rise up against the slaveholders. Since the enraged plantation owners could not answer Helper, they resorted to the use of oppressive legal measures; they banned the book throughout the south and jailed people found reading it.

This was in 1857, just three years before the election of Abraham Lincoln. The book was embraced by the North and used as a campaign document against the South and for the election of Lincoln.

At the end of the Civil War in 1865, and in the eerie silence of non-war historians, iron pins pored over the rubble and wreckage in the wake of General Sherman's “scorched-earth” march through Georgia; the human carnage; the blood-soaked battle ground at Gettysburg; and Grant's stand before Richmond. All trying to find answers to the “Whys” and the “Whats” and the “How Comes” of the bloodiest Civil Conflict in the history of the nation.

Some were intrigued with this question: Given the ground-shaking impact of Helper's book championing the cause of the white underdog, why did they (poor whites) so willingly give their lives to save a system that was clearly not in their interest?

Some historians blame this on the nearly, total illiteracy on the part of poor whites and their briar-patch, rabbit-hunting, back-woods culture. This left poor whites a single straw to hold on to identity affiliation with White Supremacy. And for this abstract, *slavocracy*-driven myth, nearly three hundred thousand (300,000) poor white men, who were equal victims of slavery “died with their boots on.”