

## Abolitionism in the United States of America

The mistreatment of minorities is not a new phenomenon. Throughout the history of the United States of America, various groups have been let down by both social institutions and governments on all levels. Women were denied the right to vote, Indigenous Peoples were killed and robbed of their land, and Asian Americans and other immigrants were met with xenophobia at every turn. The list continues on and on, but perhaps the United States is most notorious for its brutal mistreatment and oppression of African Americans. The arrival of enslaved Africans to the Jamestown Colony in 1619 is often recognized as the beginning of slavery in America, but some scholars argue that enslaved Africans arrived as early as the 1500s, which means that slavery was allowed in America for almost four centuries before the federal government banned it following the Civil War. Early abolitionists opposed this crime against humanity from the beginning, but the social movement did not gain traction or notable attention until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Abolitionism started with criticism by thinkers of the Enlightenment movement. Scholars and other rationalists argued that slavery violated the "rights of man." Quakers condemned it and pointed out how it defied Christianity's basic principles. Prominent abolitionists focused on the words of the Declaration of Independence, that "all men are created equal" and the hypocritical way that the government was upholding them. In simple terms, abolitionists made it their goal to abolish slavery completely, to eradicate slave ownership. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, moral disapproval of slavery became so widespread that all states north of Maryland abolished slavery by 1804. However, this was not seen as a big victory because slavery itself was not as common in the North as it was in the South to begin with. Slavery as an institution remained in effect in the South and continued to grow, as the economy and everyday life depended heavily on it. After more pressure from abolitionists, the U.S. government passed an act that prohibited the African

slave trade starting in 1808. Though it may have stopped slave trade between countries, it did not stop the slave trade in the South. At this point, the South already had a self-sustaining population of more than four million slaves, whose children and future generations would remain enslaved as well. Because of this, some Southern congressmen surprisingly voted to abolish the African slave trade, encouraged by the potential of the domestic slave trade.

The federal government continued to ignore calls for the end of slavery by both abolitionists and members of the Free Soil Party, who opposed the expansion of slavery in the United States. Legislation passed by the federal government such as the Missouri Compromise of 1820 allowed Missouri to become a slave state. In 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act, which mandated that escaped slaves be returned to their owners and ordered American citizens to cooperate with their captures. Seven years after the Fugitive Slave Act, the highest level of the U.S. government, the Supreme Court, ruled in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* that any black person regardless of status had no legal citizenship rights. The abolitionist movement only caused tensions between the Northern and Southern states. In fact, abolitionism was illegal in the South. The executive branch of the U.S. government, under President Andrew Jackson, banned the Postal Service from delivering abolitionist publications. In a later attempt to reach compromise between both abolitionists and pro-slavery groups, Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, which promoted the idea of popular sovereignty. Settlers in the Nebraska and Kansas territories would decide for themselves whether or not to allow slavery within those borders. This did nothing to quell the flames and instead caused a greater divide between abolitionists and slave owners.

Eventually, abolitionism became roped in with sectionalism and could not be separated from it. Abolitionists in the North formed an antislavery political party, the Republican Party.

Emotional responses to the inhumanity of slavery and to Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* only strengthened the abolitionist cause. The Harpers Ferry raid in Virginia led by abolitionist John Brown was an attempt to form an armed rebellion of slaves. The U.S. government responded by sending the Marines to seize them, and Brown was subsequently hanged for treason. When Republican Abraham Lincoln was elected as president in 1860, the Southern states seceded to form the Confederate States of America, marking the beginning of the Civil War. Lincoln himself opposed the spread of slavery but did not support the more radical ideas of abolitionism. During the war, his original goal was to preserve the United States as a nation and not to abolish slavery, but faced with anti-slavery pressure in the North and out of military necessity, Lincoln issued the final Emancipation Proclamation, freeing slaves in the Confederate states. The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which officially abolished all forms of slavery in the United States, was ratified in 1865 after the Civil War ended.

Abolitionists had finally achieved their main goal of eradicating slavery in the United States.

In his famous *I Have a Dream Speech*, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. recognized that the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution of the United States were not enough because "one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free." Almost sixty years after he gave that speech, we can still see parallels with how the United States treated Black Americans throughout history: first as not even human, then as unequal to white Americans, and lastly racially discriminated, dehumanized, and killed by police officers in today's society. The current Black Lives Matter social movement, just like the abolitionist movement, proves that the United States government still has a long way to go in order to protect its minorities. But change is being made in small waves. Abolitionism was the first step towards equality, and after a prolonged, painful, and tumultuous journey, those in power eventually

stepped up and made the right decision, albeit long overdue. Amanda Gorman, a black woman and the youngest inaugural poet in U.S. history, reminded us that “there is always light, if only we’re brave enough to see it. If only we’re brave enough to be it.” The abolitionists were the light, and never stopped fighting for what was right.