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# My Juneteenth

*A personal reflection on why we celebrate June 19*

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June 19, 2021, marks my 52nd birthday. I imagine like most people, the idea of a birthday is filled with cake, candles, well wishes and, of course, who can forget the presents. As my son puts it, you're "celebrating your first breath day." The day should promote feelings of

joy, relationship and reflection on how far you have come and how blessed you really are. However, despite the family, friends, gifts, and fellowship this day, June 19 has always held an extra significance in my life.

Juneteenth was a special day in my hometown of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We would get up early and grab our lawn chairs, grills, radios and go to Martin Luther King Drive, where one of the largest block parties you could imagine would take place. For about 2 ½ miles there would be music, food, dancing, street performers, artisans, and I can't forget the roasted corn. People would be laughing and singing, and it was one of a few moments where there was no random gunfire and no police sirens, only fellowship and celebration as far as the eye can see. Different people of different shades black, brown, tan, and every shade in between, together in one place. It was a time of recognizing our own presence and place in this society. Our value, our ethnicity, was our super-power and the streets were thick with life and promise.

This was how I spent many of my birthdays. I understood that this was more than my birthday, it had a deeper meaning and a larger significance in my life and my journey as an African American man. So, I was baffled the first time someone asked me the question, "What is Juneteenth? What is it all about?" As I tried to focus and gather my thoughts, I began to see how important the narrative is and why we must share it with as many people as possible.

On September 22, 1862, the president of the United States of America, Abraham Lincoln, issued an ultimatum to southern Confederate states who had withdrawn from the Union and were in rebellion with the United States. The proclamation stated that any state found to still be in rebellion at the end of a 100-day period would by proclamation, on January 1, 1863, have all people that have been held as slaves be made free. And that the Executive Branch of Government, its military and naval authority, would recognize and maintain that freedom without repressing any efforts of any enslaved person trying to gain their actual freedom. It was also declared that starting on January 1, 1863, freed slaves would also have representation in Congress, by members chosen at elections by a majority, which would be considered as evidence that those states were not in rebellion against the United States of America. President Lincoln identified those states as: Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia respectively.

By declaration of the president, any slave in those states was now and forever free. Lincoln asked for all those who have been freed by this proclamation to abstain from violence unless in the necessity of their own self-defense. All freed persons who were capable of serving would also be allowed to serve in the armed forces of The United States military, free to serve in garrison forts, stations, and other positions, of military service.

There had been other measures and initiatives made to resolve differences between Lincoln and southern states in rebellion before this but with no headway. Something had

to change in order for this country to move forward as a nation. Although the initial advocacy of this measure was not fully supported by many legislatures of the day, it was clear that in order to keep the United States united, there would have to be a reckoning with the effects of slavery in the country and how it has also held a lasting effect on its social, economic and political landscape. Lincoln would finally have to come to terms with slavery's stain and how the solution to it all was addressing what slavery means to the future of this nation.

Lincoln would later pen in the Emancipation Proclamation that he believed this declaration was an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution. He wrote, "I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God." January 1 should have been a day of jubilee for all those oppressed by the bondage of slavery, but little did anyone know that this proclamation of freedom and what it meant would be delayed by almost 2 1/2 years.

On January 1, 1863, countless slaves were declared free, however, in some states which had little or non-existent Union army presence, the sin of slavery continued. After the Emancipation Proclamation, it was estimated that 800,000 slaves were still suffering in some form of slavery or bondage across four hold-out states and parishes. The state of Texas was one of those states which were affected by the delay of freedom's message and the presence of the Union army. Slaves remained in bondage until June 19, 1865, when General Gordon Granger rode into Galveston, Texas with the news that all slaves were free. This became the recognized date when the last stronghold of slaveholders fell. In 1979, Gov. Bill Clements signed a bill making June 19 "Emancipation Day" in Texas, a legal holiday. It would also be recognized by countless African Americans as the day slavery died.

Despite the difficult process, sacrifices, death, and suffering which led to the Emancipation Proclamation, it became the forerunner to some of the most important legislation to be made part of our United States Constitution. On December 6, 1865, just a few months after the last stronghold of slavery fell, the 13th Amendment was passed, which prohibited all forms of slavery in this country. And on July 9, 1868, the 14th Amendment passed, granting all persons born or naturalized in the United States citizenship. Also on February 3, 1870, the 15th Amendment, which gave the right to vote to former slaves, was made a bill. Recently, our current president, Joe Biden, signed a bill officially making Juneteenth a federally recognized holiday in the United States.

So, when I wake up on June 19 and take that first breath, and as I take part in the birthday activities planned by my family and participate in Juneteenth celebrations, whether in person or virtually, I will remember the deeper meaning of this day and how blessed I am on June 19.

But I will also remember to get some roasted corn...