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BRAINS IN CHAINS

by GUY ARSENEAU

On January 1, 1863, America's sixteenth president, Abraham Lincoln, issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Ranked in the same category as the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution, this secular document, granting freedom to 3,000,000 black slaves, took on the aura of Holy Writ. Sadly, more than a century and a half after this text wrapped itself in the mantle of law, the marginalized descendants of those original slaves are still waiting for this iconic edict to sustain the weight of its own illusions.

This disparity between hope and possibility, played out against the opposing backdrop of a social structure defined by escalating street violence, drugs and poverty creates and sustains a reality of despair on a daily basis. Nowhere is this dichotomy more evident and underscored than in the field of American public education.

According to figures released by the Chicago-based nonprofit, The Black Star Project, only 10% of eighth grade black boys in the cities of Chicago and Detroit read at their respective classroom level. By comparison, 46% of their white counterparts read at their grade level. The consistency of these findings continue to be reflected in the lack of reading skills among black males throughout the nation. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Cleveland, Ohio, urban centers within America's heartland, on average, only three black boys out of one hundred read at or above their respective grade level. These gaps in literacy skills among black males are obvious and consistent on a national basis. Grade level reading ability for black boys in New York City is 13%, Boston 10%, Los Angeles 9% and a low of 6% for black males in Washington, D.C. Of particular note, and as a sidebar irony, former President Barack Obama, the first black man to occupy the White House, noted, "It is easier to obtain a gun in some Washington, D.C. neighborhoods than it is to get a book".

In other areas of The Black Star Project report, statistical data indicates that young black males represent the largest ethnic/racial group enrolled in

Special Education academic programs. Among these middle and high school students, many cannot read such basic words as "peace" and "water." The social and economic ramifications associated with these failures in education are evident to even the most casual observer. According to a 2010 evaluation by the Schott Foundation for Public Education, in the Chicago public school education system, only 30% of black males graduate from high school. The rate for high school graduation for black boys in New York City shrinks to a mere 25%. The lack of basic literacy skills and academic ability, coupled with an urban street culture defined by gang affiliation and crime is clearly discernible in terms of ever declining scholastic achievement.

In Chicago, only three black boys out of one hundred who attended that city's public educational system graduate from college. Phillip Jackson, the founder and Executive Director of The Black Star Foundation, recognizes these downward trends as a national crisis when he notes that, "In San Francisco only one out of one hundred black males qualify academically to attend a public university in California".

These discouraging observations and figures, compiled over a century and a half after the Emancipation Proclamation took effect, represent a new dimension in slavery that is bipartisan in nature. The most concrete example of this is evident in the enactment of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. National in scope but local in terms of impact, this bill was supported by Republican President George W Bush, Senators Ted Kennedy (D-Mass), John Boehner (R-OH) and George Miller (D-CA). In short, this legislation calls upon each state to develop minimum standards in terms of academic achievement in local schools.

While this may sound like a laudable goal, in reality, the application of this law creates a "smoke and mirrors" illusion that supports a system of de facto slavery and discrimination. To insure a continuing flow of federal dollars into their respective education budgets, many states simply "dumb down" the reading

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tests to make sure that every student earns a passing grade. In this way, it appears there is an overall improvement in overall academic scores. What is the outcome of this practice, known among educators as “teaching to the test”? We now have a generation of young people getting high school diplomas that they literally cannot read.

Society relies on and continues to be defined by the ever-growing use of computers. Technological advancements, coupled with a future generation that lacks basic literacy skills, creates a deadly potential for social disintegration. What will happen when the culture reaches a point whereby people can no longer read the directions on how to use computers? The social structure will then be divided into those who know how to read and those who do not. Educational tyranny will replace the outdated historical regimes that relied on military force and political maneuvering.

As things now stand, we are on the threshold of this dystopian universe that will lock in members of the Black and Latino communities into a tech driven caste

system. This type of marginalization will insure that only those “in the know” will have a say in running the world. The abilities and achievements of black writers and intellectuals such as James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Alice Walker, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Maya Angelou serve as a reminder of the vast contributions Black Americans have made to this nation and to the world at large. Their respective legacies can and should be the cultural point of reference in measuring how much can be achieved against a backdrop of state sanctioned slavery and discrimination.

The world of tomorrow depends on the achievements of today. Simply put, we cannot afford to allow the potential of an individual or an entire generation to be squandered due to a lack of basic literacy skills or for any other reason. The complexity of today’s world demands the best from each of us. We must heed this message or perish.

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