

Civil Rights: The Radical Sixties, the Civil War, and a Movie About Abraham Lincoln

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The fall of 2012 marks 50 years since James Meredith enrolled at the University of Mississippi, an act that was the first of a multitude of cultural and legal civil rights actions which radically changed American life.

At Oxford Mississippi in the fall of 1962, US troops and federal officers were necessary to shield Meredith from crowds of white men and women screaming for his death because he desired to go to classes at Ole Miss.

It was as if the angry people were saying that Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin did not really mean what they wrote when they crafted the passage in our American Declaration of Independence that read, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal..."

Fifty years in geologic time isn't very long, but historically and culturally fifty years can be a chasm wider than the Grand Canyon. And most folks would agree that America today is not the country it was just a half century ago.

The two momentous legal changes that followed Meredith's march into the classroom were the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The first of those two outlawed major forms of discrimination against racial, ethnic, national and religious minorities, and women. It also ended unequal application of voter registration requirements and racial segregation in schools, at the workplace, and by facilities that served the general public.

The Voting Rights Act outlawed discriminatory voting practices that had been responsible for the widespread disenfranchisement of African Americans in the U.S.

Looking at the inaction of our Congress over the last ten or fifteen years, it is hard to believe that such landmark pieces of legislation could have been passed in such a short period of time.

But most historians and most of the public agrees that the decade of the sixties was a transformative period of time in our nation's life.

To be truthful, most of the young people in our schools and universities today scratch their heads in bewilderment at portraits of America before the 1960s. They ask such questions as, "How could our nation have kept minorities and women out of certain schools and jobs?" and "Why would any Americans want to do such things?"

Some historians have said that the 1960s were really the American Civil War, Part II. That is, the battle over slavery was over and President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation (issued on Jan. 1, 1863) was not in force until the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts were passed one hundred years after the 1860s slaughter ended and when the South's General Lee surrendered at Appomattox, Virginia, on April 9, 1865.

Over one million Americans died in the four years of the Civil War. That is roughly the total number of American deaths in all the other wars that our nation has fought.

The number of American-on-American deaths in the Civil War prompts more head scratching not only from our young people but from all of us.

Then when more blood was shed over the same issues one hundred years later in the 1960s,

it makes one wonder if we humans really learn from history.

James Meredith's friend and coworker for civil rights, Medgar Evers, a US Army veteran of World War II, was shot in the back and killed by white supremacist Byron Beckwith on June 12, 1963, as Evers was getting out of his car at his home in Mound Bayou, Mississippi. Like Meredith, Evans had also attempted to enroll at the University of Mississippi in the early 1960s.

Over the years, from the invention of motion pictures in the late 1890s, filmmakers have given us hundreds of visual portrayals of America's civil rights struggles, and just a couple of weeks ago Steven Spielberg's movie "Lincoln" was released nationwide.

Spielberg's movie is a tribute to the president during the Civil War, but its emphasis is upon Lincoln's political work in Washington to get the 13th amendment to the constitution ratified.

The 13th Amendment outlawed slavery and involuntary servitude except in the case of punishment for a crime.

The amendment was passed by the Senate on April 8, 1864, and passed in the House of Representatives on January 31, 1865. The President took great pains to secure the needed votes, and it was this work on which the Spielberg movie focuses.

Lincoln desperately wanted the amendment because he feared that after the Civil War ended his Emancipation Proclamation could be seen as only the action of a president during a time of war and not as the law of the land. Thus, former slave owners could claim that they still

owned the individuals who had been in their servitude before the war started.

I enjoyed the Daniel Day-Lewis portrayal of President Lincoln. I think it is his best acting since the first time I was aware of him as an actor in the 1992 movie "The Last of the Mohicans," the James Fenimore Cooper novel of the French and Indian War.

Cooper's novel and the movie version of it were works about civil rights of another kind, that of Native Americans during the time when the British colonies were battling the French colonies of North American in the 1750s and 1760s when the French forces enlisted the fighting support of various Indian tribes.

To conclude this History Notebook which began by referring to James Meredith entering the University of Mississippi, I should make reference to Lea County's connection to the integration of Ole Miss.

It was a Lea County man who became the first African American basketball coach at the University of Mississippi. Rob Evans, who played basketball of Coach Ralph Tasker at Hobbs High School, became the head coach at Ole Miss in 1992.

Another Tasker coached African American was Charles Becknell, a coach, college professor, and author who has been involved in national civil rights activities for the last forty years.

Becknell has spoken twice at the Lea County Museum, and one of the ideas he stressed at both presentations was his belief that the civil rights struggles in America are still not over.

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Perhaps that is just the nature of our democratic system, that civil rights will always be a work in progress for Americans.

These three images are of President Abraham Lincoln, civil rights activist James Meredith, and the actor Daniel Day-Lewis portraying the president in the new movie "Lincoln."

