



Examining Slavery through Real History

by Richard W. Rahn

PRACTICES COMMON IN ONE ERA BECOME TABOO, THANKFULLY, IN ANOTHER

It is a safe bet that everyone reading this column had an ancestor who was either a slave or slaveholder. It is also no coincidence that the effort to abolish slavery on a sustained and global basis did not occur until after the advent of the industrial revolution. Persistent slavery can be found in all cultures once people ceased being exclusively hunter-gatherers. Slavery was in fact “normal” until recent times. Sudan became the last country to legally abolish it in 2007 but, although illegal, it continues to be practiced in some countries.

Slavery was practiced to at least a limited degree in most of the states that became the original 13, but disappeared mainly because it was not economical in the North, unlike the South with its large plantation culture. In most countries, the slaves were of the same race as the slaveholder. In Europe, slavery and serfdom were disappearing as no longer economical. But the new industries of sugar and cotton required many unskilled field hands, who could also endure the hot climates where sugar cane and cotton were grown. African slaves were less expensive than others, so it was less a race decision than an economic one. In the U.S. South, most whites were not slaveholders, and some

American blacks were. Well before the revolution, there were some white slaves — mainly Irish — that the British had brought to America.

The point of the above discussion is that slavery, like most things in history, was a complex institution that differed from time to time and place to place, and to criticize and vilify our ancestors for not having today’s values is not particularly useful. I am willing to bet that well within 50 years people will no longer slaughter animals for meat — and not because we all decide to become vegetarians. Scientists have already proven that they can grow meat in the lab without the inconvenience of the intervening animal. At the moment, lab-grown meat is very expensive. But some food companies have taken an interest, and chances are that they will learn to grow it on an industrial scale at a lower price than meat from a farm-raised animal. Once those of us who desire a juicy steak can obtain an equal- or better-quality steak, it will become uncool to butcher animals, and eventually even prohibited as an unnecessary cruelty. Past generations of meat eaters will be vilified by some — and perhaps statues of cowboys will be torn down to not offend the new sensibilities.

Would it be a better world if the statues of the ancient Egyptian, Chinese, Greek and Roman philosophers, scientists, generals and other leaders were destroyed? After all, many of them had slaves and engaged in practices that by current standards were immoral or despicable. Most reasonable people understand that these artifacts are part of the heritage of mankind, aid in our understanding of history and should be preserved. Only despotic groups like the Islamic State and the Taliban seek to erase all history and monuments, and we do a disservice to our own and future generations if we sink to their level.

Ignorance of why things were done in the past without understanding the reasons for mankind’s many failures and successes leads to bad decisions now. For instance, all too many in the political class succumb to the temptation to rely on the ignorance of the public by promising the impossible — e.g., unlimited, high-quality, free medical

care for all. They pretend the law of supply and demand does not exist by promising the \$15-dollar an hour minimum wage without job loss. Robots will win this war.

Despite all the evidence to the contrary, some are claiming that higher rates of economic growth will come about with higher taxes and more regulations. A particularly disingenuous TV ad, sponsored by some of those who want higher taxes, is now airing claiming that any tax cuts the Republicans and Trump administration will propose will help greedy corporations and the rich.

The ad assumes that most people do not know that the top 25 percent of the taxpayers pay 87 percent of the income tax, the top 1 percent pay 40 percent, and the United States has the highest corporate tax rate in the world among major countries. Most rich individuals and companies choose not to be tax slaves any more than necessary; when given a chance, they move their tax homes to low-tax jurisdictions. The flow of rich individuals and businesses from high-tax states, such as New York, to low-tax states, such as Florida and Texas, is well documented — and it is equally true internationally. The ad also assumes that its viewers will not understand that businesses create most of the jobs, and that when businesses are driven to foreign countries by bad tax and regulatory policy, the American workers are the ultimate losers.

Closing questions: Have you led a life, despite all of your successes, that if a statue was erected in your honor, someone else could not think of a reason to knock it over? Everything else being equal, would you choose to own a business and pay personal taxes in a low-tax or high-tax locale?

Richard W. Rahn is chairman of Improbable Success Productions and on the board of the American Council for Capital Formation

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