

Point of View

Jubilee

Taken from "The Shaping of Black America"
by Lerone Bennett, Jr.

To Felix Haywood, who was there, it was the Time of Glory when men and women walked "on golden clouds."

To Booker T. Washington, a nine-year-old slave on a Virginia plantation, it was a time of "great rejoicing and "wild scenes of ecstasy."

To Frederick Douglass, a former slave, now forty-eight and the best-known black leader, it was one of the major events of the nineteenth century and a down payment on the redemption of the American soul.

To Sister Winny in Virginia, to Jane Montgomery in Louisiana, to Mary Jane Hardridge in Arkansas, to Ed Bluff in Mississippi and Felix Haywood in Texas, it was the Time of Jubilee, the wild, happy, sad, mocking, tearful time of the unchaining of the bodies if not of the spirits of the blacks of the land. And across the whole sweep of land the air was sweet with song. Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty we're free at last.

W.E.B. DuBois was not there, but he had an eye and a feel for realities, and he summed the whole thing up one day in phrases worthy of the time and of the ages. It was all, he said "foolish, bizarre, and tawdry. Gangs of dirty Negroes howling and dancing; poverty-stricken ignorant laborers mistaking war, destruction, and revolution for the mystery of the free human soul; and yet to these black folk it was the Apocalypse." And he added: "All that was Beauty, all that was Love, all that was Truth, stood on the top of these mad mornings and sang with the stars. A great human sob shrieked in the wind, and tossed its tears upon the sea -- free, free, free."

This was one side of the coin, and it was real. But the coin of "freedom" had another side, equally real, a side that gave Jubilee a desperate undertone of anxiety. Stated simply but bluntly, the other side of the coin was that the fabled "Golden Dawn, after chains of a thousand years" was a false dawn, the first of many illusions and deceptions. Partly because of the default of the federal government and partly because of the bungling and bad faith of state and local officials, the slaves were hurled into "freedom" under the worst possible circumstances. Although they had worked from sunup to sundown for two hundred years without pay, although they had created the wealth of the South and much of the wealth of the North, the slaves were turned loose without clothes to hide their nakedness or shelter to protect them from the storms. Unlike the bondsmen of Russia, the bondsmen of America received no interest in the soil they had tilled for centuries. "They were," as Frederick Douglass said, "free! free to hunger; free to the winds and rains of heaven; free to the pitiless wrath of enraged masters, who, since they could no longer control them, were willing to see them starve. They were free, without roofs to cover them, or bread to eat, or land to cultivate, and as a consequence died in such numbers as to awaken the hope of their enemies that they would soon disappear."

This, then, was the underside of Jubilee. And if we are to assess the meaning of the event, not in terms of contemporary ideas, but in the terms of the men and women who experienced it, then we must see it not only as a time of shouting and dancing, but also as a time of suffering and deprivation. We must see it, in other words, as a time of extravagant expectations and heartbreaking disappointments, a time when perhaps the greatest hope this world has known rose like a dew from the unpromising soil of a cataclysmic social upheaval that brought in its wake blood, tears, separation, smallpox, dysentery, cholera, hunger, and mass destitution.

To this analysis we must add two other factors. The first is that Jubilee was process and not a cut-and-dry event. Emancipation came to different slaves at different times in different ways, and the Emancipation Proclamation was only one step in a protracted process. Some slaves escaped and celebrated Jubilee for the first time in 1861 and 1862. Others were freed, for all practical purposes, by invading Union armies in 1862 and 1863. By 1865, according to some

To Be Equal

Challenges For 1987

By John E. Jacob

The new year poses serious challenges to the nation and to black citizens.

At the top of the list is the challenge to revitalize our economy to finally move toward full employment, instead of pretending that recession-level jobless rates are acceptable. That's good to take serious action by government and by the private sector.

A real trade policy will have to be implemented. Just talking a good game of fair trade while economic rivals dump their goods and steal jobs for Americans isn't enough.

Corporate America also needs to concentrate on building its long-term, job-producing productive capacity instead of concentrating on short-term financial results, and on the mergers and acquisitions that lead to heavy debt loads, lost jobs and less competition.

The year will mark the start of political jockeying for the presidential nominations, and that could mean more grandstanding than action from Congress, even though it has a full plate of important measures that need attention.

Failure to act could mean voter dissatisfaction with both parties. The Democrats, however, have more to lose since they now control both houses of Congress and are in a position to pass long-needed legislation.

The legislative agenda should include such priorities as closing loopholes in civil rights and fair housing laws; real welfare reform that creates training and job opportunities

and expanded federal aid that helps the public schools bring quality education to disadvantaged young people.



John E. Jacob

Congress also must act to implement the broken full employment promises of the Humphrey-Hawkins Act, and to start the rebuilding of our deteriorating infrastructure and cities.

If Congress is determined to help lead the way to more responsible social and fiscal policies, it will have support from growing numbers of Americans.

1987 could be a year in which idealism and belief in principles like equality of opportunity return to the national scene after being dormant for so long.

In part, that's because so much poverty and misery can no longer be justified while whiz kids still in their 20s make six-figure salaries on Wall Street. Disgust at speculative excesses calls our era's dominant themes of selfishness and greed into question.

Another reason for a turnaround in 1987 lies in the growing heritage of voluntarism.

The government's failures have led many individuals to become involved in social problems, and they see that their efforts will come to nothing without national

policies that reinforce their activities and commit resources to fill unmet needs.

A final reason for expecting change lies in the failure of past policies.

people to understand the need for long-term, job-creating private sector policies. And the negative results of secretive foreign policies are leading to new respect for open, more

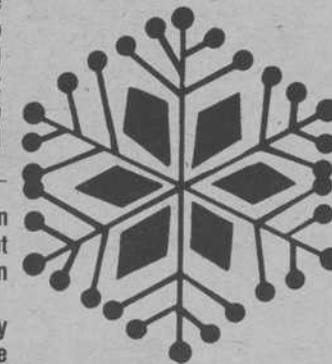
John E. Jacob is President Of
The National Urban League

Government withdrawal has led to the worsening of social problems and to a new appreciation for the positive role government can play. The failure of an unbridled marketplace are leading

democratic procedures. So 1987 may see the beginning of a shift in national sentiment that could lead to important reforms in our national life and a better deal for the poor.

"We did not demand our independence to fight with each other and kill each other, but solely to build our nation in unity, discipline, and respect for all."

Lumumba



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estimates, at least a half-million slaves had escaped to Union lines. By that time, according to historian Vernon Wharton, at least one-third and possibly one-half of all the slaves in Mississippi had tasted some of the fruits of freedom.

The second factor is that the defeat of the Confederate army in the spring of 1865 did not free their workers in bondage until June -- hence the "Juneteenth celebrations" -- July and even August. The essential point here -- and it is a point that cannot be made too often -- is that the emancipation of the black slave was a long, slow, painful process that extended over four years -- and it has never been completed.