

Reflections on The Gettysburg Address

By Mike Curtis

We have just commemorated the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Gettysburg Address. “. . . **our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.**”

“Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.”

“. . . that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

It was a masterful dedication to the field of the most horrific battle ever fought in America and the war that consumed 600,000 lives in the cause **that this nation might live**” as it was conceived — **“where all men are created equal”**.

It was **“four score and seven years”** from the moment of that great declaration in 1776 until the emancipation of four million slaves. In the four score and seventy years since, America has come a long way toward the goal of social, legal, and political equality.

However, as chattel slavery was abolished, another form of slavery began to emerge. Legal and political rights mean little without economic opportunity. The connection between free men and free land is self evident, but few of the former slaves got any land at all. As the terrorism and despotism of the former slave states that began with the withdrawal of Federal Troops, slowly ameliorated, the free land that had so grossly enhanced the lives of European immigrants, was exhausted.

In effect, the chattel slaves became economic slaves obligated to pay all but food, clothing, and shelter — the wages of a chattel slave, in rent for the use of land, without which they would starve.

Working for wages and paying rent for a place to live is a much more subtle, impersonal form of slavery where no master is responsible for anyone’s exploitation and brutality. It knows no race or skin color, and by all outward appearance it seems to be voluntary.

But, when you consider these poetic words of Henry George, there can be no doubt. *“On the land we are born, from it we live, and to it we return again — children of the soil as truly as is the blade of grass or the flower of the field. Take away from man all that belongs to land, and he is but a disembodied spirit.”*

There have always been exceptional people. We know that some chattel slaves supervised other slaves, while others were rewarded highly for their superior skill. So it is today, with gifted children of landless renters going to Harvard and Yale, becoming land owning business people. But the tendency is, with increasing proportion, for the landowners to remain landowners and the landless renters to remain renters. Why else would it be true that African Americans have such a disproportionately low incidence of home ownership, self employment, and company ownership relative to European Americans. Just the inheritance of a house from your grandparents gives an enormous boost to your disposable income and your standard of living.

As population increases and technologies advance, the owners of the land on which we live, and from which we produce our food, clothing, and shelter, take an increasing portion of what’s produced — until ultimately we are again **“a nation divided against itself”** — land-lords and land-less — masters and slaves. *“The man that owns the land owns the people.”* There will be many for whom no master can be identified, nor can anyone be pointed to in reference to the cause of their unemployment homelessness, and hunger. Parcels of land (the gifts of nature) will be bought and sold no less than chattel slaves once were.

So long as land is treated as private property, this nation will continue toward a despotism as hopeless and impoverished as any country ever was.

The legal Minimum Wage was set in 1938 because wages of the least skilled and educated had fallen to those of a slave. The Min. Wage also raised the wages of superior workers because the supply and demand for special knowledge or skill was then negotiating from a higher minimum.

Now we are told that this basic wage upon which all others are based, has been declining since 1967. That if Congress had increased it to keep up with productivity, it would now be over \$21 per hour. If they had only increased it to keep up with the cost of living, it would still be over \$10 per hour. Wages are not only falling as a portion of what’s produced, but as an amount of what’s produced as well. There is no greater symptom of a declining civilization than that those who work and produce should get a

smaller amount of what they produce while the results of their labor continue to increase.

The latest census concludes that 15% of Americans would now be seriously impoverished without a myriad of welfare programs that re-distribute wealth in a communistic measure. They consume 11% of all government spending, and that does not include Social Security and Medicare. As more and more people are unable to find work, the people will increasingly look to governments to create it. And in order to provide work, governments will need to organize and control the means of production: land, buildings, machines.

The unemployed will gladly give up their freedom as individuals in exchange for a job that provides security in the necessities of life. At some point the landless workers will become the overwhelming majority of workers and the ultimate source of political power. They will gladly choose Socialism over Feudalism — in spite of the influence of billionaires and Tea Party enthusiasts.

That is, unless Socialism is promoted violently in the middle stages of decline. In that case it will be resisted with even greater force, as we have witnessed in Latin America. It is also likely that charlatans and demagogues will gain political power and rally the people against other nations, and make available to their countrymen the natural opportunities of other countries as the Italians did with farmland in Ethiopia, the Japanese with minerals in Manchuria, and the Germans with living room in Poland — which culminated in the death of sixty million people during WWII.

But if “. . . we take increased devotion to that cause for which . . . this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom . . .” by recognizing the Earth with all its resources as a natural opportunity. If we treat the gifts of nature as a common opportunity, we may truly come to experience that solemn declaration: **“that all men are created equal. That they are endowed with certain inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.** Implicit in these rights must be the opportunity to work and keep what you produce.

Exclusive use of land is necessary, for who would plant a crop or build a house, much less a modern factory if they couldn't put up a fence and lock the door. But, by making the title to land, which includes minerals and radio waves, conditional upon a payment of its annual value, that payment to the community and society as a whole, satisfies all other peoples equal

right to the same parcel of land. It ends the monopoly and hoarding of these natural opportunities which is all that is needed for “**a new birth of freedom**”.

Under such an abundance of opportunity each person gets to take from the produce of the community a value equal to the one he or she puts in. Under equality of opportunity, the equal inclusion of all people creates a mutual benefit to all, and the freedom of competition directs people to their most productive potential.

The rent of land is the natural revenue for the needs of society, for as Mr. George observes, *“it is an increasing fund for the increasing needs of social growth.”* *“Here is a fund belonging to society as a whole from which, without the degradation of alms, private or public, provision can be made for the weak, the helpless, the aged . . .*

When land is owned as private property, rent becomes that insidious force that takes from producers all but that amount below which productivity would fall and the income of landowners would be less. When land is a common opportunity, rent becomes a beneficent distributor taking for the community and society as a whole that part of production that cannot be attributed to individuals and corporations, but results from the density of population, and is enhanced by public investment in infrastructure and public services. Here is an increasing fund that grows as the economy expands and the needs for public revenue increase. Here is a socially created fund that can provide for Social Security, national healthcare, and a cash dividend to all residents — ameliorating the natural variation in intelligence, strength, and dexterity, while assuring to individuals and groups of individuals working in concert, the full value of everything they produce.