

Slavery's Last Chapter

Long after the Civil War's final shots were fired, hundreds of thousands of African-Americans were held captive and forced to work hard labor without compensation. A new book tells their stories.

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NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

Updated: 10:29 AM ET Jul 14, 2008

Slavery in America didn't end with the Civil War. Between 1865 and 1941 millions of African-Americans were forced to work with little or no pay and many were held against their will, according to Wall Street Journal Atlanta bureau chief Douglas A. Blackmon. He chronicles this sordid history in his latest book, "Slavery By Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II." Blackmon talked with NEWSWEEK's Imani Cheers about "neoslavery" and its legacy. Excerpts:

NEWSWEEK: What prompted you to write this book?

Douglas A. Blackmon: I was born in the Mississippi Delta in the fall of 1964 and grew up in an era of tremendous racial tumult. I wondered, what would happen if we viewed American companies through the same harsh prism of historical scrutiny that we were insisting a decade ago on examining German companies, in terms of their use of forced labor during World War II? I began to examine how it was that U.S. coal corporations had used thousands of forced laborers in coal mines throughout Alabama in the early part of the 20th century and how those events relate to the present.

Can you explain the concept of "neoslavery" and the "convict labor system"?

Neoslavery is a term to describe a whole range of ways in which all across the Southern United States in the late 19th century and deep into the 20th century millions of African-Americans found themselves in a form of de facto slavery and involuntary servitude. One part of neoslavery, "convict leasing," was the sentencing of prisoners to hard labor or to fine them outrageously, and [then] they were leased out to commercial interests such as farms, coal mines, turpentine production plants, lumber and railroad camps. This was the means by which the white South forced millions of other African-Americans to go along with de facto slavery that took on the form of sharecropping, abusive farm tenancy, land renting and labor contracts.

What types of "crimes" could African-Americans be charged with?

After the Civil War, all of the Southern states passed a series of laws, which were designed primarily to criminalize black life. For example, vagrancy statutes made it a crime for any person to be unable to prove at any given moment that he was employed. Also, in every Southern state it was against the law for African-Americans to sell their crops after dark. The purpose was specifically to ensure that as a sharecropper you could only sell your crops to the landowner.

How many freed African-Americans were trapped in these systems from 1865 to the beginning of World War II?

It's impossible to determine the precise numbers, but in Alabama at least 200,000 African-American men were subjected to the most systematic form of neoslavery, the convict-leasing system. There were tens of millions of African-Americans that over this 80-year period either one way or another were forced to live on a farm or in a lumber camp or were forced into convict leasing by the perverted justice system.

How did the media play a role?

Southern newspapers played a huge role in fanning the flames of racial animosity and discontent and railed on for years against all efforts to ensure the civil rights of African-Americans. For example, the 1906 race riots in Atlanta. The city was swept up in a massive week of carnage, the destruction of black homes and the eviction of African-Americans from the city. This kind of media

involvement and the use of racial violence as intimidation were incredibly common.

One of the main figures in your book is Green Cottenham. Why was he such an important person to profile?

Because of his complete anonymity and inconsequential life. He was a man born to freed slaves in the 1880s, [and] grew up in great poverty in a difficult but optimistic time. By the time he reached adulthood in the early 20th century, a dark curtain of oppression began to fall across the South and all of black life. In 1908, he was arrested, sold into a coal mine owned by U.S. Steel Corp. and died there under horrifying conditions a few months later. Cottenham came to represent as an individual all of the similar things which had been done in totality to tens of thousands of African-Americans in the South during this time.

You report in your book that by the spring of 1903 the Department of Justice was investigating "neoslavery" in Southern states, so why did the U.S. government allow these atrocities to continue for another 40 years?

All the investigations that began in 1903 failed for various reasons, but the main one was that it wasn't a crime in America to hold a slave. The 13th amendment passed in 1865 made slavery unconstitutional. There was no federal statute that made it a crime to hold a black person as a slave. When the U.S. attorney general in the South began investigating slavery in 1903 and attempted to bring charges, they realized they did not have a clear federal statute. So the prosecution was brought under other crimes that were similar but in the end all the prosecution failed because the laws were not applicable and no [Southern] jury would convict a white man for any crime against blacks.

What is the connection between the end of neoslavery and the beginning of World War II?

The end of neoslavery came as a direct result to the attack on Pearl Harbor. When President Franklin Roosevelt convened his cabinet to discuss retaliation, the main issue was propaganda and the Japanese ability to effectively embarrass America for the treatment of blacks in the South. Immediately President Roosevelt passed a congressional law criminalizing lynching. Four days after Pearl Harbor, the U.S. attorney general ordered a memorandum that instructed all federal prosecutors to aggressively prosecute all cases of involuntary servitude.

Several companies including U.S. Steel and Georgia Power Co. were directly responsible for capitalizing off of African-American slave labor, according to your research. Have any of these companies commented on your findings?

U.S. Steel Corp. has acknowledged that their company used these forced labor during the beginning of the 20th century. The executives today insist that they don't know much about the situation and it would be wrong to judge their company in 2008 based on actions from 1907. So their view is that these may be historical realities but these are not events for which the company needs to take any steps or any action to address what happened a hundred years ago.

Should reparations be issued to descendants of these laborers?

We first need to come to terms as a society with the enormity with what happened during the first years of the 20th century. Millions of African-Americans were injured by those events and millions of white Americans benefited from the continuation of slavery. We need to have an honest unified conversation as a society about the way forward. If that includes some form of financial reparations, so be it. We have already made progress through affirmative action and scholarships. These are efforts the nation as a whole can embrace as an effective way to bridge the black-and-white divide.

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