

“Afro-Americans and the Living Constitution”

Introductory Remarks
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The problem with natural things is not that they are commonplace or easy to achieve. They are not. Things that are natural are really quite rare and difficult to achieve. But the problem is that, whenever they are achieved, they are so easily taken for granted. The eradication of slavery is a case in point. Slavery is not a natural thing. Our Declaration of Independence, the true preamble to our Constitution and national life, says as much when it holds these truths to be self-evident. Yet, prior to the promise of our Founding—a promise taking no more than a single century to redeem—prior to our American eradication of slavery, slavery was, more or less, an institution taken for granted around the world. From time immemorial, for example, Norse slave traders had harvested laborers among the Slavs, Arab slave traders had run their profitable commerce with Black Africa, Turks had enslaved Arabs and Mongols had enslaved Turks. This was not a natural state of affairs, but it certainly was typical. And the natural repudiation of this state of affairs was a long and a difficult time coming.

But, as we started out saying, the difficulty with achieving the natural is that, however laborious that achievement may have been, it is so easy to take it for granted, afterwards, and to assume that things never should have been otherwise. Yet, generally it is the case that things which look so inevitable, so easy, so long in coming, after the fact, really were very difficult, very daring, very rare, and bought at the cost of great suffering. Just because things are natural, this does not mean that they come easily. When we speak of the evolution of the Constitution, of the evolution of status of Afro-Americans in the United States, we must never suppose that this “evolution” “just happened.” We must never believe that this “evolution” was inevitable, delayed only by the perfidiousness of an evil few. We must never forget that this great achievement—this rare and amazing and difficult achievement of a free society of many races—we must never forget that this great achievement was won and is still being won only at the cost of great deliberation, toil and suffering on the part of all Americans. Much to the amazement of all the ages, much to the amazement of all the world, Americans are in fact building, have always been building, a polity worthy of its original Constitution, of the intention of its Founding Fathers, a polity respectful of the dignity of all human beings, respectful not in the abstract, not in paying lip-service to human needs, but respectful in its restraint, respectful in its founding assumption that all men are capable of running their own lives.

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