THE TRUTH ABOUT SLAVERY

A Historical Analysis Drawn from the Works of Roger D. McGrath and Thomas Sowell

A Scholarly Research Compilation

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Table of Contents

Dedication....3

A Note on Historical Accuracy....3

Table of Contents....3

Preface: Why This Subject Demands Honest Engagement....4

Chapter One: Slavery as a Universal Human Institution....4

- The Fact That Should Change Everything....4
- The Scale of Non-American Slavery....5
- The Moral Silence of Antiquity....6

Chapter Two: The American Case — Duration, Scale, and Context....6

- The Question of Duration....6
- The Scale of American Slavery in Global Context....7
- Racial Justifications as Historical Latecomer....7

Chapter Three: The African Role in the Slave Trade....8

- What the Record Shows....8
- Arab Slavers and the East African Trade....8
- Context and Moral Clarity....9

Chapter Four: Black Slaveholders in the Antebellum South....9

- The Historical Record....9
- William Ellison....10
- Anthony Johnson and the Legal Precedent....10

Chapter Five: White Servitude and the Comparative Question....11

- Indentured Servitude and Its Conditions....11
- The Economic Investment Argument....11

Chapter Six: The Economics of Slavery — Who Benefited and Who Did Not....12

Sowell's Economic Framework....12
McGrath's Economic Argument....12
Slavery's Relationship to Modern Disparities....12
Chapter Seven: Who Ended Slavery? The West's Abolitionist Revolution....13
The Uniqueness of Western Abolitionism....13
British Naval Enforcement....14
The End of Slavery in America....14
Chapter Eight: The Christian Foundation of Abolitionism....15
The Meeting of Twelve Men....15
William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect....15
Christian Abolitionists in America....15
The Complexity of Christian Involvement....16
Chapter Nine: McGrath and Sowell Compared — Method, Argument, and Legacy....17
Shared Premises....17
Differences in Method....17
Complementary Strengths....17
Critical Perspectives....18
Chapter Ten: The Reparations Question — Historical Complexity and Modern Claims....18
The Current Debate....18
McGrath's Arguments....19
Sowell's Arguments....19
The Counterarguments....19
Chapter Eleven: What Honest History Requires....20
The Standard Both Men Apply....20
What the Full Context Shows....20
The Lesson Sowell Draws....21
Bibliography and Sources....21
Primary Sources Reviewed....21
Works by Thomas Sowell....22
Works Cited in the Source Documents....22
Historical and Scholarly Works Relevant to Topics Addressed....23
Primary Historical Documents....24
Online and Periodical Sources....24

Dedication

To all who believe that honest history, however uncomfortable, serves human freedom better than comfortable myth.

A Note on Historical Accuracy

The documents reviewed in preparing this volume include a compilation of McGrath's published arguments and interview positions, a summary of Sowell's key writings on slavery, an essay on the role of Christian virtue in the abolitionist movement, and Sowell's column "Ending Slavery" as published by Jewish World Review. Where specific claims in these source documents are made with precision — dates, census figures, legal cases, named individuals — this volume has endeavored to present them faithfully and to note where the scholarly record supports, complicates, or qualifies them.

The goal is not to produce advocacy but to engage seriously with two serious historians whose work on slavery challenges widely held assumptions, and to present their arguments in context alongside the evidence on which they rest.

Table of Contents

Preface: Why This Subject Demands Honest Engagement

Chapter One: Slavery as a Universal Human Institution

Chapter Two: The American Case — Duration, Scale, and Context

Chapter Three: The African Role in the Slave Trade

Chapter Four: Black Slaveholders in the Antebellum South

Chapter Five: White Servitude and the Comparative Question

Chapter Six: The Economics of Slavery — Who Benefited and Who Did Not

Chapter Seven: Who Ended Slavery? The West's Abolitionist Revolution

Chapter Eight: The Christian Foundation of Abolitionism

Chapter Nine: McGrath and Sowell Compared — Method, Argument, and Legacy

Chapter Ten: The Reparations Question — Historical Complexity and Modern Claims

Chapter Eleven: What Honest History Requires

Bibliography and Sources

Preface: Why This Subject Demands Honest Engagement

Few subjects in American public life are treated with less honesty than slavery. This is not because scholars do not know the facts — they do. The historical record of slavery is extensive, well-documented, and available to anyone who pursues it seriously. The problem is that slavery has become, in the words of Thomas Sowell, a subject in which "selective historical mining serves political agendas rather than truth-seeking." The result is that educated Americans often hold a set of assumptions about slavery — about its origins, its uniqueness, its scale, its racial character, and its ending — that do not fully correspond to the historical record.

Roger D. McGrath and Thomas Sowell are among the most important corrective voices in this conversation. Neither man is an apologist for slavery. Both regard it as a profound human evil. But both insist that the evil of slavery can only be properly understood — and its genuine lessons properly learned — when it is seen in full historical context rather than through the narrowing lens of contemporary political debate.

McGrath, a historian and former professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, has written extensively in *Chronicles Magazine* and spoken widely in interviews about the global history of slavery, the role of African and Arab slave traders, the history of Black slaveholders in the American South, the conditions of white indentured servants, and the case against reparations. His style is deliberately provocative — he writes to disturb settled assumptions with inconvenient facts.

Sowell, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University and one of the most prolific social scientists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has addressed slavery across multiple major works, most notably in the essay "The Real History of Slavery" in *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* (2005) and in his column "Ending Slavery." Sowell's approach is more systematic than McGrath's — he brings the tools of economic analysis, comparative sociology, and global historical perspective to bear on questions that are frequently treated as purely moral or political.

Together, their work constitutes a powerful argument for a more complete and less partisan history of slavery. This book assembles, contextualizes, and analyzes their principal arguments, evaluates the evidence behind them, and draws out their implications for contemporary debates about race, reparations, and the American past.

Chapter One: Slavery as a Universal Human Institution

The Fact That Should Change Everything

The single most important corrective that both McGrath and Sowell bring to contemporary discussions of slavery is also the most consistently ignored: slavery was not invented by Western civilization, was not practiced only by white people, was not uniquely directed at Africans, and was not regarded as morally problematic by virtually anyone anywhere on earth until the eighteenth century.

This is not a fringe claim. It is among the most thoroughly documented conclusions in the history of ancient and medieval civilizations. Slavery has been practiced by virtually every human society for which we have historical records — by the Egyptians, the Sumerians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Chinese, the Indians, the Aztecs, the Incas, the Arab empires, the Ottoman Empire, the kingdoms of sub-Saharan Africa, and the indigenous peoples of the Americas. The enslaved came from every racial background. The enslavers came from every racial background. The category of "slave" was determined not by race but by vulnerability: defeat in war, capture by raiders, debt, political disfavor, or simple proximity to a more powerful group.

Thomas Sowell states this with characteristic directness in *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*: "For thousands of years, slavery existed in virtually every civilization, from ancient Egypt and Rome to Asia, Africa, and the Americas. People of all races enslaved others, and the enslaved came from diverse backgrounds." He adds what he considers the most penetrating observation: "Everyone hated the idea of being a slave but few had any qualms about enslaving others." The moral asymmetry between the experience of being enslaved and the practice of enslaving others was universal. Slavery was condemned by no major civilization before the eighteenth century.

McGrath makes the same point with a somewhat more provocative edge, noting that Africans enslaved each other for thousands of years before the first European ship arrived on the West African coast, and that Arab traders were transporting African slaves centuries before the transatlantic trade began. He insists that the conventional American narrative — which treats slavery as essentially a white-on-Black American institution — is a distortion produced by the collision of history with contemporary politics.

The Scale of Non-American Slavery

One of Sowell's most striking data points concerns the comparison between white European slavery and the transatlantic trade in African slaves. He points out that the number of white Europeans enslaved by North African Barbary pirates during the period from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries has been estimated by scholars at more than one million — a figure that exceeds the total number of Africans brought to what became the United States and its colonies combined.

The Barbary slave trade — centered in Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli, and Morocco — operated continuously from approximately 1500 to 1830. At its height in the seventeenth century, Barbary corsairs raided the coasts of Ireland, England, Iceland, France, Spain, Portugal, and Italy, seizing men, women, and children for sale in North African slave markets. Sowell uses this example not to minimize the suffering of Africans enslaved in the Americas, but to demonstrate that the historical reality of slavery was vastly more complex than contemporary American discourse acknowledges.

The Arab slave trade from East Africa, which McGrath also emphasizes, transported an estimated ten to seventeen million Africans over a period of roughly thirteen centuries — a larger number than the transatlantic trade over roughly four centuries. Unlike the transatlantic trade, the Arab trade operated with the active cooperation of Muslim-majority governments

well into the twentieth century. Saudi Arabia did not formally abolish slavery until 1962; Mauritania not until 1981, with actual enforcement remaining problematic to the present day.

The Moral Silence of Antiquity

Perhaps the most unsettling point in Sowell's treatment of slavery's history — the point he returns to repeatedly as the master key to understanding the institution — is not the scale of slavery or its racial diversity but its moral universality before the modern era. As he puts it, writing in his *Jewish World Review* column, "The most staggering thing about the long history of slavery — which encompassed the entire world and every race in it — is that nowhere before the 18th century was there any serious question raised about whether slavery was right or wrong."

Aristotle defended slavery as natural. Plato accepted it. The Stoics, who came closer than any ancient school of philosophy to asserting human equality, did not call for the abolition of slavery. The Christian church, from its earliest centuries, accepted slavery as a social institution while teaching that masters and slaves were equal before God — a theological position that coexisted with the practice without condemning it. Judaism, Islam, and every other major world religion accepted slavery in some form for most of their histories.

The implication Sowell draws from this is not that slavery was therefore acceptable, but that the moral revolution that led to its abolition was extraordinary and historically unprecedented — and that understanding where that revolution came from, and why it occurred where it did, is essential to understanding the full history of slavery.

Chapter Two: The American Case — Duration, Scale, and Context

The Question of Duration

One of Roger McGrath's most frequently cited claims — and one that tends to generate immediate controversy — concerns the actual duration of slavery under the American constitutional republic. McGrath argues that slavery in the United States, properly defined as slavery under American sovereign authority, lasted 77 years: from 1788, when the Constitution came into effect (with its infamous three-fifths compromise and its protection of the international slave trade through 1808), to 1865, when the Thirteenth Amendment abolished the institution.

The commonly cited figure of 250 years, McGrath contends, conflates the colonial period — during which what became the United States was governed by the British Crown — with the period of American self-governance. The first African slaves arrived in Virginia in 1619, which indeed places their arrival approximately 246 years before emancipation. But in McGrath's view, attributing the full 246 years to "America" misrepresents where sovereign authority and moral responsibility actually resided. Britain, not the American colonies, controlled the terms of the slave trade through most of that period.

This distinction has substantive implications for questions of national guilt and reparations, even if it does not alter the moral status of the institution itself during any portion of the period

in question. McGrath's point is not that the 77-year period of American slavery was acceptable, but that historical precision matters — particularly when imprecision is being deployed to support contemporary political arguments.

The Scale of American Slavery in Global Context

Thomas Sowell provides the most useful quantitative context. Of the approximately eleven million Africans transported across the Atlantic in the transatlantic slave trade, roughly 450,000 — approximately four percent of the total — arrived in what became the United States. The vast majority of enslaved Africans transported across the Atlantic went to Brazil (approximately 4.9 million, or 45 percent), the Caribbean sugar islands (approximately 4.0 million, or 36 percent), and Spanish mainland America (approximately 1.3 million, or 12 percent).

This is not a minor contextual footnote. In the Brazilian and Caribbean sugar and coffee economies, enslaved people were worked to death at rates that made the constant importation of new slaves an economic necessity. Life expectancy in the sugar fields of Jamaica, Saint-Domingue (Haiti), and Brazil was measured in years rather than decades. By contrast, the enslaved population in the United States not only survived but grew substantially: from approximately 700,000 in 1790 to approximately 3.95 million in 1860, without significant importation after 1808 (when the Constitution's protection of the international slave trade expired and Congress banned it).

This demographic fact — that the enslaved population in the United States nearly sextupled through natural increase while the enslaved populations in Brazil and the Caribbean required constant replenishment — is not evidence of benevolence. It reflects a different set of economic conditions. American agriculture (tobacco, cotton, rice) was less physically destructive than Caribbean and Brazilian sugar production, and American planters had strong economic incentives to maintain the health and productive capacity of their enslaved workforce over the long term. But the demographic contrast illustrates that "American slavery" and "the transatlantic slave trade" are not synonymous, and that the American variant, while cruel, was distinct from the most lethal expressions of the institution elsewhere in the Americas.

Racial Justifications as Historical Latecomer

Both McGrath and Sowell make an important historiographical point: the racial justification for slavery — the argument that Africans were inherently inferior and therefore suited to permanent bondage — was not the original rationale for the transatlantic trade. The earliest slave traders were motivated by economics, not racial theory. African labor was available in large quantities, at prices that made it competitive with European indentured servitude, and African rulers were willing to sell captives from rival groups.

Racial ideology emerged as a post-hoc justification for an institution that had developed on economic grounds, and it intensified during the eighteenth century precisely as abolitionist sentiment grew. The more forcefully critics argued that all human beings possessed equal dignity, the more urgently defenders of slavery felt compelled to argue that Africans were not fully human in the relevant sense. The racial ideology of slavery, in other words, developed in dialectical relationship with the anti-slavery movement — it became more explicit and more systematic the more seriously it was challenged.

Chapter Three: The African Role in the Slave Trade

What the Record Shows

Among the claims that generate the most discomfort in contemporary discussions of slavery is the documented role of African rulers and merchants in the transatlantic slave trade. Both McGrath and Sowell address this directly, and both insist that honest history requires acknowledging it.

The transatlantic slave trade did not work by Europeans raiding the African interior for captives. With rare exceptions, European traders did not venture far from the West African coast — the climate was lethal to Europeans without immunity to tropical diseases, and African kingdoms were militarily capable of resisting penetration. What European traders primarily did was purchase captives who had already been enslaved by African rulers through warfare, raiding, or judicial process, and transport them across the Atlantic.

The supply side of the transatlantic trade was African. Major African states — the Kingdom of Dahomey, the Ashanti Confederation, the Kingdom of Oyo, and many others — built significant portions of their economies around the capture and sale of slaves to European traders. Dahomey, in what is now Benin, was perhaps the most extensively documented. Dahomey's annual raids against neighboring peoples supplied thousands of captives for sale at the port of Ouidah (Whydah), where European traders paid in guns, textiles, and manufactured goods. Dahomey's royal treasury and military power were substantially funded by this trade.

McGrath cites this history not to distribute moral blame evenly between African sellers and European buyers — he acknowledges that the European demand created the economic incentive — but to challenge the narrative in which Africans appear only as passive victims of Western predation. The historical reality is more complicated, and acknowledging that complexity is a precondition for honest understanding.

Arab Slavers and the East African Trade

Equally important, and even more consistently omitted from contemporary American discussions, is the Arab slave trade from East Africa. This trade, which Sowell discusses in *Race and Culture* and McGrath mentions in his public lectures, operated continuously from approximately the seventh century C.E. through the early twentieth century. Arab and Swahili merchants, operating from ports on the East African coast (Zanzibar was the primary hub), penetrated deep into the African interior in search of captives.

The conditions of the East African slave trade were, by most accounts, more lethal than the transatlantic trade. The mortality rate during the overland march from the interior to the coast was catastrophically high. Survivors were transported to markets in Oman, the Persian Gulf states, India, and elsewhere in the Middle East and South Asia.

The Arab trade was ended not by internal moral revulsion within Arab or Muslim societies — no significant anti-slavery movement arose in the Arab world — but by British naval power and diplomatic pressure during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Zanzibar's Sultan

Barghash abolished the slave market there in 1873 under direct British ultimatum backed by the threat of a naval blockade.

Context and Moral Clarity

It is important to be clear about what McGrath and Sowell are and are not arguing in raising these points. Neither man suggests that African participation in the slave trade diminishes the guilt of those who enslaved Africans in the Americas. The argument is not about distributing blame to minimize any particular party's responsibility. The argument is about historical accuracy — about seeing the full system rather than a partial one.

The full system was a global market for human beings in which supply came from African (and Arab) sources, demand came from New World planters and Middle Eastern buyers, and the ships and financing came primarily from European traders. Removing any one element from this picture produces a distorted understanding of the institution.

Chapter Four: Black Slaveholders in the Antebellum South

The Historical Record

Perhaps the most striking factual claim in McGrath's treatment of American slavery is the existence of a substantial community of Black slaveholders in the antebellum South. McGrath highlights two figures in particular as representative of a larger phenomenon: William Ellison of South Carolina and Anthony Johnson of colonial Virginia.

The historical record on Black slaveholders is not disputed by mainstream scholarship. The 1860 U.S. Census — analyzed by Sowell in *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*, by the historian Larry Schweikart in *A Patriot's History of the United States*, and by Eugene D. Genovese in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* — identifies approximately 3,776 free Black slaveholders in the South, holding a total of approximately 12,000 to 20,000 enslaved people.

McGrath's claim that 28 percent of free Blacks in New Orleans owned slaves requires some context. Louisiana — and New Orleans in particular — had a unique demographic and cultural situation. The Creole community of free people of color in antebellum New Orleans was, as a community, relatively affluent, Catholic, French-speaking, and in some cases deeply embedded in the slave economy. The concentration of Black slaveholding in Louisiana (1,504 of the 3,776 documented Black slaveholders, per the 1860 Slave Schedules) reflects these unusual local conditions. It does not represent the experience of the free Black population in the South as a whole, where only about 1.2 percent of free Blacks owned enslaved people.

Sowell, characteristically, provides a nuanced interpretation of these figures. He acknowledges the data but emphasizes that the majority of Black slaveholders held small numbers of enslaved people — often family members — in a system in which legal ownership was sometimes the only way to prevent the sale of a spouse, child, or parent. The holding of family members as legal "slaves" was, in this context, a survival strategy under a legal system that afforded no other means of protection.

William Ellison

William Ellison is McGrath's most prominent example of a Black slaveholder operating at an economic scale comparable to white planters. Born into slavery around 1790, Ellison purchased his own freedom and eventually became a prosperous cotton gin manufacturer in Sumter District, South Carolina. By 1860, he owned 63 enslaved people and was one of the wealthiest men — of any race — in the district.

The Ellison case is historically documented and undisputed. It is also genuinely exceptional. Ellison was not representative of Black slaveholding generally; he represents the upper extreme of a spectrum whose dominant characteristic was small-scale ownership of family members for protective purposes.

Anthony Johnson and the Legal Precedent

McGrath also discusses Anthony Johnson, a Black man of African origin who came to Virginia in the early seventeenth century as an indentured servant, eventually obtained his freedom and became a landholder, and in 1655 won a court case affirming his right to hold John Casor — a Black indentured servant — as a slave in perpetuity.

Sowell discusses Johnson in *Ethnic America* as an illustration of how free Blacks of the colonial period sometimes navigated the colonial economic system by using its tools — including, in Johnson's case, the institution of slavery. Sowell is careful to note that this case demonstrates individual adaptation to a legal system rather than any broad moral equivalence between Black and white slaveholding.

The historical significance of the Johnson case is primarily legal: it represents one of the earliest civil judicial precedents for race-based lifetime servitude in the Virginia colony. Sowell and Schweikart both note that this precedent was quickly overtaken by explicit statutory law — Virginia's 1662 statute making slavery hereditary through the mother effectively systematized what Johnson's case had established by individual legal action.

Chapter Five: White Servitude and the Comparative Question

Indentured Servitude and Its Conditions

McGrath raises the history of white indentured servitude as part of his broader argument that slavery-like conditions were not uniquely inflicted on Black people. This is a legitimate historical point, though it requires careful handling to avoid misleading comparisons.

White indentured servants in the seventeenth-century American colonies occupied a legal status that was meaningfully different from chattel slavery in several important respects, but involved real coercion and real brutality. An indenture bound a person — typically a European immigrant who could not otherwise afford passage to America — to a master for a term of years (typically four to seven years) in exchange for transportation, food, clothing, and shelter. During the term of indenture, the servant could be bought and sold, could be physically punished by the master, had no right to marry without the master's permission, and served additional time if they ran away.

The critical distinction was termination. At the end of the term, indentured servants received their freedom — and often "freedom dues" (a small sum of money, tools, clothing, or land) — and could make their own way in the colonial economy. Chattel slavery was, in principle, permanent and hereditary. The child of an enslaved person was born enslaved; the child of an indentured servant was born free.

McGrath's more dramatic claim concerns not American indentured servitude but ancient slavery — particularly his reference to Roman mercury mines, where enslaved workers faced death within months. This is historically accurate: the silver mines of Laurion in ancient Greece and the mercury mines of Almadén in Roman Spain had extraordinarily high mortality rates among enslaved workers, and conditions were by any measure among the worst ever documented in the history of coerced labor. The point McGrath draws from this is that the comparative awfulness of slavery has no fixed racial character — human beings inflicted on other human beings, regardless of race, conditions that ranged from the mildly exploitative to the spectacularly murderous.

The Economic Investment Argument

McGrath makes an additional comparative claim that Sowell also touches on: that American slaveholders, precisely because they owned their enslaved workers as capital investments, had economic incentives to maintain their health and productive capacity that were absent in other forms of coerced labor. A slaveholder who worked an enslaved person to death destroyed his own property. An employer who worked a wage laborer or indentured servant to death suffered only the inconvenience of finding a replacement.

This argument — that chattel slavery created a peculiar economic incentive toward maintenance of the enslaved person's life, if not dignity — is genuinely present in the historical literature and was made by antebellum defenders of slavery. It is not, however, straightforwardly supported by the overall evidence. The conditions of enslaved people in the American South varied enormously by region, crop, and individual master. Cotton cultivation in the Deep South imposed severe physical demands; tobacco and rice cultivation in the Upper South involved different but also grueling conditions. The enslaved population's growth through natural increase reflects that conditions in the U.S. were less immediately lethal than in Brazil or the Caribbean, but this demographic fact should not be taken as evidence of comfortable conditions in any absolute sense.

Chapter Six: The Economics of Slavery — Who Benefited and Who Did Not

Sowell's Economic Framework

Thomas Sowell brings the tools of economic analysis to the history of slavery in ways that distinguish his work from most popular treatments. His central economic claim about American slavery is paradoxical: while individual slaveholders often profited substantially from their use of enslaved labor, slavery as a system did not advance the economic development of the societies that practiced it most extensively. It enriched a planter elite while simultaneously stunting the broader economic development of the regions in which it was concentrated.

Sowell argues in *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* that the antebellum South's slave economy prevented the emergence of the diversified, market-oriented economic structure that generated prosperity in the North. The dominance of plantation agriculture, dependent on coerced labor that required no wages and therefore created no consumer market, meant that the South developed little in the way of manufacturing, commerce, or the middle-class economic culture that was transforming the North during the same period.

This is not a novel observation — it was made by antislavery economists during the antebellum period — but Sowell's framing is distinctive. He uses it not primarily as a moral argument but as an economic one: slavery was, on a societal level, a losing proposition, even for the enslaving society. It created a small class of very wealthy landowners at the cost of a broadly impoverished and underdeveloped regional economy.

McGrath's Economic Argument

McGrath's economic argument about slavery runs parallel to Sowell's. He contends that slavery prevented the South from developing the robust middle class that was the economic engine of Northern prosperity, and that the South's relative economic underdevelopment persisted long after emancipation partly as a consequence of the structural distortions that slavery had created. In this respect, McGrath argues, slavery harmed not only the enslaved but the broader society in which it was practiced — including the non-slaveholding white majority in the South, whose economic prospects were constrained by the plantation system's dominance.

Slavery's Relationship to Modern Disparities

Both Sowell and McGrath address the question of whether current racial economic disparities in the United States can be attributed to the legacy of slavery. This is where their views are most controversial and most deserving of careful examination.

Sowell's position, developed most fully in *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* and *Discrimination and Disparities*, is that the relationship between slavery's legacy and current disparities is far less direct than is commonly assumed. He notes that Black literacy rates rose from near zero at emancipation to over 50 percent within half a century — a rate of advancement that he describes as remarkable by any historical standard. He also notes that the two-parent Black family was statistically comparable to the white family well into the twentieth century, and that the breakdown of the Black family occurred not in the immediate wake of emancipation but in the 1960s and 1970s — a timing that suggests causes other than slavery.

Sowell attributes the persistence of disparities primarily to cultural factors (including what he provocatively calls the transmission of "redneck culture" from the antebellum South to the Black community), to welfare policies that he argues created perverse incentives undermining family formation, and to post-slavery barriers including Jim Crow, segregation, and systematic exclusion from educational and economic opportunities. He does not deny that post-slavery discrimination was severe and consequential — he simply argues that it is analytically distinct from the institution of slavery itself.

Chapter Seven: Who Ended Slavery? The West's Abolitionist Revolution

The Uniqueness of Western Abolitionism

The most important argument in Sowell's treatment of slavery — the one with the broadest implications — concerns not the institution's history but its ending. Sowell's *Jewish World Review* column "Ending Slavery," which reviews Adam Hochschild's *Bury the Chains*, articulates this argument with unusual clarity and force.

The argument, in brief, is this: Slavery existed in virtually every human society for thousands of years. It was ended, globally, by the expansion of Western power during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The anti-slavery movement that produced this global transformation was born in Western civilization — specifically, in Britain — and would not have succeeded without the unique combination of moral conviction, economic resources, and naval power that Britain was able to bring to bear.

Sowell summarizes the situation with deliberate provocation: "Nothing could be more jolting and discordant with the vision of today's intellectuals than the fact that it was businessmen, devout religious leaders and Western imperialists who together destroyed slavery around the world."

The sequence of events Sowell describes is historically accurate. A small group of deeply religious men meeting in London in 1787 founded the world's first organized anti-slavery movement. They faced extraordinary opposition: Britain was at the time the world's largest slave-trading nation, and the economic interests defending the trade were wealthy and politically powerful. The movement nevertheless persisted through decades of parliamentary defeats until securing the Slave Trade Act of 1807, which banned British participation in the international slave trade, and the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which abolished slavery throughout the British Empire.

British Naval Enforcement

What came next is, as Sowell notes, even more remarkable. Britain, having abolished slavery within its empire, took upon itself the project of suppressing the international slave trade globally. The Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron, established in 1808 and expanded substantially after 1833, patrolled the West African coast for fifty years, boarding ships flying the flags of other nations, seizing slave cargoes, liberating enslaved people, and bringing slave traders to justice. This operation cost Britain enormous sums — Sowell quotes John Stuart Mill's estimate that the British spent annually "sums equal to the revenue of a small kingdom" in pursuit of a goal that was, as Mill acknowledged, "contrary to our pecuniary interest."

Between 1808 and 1860, the West Africa Squadron intercepted approximately 1,600 ships and liberated approximately 150,000 enslaved people. The squadron suffered significant casualties from disease — the West African coast was called "the white man's grave" — and the operation imposed real costs on British taxpayers with no economic return. It was, as Sowell argues, an act of collective moral conscience without significant parallel in world history.

The End of Slavery in America

In the United States, slavery ended through a more violent and politically complex process. The Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, issued by President Abraham Lincoln, declared freedom for enslaved people in Confederate-held territories as a war measure — it did not immediately free anyone in practice, since it applied only in areas where the U.S. government lacked enforcement authority. Its practical and symbolic effect was to transform the Civil War's purpose from union-preservation to abolition, enabling the recruitment of Black soldiers into the Union Army and changing the diplomatic calculus with Britain and France, neither of which would support the Confederacy in a war now explicitly fought to preserve slavery.

The Thirteenth Amendment, ratified December 6, 1865, abolished slavery throughout the United States with the words: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

The abolitionists — Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, William Lloyd Garrison, Sojourner Truth, and the many others who built the anti-slavery movement through decades of moral argument, journalism, and political organizing — were essential to creating the cultural and political conditions that made the Thirteenth Amendment possible. The enslaved people themselves contributed through resistance, escape, and their service in the Union Army. But the legal and military mechanism of ending slavery was an act of the American constitutional government — a government that had, for 77 years, both permitted and protected the institution.

Chapter Eight: The Christian Foundation of Abolitionism

The Meeting of Twelve Men

Thomas Sowell, in his review of Adam Hochschild's *Bury the Chains*, identifies the origin of the world's first organized anti-slavery movement with precision: twelve "deeply religious" men meeting in London in 1787. This is the historical founding of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and Sowell is correct that its character was overwhelmingly Christian and evangelical.

The twelve men who gathered in a London printing shop on May 22, 1787, included nine Quakers and three Anglicans. Their shared conviction was rooted in Christian theology: that all human beings are created in the image of God, that all are equal before God regardless of race or social station, and that the institution of slavery was therefore a sin — not merely an unfortunate social arrangement but a direct affront to the Creator. This theological conviction drove them to undertake what must have seemed, in 1787, an essentially impossible political project.

The Quakers had been the first organized religious group to oppose slavery on theological grounds, beginning in Pennsylvania with the 1688 Germantown Petition Against Slavery — the earliest formal anti-slavery protest in American history. Their arguments rested on the same

foundation: if all human beings are equally children of God, then no human being can be the permanent property of another.

William Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect

The parliamentary face of British abolitionism was William Wilberforce, a Member of Parliament whose evangelical conversion in 1784–1785 led him to dedicate his political career to what he described as "two great objects": the reform of morals and the abolition of the slave trade. Wilberforce's *A Practical View of Christianity* (1797) argued explicitly that genuine Christian faith demanded engagement with the moral crises of the age, and he identified the slave trade as the most urgent of those crises.

Wilberforce worked in close cooperation with the Clapham Sect — a group of evangelical Anglican laypeople centered in the London suburb of Clapham who combined deep religious conviction with political sophistication and economic resources. The Sect included businessmen, lawyers, journalists, and politicians who brought professional competence to the abolitionist cause alongside their moral convictions.

The Slave Trade Act of 1807, which Wilberforce had pursued through twenty years of parliamentary defeats, was the Sect's greatest legislative achievement. Wilberforce lived to see the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 pass the Commons in its second reading — he died three days later.

Christian Abolitionists in America

In the United States, the abolitionist movement drew its deepest energies from Christian revivalism, particularly the Second Great Awakening of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This evangelical revival, which swept through New England, New York, and the frontier regions of Ohio and Kentucky, emphasized personal conversion and social transformation as inseparable — the reformed soul was expected to reform the world.

Charles Finney, the most prominent evangelist of the Second Great Awakening, was an uncompromising abolitionist. Oberlin College, which Finney led, was the first college in the United States to admit Black students and among the first to admit women, reflecting its connection between evangelical piety and social reform.

The Quakers maintained their traditional opposition to slavery, providing crucial organizational infrastructure for the Underground Railroad — the network of safe houses, routes, and guides that enabled tens of thousands of enslaved people to escape to the North and to Canada. Harriet Tubman, herself a woman of deep Christian faith, operated within this Quaker-supported network in making her remarkable nineteen return journeys into the South to liberate enslaved people.

Frederick Douglass, the most powerful antislavery voice in American public life during the mid-nineteenth century, was a Christian who drew explicit and devastating distinctions between what he called "the slaveholding religion of this land" and "the Christianity of Christ" — between the Christianity used to justify slavery and the Christianity that condemned it. His 1852 speech "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" is a masterwork of Christian moral argument deployed against a Christian nation's moral failure.

The Complexity of Christian Involvement

Both the source documents reviewed for this volume and the broader historical record require acknowledging what the McGrath compilation rightly notes: Christianity was not a unified moral force against slavery. Southern denominations actively defended the institution on biblical grounds. The Southern Baptist Convention was founded in 1845 explicitly in defense of slaveholding missionaries. Southern Presbyterians and Methodists developed sophisticated theological arguments — drawing on Ephesians 6:5, Colossians 3:22, and the so-called "Curse of Ham" in Genesis 9 — for the proposition that slavery was divinely sanctioned.

The Catholic Church's history on slavery was similarly ambiguous. Pope Gregory XVI's 1839 encyclical *In Supremo Apostolatus* condemned the slave trade but did not unequivocally condemn the institution of slavery itself, and Catholic slaveholders throughout the Americas largely ignored its implications.

What Sowell argues — and what the historical record supports — is that Christianity generated both the strongest defense and the most powerful criticism of slavery. The anti-slavery argument ultimately prevailed within Western civilization, which is the fact that matters most. But it prevailed through a prolonged internal struggle within Christianity, and between Christian moral reasoning and the economic interests of those who benefited from slavery.

Chapter Nine: McGrath and Sowell Compared — Method, Argument, and Legacy

Shared Premises

Roger McGrath and Thomas Sowell share a set of fundamental premises about the history of slavery and its relationship to contemporary American life. Both reject what they regard as a politically motivated simplification of slavery's history that treats it as essentially a white American crime against Black people rather than a global human institution. Both insist that historical accuracy requires acknowledging African and Arab participation in the slave trade, the existence of Black slaveholders, the broader global context of slavery, and the West's unique role in ending it. Both oppose reparations for slavery. And both challenge what they see as the misuse of slavery's history to sustain victimhood narratives that they regard as harmful to the communities they purport to serve.

Differences in Method

Despite these shared premises, McGrath and Sowell differ significantly in their methods, scope, and intellectual style.

McGrath is primarily a narrative historian of the American West who has applied his skills to the history of slavery as a polemicist and public intellectual. His work on slavery appears primarily in magazine articles and public interviews rather than in scholarly monographs. His style is deliberately provocative — he leads with the most startling claims, citing Black slaveholders and white indentured servants in ways designed to disrupt his audience's settled assumptions. His strength is in vivid historical examples; his limitation is that his treatment can

feel anecdotal rather than systematic, and his rhetorical edge can lead him to present counterexamples as if they were more representative than the evidence fully supports.

Sowell is a social scientist of the first rank — trained in economics at the University of Chicago and Harvard, with a scholarly career spanning more than half a century and producing more than forty books. His treatment of slavery in *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*, *Ethnic America*, *Race and Culture*, and *Discrimination and Disparities* is grounded in statistical analysis, global comparative evidence, and economic theory. He arrives at many of the same substantive conclusions as McGrath, but through a more rigorous analytical framework that is considerably more difficult to dismiss.

Complementary Strengths

The two scholars' approaches are genuinely complementary. McGrath provides the vivid historical particularity — the specific cases of William Ellison and Anthony Johnson, the statistics on Black slaveholders in New Orleans, the conditions of Roman mercury mines — that makes the broader argument concrete and accessible. Sowell provides the theoretical and empirical framework — the economics of coerced labor, the sociology of cultural transmission, the global comparative data on slavery's universality — that situates the particulars in a coherent explanatory structure.

Read together, they present a more complete picture than either provides alone. McGrath's challenge is most powerful when read alongside Sowell's systematic treatment, which provides the evidence base that McGrath's anecdote-driven style implies but does not always fully demonstrate. Sowell's analysis is given human texture and immediate impact by the specific cases that McGrath emphasizes.

Critical Perspectives

Honest engagement with these scholars requires acknowledging the criticisms their work has received, including from scholars who share their commitment to factual accuracy.

The most substantive critique of McGrath's work is that his emphasis on Black slaveholders, white indentured servants, and the relatively shorter duration of American slavery, while historically accurate in detail, can produce a misleading gestalt. A reader might conclude from McGrath's presentation that American chattel slavery was not qualitatively different from other forms of historical servitude, or that its racial character was merely incidental rather than central. This would be a misreading of the historical evidence. American chattel slavery — particularly in its developed antebellum form — was distinguished by its hereditary character, its explicit racial ideology, its systematic dehumanization, and its integration into a legal and social system that extended well beyond the plantation into every institution of Southern society. These features were not incidental.

The most substantive critique of Sowell's work on these questions concerns his cultural explanations for persistent racial disparities. His argument in *Black Rednecks and White Liberals* that Black urban culture inherited dysfunctional traits from the "redneck culture" of Southern whites — who in turn inherited them from the Celtic borderlands of Britain and Ireland — is a provocative hypothesis that has been criticized by historians for overgeneralizing

from cultural patterns that were more varied and more contested than his account suggests. His claim that welfare policy was more damaging to the Black family than slavery has been challenged by scholars who argue it underestimates the long-term psychological and institutional effects of enslavement and segregation.

These are legitimate scholarly criticisms. They do not, however, undermine the core empirical claims that both authors make about slavery's global universality, African participation in the slave trade, the West's unique abolitionist role, or the complexity of the Black slaveholder phenomenon.

Chapter Ten: The Reparations Question — Historical Complexity and Modern Claims

The Current Debate

The question of reparations for slavery — payments by the U.S. government to descendants of enslaved people — has moved from the academic margins to mainstream political debate in recent years. Both McGrath and Sowell are unequivocal opponents of reparations, and their arguments against it constitute an important part of their broader engagement with slavery's history.

McGrath's Arguments

McGrath's primary arguments against reparations, articulated in his *Chronicles Magazine* essay "Getting Real About Reparations," are practical and historical:

First, the complexity of assigning guilt across generations makes reparations practically impossible. The majority of Americans today are descendants of people who arrived in the United States after slavery ended — Irish, Italian, Jewish, Eastern European, Asian, and Latin American immigrants who had no involvement in American slavery and whose ancestors, in many cases, were themselves victims of slavery or slavery-like conditions elsewhere in the world.

Second, the existence of Black slaveholders — particularly in Louisiana and South Carolina — and Native American slaveholders (the Five Civilized Tribes of the Indian Territory held enslaved Black people and were slave-trading nations) complicates the narrative of white-on-Black oppression on which the reparations argument typically rests.

Third, McGrath argues that the identification of who qualifies as a "descendant of enslaved people" is practically impossible to determine with any accuracy, given the extent of interracial parentage in American history both during and after slavery.

Sowell's Arguments

Sowell makes the additional economic and sociological arguments that he has developed across multiple books:

The groups that have risen most successfully from conditions of oppression — Jews after millennia of persecution and discrimination, Chinese Americans after brutal exclusion and exploitation, Japanese Americans after wartime internment — have done so without reparations payments and without sustained government programs premised on victimhood. Sowell's comparative sociology suggests that the path from oppression to success runs through cultural adaptation, educational investment, and family stability rather than through transfers of resources from one group to another.

Sowell also argues that reparations discourse "poisons the present by distorting the past" — that the primary function of the reparations debate in contemporary American life is to sustain a sense of grievance that, in his view, actively impedes the cultural changes he regards as the real precondition for advancement.

The Counterarguments

Complete engagement with this debate requires acknowledging that the counterarguments to McGrath and Sowell on reparations are substantial. Proponents argue that the economic effects of slavery extended well beyond emancipation into the system of debt peonage, sharecropping, convict leasing, and formal Jim Crow segregation that effectively re-enslaved much of the Southern Black population for generations after 1865. On this view, the damage being compensated is not only slavery itself but the century-long system of exploitation that followed emancipation, which was explicitly maintained by government action and in which contemporary living Americans were directly involved.

The economic historian Gavin Wright, among others, has argued that the wealth gap between Black and white Americans cannot be understood without accounting for the systematic exclusion of Black Americans from wealth-building mechanisms — homeownership, access to credit, property rights, educational opportunities — that were available to white Americans during the decades of greatest American economic growth in the mid-twentieth century. This exclusion was enforced by federal, state, and local governments, not merely by private discrimination, which raises the question of government liability in a form that does not depend on establishing a direct causal chain from antebellum slavery.

McGrath and Sowell's arguments are strongest against naive versions of the reparations claim that treat slavery as the direct cause of contemporary disparities without accounting for the complex intervening history. Their arguments are less decisive against the more sophisticated versions that locate the primary harm in post-emancipation government-enforced discrimination.

Chapter Eleven: What Honest History Requires

The Standard Both Men Apply

The deepest and most important contribution of McGrath and Sowell to the discussion of slavery is methodological as much as substantive: they insist on applying to the history of slavery the same standards of evidence, context, and comparative analysis that responsible historians apply to every other subject.

This sounds uncontroversial — of course history should be done honestly. But in practice, the history of slavery in the United States has been treated by both sides of the contemporary political debate as a subject in which the normal rules can be suspended. Conservative commentators sometimes cite Black slaveholders or Arab slave traders as if these facts extenuated American chattel slavery's moral gravity. Progressive commentators sometimes treat any acknowledgment of African participation in the slave trade or any contextualizing of American slavery within global history as suspect — as if honest history were itself a form of apologetics for slavery.

Both of these approaches are wrong. McGrath and Sowell, whatever the specific limitations of their respective arguments, are right that honest history requires the full context.

What the Full Context Shows

The full historical context of slavery reveals several things simultaneously:

Slavery was a universal human institution, practiced by virtually every civilization for thousands of years, without serious moral questioning until the eighteenth century in Western civilization. This is simply true, and acknowledging it does not minimize the evil of American slavery.

The transatlantic slave trade was facilitated by African rulers and merchants who supplied the captives that European traders transported across the Atlantic. This is also simply true, and acknowledging it does not exonerate the European traders and American planters who created the demand and built the system of chattel slavery in the Americas.

The American variety of slavery, while less immediately lethal than Brazilian or Caribbean slavery, was a profound moral evil — a system of hereditary racial bondage enforced by law, violence, and a comprehensive ideology of racial hierarchy. Acknowledging the global context of slavery does not qualify this judgment.

The abolition of slavery globally was driven primarily by the moral revolution that occurred within Western civilization — particularly within evangelical Christianity in Britain and the United States — and was enforced globally by British naval power. This is true, and it is also true that the societies that abolished slavery had previously been among its greatest practitioners.

The ending of slavery in the United States required a civil war that killed approximately 620,000 soldiers and untold numbers of civilians — the largest single cost in American military history. The society that enslaved people paid an enormous price for that choice, though the enslaved people themselves paid a far higher one.

The Lesson Sowell Draws

Sowell ends his "Ending Slavery" column with a characteristically stark formulation: "If the history of slavery ought to teach us anything, it is that human beings cannot be trusted with unbridled power over other human beings."

This is a conclusion that transcends the specific debates about duration, percentage, reparations, and cultural transmission that occupy so much of the contemporary discussion. It

is a lesson about human nature and the necessity of institutional constraints on power — the same lesson that the framers of the American Constitution drew from the history of tyranny when they designed a system of separated powers and protected rights.

It is also, perhaps, the conclusion most useful to carry forward from the history of slavery. Not as an indictment of any particular racial or national group, but as a warning about what human beings do to one another when power is unchecked — and what is required, morally and institutionally, to prevent it.

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