‘Deep Roots’ delves into slavery’s effect on Southern politics

By Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler
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Barbour County has produced eight governors of Alabama, including some of the most virulent segregationists in the United States.

One of them, William J. Belt, denounced the Black man as “an ignorant devil, a foul blot, a blight upon the land, and a little short of savage.” Another governor, George Wallace, declared in his 1963 inaugural address: “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.”

By contrast, nearby Coffee County was the home of Governor “Big Jim” Folsom, who told his fellow citizens in a Christmas address in 1949, “As long as Negroes are held down by deprivation and lack of opportunity, the other poor people will be held down alongside them.” Folsom pleaded with Alabamians to do more than talk about fellowship and brotherly love: “Let’s start living it.”

Ruled by region

In “Deep Roots,” three social scientists, Avditi Acharya (Stanford), Matthew Blackwell (Harvard) and Maya Sen (Harvard), account for the divergent views of the natives of southern counties.

The authors claim that “behavioral path dependence” — the cultural and political attitudes of a region — can persist across generations, when they are reinforced by institutions, laws, families, and communities.

Using sophisticated quantitative techniques, they demonstrate that Whites in areas where slaveholding was more prevalent “are today more conservative, more open to African Americans, and more likely to oppose race-related policies” designed to assist them.

Insight on racism

“Deep Roots” is aimed primarily at academics. That said, the book contains valuable insights about race and racism in the United States.

In the decades following the emancipation of slaves and the

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more tolerant, federally enforced Reconstruction policies of the 1860s and 1870s, the authors indicate, Black Belt elites, desperate to secure a large, cheap, docile workforce, and regain political power, used formal and informal institutions and violence to oppress African Americans.

Lynchings, laws criminalizing Black vagrancy, disenfranchising Blacks and codifying segregation were more numerous in counties that had had substantial slave populations. During this pivotal period, racial attitudes of Whites hardened.

Inherited prejudice

According to the authors, two mechanisms help explain the persistence and power of the new Jim Crow realities in Black Belt counties. Through intergenerational socialization, White children inherited the racial prejudice of parents, grandparents and other relatives.

Lynchings, for example, were communal events. Children attended, and at times, participated; many noticed, no doubt, that lynchers won praise from their fellow citizens. Equally important was the reinforcing role of schools, churches, courts, political parties and other institutions.

Movement’s impact

The Civil Rights Movement, the authors acknowledge, helped attenuate behavioral path dependence.

The desegregation of schools evinced African American educational outcomes in the Black Belt and other parts of the South. Sharp household income variations were reduced as well. Because the federal government targeted the Black Belt in implementing the Voting Rights Act, Black registration rates there were even higher than elsewhere.

Despite the substantial impact of the Civil Rights Movement and federal legislation, Acharya, Blackwell and Sen emphasize, differences in opinions on race and race-related policies between residents of the Black Belt and other areas in the South remain, “testament to slavery’s lasting political and cultural legacy,” and the difficulty of compelling Whites “to accept blacks as social or economic equals.”

Vigilance, intervention

“Deep Roots” refutes the claim, attributed to sociologist William Graham Sumner, that “stateways cannot make folkways.” After all, Supreme Court decisions, civil rights legislation, and Justice Department enforcement have had an enormous impact on race relations in the United States.

The authors remind us, however, that race prejudice, “triggered by historical forces and pushed forward by behavioral path dependence” is difficult to eradicate.

Reducing inequalities between Blacks and Whites requires vigilance and forceful intervention by advocacy groups and the national government.

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