

## Commentary

# ROOTS

More people watched *Roots* than any other TV show in history. 130 million people saw one or more episodes. The final episode was seen in 85% of all the households that own TV sets.

Considered in the context of previous presentations of slavery—*Birth of a Nation*, *Gone With The Wind*, etc., *Roots* was a step forward. The interest it won proves that the people of the USNA are hungry for information about their history. The question that must be asked is why now?

The most striking aspect of *Roots* was that it ended in 1870 with freedom "won." The bitter defeat of the democratic aspirations of the Negro people and the poor Anglo-Americans was not mentioned. The new masters of the South after 1876, the Wall Street imperialists, made no appearance. The 100 years of terror and oppression that followed are not mentioned. Even within the time period

covered, no mention is made of John Brown. The abolitionist movement to end slavery is only vaguely alluded to and the issues of the Civil War are not presented. Although the character "chicken George," a free man, serves in the Union Army during the war, this is not shown, only talked about.

The presentation of *Roots*, although a great improvement over past treatments of slavery, skirted the most important issues. The struggle for freedom was shown as an individual struggle—within one family—and shown as a battle that could be won by individuals. The "new" populism of the Carter administration has created an atmosphere where progressive programs like *Roots* can appear on TV—and no one can deny that *Roots* was a vast improvement over *Starky and Hutch* or *Charlie's Angels*. But this new atmosphere is one with limits to its oxygen and allows no real challenge to imperialism and no real questioning of its ideological foundations.

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