The Lengthened Shadow of the Past

In this bicentennial year we are often reminded of the glorious feats of the Founding Fathers. We are often reminded to follow their examples, to be possessed of the courage of our convictions as were the early leaders of the country. No one can deny that the early leaders of the country were men of courage and determination. In many ways they left indelible impressions and footprints on the sands of our historical time. They did indeed help to give shape and character to the continuing ambivalence toward the black presence in this country.

At first glance it might appear that the Founding Fathers really had undergone some kind of transformation in their thinking when we see them move from the clear and universal language of the Declaration of Independence to the adoption of the 3/5 Compromise in the Constitution.

The Declaration boldly stated:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness..."

These words seem to give voice to Thomas Jefferson's famous vow of enmity toward every tyranny over the mind of man.

However, in Article I, Section 2, Clause 3 of the Constitution, we see the particularized application of these self evident, universal truths.

"Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three-fifths of all other persons."

However, the "problem" which occasioned the 3/5 Compromise—the black presence—also overshadowed and helped to give final shape to the Declaration itself. In Jefferson's draft of the Declaration in which he catalogued the grievances of the colonies against King George III of England, a long section on the slave trade and slavery was included.

Jefferson wrote:

"He (King George) has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people, who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the "Christian" King of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative