



# *The Wolf by the Ears*

*by Thomas Jefferson*

"We have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go." I am much quoted for describing slavery in this way, yet I fear this vision may seem strange to many. So please, allow me to explain.

From the time I wrote in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal," I well knew this was not so in America. Slavery had existed in the colonies from the outset. By 1776 there were more than a half million African slaves, almost one-fifth of the new nation's population. And slaves made up 40% of the people in the southern colonies. When I wrote those noble words, I fully believed that terrible institution was unlikely to disappear.

The southern colonies in particular relied heavily on slavery. Its cash crops of tobacco, indigo, and rice depended upon cheap, slave labor. The region simply could not and would not give up its slaves. When our young nation formed its first government under the Articles of Confederation, slavery as almost everything else, was left to the states to oversee. But of course we soon found the Articles were too weak to guide the government of a nation.

Naturally, when our Founding Fathers began to draft the lasting framework of our government, the Constitution, the subject of slavery arose. However, all at the Constitutional Convention knew the issue was so difficult to resolve, it could have divided and destroyed the new land at its very beginnings. Rather than allowing that to happen, a compromise was reached.

The right or wrong of slavery was not addressed in the Constitution. Slavery was considered only as it affected the number of state representatives in Congress. What was called the Three-fifths Compromise stated that each slave would be counted as  $\frac{3}{5}$  of a person in terms of a state's population, to be reflected in its number of representatives.

Yet even before the Constitution of the United States could be completed and signed, the issue of slavery reared its ugly head over and again. A series of compromises were made to keep the young nation whole.

One was the agreement that what was then the Northwest Territory, the states of Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and part of Wisconsin, would ban slavery. A controversy also arose over the slave trade itself. Though most states had outlawed the import of slaves, Georgia and the Carolinas had not. In response to those states' threats to leave the Constitutional Convention and the new land, the Founding Fathers agreed to postpone any trade bans until at least 1808. A third compromise addressed escaped slaves, saying that non-slave states would return any escapees they found.

In effect the issue of slavery was simply placed on the back burner so the new United States could be formed. There were some, I know, who hoped that those in states that relied on the institution would change their views. These same men hoped, too, that slavery would die out as it had in other places and times. Yet, alas, that did not occur. The issue would be one that would plague the United States for many years to come.