

Walter Williams essay in response to a question at quora.com

## **What if Florida was a black ethnostate after the civil war? How different would the US be?**

Florida not only had the potential to become a black state, but it almost happened. Consider these events.

From the start of the secession crisis in 1861, the Union navy kept control of Fort Jefferson, off the coast of Key West at the southern tip of Florida, and Fort Pickens near Pensacola on the Gulf Coast near the northwest part of the state. When the fighting began at Fort Sumter in South Carolina in April, the Union occupation of those forts remained unchallenged.

In November 1861 the Union navy scored its first major victory when it blasted its way into Port Royal, South Carolina. It should have followed up this victory with a similar attack on Jacksonville, Florida, and up the Ochlockonee River to land troops to capture Tallahassee. If they had managed just these two victories, the Union could have established strong bases along the eastern, central, and western parts of Florida that connected the state to the rest of the Confederacy. Plus, the capture of Tallahassee would have been the first state capitol to be restored to the Union.

Florida at the time was the least populous of the Southern states, with less than 90,000 white residents. If secessionists fled to Georgia and Alabama, and Union troops had arrested or expelled the remaining white slaveowners, that military campaign would allow northern abolitionists to move en masse to Tallahassee. After meeting the residency requirement of 30 days these white northern transplants could have voted themselves into the state legislature. Once in control of the state legislature, they could have changed the state constitution to abolish slavery and allow for universal suffrage of all residents above age 18. Since many abolitionists supported women suffrage, that change would have allowed black residents, both male and female, to vote.

Even if most of the white Northerners returned to their homes in the North after the state constitution was changed, their places could have been taken by educated free black people from the North. The Union navy could have then begun a policy of sailing along the coastline of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas, welcoming escaping slaves to board their ships, and then transferring them as quickly as possible to northern Florida. Along the trip, naval sharpshooters could have trained the adults to load and fire muskets.

It is difficult and time-consuming to train an army in offensive warfare, but very easy to train people how to load and fire a musket from behind defensive earthworks. If white Northern engineers oversaw battalions of freed slaves in building a line of earthworks along the northern area of Florida, from Jacksonville to Tallahassee and from there to Pensacola, that would defend the entire peninsula. The Confederacy had next to no navy, and little ability to mount a naval invasion of Florida. And if they had to divert troops from Confederate armies in Virginia and Tennessee, they would face a defiant force determined to protect their newly-won freedom. In addition, slaves in southern Georgia and Alabama would no doubt flee through the woods and swamps to join their black compatriots in Florida. White Southerners would be forced to choose between attacking this black militia in Florida, versus defending their homes from invasion from the North. Many historical studies have shown that the prime motive for white Southern men to join the Confederate army was to protect their home from invasion, so it is probable that most white Southerners would choose to protect their homes rather than attack Florida.

Over ninety percent of all Union military expenses went to support Northern armies, and only ten percent went to the Union navy. If those percentages were reversed, the North would soon have been able to build a massive fleet of ships that could not only have blockaded the Southern coast, but also to rescue enslaved persons to transport them to Florida.

This above scenario is what might have been, if the Union had enacted a deliberate policy from the beginning of the war in 1861 to rescue black people, instead of waiting until 1863 to begin recruiting black troops into the Union army. But what actually happened is that, even without this policy, Florida still had the potential to become a black state.

In the nineteenth century, Florida's white population remained small, mainly because the subtropical climate led to many diseases. People of African descent had more natural protection from malaria and other illnesses, and they could more likely live healthy lives in Florida. During the time when Florida was under Reconstruction state government, black men got the vote, and they voted in about half of the representative into the Florida state legislature. It was only because the white U.S. government official who was appointed to be in charge of the Freedmen's Bureau, betrayed their interests in allowing the white planter class to gain control of the state legislature, that they made new rules which disfranchised many black voters. Thus, Florida came within a hair's breath of having a pro-black state government. This is, in fact, the closest North America has ever come to having a black state.

American history would no doubt be extremely different if people of African descent had been able to retain control of at least one state of their own. Unfortunately, that opportunity was lost, and black people remained under the thumb of Jim Crow white domination for over a century following that fateful betrayal.