



EMORY  
UNIVERSITY

Department of History  
College of Arts and Sciences

February 15, 2013

James Wagner  
President  
Emory University

Dear President Wagner:

The undersigned faculty from the Departments of History and African American Studies at Emory University would like to respond to your article, “As American as . . . Compromise,” which appeared in the Winter 2013 issue of *Emory Magazine*. While we endorse your plea for civil debate, free exchange, and compromise in public affairs, we regret that you chose to illustrate your argument with the infamous three-fifths clause from the Constitution, wherein fifty-five white men who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 concluded that in the “more perfect union” they hoped to create a slave would count as three-fifths of a person for purposes of representation and taxation. This is the first time that any of us has seen anyone point to the three-fifths clause as an example of what good, right-thinking individuals can accomplish when they avoid ideological fixity. It is also, though we are sure unintended, an insult to the descendants of those enslaved people who are today a vital part of the Emory University community and our nation.

The Constitution is filled with compromises, the most famous of which is the Great Compromise between the Virginia and the New Jersey plans for representation. For two weeks, after nailing the windows shut so that they could speak freely without fear that their words would come back to haunt them, the delegates from the large states and the small states debated their competing views. The result, of course, was that one house in the two-house legislature would be apportioned by population and the other apportioned equally. We believe that the Great Compromise would better serve your argument and avoid the racial denigration inherent in the Compromise you chose.

Although the Founders were careful never to use the words “slave” or “slavery,” the Constitution recognized, guaranteed, and thereby perpetuated the institution of slavery. At the time of the writing of the Constitution, there were 700,000 enslaved people in the United States; on the eve of the Civil War, there were 4,000,000. Abraham Lincoln recognized that the long string of compromises between South and North was over. In his first inaugural, he identified the issue dividing the nation: “One section of our country believes slavery is *right* . . . while the other believes it is *wrong* . . . .”

**Emory University**  
221 Bowden Hall  
Atlanta, GA 30322  
*An equal opportunity, affirmative action university*

Tel 404.727.6555  
Fax 404.727.4959

When white Americans fully faced the moral issue of slavery, it cost the nation between 620,000 and 750,000 lives. In 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment finally erased slavery and the Constitutional provision that a black American was three-fifths of a white American.

The very meaning of the 3/5 Compromise still resonates negatively today, and nowhere more strongly than in the African American community. Many African Americans within and outside of the academy see only the most glaring aspect of the compromise—that they were valued only a fraction as much as a white American—no matter for what purpose or the context; and many others abhor the denigration inherent in that failed compromise.

Compromise is necessary to the public good, but we urge you to be careful about the compromises you hold up for emulation. Some compromises don't hold; others shouldn't hold. Surely if the goal is to make Emory, and our nation, a “more perfect union” that is inclusive instead of exclusive, and if compromise is a possible model, there are more admirable choices than the 3/5 Compromise.

Sincerely,

James L. Roark	Leroy Davis	Mary Odem	Leslie Harris
Jonathan Prude	Mark Sanders	Joseph Crespino	Nagueyalti Warren
Judith Miller	Dianne Diakite	Sharon Strocchia	Brett Gadsden
Clifton Crais	Pellom McDaniels	Astrid M. Eckert	Randall Burkett
Nathan McCall	Pamela Scully	Gyanendra Pandey	Matthew Payne
Kristin Mann	Brian Vick	James Melton	Yanna Yannakakis
Ruby Lal	Elena Conis	Tonio Andrade	Vanessa Siddle Walker
Cynthia Patterson	Valerie Loichot	Fraser Harbutt	

CC:

Gary Hauk, Vice President, Emory University  
*The Emory Wheel*  
*The Emory Magazine*