

The Oldest Democracy
by Norman Balabanian

In his opening remarks during the UN Security Council debate about Iraq prior to the US invasion in 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell smilingly declared that: "the US is the oldest democracy". He was probably referring to 1787 when the US Constitution was adopted.

In this "oldest democracy", the vote was denied to women, to slaves, and to indentured servants. (This category is probably not familiar to most people now, but there were a lot of them in the Colonies, all white.) Native Americans were not counted at all, even by the census. So, less than a fifth of the age-eligible population was allowed to vote! So, calling this a "democracy" in 1787 makes sense only as a fable.

Interestingly, Article I of the Constitution of the "oldest democracy" denies the humanity of Blacks, counting each of them as 3/5 of a human person! If Blacks were not permitted to vote, why count them at all? There was a very good reason, not having anything to do with "democracy". The original 13 states included Virginia, Georgia and the Carolinas, all with large populations of black slaves, exceeding the number of whites. Even though the condition of slavery was lifted de jure by the 14th Amendment in 1868, it remained de facto for another century. Anti-democratic racism is still alive and well: Trent Lott, the racist Senator from Mississippi, not only was re-elected to his seat in the Senate at his last election, but in late November 2006 was named to a GOP leadership position in the next US Senate!

Since representation in Congress was to be based on population, if Blacks had not been counted, the slave-holding States would have been very lightly represented in Congress; so they would have had little clout in the affairs of this "democracy". The 3/5 clause of the Constitution was the price to be paid to the slave states in order to form the "perfect union".