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Black Farmers Diminished, not Defeated

Lexington, KY—Today we are approaching the end of a story whose beginnings reach back to the birth of this country. ***Black Farmers in America***, with photographs by John Francis Ficara and an essay by Juan Williams, is a visual document of the final generation of black family farmers.

In 1865, shortly after Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, President Andrew Johnson rescinded on the U.S. government's promise of "forty acres and a mule" for recently freed slaves who wished to continue working the land. Despite this setback, thousands of black people turned to farming as a way of life because it was the only professional skill they had acquired during slavery. In farming their own land, these free men and women experienced for the first time the dignity, self-sufficiency, and independence associated with an American family farm.

But the family farm itself was soon to be in danger. In 1920, African Americans made up 14 percent of all farmers in the U.S., when farmers as a group represented more than a quarter of the entire American labor force. Today, those numbers have dwindled nearly to the vanishing point: black farmers now account for less than one percent of all farmers, whose total share of the American labor force is now less than three percent.

In his essay, Juan Williams outlines the human history of this decline: American family farms were slowly but steadily consumed by farming corporations. But while the U.S. Department of Agriculture made efforts to ease this transition to the modern megafarm, black farmers consistently found themselves last in line for aid. The average subsidy granted to each black farmer was recently found to be one-third of the amount granted to each white farmer for the same period, despite a much higher average income for white farmers. Institutional and individual acts of racism have succeeded in driving blacks out of farming at a rate, by a conservative estimate, at least ten times higher than the white attrition rate.

With their children so thoroughly discouraged by history from staying in agriculture, today's black farmers effectively represent the last generation. But those who remain have lived lives of extraordinary strength and struggle. In 1999, John Francis Ficara began a four-year quest to capture the images for *Black Farmers in America*, traveling throughout the southeastern United States to record a vanishing era. Ficara photographed the antiquated machinery, the beautiful and productive land, the vigorous crops, and the farmers themselves, who embody all of these qualities.

John Francis Ficara is an international award-winning photojournalist and documentary photographer who has worked for *Newsweek* and several other national and international magazines. Currently a freelance photographer, he lives near Washington, D.C.

Juan Williams is senior correspondent for NPR's Morning Edition and author of the bestselling book, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965* and the widely acclaimed biography, *Thurgood Marshall: American Revolutionary*. Williams has won numerous awards for his work, including an Emmy award for TV documentary writing.

BLACK FARMERS IN AMERICA
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN FRANCIS FICARA ESSAY BY JUAN WILLIAMS

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