

IT'S COMPLICATED

Why Simple Narratives About the Founders and American Slavery are Wrong

That mankind are all formed by the same Almighty Being, alike objects of his care, and equally designed for the enjoyment of happiness, the Christian religion teaches us to believe, and the political creed of Americans fully coincides with the position. . . . [We] earnestly entreat your serious attention to the subject of slavery – that you will be pleased to countenance the restoration of liberty to those unhappy men who alone in this land of freedom are degraded into perpetual bondage and who . . . are groaning in servile subjection. Benjamin Franklin, Signer of the Declaration, Signer of the Constitution, President of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society

The young always seem to suffer from historical amnesia. I did; I don't suppose it will ever change. It generated in me, as it always does, an arrogance toward the failings of previous generations. This was, more than anything else, a reflection of my lack of experience with the complex tragedy of the human condition, something which a better exposure to history would have helped ameliorate. Time however, as it usually does, has rectified that lack in me.

Younger activists have been, for some time now, attacking the founders for their inclusion of slavery in the United States Constitution. Human complexity has, in the process, been flattened to skin color, history to a simple narrative. In consequence, a sense of the humanity of those who

hold different opinions on matters felt to be crucially important to social justice is often lost. Our opponents become an *other*, no longer human beings who love their children or struggle with chronic disease or who have simply done their best, within the limitations that all of us possess, to survive what life has given them.

This view of others, common in our current cultural struggles, comes to a large extent from what Paul Ricoeur termed The Hermeneutics of Suspicion (and about which I have written elsewhere). This suspicious world view, generated to large extent, by postmodernist ideology, that is: “a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power,” is now widespread among the left. (Though aspects of it have been internalized by nearly every social group.) Its presence can always be determined by the flattening of the complexity of others along with the identification of specific classes of victims who the holders of political or economic power are oppressing.

One of postmodernism’s common targets in our time is liberal democracy and, by extension, its American origin: the Constitution of the United States. The most damning of the accusations being made is that the inclusion of slavery negates both the accomplishments of the founders as well as their inherent humanity. More specifically: they have nothing to say to us that is legitimate because they colluded in the evil of slavery, something which still infects the American culture today. A deeper look however, as it usually does, reveals a much more complex picture.

Slavery was introduced to the American continent by the European powers who colonized the country. Contrary to many of the postmodernism narratives, many of the founders hated

slavery and blamed England for its introduction into the American States. Many of the founders were in fact abolitionists and viewed the formation of the United States as an opportunity to end slavery once and for all. Their comments are on the record for any who wish to read them. Here are a few . . .

[M]y opinion against it [slavery] has always been known . . . [N]ever in my life did I own a slave. John Adams, Signer of the Declaration, U. S. President (did not sign Constitution as he was at the time ambassador to Great Britain)

But to the eye of reason, what can be more clear than that all men have an equal right to happiness? Nature made no other distinction than that of higher or lower degrees of power of mind and body. . . . Were the talents and virtues which Heaven has bestowed on men given merely to make them more obedient drudges? . . . No! In the judgment of heaven there is no other superiority among men than a superiority of wisdom and virtue. Samuel Adams, Signer of the Declaration, “Father of the American Revolution”

As Congress is now to legislate for our extensive territory lately acquired, I pray to Heaven that they may build up the system of the government on the broad, strong, and sound principles of freedom. Curse not the inhabitants of those regions, and of the United States in general, with a permission to introduce bondage [slavery]. John Dickinson, Signer of the Constitution; Governor of

Pennsylvania

That men should pray and fight for their own freedom and yet keep others in slavery is certainly acting a very inconsistent, as well as unjust and perhaps impious, part. John Jay, President of Continental Congress, First Chief Justice U.

S. Supreme Court

I hope we shall at last, and if it so please God I hope it may be during my life time, see this cursed thing [slavery] taken out. . . . For my part, whether in a public station or a private capacity, I shall always be prompt to contribute my assistance towards effecting so desirable an event. William Livingston, Signer of the Constitution; Governor of New Jersey

Benjamin Franklin and Benjamin Rush (also a signer of the Declaration of Independence) founded America's first anti-slavery society in 1774. John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and one of the three authors of the Federalist Papers, was president New York's anti-slavery society. Other founders, some whose names most Americans can recognize were also active in societies whose purpose was to end slavery: James Madison, James Monroe, John Marshall, Richard Bassett, Charles Carroll, William Few, Bushrod Washington, Richard Stockton, Zephaniah Swift.

Their efforts (as well as that of many others) led Pennsylvania to begin the slow abolishment of slavery in 1780, Massachusetts did so by 1783, Connecticut and Rhode Island

followed suit in 1784, Vermont in 1786, New Hampshire in 1792, New York in 1799, New Jersey in 1804. Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa all prohibited slavery because of a Congressional act, authored by Constitution signer Rufus King, and signed into law by President George Washington. So, the question becomes: If there was this kind of opposition, why was slavery enshrined in the Constitution?

The forging of a single country after the revolution was not a given. As has always been true, there were multiple competing groups, each wishing a formation that best served their interests. *The Federalist Papers*, authored by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, were written to defend the formation of a single country under the oversight of a federal government and to answer the assertions made by various parties as to why it should not occur.

The three each addressed crucial reasons why a unified country was essential. Among them were preventing the anarchy of unrestrained populism, stopping special interest groups from gaining undue power (not working too well these days), separating the powers of government in order to prevent an unrestrained monarchy (ibid), the ability to repay debts, providing for the national defense, and importantly: preventing the fracturing of the new nation into a series of regional confederacies which would, over time, become antagonistic to each other and thus weaken the nation – especially in relation to the very powerful, military nations of Europe. In essence they were addressing problems both foreign and domestic. One of the strongest arguments Hamilton put forth (in Federalist Paper 15) directly concerned the weakness of the new republic in relation to the imperialist powers of Europe, specifically England, Spain, and France.

Are we in a position to resent or to repel the aggression? We have neither troops,

nor treasury, nor government. Are we in a condition to remonstrate with dignity? . . . Are we entitled by nature and compact to a fere participation in the navigation of the Mississippi? Spain excludes us from it. . . . Is respectability in the eyes of foreign powers a safeguard against foreign encroachments? The imbecility of our government even forbids them to treat with us. Our ambassadors abroad are the mere pageants of mimic sovereignty. . . . [L]et us make a firm stand for our safety, our tranquility, our dignity, our reputation.

Papers 16 through 22 continued to parse the dangers they felt would come from failing to form a unified nation. Their reasoning still shines with its clarity of perception and sophistication of language and insight. They did their homework. When faced with the formation of a new government, the founders closely studied European history, in fact reading every text both ancient and modern they could locate, ordering cases of books from Europe if necessary. They were attempting to discern the reasons why nations ultimately failed so that the structure of the new nation could be designed in such a way as to avoid them.

Despite so many of them having a personal hatred of slavery, they felt that to exclude the slave states by prohibiting slavery would lead to failure of the new nation. It would allow entry of the major European powers into domestic problems and the ultimate collapse of everything they were trying to create. They were concerned with survival, as all of us often are. So, they compromised, as all of us learn that to some extent we must do if we are to survive. And the nation did survive.

The problem of slavery still existed, as so many of the founders knew it would; they hoped

that a slow resolution of the problem could occur. But they did know it would have to happen, eventually. As Thomas Jefferson, that brilliant, conflicted man once said, “Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever.”

The struggles of so many of the founders to eliminate slavery are often overlooked, all contemporary and historical white people continually branded with its evil. But our ancestors were not monochrome in their moral sentiments, nor in the actions that their moral sentiments demanded of them. Many of them were active abolitionists, others fought and died in the civil war solely to end slavery. No human being in history nor alive now is monochromatic in their nature, thoughts, or beliefs irrespective of the color of their skin.

It is foolish, as many have noted, to judge the past by the standards of the present. But it is also foolish to condemn the founders (or our ancestors) for traits that each of us also possess. (The powerful biological tendency to hate or fear those in outgroups has a long evolutionary history; no one is exempt from it. The nature of the outgroups to be hated is still a constant topic of conversation and argument in this country.)

The proper frame of mind toward historical figures is not that possessing so many gifts they did so little but that possessing the same limitations every human does that they did so much. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States were documents that contained within them great ideals, ideals which had never before been articulated so powerfully as a legitimate foundation of a government or a country or society. (Vaclav Havel looked to Jefferson and the Declaration and Constitution – as so many others around the world have done – during his long struggles with communism in the attempt to free Czechoslovakia.) What is contained in those documents are ideals; we work for their achievement, decade by decade.

Sometimes the worst among us subvert the journey and eventually those ideals and the goals we have set for creating a fair and just society have to be reclaimed. Barbara Jordan, one of my heros, spoke eloquently to this during the Watergate impeachment hearings. (Her entire speech is as relevant today as it has ever been given our current administration; you can read it at the following link: <https://watergate.info/1974/07/25/barbara-jordan-speech-on-impeachment.html>)

Earlier today, we heard the beginning of the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States, "We, the people." It is a very eloquent beginning. But when the document was completed on the seventeenth of September 1787 I was not included in that "We, the people." I felt somehow for many years that George Washington and Alexander Hamilton just left me out by mistake. But through the process of amendment, interpretation and court decision I have finally been included in "We, the people."

Today, I am an inquisitor; I believe hyperbole would not be fictional and would not overstate the solemnness that I feel right now. My faith in the Constitution is whole, it is complete, it is total. I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution.

Her faith in the ideals in the Constitution had not wavered despite what she personally knew of racism and oppression. She did not abandon what the founders had created. She saw it through her deep and expansive education in history. She understood that it is a work in process . . . as

each of us are in our lifetimes. None of us are not born moral, we learn true morality, one hard step at a time. It does not come from some outside, top down, rigid, formulaic list of behaviors; it comes from inside, from the maturing of the heart's ability to think with and through what it senses and feels in the world around it. To become human is one of the the hardest tasks that any of us face, surpassed perhaps only by the difficulty of becoming ourselves.

Hatred and shaming will never take us where we wish to go. The denial of dignity and recognition to those who oppose us, who think and feel differently than we do will only create more hatred and violence. The hardest thing of all is to receive a wound and not respond in kind; it is something that I still struggle with, for the wounded heart always wants to strike out. The wounds in America are long and deep and our government the past forty years has done its best to worsen them. One of the great sophistications of the Republican party since Reagan has been to fracture the left into competing and angry subgroups. I am still surprised the left falls for it. Our acquiescence to this must stop; there are greater threats facing us than what Thomas Jefferson did or didn't do two and a half centuries ago. There are far greater threats facing us in the destabilization of ecosystems than are present in "microaggressions" or someone using a "trigger" word in conversation. There are far greater threats facing us than conflicts between the melanin-gifted and melanin-challenged. Shifting out of that frame of conflict into one with an understanding of the complexity of human history, of the complexity of the human tragedy, of realizing in the depths of the self that all of us suffer these limitations of character, that it is a continual struggle to overcome them, that in two centuries our descendants will look back upon us much as some now look upon Jefferson allows the development of a different kind of hermeneutics, not one based in suspicion but one rooted in redemption.

The need for this is something that Martin Luther King, Jr knew well.

We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies. . . . I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word. . . .Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

