

No, the American Republic Was Not Founded on Slavery

Journalistic propaganda is a powerful instrument of indoctrination. Without evidence, foul ideas can easily penetrate mainstream discourse. For instance, recently it has become fashionable to posit that slavery is America's [original sin](#). To sensible people, this is a risible claim, because there is nothing particularly American about slavery. But revisiting the history of slavery in non-Western societies in [Asia](#) and [Africa](#) would do little to change the minds of America's critics. A more appropriate strategy would be to contrast the opinions of the Founding Fathers on slavery with those of leaders in other countries. Only after undertaking this task will we be able to judge America.

In a larger historical context, asserting that some of the American founders [owned](#) slaves does not make them appear remarkable, because for most of history slavery was a normal institution. Therefore, in retrospect, they are to be seen as the products of a peculiar time. What matters is not that they possessed slaves, but their revolutionary views on slavery during an era when it was universally embraced and their attempts at dismantling the system.

Thomas Jefferson in the original draft of the Declaration of Independence was exceptionally caustic in his [critique](#) of George III for imposing the slave trade on the colonies:

He [George III] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian

king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where Men should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or restrain this execrable commerce. And that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished dye, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people on whom he has obtruded them: thus paying off former crimes committed against the liberties of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the lives of another.

Of profound importance in this statement is that Jefferson capitalized the word *men*. To historian M. Andrew Holowchak this [indicates](#) that “philosophically and unequivocally Jefferson considered Blacks as men, not chattel.” However, such a remonstrance of slavery was [deleted](#) by the Continental Congress to achieve a compromise with Southern states. Like now, tradeoffs formed a crucial aspect of the political process. Those seeking to berate the Founding Fathers lack a proper understanding of history and politics. Thomas Sowell in his highly recommended text [Black Rednecks and White Liberals](#) [described](#) the intense political environment the founding fathers endured in their quest to outlaw slavery:

Many who have dismissed the anti-slavery words of the founders of the American republic as just rhetoric have not bothered to check the facts of history. Washington, Jefferson, and others did not just talk. They acted. Even when they acted within the political and legal constraints of their times, they acted repeatedly[,] sometimes winning and sometimes losing...When Jefferson drafted a state constitution for Virginia in 1776, his draft included a clause prohibiting any more importation of slaves and, in 1783, Jefferson included in a new draft of a Virginia constitution a proposal for the gradual emancipation of slaves. He was defeated in both these efforts. On the national scene, Jefferson returned

to the battle once again in 1784, declaring slavery illegal in all western territories of the country. The bill lost by one vote, that of a legislator too sick to come and vote. Afterwards, Jefferson said that the fate of millions unborn was hanging on the tongue of one man and heaven was silent in that awful moment.

Contemporary observers fail to acknowledge that the hostile political climate at the time limited what the Founding Fathers could achieve. Moreover, they had to contemplate the most feasible route to abolition. Emancipating slaves, if all legislators agreed, was easy, yet one had to confront the political difficulties one encounters in abolition without a clear plan. In a [letter](#) to Robert Morris, George Washington displays his penchant for the destruction of slavery provided that it was guided by a sound plan: "I can only say that there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it; but there is only one proper and effectual mode by which it can be accomplished, and that is by Legislative authority; and this, as far as my suffrage will go, shall never be wanting."

But not everyone was a pragmatist. Due to their personal convictions, some patriots were incensed by slavery, and they took personal steps to emancipate slaves. Men like [Oliver Ellsworth](#) and Roger Sherman fall into this category. Whereas the will of George Washington [stipulated](#) the emancipation of enslaved laborers, [Benjamin Franklin](#) liberated his slaves during his lifetime. So far, we have discussed the views of the Founding Fathers on slavery. Now let us contrast them with those of leaders of different societies to determine which positions were more enlightened.

William G. Clarence Smith in his intriguing [publication *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery*](#) details the venom leveled at emancipation in Islamic territories: "Asked to give up his slaves in 1861, the sultan of Magindanao replied 'that he

would rather give up his wife and children than his slaves, for lacking the latter he would cease to be a sultan.’” He continues: “The Sultan of Sulu wrote to the American authorities in 1902, insisting that slaves were held ‘according to Moro law, custom and the Mohammedan religion,’ in that order. Moreover, ‘slaves are part of our property. To have this property taken away from us would mean a great loss to us.’”

Similarly, historian Robin Law reminds us of the militant reaction of the [Dahomean](#) elite when the British began pressuring the government to disband the slave trade: “King Glele told British missionary Peter Bernasko in 1860 that ‘war, bloodshed (i.e. human sacrifice) and slave selling had been left to him by his father, he could not avoid them.” Law also notes that the assault on the slave trade “implied the demilitarization of the Dahomian state and this in turn implied an attack on human sacrifice, which in Dahomey was bound up with the culture of militarism.”

The examples provided suggest that slavery underpinned the cultural fabric of several non-Western societies. Furthermore, it is evident that following the abolition of slavery in America its leaders placed pressure on other countries to terminate the practice. So, in a strange sense, we may say that American imperialism helped to topple slavery. Likewise, based on our survey an objective analysis of historical positions on slavery should illustrate that America’s founding fathers were not only more progressive, but exhibited a moral disposition absent in most [places](#). Therefore, in contrast to the utterances of critics, what is distinct about America is not slavery, but rather its strident antislavery ideology despite slavery’s universal acceptance.

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