

The American Contradiction: Conceived in Liberty, Born in Shackles

Kenneth C. Davis

America was conceived in liberty and born in shackles. This is the Great Contradiction at the heart of our nation's story.

When the United States of America was founded in 1776, the Founding Fathers declared the lofty ideal of “all Men are created equal.” The Framers of the Constitution later set out to form a “more perfect Union” to secure “the Blessings of Liberty.”

But among their ranks were many men who bought, sold, and enslaved people. Slavery was present at the nation's birth and was essential to the foundation of the political and economic power that built the country in the early nineteenth century. As the United States grew from a thin ribbon of 13 states along the Atlantic coast to a nation spanning a continent, the spread of slavery created the fault line that eventually brought the nation to Civil War. In its wake was left a ruinous legacy of racism, inequality, and discrimination.

For some 30 years, as I have written and discussed this history and its repercussions in classrooms and with the general public, I have repeatedly encountered a pair of stark misconceptions. The first is that American slavery was a sideshow in U.S. history, practiced by a relatively small number of Americans, mostly in the Southern states. The second fallacy is that since slavery ended 150 years ago, we don't need to talk about it anymore.

But “The past is never dead,” as William Faulkner, a son of the South, once wrote. “It's not even past.”

Let's be clear. American slavery was not a minor subplot in the American drama, but one of the central acts in its history. For many years, the long, tragic narrative of slavery's destructive power and its cruel savagery were concealed

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in textbooks behind bland euphemisms, code words, and court rulings. Papered over with political rhetoric, most schoolbooks denied the harsh reality, or simply ignored the stark hypocrisy of what is called America's original sin. At best, slavery was treated like the awkward family relation whose picture gets pulled from the family photo album. At worst, it was justified and explained away. But, as John Adams once said, “Facts are stubborn things.”

Now more than ever, it is past time to set the record straight. Social studies educators need to take action. While celebrating the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, we

must acknowledge that slavery rocked the cradle of American history.

We need a new framework to teach that subject. I believe it must begin with five central points about the role that racial slavery played in the founding, creation, and development of the American republic. We must weave these fundamental facts into the bedrock of how we teach American History and Civics.

• *Enslaved people were in America before the Mayflower Pilgrims.*

In August 1619, a shipload of Africans captured to be sold arrived in Jamestown, Virginia.¹ These “twenty and odd Negroes” were traded in Virginia shortly after the colony's first elected assembly opened a session in a Jamestown church²—a fledgling step towards democracy in the Anglo-American colonies—and before the *Mayflower* arrived late in 1620.

The African slave trade in the Americas had commenced in the early 1500s when the Spanish began to transport kidnapped Africans to replace the enslaved indigenous people who were dying at an astonishing rate from forced labor, draconian punishments, and pandemic disease. That was the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade that took more than 12 million African people from their homes and violently carried them into bondage and death.

A depiction of the 1619 arrival of Africans at Jamestown.



Democracy and slavery in America were, in essence, born as twins. But their growth and development has not been equally recognized for much of our history. All 13 of the original colonies permitted slavery and most passed laws that cemented racial slavery as a permanent fixture, including the rule that children born of enslaved women were also enslaved—contrary to existing English law.

That 400-year trajectory was at the core of the ambitious 1619 Project produced by the *New York Times* in August 2019. This sweeping journalistic undertaking was an attempt to view American history through the lens of slavery and the impact of African Americans on every facet of American life and culture, going far beyond slavery’s role in history.³

The bold initiative had its critics who found shortcomings in some of the 1619 Project’s conclusions, including the view that America’s independence was

declared “in order to ensure slavery would continue.” Five prominent historians contested that and other claims made by the 1619 Project and the resulting conversation between them and the *Times* is an instructive exchange in the how and why of history.⁴ On March 11, 2020, the *New York Times* added a clarification on this point to the 1619 Project.⁵

But the fact remains that enslaved people were in the Americas long before the first English settlers. And the 400th anniversary of the first arrival in Jamestown, acclaimed as a cradle of American democracy, underscores that reality.

• *Thomas Jefferson condemned slavery in drafting the Declaration of Independence but other Founders scrubbed the language from the nation’s “birth certificate.”*

The proud, patriotic schoolbook version of tea parties, midnight rides, July

Fourth, and Valley Forge largely erased an important part of the story—the role slavery and African Americans played in the independence debate and revolutionary history.

While slavery may not have been the central issue in the American Revolution (as the 1619 Project claimed), its significance can’t be diminished or denied. As the American Revolution got underway, the nation was founded and governed by a group of Patriots, many of whom bought, sold, and enslaved people. The fact that men like Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Patrick Henry, George Mason, Benjamin Rush, and scores of other Founders had a hand in enslaving people was the reason that Dr. Samuel Johnson famously asked in 1775, “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for Liberty from the drivers of negroes?”⁶

In Thomas Jefferson’s draft version of the Declaration in July 1776, the author called slavery the “execrable



The scene at the signing of the Constitution, oil painting by Howard Chandler Christy, 1940

Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol, Washington, D.C.

Commerce” and “this assemblage of Horrors.” Jefferson’s original was then revised by the full Continental Congress, which had its own ideas and made some changes.

The alterations, Jefferson thought, were “mutilations.” Distressed by the editing, he made “fair copies” of his original sometime after July 4th. (The New York Public Library holds one of only two known surviving copies, which is displayed on occasion.⁷) In his careful, flowing script, Jefferson recreated his entire original wording to show what the Congress had changed, underscoring words and phrases that had been deleted or altered.

The most startling of these changes is a paragraph about what Jefferson calls “*this execrable commerce*”—in other words, slavery. Jefferson charged, without any foundation, that King George III was responsible for the slave trade and was preventing American efforts to restrain that trade. The entire section was deleted.

But it is striking to see Jefferson’s bold, block lettering when he describes:

an open market where MEN should be bought & sold.

Thomas Jefferson is the iconic personification of America’s Great Contradiction. Born into Virginia’s wealthy planter aristocracy, he was raised with enslaved people surrounding him. When he went off to William

and Mary College to study law, his childhood playmate, Jupiter—born enslaved in the same year as Jefferson—went along as his “trustworthy servant.” In his early legal and political career, Jefferson would argue against aspects of slavery. Yet the author of the Declaration was completely dependent upon the labor of enslaved people for his wealth, the food on his table, and the clothes on his back.

His stinging denunciation of slavery in the Declaration simply rings hollow when set against a lifetime of profiting from slavery and his personal behavior. Jefferson’s later published views on the inferiority of African Americans are indefensible. Most offensive are his degrading racist views of black women,⁸ especially in light of his now-acknowledged relationship with Sally Hemings, an enslaved woman who bore him at least six children, four of whom reached adulthood.⁹

But in his double standard, Jefferson had plenty of company. At least 40 of the 56 Signers of the Declaration either enslaved people, participated in the slave trade, or profited from it. Jefferson later noted that his condemnation of slavery—and the King for his role in it—was removed in deference to those Signers who had enslaved people and those who had earned their wealth from the market “where men should be bought and sold.”¹⁰

There is no question that the Signers of the Declaration, and many others in the Revolutionary generation, were risking “lives, fortunes, and sacred honor” in the struggle for Independence. But when we focus on that proud, patriotic narrative at the expense of the whole truth, we are not teaching history. Instead it is a comfortable narrative bleached of the searing reality that many of the Signers owed the lives and fortunes they had pledged to slavery.

One corrective to this “white history” is to teach some “black history,” such as *The Hemingses of Monticello*, Annette Gordon-Reed’s magisterial account of the black family so central to Thomas Jefferson’s home and life. Or read Frederick Douglass’s “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”¹¹ This tirade was delivered in 1852 in Rochester, New York, to an audience that included President Millard Fillmore, who had signed the bills collectively known as the Compromise of 1850. Among them was the Fugitive Slave Act that had so enraged Douglass and others—such as Harriet Beecher Stowe who wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in response to the law—because it made the entire nation complicit in support of slavery. Douglass shocked many of his fellow Abolitionists that day by denouncing the hypocrisy of celebrating freedom when so many people were still in chains.¹²

“What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham.... There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour.”¹³

Of course, this view was not widely shared through most of our past teach-

ing of the American Revolution. It was a period that became mythologized almost instantly. John Adams forlornly predicted this in 1790. “The history of our Revolution will be one continued lie from one end to the other,” he wrote fellow Declaration signer Benjamin Rush. “The essence of the whole will be that Dr. Franklin’s electrical rod smote the earth and out sprang General Washington.... [T]henceforward these two conducted all the policies, negotiations, legislatures and the war.”¹⁴

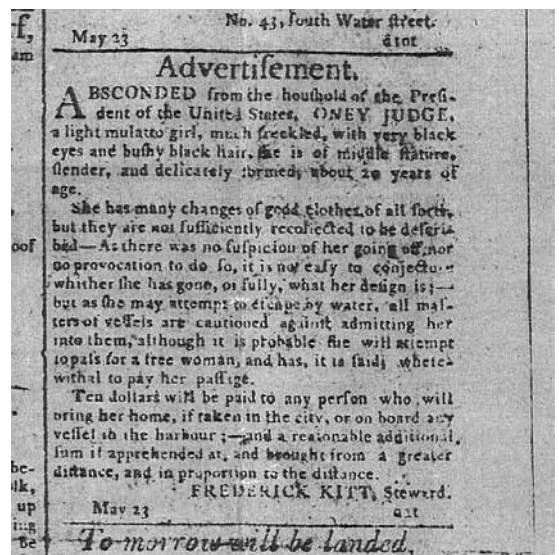
Part of that mythology was the complete erasure of the role of African Americans and slavery during the Revolution. It is also long past time to correct that. African Americans fought in every major engagement of the American Revolution. But George Washington did not want armed black men in his army. Necessity forced him to relent.

And we can no longer teach how Washington won the Battle of Yorktown in October 1781 without acknowledging that his first order of business after the surrender was to return thousands of enslaved people who had sought refuge with the British, including dozens from his Mount Vernon and Jefferson’s Monticello plantations. (The Monticello contingent included five-year-old Isaac Granger who was with the British in Yorktown and whose story is recounted in my book *In the Shadow of Liberty*.)

• *Slavery was “baked into the cake” of the Constitution.*

Although the completed draft of the U.S. Constitution never used the words “slave” or “slavery,” perpetuating Jefferson’s “execrable commerce” was essential to the compromises that created the plan of government and its eventual ratification by the states. The most important of these was the “three-fifths” compromise, or “federal ratio,” which counted enslaved people in the census to determine the number of seats each state was

Advertisement for Runaway Oney Judge, enslaved servant in George Washington’s presidential household. *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 24, 1796 Wikimedia Commons



given in the House of Representatives and its number of Electors.

This provided states like Virginia, with the nation’s largest enslaved population, the core of its “slave power”—the political bedrock that meant that four of the first five presidents were Virginia enslavers; five of the first seven and ten of the first fifteen presidents were enslavers or born into enslaved households.¹⁵ Also cemented into the Constitution was the provision that no laws regulating the slave trade could be passed for twenty years.

The Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the Year one thousand eight hundred and eight, but a Tax or duty may be imposed on such Importation, not exceeding ten dollars for each Person.

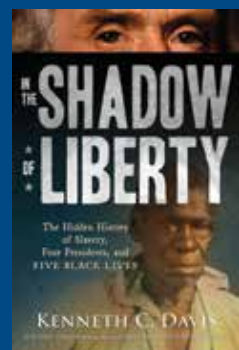
There was some optimism in 1788 that the end of the foreign slave trade, which came in 1808, would ultimately cause slavery’s demise. It was a tragically false hope.

Under the Constitution, the federal government was also expected to assist in the recovery of fugitives.

No Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due.

This clause was strengthened with passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793.¹⁶ The law was signed by President George Washington in Philadelphia, where slavery had been abolished in 1780,

This article draws on the research, history, and material explored in Kenneth C. Davis’s book, *In the Shadow of Liberty: The Hidden History of Slavery, Four Presidents, and Five Black Lives* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2016), about enslaved people and the presidents who “owned” them.



the first act of abolition in history by a democracy.

As president, Washington had to contend personally with the issue of fugitives. In May 1796, a young enslaved woman escaped from Washington's Philadelphia residence when she learned she would be given away as a wedding present. When the enslaved maid, Ona Judge, learned that she would be gifted to one of Martha Washington's granddaughters, Judge chose to flee. Ona Judge "absconded" from the Washington's presidential household and the president soon advertised a reward of \$10 for her return. Washington spent the next three years trying to track her down and restore her to bondage. (An account of Ona Judge's escape is also offered in *In the Shadow of Liberty*.)

Before 1780, slavery was legal in every one of the first 13 states and the source of great fortunes. At the birth of the Republic, there were slightly less than one million enslaved people in America. By 1860, that number had grown to nearly four million of a total population of a little more than 23 million (or 12.6% of the total population). Even though the foreign slave trade was banned in 1808, the internal slave trade became America's most valuable financial resource.

"Entrepreneurial enslavers moved more than 1 million enslaved people, by force ... to vast territories that were seized—also by force—from their Native American inhabitants," writes Edward E. Baptist in *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, an excellent source exploring how internal slavery became the engine of American wealth and industrial development. "From 1783 at the end of the American Revolution to 1861, the number of slaves increased five times over, and all this expansion produced a powerful nation. ... Slavery's expansion shaped every crucial aspect of the economy and politics of the new nation."¹⁷

The three-fifths compromise had guaranteed the profound impact of slavery on presidential politics. And most slaveholding presidents—includ-

ing Washington in New York and Philadelphia, Jefferson, Madison, and Jackson—brought enslaved people to serve them in the nation's capital. The White House was built, and later rebuilt, with enslaved labor. The last president to bring enslaved servants to the White House was Zachary Taylor in 1851.

• *Slavery made the Civil War inevitable.*

The political and economic power that slavery endowed upon the slaveholding states—not necessarily the moral, religious, philosophical, or legal questions raised by slavery—constituted the fault line in nineteenth-century America that brought the nation to war. It was not some amorphous concept of "states' rights" still touted by the Confederacy's apologists. Most opponents of slavery—including Abraham Lincoln—were content to permit slavery to continue where it existed. They wanted to stop its spread to new territories. Each new state with slavery permitted added congressional seats and Electors to the power of the slaveholders.

The documents explaining the secession of such states as South Carolina make plain that slavery and its extension and perpetuation was the issue.

We affirm that these ends for which this Government was instituted have been defeated, and the Government itself has been made destructive of them by the action of the non-slaveholding States. Those States have assumed the right of deciding upon the propriety of our domestic institutions; and have denied the rights of property established in fifteen of the States and recognized by the Constitution; they have denounced as sinful the institution of Slavery; they have permitted the open establishment among them of societies, whose avowed object is to disturb the

peace and to eloin the property of the citizens of other States. They have encouraged and assisted thousands of our slaves to leave their homes; and those who remain, have been incited by emissaries, books and pictures to servile insurrection. ("South Carolina Declaration of the Causes of Succession;" See Note for the secession declarations of Georgia, Mississippi, Virginia, and Texas.)¹⁸

Another of the prominent voices justifying secession belonged to Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens, who delivered what is known widely as the "Cornerstone Speech" in March 1861.

Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.¹⁹

The economic and political power this "corner-stone" provided to the enslavers, and to the industrialists dependent on the production of cotton—the United States of America's most valuable commodity—was at the center of the struggle that ended in bloodshed. For many years after the Civil War ended, the "glorious cause" and "War of Northern Aggression" narrative dominated the teaching of Civil War history. These arguments still echo in the opinions of those who want to retain the monuments and statues honoring major figures of the Confederacy, the physical vestiges of the "Lost Cause" mythology. New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu eloquently made the case for removal of these monuments in 2017:

The record is clear: New Orleans's Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis and P.G.T. Beauregard statues were erected with the goal of rewriting history to glorify the Confederacy and perpetuate the idea of white supremacy. These monuments stand not as mournful markers of our legacy of slavery and segregation, but in reverence of it.²⁰

It is long past time to put that reverent mythology to rest.

• *The abolition of slavery after the Civil War did not end the stark divisions that plague the United States.*

On June 19, 1865, Major Gen. Gordon Granger of the U.S. Army stood on the balcony of a building in downtown Galveston and read General Order No. 3 to the assembled crowd below. "The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free."

Two months after Robert E. Lee's surrender ended the Civil War in April 1865, the enslaved people of Texas learned about Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, formally announced on January 1, 1863.²¹ Overnight, some 250,000 people enslaved in Texas were free. The date of June 19 would quickly become celebrated, first in Texas, and later in emancipated communities in the former Confederacy as "Juneteenth."²²

While the tradition of celebrating the end of slavery with picnics, "red soda," rodeos, and rousing church services was well-known throughout much of the African American community and eventually travelled North with the "Great Migration," it was little-known in the white world. And this holiday celebrating the end of slavery was certainly not officially recognized—until recently. The point is that how we tell history and then drape it over national holidays has

always been subject to someone's agenda. Winners wrote history and who got to tell the story shaped the narrative—or the myth, depending on your perspective.

More than 50 years ago, a commission appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson investigated urban violence in largely African American cities in the "long, hot summer" of 1967. In February 1968, the Kerner Commission starkly warned that America was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal."²³ But that warning also aptly describes how we teach the American past. We have two histories: one black, one white, separate and unequal. The once somewhat obscure folk holiday of Juneteenth represents another example of black and white history.

While Juneteenth marked slavery's end in the popular mind of many African Americans, the end of the war eventually led to the legal end of slavery with ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment (1865), and the two other "Reconstruction" Amendments—the Fourteenth (1868) and Fifteenth (1870).²⁴ There are those who choose to believe that slavery's impact ended there.

One example of the idea that this piece of the nation's past is "ancient history" was the reaction of Senator Mitch McConnell to the issue of reparations for slavery. "I don't think reparations for something that happened 150 years ago when none of us currently living are responsible is a good idea," the Kentucky Republican said last year about the issue. "We've tried to deal with our original sin of slavery by fighting a civil war, by passing landmark civil rights legislation. We've elected an African American president."²⁵

But the slate is not clean. And unfortunately, the subject of slavery is still badly taught, misunderstood, swept away, and overlooked. We don't like to face the fact that its pernicious impact—socially, politically, and historically—remains at the core of so many American ills.

And while Senator McConnell may think that the Civil War removed the

stain of America's "original sin," the damage of American slavery continued. Its role in building the nation, the fabric of America's original constitutional government, presidential power, and the legacy of racism it created over centuries of bitter racial division are as profound as ever.

A recent study by the Southern Poverty Law Center has underscored the grievous shortcomings of American schools when it comes to teaching about slavery and its central role in American history. According to the report, only eight percent of high school seniors surveyed can identify slavery as the central cause of the Civil War.²⁶

But, in broader terms, there is another problem, perhaps more disturbing. Not everyone wants to learn these lessons. The divisiveness of the question of how we teach about slavery and African American history was underscored by a recent survey revealing that 85 percent of African Americans say there's not enough black history in our schools, but only 32 percent of whites agreed. According to the survey, the split is even starker when divided by parties, with Republicans now 30 points more likely than Democrats to say schools should *teach less black history*.²⁷ Of course, the history of American slavery is American history. It is the story of global commerce, a Triangle Trade that made great fortunes. The story of a Constitutional Compromise that fixed enslaved people as "three-fifths of a person," providing the slaveholding states with the congressional and electoral advantage that was the core of "Slave Power" in the half-century leading to the Civil War. And it is the story behind the long decades of Jim Crow legislation, segregation, and dehumanizing injustice that flowed in the wake of the Civil War.

But we can't pretend the slate is clean. We must make this story much more real and compelling than history classes have done for a very long time. It needs blood, sweat, and tears. It needs tragedy and triumph. A centuries-long crime against humanity, American slavery can't be reduced to bullet points of

dates, speeches, and proclamations in a classroom Power Point presentation.

In 1858, Abraham Lincoln told an audience in Edwardsville, Illinois,

When by all these means you have succeeded in dehumanizing the negro; when you have put him down, and made it forever impossible for him to be but as the beasts of the field; when you have extinguished his soul, and placed him where the ray of hope is blown out in darkness like that which broods over the spirits of the damned; are you quite sure the demon which you have roused *will not turn and rend you?* ... Familiarize yourselves with the chains of bondage, and you are preparing your own limbs to wear them.²⁸

Lincoln warned against dehumanizing the enslaved. We must guard against dehumanizing the real story of real people. The key to teaching this subject, in my recent experience of speaking to thousands of students in hundreds of classrooms, is to give slavery a human face. When I tell school children about George Washington buying teeth from his enslaved people, they sit up and pay attention. They take note when they learn that Ona Judge challenged the most powerful man in America because she chose not to be a wedding present. They are fascinated by the notion of a 10-year-old Paul Jennings being taken to the White House to tend the Madisons and then, many years later, standing in Madison's bedroom as the ex-president died.

Will America continue to hide this history? Will that history be dehumanized by relying on the constitutional euphemisms of "involuntary servitude," "those bound to service," and "persons held in service," and the academy's jargon? Or can we talk about the real blood, sweat, and tears of slavery—its true human cost—and the legacy it led to in creat-

ing the civil rights movement. We ignore those very human stories at our peril.

As educators, we have a solemn obligation to stop the endless loop of willful ignorance that keeps students in the dark. But our education deficit can't be fixed with Band-Aid solutions. The notion that a month of African American history each February covers the wound is foolhardy. This is not simply a matter of tinkering around the edges and adding a corrective patch to the problem. It is time to face our flaws and correct them. 🌍

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