

ESSAY

How America's Founding Fathers Missed a Chance to Abolish Slavery

They swept the issue under the rug, and even Thomas Jefferson realized that civil war was inevitable before he died on July 4, 1826. But history could have taken a different direction.

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There was no greater devotee to the American cause of independence than the Marquis de Lafayette. The young and idealistic French aristocrat endured the terrible winter at Valley Forge and fought bravely in critical battles in the Revolutionary War—playing a decisive role in George Washington's victory at Yorktown. He revered the man he called his “beloved, matchless Washington” as a surrogate father. Gen. Washington was just as enamored of the Frenchman who helped him win the war: If you visit the first president's estate at Mount Vernon today, you will see, displayed prominently in the front parlor, the rusted key to the Bastille in Paris that Lafayette sent Washington during the French Revolution, describing it in a letter as a tribute from a “missionary of liberty to its patriarch.”

And yet when the war was done, Lafayette expressed disillusionment with the patriarch of liberty, who politely rebuffed or ignored the Frenchman's repeated pleas to free America's slaves—some of whom had fought valiantly as soldiers in the assault at Yorktown. “I would never have drawn my sword in the cause of America, if I could have conceived that thereby I was founding a land of slavery,” Lafayette later said, according to historian

Henry Wiencek's 2003 book *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America*. His sentiments came to be used as a rallying cry by abolitionists before the Civil War.

Lafayette was only one of many legendary figures associated with America's founding 244 years ago this Saturday, July 4, who died dismayed over its inherent contradictions over race, which only grew more intractable with time. And as Americans celebrate another Independence Day, the sense of disillusionment has not disappeared, either. No doubt, a great deal has changed for the better since the Civil War, including the abolishment of slavery 155 years ago and the constitutional and legislative establishment of equal rights for all Americans. But, somehow, too little has changed in terms of the racial divide that—in a way that is all too apparent after the killing of George Floyd and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement—the founders and their successors not only failed to heal but often to address at all.

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It did not have to be this way. As some historians now argue, America's racial divisions might have been addressed much sooner. "I think there are two great tragedies that come out of the Revolutionary War," said the Pulitzer Prize-winning presidential historian Joseph Ellis, who is working on a new book about the subject. "One is removal of the Indians and the other is slavery. I think the removal of Native Americans from their lands was a Greek tragedy—in other words, I don't think it could have happened any other way. The demography was such that it was fated. But I think slavery was a Shakespearian tragedy. That is, it could have gone the other way. The first anti-slavery movement in the entire Western world happens here in the United States, right at the end of the Revolutionary War."

Only in recent years have scholars begun to acknowledge the extent to which the true abolitionist movement in America began not in the mid-19th century leading up to the Civil War, under such famed figures as William Lloyd Garrison, but in the very earliest years of the republic, at the hands of such anti-slavery Founding Fathers as Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay. It was shortly before the Revolution that the Pennsylvania Abolition Society was formed, with Franklin later elected its president. The New-York Manumission Society was created in 1785 by Jay, and joined by Hamilton, to promote the gradual abolition of slavery. Franklin, who was a sage, grandfatherly figure revered by the other founders as a font of wisdom and advice, actually made the abolition of slavery the last crusade of his life. Though as a young man Franklin had owned slaves himself and published advertisements for slave sales in his newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, toward the end of his life he became a passionate activist for emancipation. Franklin's last public act before his death in 1790 was to send to the first Congress of the United States a petition asking it to "devise means for removing the Inconsistency from the Character of the American People" and "promote mercy and justice toward this distressed Race."

From left: An abolitionist pamphlet published in Boston in 1762. The cover of a letter to George Washington on his continued enslavement of people from Edward Rushton, a British abolitionist, in 1797. The title page of a pamphlet from former U.S. President James Madison proposing the gradual abolition of slavery, "without danger or loss" of the economic and social stability of the South, in 1825. MPI/NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS/GETTY IMAGES

Even in Virginia, gradual emancipation plans were discussed, and both Washington and Thomas Jefferson thought—perhaps wishfully—that slavery would die a natural death before long. Their default position was to leave the issue to the coming generations; they were too busy creating a new nation out of unwieldy former colonies. But Washington, prodded by comrades he admired like Lafayette and Lt. Col. John Laurens—an idealistic South Carolinian who pushed hard for emancipation before being killed near the end of the Revolutionary War—remained deeply anguished over the issue, some historians say. Ultimately, he became the only founder to free all his slaves in his will (though he left it to his wife, Martha Custis Washington, to execute his plans, which she delayed).

“If you look at Washington’s will, he’s not conflicted over the place of African Americans at all,” Wiencek said in an interview. “From one end of his papers to the other, I looked for some sense of racism and found none, unlike Jefferson, who’s explicit on his belief in the inferiority of Black people. In his will, Washington authored a bill of rights for Black people and said they should be taught to read and write. They were Americans, with the right to live here, to be educated, and to work productively as free people.” Washington’s devoted comrade-in-arms, Lafayette, like many early abolitionists including Franklin, also rejected all notions of Black inferiority. In a 1786 letter to John Adams, Lafayette wrote: “In the cause of my black brethren, I feel myself warmly interested and most decidedly side against the white part of mankind.”

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“That moment at the founding was really a horrible missed opportunity,” said another historian, Sharon Murphy of Providence College, author of *Investing in Life: Insurance in Antebellum America*. “Many of these slave owners weren’t wedded to slavery in a real hard way. It wasn’t empty talk. They really did see it as going against what they were preaching as a new nation.”

Indeed, in the early years of the republic, slavery looked destined for extinction not only because it was antithetical to the founding principles of the nation, but also because it wasn’t working economically. Before the invention of the cotton gin at the end of the 18th century, when many Virginia plantations like Jefferson’s and James Madison’s were mainly growing tobacco and only beginning to shift to wheat, they were actually losing money on slavery. “Tobacco was destroying the soil. At the time, Virginia would have been better off without slavery,” Ellis said.

“Washington had over 300 slaves but only a third of them worked. The rest were too old. ... Jefferson, Madison, and [James] Monroe all ended up bankrupt because of this problem. The right way to go was to end slavery economically, as well as for justice’s sake.”

Ellis suggests that Washington—who set so many critical precedents that shaped the character of the new nation, for example, forestalling a rebellion among his soldiers against civilian control near the end of the Revolutionary War and then leaving power after two terms—might have made a difference on the race issue had he lived longer and expressed his real views more forthrightly. (He died suddenly of a throat infection in 1799 at the age of 67.) Washington “could have changed history” by turning his home state of Virginia into a “beachhead” for abolition, Ellis argues.

“There was a chance that could have happened. If Washington had decided, ‘Let’s go to the capital; this is a testament I want to make about the country’s future.’ Instead of delivering a Farewell Address about foreign policy, which is what he did, make it about slavery; that would have made a huge difference.”

But Washington at the time was far more preoccupied with keeping his new nation out of entanglements with France and England and tamping down the emerging factionalism between Jefferson and Hamilton over the powers of the federal government. So he and the other founders took the less onerous path of sweeping the slavery issue under the rug, believing

that time was on their side. “My feeling is that Washington believes slavery would come to an end when the international slave trade ended in 1808, which is what the U.S. Constitution called for,” Wiencek said.

Yet even as the United States stabilized as a new nation, slavery did not quietly wither and die off; on the contrary, it became more profitable and widespread, and the Southern slave states became more recalcitrant about abolishing it. And some of the founders, including Jefferson, later came to realize that all they had really done was lay the groundwork for the Civil War.

A family of enslaved people picks cotton in the fields near Savannah, Georgia, circa 1860. BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

In the early 19th century, as the fervor over the Revolution's ideals and moral qualms over slavery faded, the "peculiar institution" (the euphemism some Southerners used to refer to slavery) also began to make sense economically with the shift among Southern plantations from tobacco to cotton, which was much easier to cultivate, and the widespread use of the cotton gin. Because the machine could separate out seed from cotton on its own—a slow, painstaking job formerly done by slaves—Eli Whitney's invention meant the more pickers of cotton bolls (that is, slaves) one owned, the more profit one made. "Washington thought the window for emancipation was opening toward the end of his life, but it was really closing," Ellis said. "They [the founders] didn't foresee the cotton gin and the rise of the cotton kingdom. The first census made clear that the slave population was doubling every 20 to 25 years."

Jefferson, who spent his life trying to get out of debt and in the end freed only a few of his slaves, became a key figure in preserving slavery, as he and other Southern planters came to view slaves as valuable capital assets that would multiply over time through birth rates. "By then, the ownership of Black people was so profitable, the institution was getting harder and harder to dislodge, especially after Jefferson allowed it in the [newly purchased] Louisiana territory," Wiencek said. "Jefferson was one of the first to realize you could use enslaved people as collateral; he took out a \$2,000 slave-equity loan in Amsterdam. When this notion spread throughout the South, it was really game over for abolition." Edward Baptist of Cornell University, another historian of slavery, notes that by the 1830s, slave assets were being bundled and securitized by banks for big profits, not unlike mortgages were in the financial crisis of the mid-2000s. "It's not just the productive labor but also the reproductive labor of enslaved people that is extracted and exported around," he said in an interview.

Jefferson, the third president, was followed by two successive slave-owning Virginian presidents—his acolytes James Madison and James Monroe, who ensured the perpetuation of slavery into the early 19th century and the Civil War period. "The Virginia dynasty set things in the wrong direction," said Ellis, referring to the fact that four out of the first five U.S. presidents were Virginians. "If Virginia had gone the other way, I think the whole arc of history would have also gone the other way."

And so, in one of the consummate ironies of American history, it was Jefferson—the author of the Declaration of Independence who wrote that “all men are created equal”—who proved central to institutionalizing the racial inequality that still pervades American life. Though as a young man, Jefferson, too, had gingerly advocated freeing the slaves, as time passed, his statements on the topic became more contradictory and deceptive, and he gradually hardened toward emancipation. Indeed, perhaps no founder embodies the grotesque ambiguity of America’s original sin more than Jefferson, who called slavery a “hideous evil” but, by the time he reached middle age, had turned Monticello into a slave factory to pay down his debts—and until he died, he never truly acknowledged the hypocrisy that defined his entire life.

A map shows the status of slavery in the United States in 1821. Published in 1920, it shows free states, states undergoing gradual abolition, free states via the Ordinance of 1787, free states via the Missouri Compromise, and slave-holding states.

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Jefferson—who was one of the youngest of the Founding Fathers in 1776—was also one of the few to live long enough to realize how costly his

avoidance of the issue would become. A few years before he died, Jefferson appeared to understand that the Civil War was inevitable, warning in a famous letter that he heard the toll of “the [death] knell of the union” after the Missouri Compromise of 1820, when the Southern slave states insisted on maintaining an equal balance of slave and free states by demanding that Missouri be admitted to the union as a slave state to counter the admittance of free Maine. The Missouri Compromise meant an irreconcilable stalemate—to be resolved only by war.

Equally alarmed by the Missouri decision was Jefferson’s devoted friend and fellow Founding Father John Adams—who famously died on the same day as Jefferson, July 4, 1826, 50 years to the day after independence. Though Adams, a Northerner who owned no slaves, opposed slavery his whole life, he had genteelly avoided pressing the “sage of Monticello” too much on the issue. Preserving the union was paramount in Adams’s mind, especially in face of foreign threats to its unity. But in one of his last letters to Jefferson, Adams spoke at last of being “terrified” about “the black cloud” of slavery that has been “hanging over [this country] for half a century.” (Jefferson did not respond.)

Following the Missouri Compromise, Adams also knew it was time to speak out publicly—and he prodded his equivocating son, soon-to-be-president John Quincy Adams, to take a stand on the issue. “I shudder when I think of the calamities which slavery is likely to produce in this country,” the second president wrote in a letter to John Quincy’s wife, Louisa Catherine Adams, in 1820. “If the gangrene is not stopped I can see nothing but insurrections of the blacks against the whites and massacres by the whites in their turn of the blacks. ...”

John Quincy Adams, the sixth president, later became one of the most prominent abolitionists in the country. But it was much too late to stop the Civil War—and all that followed.

The Union commander's notice of the Emancipation Proclamation to the citizens of Winchester, Virginia, on Jan. 5, 1863. FOTORESEARCH/GETTY IMAGES

Could slavery have been abolished earlier, the Civil War

avoided, and Black Americans afforded more of an opportunity to enjoy equal rights much sooner, as George Washington himself apparently once wanted? It may be “wishful thinking,” as Providence College’s Murphy puts it, to suggest that history could have played out much differently. “The problem is that Washington is more of an outlier,” Murphy said. “More people then were like Jefferson.” Washington himself understood this fact, which was one reason, Ellis added, that the first president “thought you couldn’t raise the issue frontally” and why he evaded Lafayette’s plans for emancipation and building communities of freed slaves.

In a letter to Lafayette, Washington told his French friend that he was moved by “the benevolence of your heart. ... Would to God a like Spirit would diffuse itself generally into the minds of the people of this country, but I despair of seeing it—some petitions were presented to the Assembly, at its last Session, for the abolition of slavery, but they could scarcely obtain a reading.”

Lafayette remained unassuaged, and his example lived on. Frederick Douglass later paid homage to the Frenchman at his grave in Paris and savaged the “shameless hypocrisy” of the founders in an 1852 speech: “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; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity.” It was poetic justice, perhaps, that the recent protests after the killing of George Floyd converged on Lafayette Square, the park across from the White House that is named for the French abolitionist hero of the revolution, without acknowledging his importance in the cause the protesters were fighting for.

But like Adams, Jefferson, and other founders, Washington was far more concerned about the stability of the new republic. “He and the other founders knew that republics always died young,” Ellis said. “They fell apart. They feared the fate of the republic was still at risk, until it was solidified.” As Jefferson put it in his warning letter about the Missouri decision, “We have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.”

William Darity, a Duke University economist and scholar who is one of the nation’s leading authorities on the economic impact of slavery and the continuing problem of income inequality for African Americans, believes that there were “a number of roads when the wrong path was taken” going back to the beginning of the republic. At the same time, he said in an interview, it’s nearly impossible to imagine that all 13 colonies would have joined in the revolution had slavery been made an issue. “The most resistant would have been South Carolina,” said Darity, who recently co-wrote the book *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*.

Cornell’s Baptist agrees that states in the Deep South like South Carolina and Georgia were quite dug in, even if some in Virginia were wavering on the issue. “I would point out that the most pro-slavery elements in the Constitutional Convention and in the ratification process frequently got what they wanted,” Baptist said. “The South Carolinians came to Philadelphia determined to get lots of things, including the fugitive slave clause, in the Constitution, and they did.”