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Slavery Was Not a Secondary Part of Our History

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I am just one of many contributors to The New York Times Magazine's 1619 Project and can't claim to speak for it. But I have found the reaction to the project — or at least, one specific set of reactions — very revealing and worthy of a little analysis.

The stated aim of the project is to "reframe the country's history" around the arrival of enslaved Africans to English North America. The argument is not that the United States was actually founded in 1619 but that its culture, economy, politics and social relations are inextricably bound in the race-based chattel slavery that would emerge in Virginia and spread throughout the colonies. Or as Nikole Hannah-Jones, who organized the project, puts it in her introductory essay, "Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country."

Unsurprisingly, the package has received considerable pushback from conservatives. They've made a forceful attack, in particular, on the idea that the founding was bound up in slavery and white supremacy. In The New York Post, Rich Lowry of National Review calls this idea an "odious and reductive lie." The Federalist says it is "sweeping historical revisionism in the service of contemporary left-wing politics." Ilya Shapiro, of the Cato Institute's Robert A. Levy Center for Constitutional Studies, said the 1619 Project was intended to "delegitimize mankind's greatest experiment in human liberty & self-governance."

Read in good faith, these arguments reflect an older consensus about the historiography of the early American republic. For those historians, working through the 20th century, slavery was a secondary part of the story of the American Revolution, with only modest influence on the shape and structure of the Constitution. It's not that they didn't recognize slavery as an important part of American society, or were unaware of contemporaneous critique of the founding generation (like Samuel Johnson's famous quip in 1775's "Taxation No Tyranny" asking "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?"), but that slavery was a parenthetical in their story of the founding.

There is, however, a competing narrative that puts slavery at the center of constitutional debate and ties white racism to the revolutionary project. I want to talk about two recent entries in this literature: "Slavery's Constitution: From Revolution to Ratification," by the historian David Waldstreicher, and "The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution," by the historian Robert G. Parkinson.

The popular narrative of the American Revolution depicts a colonial population united in frustration and anger with Britain. But the history is more complicated — it always is. "Patriot leaders had a momentous task of narration in the days after Lexington," Parkinson notes. "Not only did they have to convince a majority of colonists that their cultural cousins were now their mortal enemies; they had to make such an appeal using arguments that all could agree on." With

one hand, they appealed to common values — of liberty and equality. With the other, they defined an enemy. They "valorized white citizen soldiers for defending freedom and castigated those who opposed it." They gave "new republican valence" to longstanding prejudices against enslaved Africans and Native Americans. "Through hundreds of stories told and retold, published and republished, in weekly patriot newspapers, the first construction of what it meant to be an American meant the diametric opposite of merciless savages or domestic insurrectionists."

In their effort to construct a singular American people, the patriots attached new meaning to whiteness, conflating it with reason, with freedom, with citizenship. Thousands of blacks and Native peoples fought for a revolution whose architects excluded them as members of the new polity.

Then there's the Constitution. In his book, Waldstreicher asks readers to hold two ideas in their minds simultaneously. First, that the egalitarian ideals of the American Revolution produced a sincere politics of antislavery. Vermont, for example, eliminated slavery in its 1777 Constitution, and Pennsylvania introduced gradual emancipation in 1780. In Virginia, where 40 percent of the population was enslaved, some planters freed their slaves. Even Thomas Jefferson, as a member of Congress under the Articles of Confederation, proposed a ban on slaves in the western territories after 1800. It failed by a single vote. Americans were conflicted on how blacks would fit into their new republic, but a growing number could not reconcile the rhetoric of liberty with the practice of bondage.

At the same time, the American revolutionaries were committed to the protection of private property. Which, for many of the most prominent, powerful men in the country, meant property in enslaved people. Principles of liberty may have weakened slavery in the North, but they did the opposite in the South.

When delegates gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 to construct a new government, slavery was the issue of key concern. It came to the floor during the first days of deliberation and would shape nearly every decision of that summer.

How could it not? The framers wanted a national government with the power and flexibility to confront any problem the Republic might face. They wanted to be able to govern. But every question of representation and federal power touched slavery. It was inescapable. Here's Waldstreicher on how they resolved the problem:

It is common, and accurate enough, to say that the federal republic could not have been created in 1787-88 had not slavery been left alone, but the convention went further and deeper than that. In the founders' design, slavery informed the successes of the movement for a stronger national government and shaped its limits. Because proslavery forces were able to make deals to protect their interests in particular, slavery itself gained the protection of the federal union while being protected from that union's new powers.

Conservative critics have challenged the 1619 Project with a series of claims and assertions about slavery and the founding. There are clear answers and rejoinders. Rich Lowry points to the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which banned slavery in the territories between the Great Lakes and the Ohio River, as evidence of the antislavery intent of the founding generation. But this argument misses a provision in the ordinance for the return of fugitive slaves, as well as

considerable evidence that Southerners backed the ban on slavery for commercial concerns, not out of lofty idealism. "The clause respecting slavery was agreed to by the Southern members for the purpose of preventing Tobacco and Indigo from being made on the N.W. side of the Ohio as well for sev[eral] other political reasons," wrote Senator William Grayson of Virginia, an antifederalist, to James Monroe on Aug. 8 of that year.

The Federalist, likewise, points to the federal ban on the international slave trade, passed in 1807 to take effect in 1808. But that's also complicated. The Constitution doesn't mention slavery — which conservatives state as a point of defense for the framers — but it has multiple clauses that insulate the institution from federal power. There's the three-fifths clause, which ties representation and the power to spend and levy taxes to slavery. There's the fugitive slave clause, which is self-explanatory. There are clauses that empower Congress to suppress "domestic insurrections" (understood as slave rebellions), and clauses that prohibit Congress from levying high taxes on slaves, closing one avenue for forced emancipation. (High taxes on enslaved people, like high taxes on cigarettes and alcohol in the present, would discourage the purchase of slaves.) Looked at in concert with these provisions of the Constitution, the ban on the slave trade can be easily read as a *concession* to slave owners, given the presence of revolutionary antislavery sentiment (the same sentiment conservatives cite in defense of the framers).

Antifederalists saw it as such. "What adds to the evil" of the three-fifths compromise, wrote "Brutus," a prominent pseudonymous opponent of the Constitution, "is that these states are to be permitted to continue the inhuman traffic of importing slaves, until the year 1808." And "for every cargo of these unhappy people," he continued, "they are to be rewarded by having an increase of members in the general assembly."

As for the passage of the prohibition itself, the motives were mixed. By the time Congress voted in 1807, "natural increase" had produced a large population of native-born enslaved people who could meet demands for cotton cultivation as well as fuel a lucrative domestic trade in human property. Southern slaveholders could back a ban because they no longer needed an international market for slaves.

No, the American revolutionaries did not declare a commitment to white supremacy, and the framers of the Constitution did not spell out their structural accommodation with slavery. But there's good, strong evidence that these were critical parts of the founding moment, fundamentally tied to the identity and political economy of the new nation. This was not inevitable. There were other choices available — other options for constructing the nation. "A general emancipation after the revolution," writes the historian Winthrop D. Jordan in "Black Over White: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550 to 1812," "would have come as a glorious triumph, the capstone of the Revolution." Instead, the revolutionary generation ran away from the implications of their ideas. And when, just a few years later, enslaved people in the French colony of Saint-Domingue rebelled in the name of liberty, American officials like Jefferson feared similar "combustion" in the South.

My larger point is this: History is not the uncovering of absolute truths. It is a dialogue between the present and the past, between communities of scholars and thinkers working to understand the record of what came before — it is always a process of change and revision and critique. Conservatives have every right to criticize The 1619 Project. But if they're going to call it "lies" and "garbage history" — if they're going accuse it of propaganda and partisanship — then they

should ask themselves a question: Are they looking for better scholarship or are they making a demand for orthodoxy?