

# 1776: Out of Many, One

by Dr. Gordon S. Wood

**I**t is a great honor to be here to receive the Philip Merrill Award from ACTA. For a number of years, I have been on the nominating committee, but in all those years it never occurred to me that I might become the recipient of this distinguished award. Looking at the previous recipients of this award, I am deeply humbled and grateful for the honor you have bestowed on me.

This is a special year for ACTA, 25 plus one. I realize that decades ago I participated in ACTA affairs before the organization became famous. I only later became aware that I had been present at the creation of something very important. Sometime in the mid-1990s, Jerry Martin, whom I had known from some previous academic business with NEH, invited me to come to Washington and talk about the Founders. I don't recall the details, but I remember that John Patrick Diggins joined us, my first meeting with him. (I miss the moral seriousness and earnestness of Jack Diggins very much. Right now the country needs him.) We were interviewed out of doors and joined by Anne Neal, who later became the second president of this distinguished institution.

I want to make a few remarks about the extraordinary times we are living in, which you know about as well as I. In addition to experiencing a pandemic that has disrupted and changed our lives in many ways, we are undergoing major changes in our race relations and in our understanding of our nation's history. We are going through a massive act of atonement



for the 400 years in which blacks endured the oppressions of slavery and segregation. Colleges and universities, large business corporations, and elite institutions of all sorts have been stumbling over themselves in their eagerness to demonstrate their anti-racist credentials. We have toppled or removed statues of anyone associated with slavery or the Southern Confederacy. The Lost Cause has really become lost, and nobody seems to be publicly defending it anymore.

The culture has radically shifted. Congress has established a new federal holiday commemorating the end of slavery. With the killing of George Floyd and the reinvigorating of Black Lives Matter, our police forces will never be the same.

And as a consequence of what's happening in race relations, neither will our history, it seems, ever be the same. For the past 50 years or more, academic historians have been writing about slavery and race with an unprecedented intensity. In the era of critical race theory, this recovery of the history of slaves and black lives has reached a fever pitch. There is hardly a dissertation in American history now being written, it seems, that doesn't deal with issues of race or marginalized peoples in one way or another.

Since the Revolution is the most important event in our history, much of the revisionist scholarship has focused on it. These revisionist historians have turned the event that founded our nation into something we can scarcely be proud of.

The Revolution, like our progressive politics, has become all about race, gender, and identity. "Those marginalized by former histories," declares one of the most distinguished of recent scholars of the Revolution, "now assume centrality, as our stories increasingly include Native peoples, the enslaved, women, the poor, Hispanics, and the French as key actors."

No doubt it's time for these stories to be told, and they should be told, but if these formerly marginalized people become the leading actors in the story, as they do in the recent narrative histories of the Revolution, these accounts are bound to emphasize the Revolution's dark and shameful side



with little room for any other side. White male supremacy and what is now called the “genocidal” treatment of the native peoples necessarily dominate these recent histories of the Revolution. The Revolution has become an event of white privilege and white supremacy in which blacks, women, and the native peoples were sidelined and suppressed.

These accounts of marginalized people may be necessary, but they are hardly sufficient explanations of what the Revolution was about. These stories do not have much to say about liberty, equality, and democracy—which, when mentioned, are usually dismissed as rhetorical and hypocritical covers to hide the actual inequality and repression that went on.

The titles and subtitles of some books on the Revolution written over the past two decades will give you some idea of the unbalanced and one-sided nature of their interpretations, all designed presumably to offset the heroic and rosy stories these historians mistakenly believe dominate our public mythology about the Revolution. *The Failure of the Founding Fathers; Independence Lost; Unworthy Republic; Slave Nation; The Counter-Revolution of 1776; Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive; The Unfinished Revolution; The Freedoms We Lost; A Slaveholders’ Union; Slavery’s Constitution; To Begin the World Over Again: How the American Revolution Devastated the Globe; Thirteen Clocks: How Race United the Colonies and Made the Declaration of Independence.*

In many cases, the historians who wrote these accounts were engaging in politics by other means. They are activist historians who want a usable past. When even historians themselves admit that they are trying “to illuminate conditions of the present by casting a harsh light on previous experience” and declare that the Revolution was a failure, producing “more misery than freedom,” it’s not surprising that activists and journalists became involved in emphasizing the dark side of our history.

This is the context for the introduction of the 1619 Project of the *New York Times* in August 2019.



Forget the Fourth of July, 1776, said the *New York Times*; that was not the real birthday of the nation. August 20, 1619 was the crucial date. That was the date over 400 years ago in which the first Africans were brought to the shores of what became the United States. They were probably bonded servants, not slaves, since English law had not yet worked out the concept of slavery.

This 1619 Project, the *New York Times* said, aims “to reframe American history by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation’s birth year.” To do so, the *Times* said, “we have to put slavery and the contribution of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are as a country.” “Out of slavery,” the *Times* claimed, “and the anti-black racism it required—grew nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional.”

According to Nikole Hannah-Jones, the originator of the project, the American Revolution was a hypocritical example of white supremacy mouthing values that whites violated at every turn. Instead of promoting liberty and equality, white Americans undertook the Revolution largely to save slavery. “Conveniently left out of our founding mythology,” she wrote, “is the fact that one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery.” (This was later clarified to “some colonists decided,” a momentous change: It could mean a half dozen or it could mean thousands.) In 1776, she says, Great Britain was on the verge of abolishing slavery and the slave trade, thus provoking the colonists into independence.

This claim is false. In 1776, Great Britain was not threatening to abolish slavery in its empire. If it had been, then the British sugar-producing colonies in the Caribbean would have been much more interested in leaving the empire than they were. Few if any British colonists in 1776 were frightened of British abolitionism. If the Virginian slaveholders had been frightened of British abolitionism, why only eight years after the war ended would the board of visitors or the trustees of the College of William



and Mary, wealthy slaveholders all, award an honorary degree to Granville Sharp, the leading British abolitionist at the time? Had they changed their minds so quickly? From being so frightened of abolitionism as to leave the empire to awarding a Briton who promoted abolitionism? The *New York Times* has no accurate knowledge of Virginia's Revolutionary culture and cannot begin to answer these questions.

It was the American colonists who were interested in abolitionism in 1776. While many of the Virginian planters were struggling with manumission and other ways of ending slavery, it was left to the northern states to successfully undertake the immense task of legally abolishing slavery. Far from protecting slavery, the American Revolution inflicted a massive blow to the entire slave system of the New World. Not only were the northern states the first slaveholding governments in the world to abolish slavery, but the United States became the first nation in the world to begin actively suppressing the despicable international slave trade. The *New York Times* has the history completely backwards.

Nonetheless, the *Times* intends its 1619 Project as an "educational outreach" that involves creating a curriculum that will be brought to students in schools throughout the country. "By acknowledging [our] shameful history, by trying hard to understand its powerful influence on the present," the editor of the *New York Times Magazine* declared, "perhaps we can prepare ourselves for a more just future."

Right now, it looks as if the desire for social justice is overwhelming the need for historical accuracy, at least with elites. As historian Matthew Karp has recently pointed out, Hannah-Jones and other black intellectuals nowadays "sit not at the margins but near the core of the American cultural elite, writing for the nation's most influential journals, winning its most prestigious prizes, and receiving acclaim from its most powerful politicians."

No one should ever minimize the importance of slavery and Jim Crow segregation in our history. But to make 1619 the birth date of the nation and to make slavery and segregation the frame for interpreting all of our



turbulent and complicated past is not only false to the totality of our history but it will divide us further and undermine whatever sense of comity and unity we have left. Ordinary Americans seem to be becoming increasingly aware of this.

The Revolution and the principles that it articulated—liberty, equality, and the well-being of ordinary people—are really the only things that hold us Americans together and make us a single people. We are not a nation in any traditional meaning of the term, that is, a people with a common ancestry, and we never have been. John Adams doubted at the outset that we could ever be a real nation. In the United States, he said, there was nothing like “the Patria of the Romans, the Fatherland of the Dutch, or the Patrie of the French.” All he saw in America was an astonishing diversity of religious denominations and ethnicities. In 1813, he counted at least 19 different religious sects in the country. “We are such an Hotch potch of people,” he concluded, “such an omnium gatherum of English, Irish, German, Dutch, Sweedes, French, &c. that it is difficult to give a name to the Country, characteristic of the people.”

During the antebellum decades, the United States became even more diverse, as European immigrants poured into the country and the difference between the free and the slave states became more palpable and more contentious. We became even less of a traditional nation, and we were certainly not very united. In the antebellum period, Americans rarely referred to themselves as a nation. The Union became a substitute for the word “nation,” and since the individual states commanded most of people’s loyalties, that Union was not very strong. The breakup of the Union in 1861 was not unexpected.

It was Lincoln’s genius to grasp the peculiar and fragile nature of the United States and to see that a nation of immigrants and diverse states needed something other than an ethnic basis for its nationhood. He found the words and the ideas to make us a single people and to justify a nation that had never been a traditional nation. It was Lincoln who almost single-



handedly turned the Revolutionary leaders into the Founding Fathers.

Throughout the antebellum period, most Americans applied the term Founding Fathers not to the Revolutionary leaders but to the 17<sup>th</sup>-century founders of the colonies, such as John Winthrop, John Smith, William Bradford, Lord Baltimore, and William Penn. After Lincoln and the Civil War, the Revolutionary leaders and the framers of the Constitution became the Founders.

For Lincoln, Jefferson became a proxy for all the Founders. When he said in 1858, “all honor to Jefferson,” he paid homage to the Revolutionary leader who had written the document whose words best bound the different peoples of America together and demanded the ending of slavery.

Half the American people, said Lincoln in 1858, had no direct blood connection to the Revolutionaries of 1776. These German, Irish, French, and Scandinavian citizens either had come from Europe themselves or their ancestors had, and they had settled in America, and amazingly, they found “themselves our equals in all things.” Although these immigrants may have had no actual connection in blood with the Revolutionary generation that could make them feel part of the rest of the nation, they had, said Lincoln, “that old Declaration of Independence” with its expression of the moral principle of equality to draw upon.

This moral principle, which was “applicable to all men and all times,” made all these different peoples one with the Revolutionaries, “as though they were blood of the blood and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration,” a biblical image that continues to take my breath away. This emphasis on liberty and equality, he said, switching metaphors, was “the electric cord . . . that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.”

Lincoln used the phrase in the Declaration that all men are created equal in order to make a nation out of an ethnically and racially diverse people who lacked a common ancestry. And as he came to realize by the end



of the Civil War, all those black slaves who had been freed by the war could now be included among those peoples connected by this electric cord and made one with the Revolutionaries, as though they were blood of the blood and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote the Declaration.

This is why the Founding has so much meaning for us Americans. The Revolution and the documents and ideals that came out of it are the bonds, the adhesives, that make us a nation. Without these bonds, we would be a very different country. That's why the Founding became so important to us and why we spend so much time writing about it. Without the Founding of 1776, we will never be the "one People" the Declaration says we are.

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