America's Original Sin

Slavery and the Legacy of White Supremacy

By Annette Gordon-Reed

The documents most closely associated with the creation of the United States—the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—present a problem with which Americans have been contending from the country's beginning: how to reconcile the values espoused in those texts with the United States' original sin of slavery, the flaw that marred the country's creation, warped its prospects, and eventually plunged it into civil war. The Declaration of Independence had a specific purpose: to cut the ties between the American colonies and Great Britain and establish a new country that would take its place among the nations of the world. But thanks to the vaulting language of its famous preamble, the document instantly came to mean more than that. Its confident statement that "all men are created equal," with "unalienable Rights" to "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness," put notions of freedom and equality at the heart of the American experiment. Yet it was written by a slave owner, Thomas Jefferson, and released into 13 colonies that all, to one degree or another, allowed slavery.

The Constitution, which united the colonies turned states, was no less tainted. It came into existence only after a heated argument over—and fateful compromise on—the institution of slavery. Members of the revolutionary generation often cast that institution as a necessary evil that would eventually die of its own accord, and they made their peace with it to hold together the new nation. The document they fought over and signed in 1787, revered almost as a sacred text by many Americans, directly protected slavery. It gave slave owners the right to capture fugitive slaves who crossed state lines, counted each enslaved person as three-fifths of a free person for the purpose of apportioning members of the House of Representatives, and prohibited the abolition of the slave trade before 1808.

As citizens of a young country, Americans have a close enough connection to the founding generation that they look to the founders as objects of praise. There might well have been no United States without George Washington, behind whom 13 fractious colonies united. Jefferson's language in the Declaration of Independence has been taken up by every marginalized group seeking an equal place in American society. It has influenced people searching for freedom in other parts of the world, as well.

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Yet the founders are increasingly objects of condemnation, too. Both Washington and Jefferson owned slaves. They, along with James Madison, James Monroe, and Andrew

Jackson, the other three slave-owning presidents of the early republic, shaped the first decades of the United States. Any desire to celebrate the country's beginning quickly runs into the tragic aspects of that moment. Those who wish to revel without reservation in good feelings about their country feel threatened by those who note the tragedies and oppression that lay at the heart of this period. Those descended from people who were cast as inferior beings, whose labor and lives were taken for the enrichment of others, and those with empathy for the enslaved feel insulted by unreflective celebration. Learning how to strike the right balance has proved one of the most difficult problems for American society.

WHY SLAVERY'S LEGACY ENDURES

The issue, however, goes far beyond the ways Americans think and talk about their history. The most significant fact about American slavery, one it did not share with other prominent ancient slave systems, was its basis in race. Slavery in the United States created a defined, recognizable group of people and placed them outside society. And unlike the indentured servitude of European immigrants to North America, slavery was an inherited condition.

As a result, American slavery was tied inexorably to white dominance. Even people of African descent who were freed for one reason or another suffered under the weight of the white supremacy that racially based slavery entrenched in American society. In the few places where free blacks had some form of state citizenship, their rights were circumscribed in ways that emphasized their inferior status—to them and to all observers. State laws in both the so-called Free States and the slave states served as blueprints for a system of white supremacy. Just as blackness was associated with inferiority and a lack of freedom—in some jurisdictions, black skin created the legal presumption of an enslaved status—whiteness was associated with superiority and freedom.

The historian Edmund Morgan explained what this meant for the development of American attitudes about slavery, freedom, and race—indeed, for American culture overall. Morgan argued that racially based slavery, rather than being a contradiction in a country that prided itself on freedom, made the freedom of white people possible. The system that put black people at the bottom of the social heap tamped down class divisions among whites. Without a large group of people who would always rank below the level of even the poorest, most disaffected white person, white unity could not have persisted. Grappling with the legacy of slavery, therefore, requires grappling with the white supremacy that preceded the founding of the United States and persisted after the end of legalized slavery.

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Consider, by contrast, what might have happened had there been Irish chattel slavery in North America. The Irish suffered pervasive discrimination and were subjected to crude and cruel stereotypes about their alleged inferiority, but they were never kept as slaves. Had they been enslaved and then freed, there is every reason to believe that they would have had an easier time assimilating into American culture than have African Americans. Their enslavement would be a major historical fact, but it would likely not have created a legacy so firmly tying the past to the present as did African chattel slavery. Indeed, the descendants of white indentured servants blended into society and today suffer no stigma because of their ancestors' social condition.

That is because the ability to append enslaved status to a set of generally identifiable physical characteristics—skin color, hair, facial features—made it easy to tell who was eligible for slavery and to maintain a system of social control over the enslaved. It also made it easy to continue organized oppression after the 13th Amendment ended legal slavery in 1865. There was no incentive for whites to change their attitudes about race even when slavery no longer existed. Whiteness still amounted to a value, unmoored from economic or social status. Blackness still had to be devalued to ensure white superiority. This calculus operated in Northern states as well as Southern ones.

CONFEDERATE IDEOLOGY

The framers of the Confederate States of America understood this well. Race played a specific and pivotal role in their conception of the society they wished to create. If members of the revolutionary generation presented themselves as opponents of a doomed system and, in Jefferson's case, cast baleful views of race as mere "suspicions," their Confederate grandchildren voiced their full-throated support for slavery as a perpetual institution, based on their openly expressed belief in black inferiority. The founding documents of the Confederacy, under which the purported citizens of that entity lived, just as Americans live under the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, announced that African slavery would form the "cornerstone" of the country they would create after winning the Civil War. In 1861, a few weeks before the war began, Alexander Stephens, the vice president of the Confederacy, put things plainly:

> The new constitution has put at rest, forever, all the agitating questions relating to our peculiar institution—African slavery as it exists amongst us—the proper status of the negro in our form of civilization. This was the immediate cause of the late rupture and present revolution. Jefferson in his forecast had anticipated this as the "rock upon which the old Union would split." He was right. . . . The prevailing ideas entertained by him and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old constitution, were that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically. . . . Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error. Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone 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.

Despite the clarity of Stephens' words, millions of Americans today are unaware of—or perhaps unwilling to learn about—the aims of those who rallied to the Confederate cause. That ignorance has led many to fall prey to the romantic notion of "the rebels," ignoring that these rebels had a cause. Modern Americans may fret about the hypocrisy and weakness of the founding generation, but there was no such hesitancy among the leading Confederates on matters of slavery and race. That they were not successful on the battlefield does not mean that their philosophy should be ignored in favor of abstract notions of "duty," "honor," and "nobility"; Americans should not engage in the debate that the former Confederates chose after the war ended and slavery, finally, acquired a bad name.

It has taken until well into the twenty-first century for many Americans to begin to reject the idea of erecting statues of men who fought to construct an explicitly white supremacist society. For too long, the United States has postponed a reckoning with the corrosive ideas about race that have destroyed the lives and wasted the talents of millions of people who could have contributed to their country. To confront the legacy of slavery without openly challenging the racial attitudes that created and shaped the institution is to leave the most important variable out of the equation. And yet discussions of race, particularly of

one's own racial attitudes, are among the hardest conversations Americans are called on to have.

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This issue of the Confederacy's legacy was made tragically prominent in 2015, when the white supremacist Dylann Roof shot 12 black parishioners in a church in Charleston, South Carolina, killing nine of them. History had given the worshipers in Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church every reason to be suspicious of the young man who appeared at their doorstep that day, yet they invited him in to their prayer meeting. Although they had, Roof said, been "nice" to him, they had to die because they (as representatives of the black race) were, in his words, raping "our women" and "taking over our country." Their openness and faith were set against the images, later revealed, of Roof posing with what has come to be known as the Confederate flag and other white supremacist iconography. The core meaning of the Confederacy was made heartbreakingly vivid. From that moment on, inaction on the question of the display of the Confederate flag was, for many, no longer an option. Bree Newsome, the activist who, ten days after the shooting, scaled the flagpole in front of the South Carolina State House and removed the Confederate flag that flew there, represented the new spirit: displaying symbols of white supremacy in public spaces was no longer tolerable.

And those symbols went far beyond flags. Monuments to people who, in one way or another, promoted the idea of white supremacy are scattered across the country. Statues of Confederate officials and generals dot parks and public buildings. Yet proposals to take them down have drawn sharp opposition. Few who resist the removal of the statues openly praise the aims of the Confederacy, whatever their private thoughts on the matter. Instead, they raise the specter of a slippery slope: today, Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee; tomorrow, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Yet dealing with such slopes is part of everyday life. The problem with the Confederacy is not just that its leaders owned slaves. The problem is that they tried to destroy the Union and did so in adherence to an explicit doctrine of slavery and white supremacy. By contrast, the founding generation, for all its faults, left behind them principles and documents that have allowed American society to expand in directions opposite to the values of the South's slave society and the Confederacy.

It is not surprising that colleges and universities, ideally the site of inquiry and intellectual contest, have grappled most prominently with this new national discussion. Many of the most prestigious American universities have benefited from the institution of slavery or have buildings named after people who promoted white supremacy. Brown, Georgetown, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale have, by starting conversations on campus, carrying out programs of historical self-study, and setting up commissions, contributed to greater public understanding of the past and of how the country might move ahead. Their work serves as a template for the ways in which other institutions should engage with these issues in a serious fashion.

RECONSTRUCTION DELAYED

For all the criticism that has been leveled at him for the insufficient radicalism of his racial politics, Abraham Lincoln understood that the central question for the United States after the Civil War was whether blacks could be fully incorporated into American society. Attempting to go forward after the carnage, he returned to first principles. In the Gettysburg Address, he used the words of the Declaration of Independence as an argument for the emancipation of blacks and their inclusion in the country's "new birth of freedom." What Lincoln meant by this, how far he was prepared to take matters, will remain unknown.

What is clear is that Reconstruction, the brief period of hope among four million emancipated African Americans, when black men were given the right to vote, when the freedmen married, sought education, and became elected officials in the South, was seen as a nightmare by many white Southerners. Most of them had not owned slaves. But slavery was only part of the wider picture. They continued to rely on the racial hierarchy that had obtained since the early 1600s, when the first Africans arrived in North America's British colonies. Rather than bring free blacks into society, with the hope of moving the entire region forward, they chose to move backward, to a situation as close to slavery as legally possible. Northern whites, tired of "the Negro problem," abandoned Reconstruction and left black people to the mercy of those who had before the war seen them as property and after it as lost possessions.

The historian David Blight has described how the post–Civil War desire for reconciliation between white Northerners and white Southerners left African Americans behind, in ways that continue to shape American society. The South had no monopoly on adherents to the doctrine of white supremacy. Despite all that had happened, the racial hierarchy took precedence over the ambitious plan to bring black Americans into full citizenship expressed in the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution. In a reversal of the maxim that history is written by the victors, the losing side in the Civil War got to tell the story of their slave society in ways favorable to them, through books, movies, and other popular entertainment. American culture accepted the story that apologists for the Confederacy told about Southern whites and Southern blacks.

That did not begin to change until the second half of the twentieth century. It took the development of modern scholarship on slavery and Reconstruction and a civil rights movement composed of blacks, whites, and other groups from across the country to begin moving the needle on the question of white supremacy's role in American society.
Since then, black Americans have made many social and economic gains, but there is still far to go. De jure segregation is dead, but de facto segregation is firmly in place in much of the country. The United States twice elected a black president and had a black first family, but the next presidential election expressed, in part, a backlash. African Americans are present in all walks of life, up and down the economic scale. But overall, black wealth is a mere fraction of white wealth. Police brutality and racialized law enforcement tactics have shown that the Fourth Amendment does not apply with equal force to black Americans. And the killing of armed black men in open-carry states by police has called into question black rights under the Second Amendment. To understand these problems, look not only to slavery itself but also to its most lasting legacy: the maintenance of white supremacy. Americans must come to grips with both if they are to make their country live up to its founding creed.