

The Not So Black And White Of Slavery In America

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We have come to a time in America when everything is seen as black or white – not just the Black or White of the racial divide which has been thrust upon the contemporary American scene as if it were a de facto truism, but a black or white reading of our history - making it out to be something it never was.

In its most basic terms, when history was being taught in American schools up through the 1950's, students learned of the compromises that brought the Convention delegates to close enough agreement to send the Constitution to the States for an up or down vote – ratification or rejection. Some even learned about changes made to the Declaration of Independence before it was finalized. Pertaining to the issue of slavery, and its being referenced in an early version of the Declaration and then not being referenced in the final draft, here is an excerpt from what was removed:

“He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian King of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where Men should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or restrain this execrable commerce...”

It is now argued that Jefferson was a slave holder, and that his words “All men are created equal,” are hypocritical. Still, the men who formed the nation were out to change the system of government, and many wanted to end slavery – but, alas they were only mere mortals, and limitations were imposed upon them by other mortals with different interests. Jefferson is said to have blamed the deletion of his anti-slave passage on South Carolina and Georgia and merchants in the North who profited

from the slave trade. Like it or not – slavery was not solely a North versus South issue. Enslavement has accompanied every human society on every continent – ranging from the taking of captives during wars to the taking of captives for food where cannibalism was practiced. The ancient Egyptians enslaved Jews for hundreds of years. Indigenous American tribes enslaved their captives. African tribes enslaved other Africans. The Nazis enslaved millions in labor camps. The Japanese enslaved the Chinese. Stalinist Russia enslaved its own people in gulags and Muslims still enslave [kidnapped](#) young girls for sex, as Muslim ISIS did in its self-proclaimed caliphate and as [Arab](#) Muslims have done for centuries and are still doing. None of these atrocities, and the thousands more, excuses American slavery, but it defines American slavery as something less than a societal aberration – existing only in White Christian America.

What is not being discussed, is what would have become of America had the union not been formed and been strengthened soon afterwards. There were some, like Patrick Henry, who fought for the separation from England but did not support the proposed Constitution as it was drafted. But, all in all there was an understanding that changes in the form of the government were needed. Whether it should remain purely federal or become consolidated was the primary argument, and it was that debate that underlay all the other issues, like representation, religiosity and slavery.

Today we are told to think of what is not in the Declaration or the Constitution, instead of what changes the documents brought with their passage. If we look at history more clearly we will understand the exigencies under which the Federal Convention operated.

Looking at 1781, we will see that the French Fleet would not have been a match for the larger British fleet, but the British fleet was not at Yorktown in full strength, and those elements of the French Fleet blockading Yorktown were enough to seal the fate of the British and cause their army to surrender there.

The British formerly signed the Treaty of Paris with America in 1783. But, even given the importance of the end of the Revolutionary War, England's concerns at the time

were focused closer to home in Europe, which was about to be embroiled in the French Revolutionary Wars, which devolved into the Napoleonic Wars lasting into 1812.

It is possible that if Britain not been involved in the European wars, it might have been in a position to continue to prosecute the War in America. As it turned out, England seemed to accept and be satisfied with the re-establishment of substantial trade with her former colony. Still, the signing of the Treaty of Paris did not signify and end to England's hopes to regain some control over their former colonies at some later date.

The Canadians had already rejected a union with the United States during the Revolution, and after the Revolution England retained control over the former French possession, continuing to have a vantage from which to interfere with the United States. The British had previously employed Indians to fight the Colonists in the French and Indian War, and there was no reason that some alliance with other nations, such as Spain, who still had territory in North America, and the native tribes could not once again be established as a way to partake in America's riches.

After the Revolutionary War, the young United States disbanded the [Continental Navy](#), and in 1785, just prior to the Federal Convention, it sold its last remaining warship, the [Alliance](#) because of a lack of money to make repairs. At that very time Algeria seized two American merchant ships in the Mediterranean and held their crews for ransom.

American shipping was susceptible to piracy, a situation that wouldn't be corrected until six frigates were constructed for the American Navy beginning in 1799. American land borders were also insecure. The United States did not yet extend to Florida or anything past the Mississippi; in fact, most settled land went no farther than the Appalachians. The Louisiana Purchase was yet to come, and the further West Americans ventured, the less secure the borders were.

At the time of the Federal Convention other security issues were also in the forefront; there was a consensus that there was a need for greater unity because of events like Shay's Rebellion in Massachusetts. The rightness or wrongness of former Revolutionary Army Captain Shay's arguments, and the arguments of other former officers and enlisted men all marching together, was not what the Confederation saw. The Congress of the Confederation did not see frustrated heroes of the Revolution, men who had fought in major battles of the war beginning with Bunker Hill - they saw insurrection; and as it turned out the Congress was practically incapable of quelling it.

It could be said that the most important issue on the delegates' minds in 1787 was security, both international and domestic. It was understood that the young nation was in a very tenuous position in a hostile world. But, even with a strong desire to become more united and gain security, three political issues stood as potential blocks to the formation of a more unified nation. The issues high on the agenda were state representation in a new government, religion and slavery.

In the existing Congress each state had one vote, which the larger states felt would be unfair going forward. The issue of Representation in the new Congress between the larger and smaller states was resolved by the establishment of two Chambers in Congress, what we call the Great Compromise, the Connecticut Plan. In one chamber all states, regardless of population, would be equal by virtue of having an equal number of Senators, who it was intended would represent the states' interests. The second chamber would have unequal representation by having their number of representatives decided by the size of their population, representing the citizens' interests. The Presidency would be determined by a combination of those two factors in an Electoral College.

The contentious issue of religion was defused with the exclusion of a religious oath being required for office and by the guarantee of religious freedom in a promised Bill of Rights.

The issue of slavery was irreconcilable. Certain States had already opted out of the slave trade and of the practice of slavery itself. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 forbade slavery in the Northwest Territory, which became the states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin. Also, in 1787 Rhode Island forbade participation in the slave trade, and South Carolina, which had demanded the reference to Slavery be removed from the Declaration, temporarily suspended the importation of slaves in 1792. After the Convention, in 1788, Connecticut and Massachusetts also forbade residents from participating in the slave trade. Congress took its first timid step towards controlling slavery in 1794 when it passed legislation forbidding slave trade from foreign countries on U.S. ships. In 1798 Georgia, the other state that blocked a reference to slavery in the Declaration, prohibited international slave trade. By 1800 Congress prohibited Americans from exporting slaves. In 1804, four years before the 1808 Constitutionally mandated end to the international slave trade, New Jersey passed laws intended to gradually begin emancipation.

In 1820 the most significant federal legislation to be passed, the Missouri Compromise, prohibited slavery in the Louisiana territory north of Missouri's Southern border. The compromise was that Missouri would be admitted as a slave state and Maine admitted to the Union as a free state.

The list of gains and losses in the crusade to end slavery in the United States is much larger than this short list. It is long and emotionally torturous, but the march on the road to a Civil War, which would end slavery for good, was well on its way by the beginning of the 19th century. For each anti-slave victory in a state or from the Federal Government, there was a setback in another state, or a reversal of federal policy; still a final decision in favor of ending slavery was on the horizon, especially by 1861 when there were 19 free states and 15 slave states. The slave states saw that it had lost control of the issue in the Congress. By 1861, it became obvious that the issue was not to be decided politically.

But, at the time of the Federal Convention in 1787, even those states that had relented on importing slaves were still opposed to abolition. A mandate to end to

slavery would have destroyed the economy of several of the Southern States, and those wielding economic power in those states would never have acceded to the Constitution; had the issue of ending slavery been demanded as a prerequisite to union, the existing United States would not have been re-formed under a new central government.

If the United States had been split, it would have been weaker than it was during the Revolution, and the United States may have wound up losing the War of 1812. The fact that the British burned the U.S. Capitol and shelled coastal cities at will at the onset of the War gives credence to the tenuous capability of American forces at the beginning of the War of 1812. England brought the United States into the war by interfering with American ships on the high seas and by impressing sailors into service on British Ships. Had England increased its naval warfare against the United States, it might have created enough dissention within the United States to cause dissolution of the new government. In any event, a loss would have done serious harm to America's expansion West, especially into the North West. The British enlisted the aid of several Indian tribes, just as it had done in the French and Indian War. If the British had not been preoccupied with the War in Europe, they may have succeeded in extracting stronger demands in the Treaty of Ghent, or at least maintaining a larger physical presence in America.

Both the continuing piracy in the Mediterranean and Britain's ability to impress sailors prior to the War of 1812 proved out the security concerns that the Founders had at the Convention.

Still, there are those who look at the history of the United States only through the veil of slavery, as if it were universally accepted or as if it could have been eliminated had there been a greater will to do so. In their minds, the continuation of slavery into the new government de-legitimizes the American founding.

But, those who look at history and the limited choices that are presented at any given time understand that the continuation of the existence of slavery into the new government did nothing to diminish the standard of equality and liberty established in

the Declaration of Independence. The coming to fruition of the words was to become a work in progress. As experienced people understand, very little happens immediately with the signing of a piece of paper. With the issuance of the Declaration, the end of slavery and the universal condition of liberty as a standard had been established. To look back and say that slavery's continuation demeaned the words of the Declaration is false. The Declaration was a goal, a beginning – not an end in of itself. The first step was the Revolution. It took seven years to accomplish Independence from the date that the Declaration was signed. The next step was Union; and a more permanent Union did not occur until 1789, thirteen years after the signing. The next steps, however many it would take, were already being taken. The international slave trade was already mandated to be stopped in 1808, 28 years after the signing – after almost all of the signers were dead.

We are not told much about the [signers](#) today and the fate that many of them suffered as a result of supporting the Declaration. Some were captured and tortured as traitors, some died in the Revolution, and many of them died in poverty because of their signing, with no remuneration from their government.

As it turned out it would take fourscore and seven plus two years to finally decide the issue of Slavery. But, it was decided – pursuant to the ideals enshrined in the Declaration. At the end of the Civil War in 1865, slavery still existed in many parts of the world – as it still does today.

The choice for America in 1787 was union and strength or continued weakness and susceptibility to attacks on American sovereignty.

The founders chose well. Their heirs have continued to progress towards a full implementation of the words and meaning of what was declared on paper on July 4th 1776.

What must be considered is not that the words of the Declaration have taken so long to bring to fulfillment – but that the words are there - and are held high as the ultimate goal for the nation.

On August 28, 1963, 183 years after the signing, Martin Luther King Jr. did not, like many today, disparage the words of the Declaration, but because the words are there, and enshrined in the American founding, Reverend King was able to declare:

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

To couch the words of the Declaration in terms of disingenuousness defeats their efficacy. That the words are there, and held up high to guide us, is what should be countenanced by all liberty loving Americans.

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