Essay Assignment Metaphors of the Nation’s Founding

Read the attached excerpt taken from Nikole Hannah-Jones’ lead essay for the 1619 Project, “the Idea of America,” and the various essays commenting about it (2 in support, 2 critical). Answer the questions posed at the end of each article. Then write a four to five paragraph essay (including introduction and conclusion) that addresses the following question:

> In his essay, “The 1619 Project: An Autopsy,” Timothy Sandefur asserts that “all foundings are metaphors” because a nation is, by its very definition, a “theoretical or imaginative institution—which means its origin is necessarily spoken of in metaphor, ritual, and symbolism.” Two competing metaphors have been asserted by scholars in the debate about America’s founding--one (most famously stated by Martin Luther King, Jr.) comparing the Declaration of Independence to a “promissory note,” perhaps not immediately paying dividends for all citizens but eventually becoming due as each new group lays claim to its enduring promise of equality, and the other (as outlined in the “Idea of America”) that identifies racism and slavery as our original sin, ideas that were present from this nation’s founding and that were woven into “our nation’s DNA,” the consequences of which we have never been able to fully escape as a nation. Which metaphor of America’s founding do you find more persuasive? Your thesis statement should affirmatively state what position you are taking on the question. Your argument should address what makes one metaphor more persuasive and the other less so. Each body paragraph should include at least two pieces of evidence to support your thesis. You may use evidence taken from the included articles or material that you have read in class about the nation’s founding, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and various groups’ struggle to gain equality under the law. You should also include analysis of that evidence and explain how it supports your thesis.

Excerpt 1 from “The Idea of America”
by Nikole Hannah-Jones,
New York Times “1619 Project”
August 18, 2019.

My dad always flew an American flag in our front yard. The blue paint on our two-story house was perennially chipping; the fence, or the rail by the stairs, or the front door, existed in a perpetual state of disrepair, but that flag always flew pristine. Our corner lot, which had been redlined (a practice where blacks were forced to live on one side of the line and whites on the other) by the federal government, was along the river that divided the black side from the white side of our Iowa town. At the edge of our lawn, high on an aluminum pole, soared the flag, which my dad would replace as soon as it showed the slightest tatter.

So when I was young, that flag outside our home never made sense to me. How could this black man, having seen firsthand the way his country abused black Americans, how it refused to treat us as full citizens, proudly fly its banner? I didn’t understand his patriotism. Like most young people, I thought I understood so much, when in fact I understood so little. My father knew exactly what he was doing when he raised that flag. He knew that our people’s contributions to building the richest and most powerful nation in the world were indelible, that the United States simply would not exist without us.

In August 1619, just 12 years after the English settled Jamestown, Va., one year before the Puritans landed at Plymouth Rock and some 157 years before the English colonists even decided they wanted to form their own country, the Jamestown colonists bought 20 to 30 enslaved Africans from English pirates. The pirates had stolen them from a Portuguese slave ship that had forcibly taken them from what is now the country of Angola. Those men and women who came ashore on that August day were the beginning of American slavery. They were among the 12.5 million Africans who would be kidnapped from their homes and brought in chains across the Atlantic Ocean in the largest forced migration in human history until the Second World War. Almost two million did not survive the grueling journey, known as the Middle Passage. Before the abolishment of the international slave trade, 400,000 enslaved Africans would be sold into America.

Those individuals and their descendants transformed the lands to which they’d been brought into some of the most successful colonies in the British Empire. They built the plantations of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, sprawling properties that today attract thousands of visitors from across the globe captivated by the history of the world’s greatest democracy. They laid the foundations of the White House and the Capitol, even placing with their unfree hands the Statue of Freedom atop the Capitol dome. They lugged the heavy wooden tracks of the railroads that crisscrossed the South and that helped take the cotton they picked to the Northern textile mills, fueling the Industrial Revolution. It was the relentless buying, selling, insuring and financing of their bodies and the products of their labor that made Wall Street a thriving banking, insurance and trading sector and New York City the financial capital of the world.

But it would be historically inaccurate to reduce the contributions of black people to the vast material wealth created by our bondage. Black Americans have also been, and continue to be, foundational to the idea of American freedom. More than any other group in this country's history, we have served, generation after generation, in an overlooked but vital role: It is we who have been the perfecters of this democracy.

The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie. Our Declaration of Independence, signed on July 4, 1776, proclaims that ''all men are created equal'' and ''endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.'' But the white men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of black people in their midst. ''Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness'' did not apply to fully one-fifth of the country.

At the time, one-fifth of the population within the 13 colonies struggled under a brutal system of slavery unlike anything that had existed in the world before. Chattel slavery was not conditional but racial. It was heritable and permanent, not temporary, meaning generations of black people were born into it and passed their enslaved status onto their children. Enslaved people were not recognized as human beings but as property that could be mortgaged, traded, bought, sold, used as collateral, given as a gift and disposed of violently. Jefferson's fellow white colonists knew that black people were human beings, but they created a network of laws and customs, astounding for both their precision and cruelty, that ensured that enslaved people would never be treated as such.

Enslaved people could not legally marry. They were barred from learning to read and restricted from meeting privately in groups. They had no claim to their own children, who could be bought, sold and traded away from them on auction blocks alongside furniture and cattle or behind storefronts that advertised ''Negroes for Sale.'' Enslavers and the courts did not honor kinship ties to mothers, siblings, cousins. In most courts, they had no legal standing. Enslavers could rape or murder their property without legal consequence.

Yet despite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised to all, black Americans believed fervently in the American creed. Through centuries of black resistance and protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding ideals. And not only for ourselves — black rights struggles paved the way for every other rights struggle, including women's and gay rights, immigrant and disability rights.

Without the idealistic, strenuous and patriotic efforts of black Americans, our democracy today would most likely look very different — it might not be a democracy at all. My father...knew what it would take me years to understand: that the year 1619 is as important to the American story as 1776. That black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation's capital, are this nation's true ''founding fathers.''And that no people has a greater claim to that flag than us.

What the 1619 Project Really Means

Its liberal and conservative critics both miss the point.

By Timothy Messer-Kruse
MARCH 5, 2020
The Real Meaning of the Controversy Over 1619

On the 400th anniversary of the landing and sale of the first Africans in Virginia, The New York Times published a series of essays — the “1619 Project” — by journalists and scholars on the meaning of slavery to America. Its purpose was “to reframe the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative.” Oddly, this gesture toward questioning the national hymn of progress provoked a loud protest from both liberal and conservative academics.

Five distinguished historians of early America responded by penning a protest letter to The New York Times. While the 1619 Project ranged across a large swath of the American experience, including redlining, mass incarceration, the history of racist medicine, the white appropriation of black music, and the emergence of historically black colleges, the five historians’ letter focused obsessively on the project’s reinterpretations of the American Revolution and the abolitionist movement.

Underneath the complaints about historical inaccuracies and exaggerations lies a deeper concern about the meaning of the American story. Wilentz, for instance, has proposed that the slave-owning authors of the Constitution consciously laid the groundwork for later abolitionism by excluding from the great charter the phrase “property in slaves” that would have precluded emancipation. Wilentz’s clutch of historians seem most upset that the efforts of anti-racist whites, like Elijah Lovejoy, William Lloyd Garrison, or John Brown, are overlooked and the racially progressive aspects of complicated white leaders like Abraham Lincoln are downplayed. It just so happens that all their objections center on the exclusion of white activists and leaders from the national narrative.

Since then, other scholars, journalists, and activists have piled on, including a group of conservatives organized by a former American Enterprise Institute fellow, Robert L. Woodson Sr., calling themselves the “1776 Project.” The 1776 Project team largely attacks the 1619 Project on the grounds, they say, that its message disempowers people of color. To counter the revisionists who undermine the majesty of America’s founding, the 1776 Project essayists proclaim it their mission to “uphold our country’s authentic founding virtues and values” and to “celebrate the progress America has made on delivering its promise of equality and opportunity.”

But at some point the effort to celebrate the principles of equality and democracy expressed by a founding generation that didn’t practice them tips over into historical fabrication. In the course of attacking the 1619 Project for its “focus on our victimization,” Page burnishes the nation’s founders by claiming that though they may have denied the equality they proclaimed to some, they consciously crafted “legal mechanisms to extend those equal protections to others” over time. In doing so Page overlooks such stark contradictory evidence as the 1857 Supreme Court

decision in Dred Scott v. Sandford, which ruled that African Americans were not, and had never been, included within the phrase “We the people.” It took three amendments to restructure the American Constitution to include black Americans in that ideal. Just because James Madison and the other drafters of the Constitution included a mechanism for amending the document (though they prohibited any amendments that might restrict the slave trade for 20 years) does not mean they deserve credit for setting in motion the gears that would turn history toward birthright citizenship and equal protection of the laws.

While appearing on its face as a flap over historical facts and the meaning of a few key events, at the heart of this controversy is a clash of fundamental understandings of what New Left historians used to call the “Usable Past.” For the first time, the 1619 Project pushed into public view a theory that holds that the architecture of America is built of antiblack racism and that America’s evolution was propelled by African American struggles for liberation. To many conservatives whose patriotism is not resilient enough to withstand morally compromised founders, such a history is anathema. But it is also unusable to some scholarly progressives who pushed to expand the historical canon beyond great white men, and for whom this seems like a step away from a national story rooted more in class than in race.

Many specialists studying the construction of race and the role of racism in the making of America would agree that all of these protests, whether from conservatives or liberals, are an overreaction to interpretive innovations long established and broadly held. The retrieval of racism from the margins and footnotes of history, which is the spine connecting past and present in many of our curricula and syllabi, took place long before the 1619 Project debuted.

What the essayists of the 1619 Project pulled together was a brilliantly accessible summation of interpretive trends building within history and ethnic studies for decades.

1. What errors or omissions does Messer-Kruse feel that critics of the 1619 Project obsessively focused on?
2. What is the 1776 Project? What are its members attempting to do in reaction to the 1619 Project?
3. What does Messer-Kruse believe the 1619 Project pushed into public view for the first time?
4. What is Messer-Kruse’s response to the critics of the 1619 Project? Do you find his argument persuasive? Explain.

The Hidden Stakes of the 1619 Controversy

Seeking to discredit those who wish to explain the persistence of racism, critics of the New York Times's 1619 Project insist the facts don't support its proslavery reading of the American Revolution. But they obscure a longstanding debate within the field of U.S. history over that very issue—distorting the full case that can be made for it.

DAVID WALDSTREICHER

Boston Review January 24, 2020

Last August the New York Times Magazine released a special issue they called the 1619 Project, which uses the 400th anniversary of the arrival of "20 and odd" enslaved Africans in Virginia to recast the history of the United States as a story about slavery and its long afterlives. Lead writer Nikole Hannah-Jones began with a frontal attack on the traditional notion of 1776 as the beginning of an American history of exceptional liberty. She ended her introduction with a soaring call to reconciliation and a new American identity.

In response, rightwing magazines began to offer stinging rebukes. A backlash built momentum, culminating in December with a letter from five historians addressed to the Times Magazine's editor-in-chief, Jake Silverstein. The letter writers had three main objections, all concerning passages in the project's lead essay by Hannah-Jones—none of which concern the other line of controversy. The first concerns her assertion 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." The second concerns her depiction of Abraham Lincoln as not committed to black equality, and the third concerns her contention that across U.S. history, black people have "for the most part . . . fought alone" in their struggles for freedom.

These are perennial issues in the history of emancipation and civil rights. It is no coincidence, though, that the first claim, about the American Revolution, has proved the most controversial. This dispute reflects deep fault lines in the field of U.S. history over interpretations of the Revolution, particularly in terms of its relationship to slavery and the status of African Americans. Though it rarely spills out into public view in quite the way it has recently, there is a longstanding debate within the academy over just how revolutionary the American Revolution really was.

Some historians, espousing what we might call the establishment view, insist that it is anachronistic to see slavery as central to our understanding of the decades-long revolutionary period. Such accounts emphasize that various Northern states restricted the slave trade and began to institute gradual emancipation during and after the Revolutionary war, and that enslaved people used the ideals of equality voiced during the Revolution to press their own case for freedom.

According to the establishment view, the Revolution was in fact fundamentally antislavery, since it led to what Bernard Bailyn called a “contagion of liberty” that made it possible for Americans to think about ending the institution.

On the other side of this debate is a growing number of scholars—myself, among others—who question the establishment view of the Revolution and the founders. These historians, see a multi-sided struggle in an American Revolution that was about colonizing and winning power and authority. Their work has considerably undercut the glass-half-full version of the narrative, which sees the end of slavery as a long-term consequence of American idealism and independence.

Perhaps most important of all, newer histories show how Africans and their children themselves forced the issue onto the agenda of the revolutionaries and the empires competing for dominion, especially in wartime. If we were talking about any other revolution or civil war, we wouldn’t be surprised that enslaved people fought on both sides, depending on which side seemed more likely to improve their condition.

The split between these two camps is hinted at in Adam Serwer’s fine recap of the 1619 Project controversy for The Atlantic, “The Fight over the 1619 Project Is Not About the Facts,” published in late December as the debate was still heating up. Serwer writes:

> The clash between the Times authors and their historian critics represents a fundamental disagreement over the trajectory of American society. Was America founded as a slavocracy, and are current racial inequities the natural outgrowth of that? Or was America conceived in liberty, a nation haltingly redeeming itself through its founding principles?

What Serwer misses is that this is not simply a clash between the Times authors and a group of historians: it is also a pre-existing argument between historians themselves. By bringing the critical ideas of these scholars to a wide audience, the 1619 Project essentially drew back the curtain on a vital debate within the field of U.S. history. By responding with such force, critics of the project have helped define the contours of this debate. It is an important one for us to have, in part because this is an argument that goes all the way back to the founding itself.

Revolutions are measured by results as well as intentions, by effects as well as causes. And here too the record is mixed—in some regards the war only strengthened slavery, and in others it did indeed open new paths for dismantling it. Emancipation in the North was only conceivable with the revolutionary transfer of sovereignty to states that could, and in some cases quickly did, emancipate or legally permit voluntary emancipation. This development, along with the thirty to hundred thousand Africans who became free during the war years, created free black communities that ultimately formed the mainstay of an abolitionist movement that destabilized U.S. politics and inspired a slaveholders’ revolt and a civil war.

This is more than the proverbial butterfly's wings—a lot more. Much of the debate about how, and how much, to see slavery as a fundamental aspect of the founding, including the contention about how proslavery or antislavery the Constitution was or became, will be more satisfactorily addressed by thinking of the first century or so of United States history as two revolutions, two civil wars, two emancipations, two reconstructions, and a lot of not-so-great compromises.

But if results matter, numbers matter too. And the unavoidable fact is that in the American Revolution, slaveholders won the freedom to determine the future of slavery under a constitution that protected their interests in multiple, complicated, and especially political ways. The infamous Three-Fifths Clause, which counted three-fifths of "all other persons"—meaning the enslaved—for representation and taxation gave the South more power to shape all federal legislation as well as presidential elections. The Constitution of 1787 hardwired slavery into the political order, without ever mentioning the word "slavery." This enabled the liberals of 1787 to walk away having not admitted there to be "property in man" but having done much that would prove to be worse.

It is all the more important to push back critically against the voices who would insist that the American Revolution and the Constitution were innocent of slavery—but also against the notion that they had no antislavery implications whatsoever. It remains important to question the myth that the founders never thought about slavery politically and that black people were not "central" actors of the period. Similarly, we should interrogate the debatable but equally problematic notion that no white person with power ever really meant that all men are created equal. The Revolution was a triumph and a tragedy precisely because it was an emancipation and a betrayal of its egalitarian potential. Denying the radicalism or the reaction against it is to deny that the American Revolution actually was a revolution.

Revolutions must be measured by what they do for everyone. Racism is a product as well as a cause of our politics, starting with the American Revolution—and we should stop blaming those who wish to explain its persistence. A bridge over the fault lines in the scholarship might be built by emphasizing both the proslavery and antislavery dimensions of the American Revolution and Constitution. This sort of understanding would also make better sense of the Civil War. But it would require us to see the American Revolution as more like other revolutions in history: filled with idealism, but also with selfish motives, and characterized by violent backlashes. Most of all, it would require us to accept that racism is a product as well as a cause of our politics, starting with the American Revolution, and that we should stop blaming those who wish to explain its persistence.

1. What three objections to the 1619 Projet did the five historians have after its publication?
2. What is the establishment view of the Revolutionary War?
3. What is the alternative view on the purpose of the Revolutionary War according to Waldstreicher?
4. How did the 1619 Project draw back the curtain on the field of historians according to Waldstreicher?

5. What is the author referring to when he says we should view America as having two civil wars and two emancipations?
6. Why does the author believe the Revolution was both a tragedy and a triumph?

https://www.cato.org/commentary/1619-project-autopsy

The 1619 Project: An Autopsy
In seeking to debunk American principles, the 1619 authors were led to ignore history, to disregard some of its most moving and revealing aspects, and, most importantly, to distort the metaphors whereby we became, and continue to become, "one people."

OCTOBER 27, 2020 • COMMENTARY

By Timothy Sandefur

This article appeared on The Dispatch on October 27, 2020.

When the New York Times's 1619 Project was unveiled last year, it began with an audacious claim: "the moment [America] began," it said, was on an August day four centuries before, when about 20 enslaved Africans were brought ashore in Virginia and sold. This incident, the Times writers said, "is the country's very origin." Although the nation's "official birthdate" came long after, it is really "out of slavery—and the anti-black racism it required" that "nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional" grew.

These opening sentences—and more recent statements by the project's organizer, Nikole Hannah-Jones—have recently generated a new round of controversy, due to revelations that Times editors altered the online version of the project's text after being criticized for calling 1619 the nation's "true founding." The project's editors have responded by saying the changes were immaterial, because the idea that 1619 was the "true founding" was never meant to be taken literally. "We know this nation marks its founding at 1776," wrote Hannah-Jones. The "true founding" phrase was "always a metaphoric argument." New York Times Magazine editor-in-chief Jake Silverstein repeated this defense in an article days ago: The year 1619 was always meant as "a metaphor," he wrote. Whatever errors the editors may have committed, the project's "'core premises' remain unshaken."

But this defense misses the point entirely. Obviously the "true founding" claim was always a metaphor, because all foundings are metaphors. Like a corporation, an athletic team, or a social club, a nation is a theoretical or imaginative institution—which means its origin is necessarily spoken of in metaphor, ritual, and symbolism. We typically speak of promises in metaphorical terms for the same reason we use poetic terms to speak of love: because they are made of words, and only the language of reverence can give those words any power to compel.

In seeking to debunk American principles, the 1619 authors were led to ignore history, to disregard some of its most moving and revealing aspects, and, most importantly, to distort the metaphors whereby we became, and continue to become, "one people." Thus to speak of America's "founding" at all is necessarily to speak of what makes Americans a "people." When Abraham Lincoln said that the nation was "conceived in liberty" and when, a century later, Martin

Luther King referred to the Declaration as America's "promissory note," they were speaking in metaphor. And when the Times writers insisted to the contrary that America was conceived not in liberty but in slavery, they, too, were obviously speaking in metaphor. For Hannah-Jones and Silverstein to accuse their critics of being overly literal is therefore to set up a straw man. Their metaphor was always the source of the dispute. The question the 1619 Project posed was whether the American nation should be viewed as having its genesis not in the Declaration of Independence, with its covenants of equality and liberty, but in a commercial transaction for human flesh.

But for one metaphor to be more fruitful than another requires that it provide a better explanation for the subject in question. And the 1619 metaphor failed this test not because it got the dates wrong, but because its effort to frame the question in (literally) black and white terms essentially required ignoring large swaths of American history. America is not, and never has been, a simple dichotomy of black versus white, any more than it falls into the tidy dichotomy of exploiter and exploited, oppressor and oppressed. Instead, its conceiving principle—that each individual is of infinite value and has a right to pursue his or her own happiness in peace—has manifested itself in far more complicated ways, resulting in far more interesting human stories of triumph, treachery, loss, and victory, than is dreamt of in any effort to portray American history as "us" versus "them."

Many other minority groups have faced mistreatment, including the indigenous population, who were enslaved by the conquistadores or employed in ways tantamount to enslavement. But none of this was mentioned in the 1619 Project articles, which apparently means their history can be ignored. The fashionable term for this is "erasing," and it's easy to see why she did it: The "reframing" that the 1619 Project attempted is rooted in an ideology that views America's political-economic foundation—that is, capitalism—as not just tainted by racism, but actually designed to immiserate minorities and enrich those on top.

According to this worldview, racism is not a bug, but a feature of American institutions. But that binary narrative collapses in light of the struggles, and especially the successes, of countless Americans of all races who have found this country to be a refuge and a land of opportunity.

More generally, it ignores the fact that the racial conflicts that have plagued American history are far from unique to the United States. Slavery, too, is ubiquitous in mankind's past; it may, in fact, be the oldest human institution after the family. What was unique about America was that its founding marked the very first time that a nation was expressly founded on principles incompatible with slavery.

Had the Times set out to tell that story—to celebrate the struggles of Americans whose ancestors were once excluded and exploited, and whose victories are still too little known—things might have turned out differently. But that idea clashed with project's larger thesis that capitalism is inherently exploitative, and that "anti-black racism" is the real nucleus of American nationhood.

All of this matters beyond history classrooms, thousands of which are now teaching curricula based on the 1619 Project, because the metaphors we find persuasive about the nation's identity say something not just about the nation's past, but about ourselves. To adopt the 1619 metaphor instead of 1776 or 1868 means to accept a particular understanding of the nature of Americanness—one profoundly contrary to that expressed in both the nation's founding and re-founding documents. For some, in fact, it means a commitment to the proposition that commitments are meaningless in any event. Such nihilism is the logical consequence of a certain conception of what America stands for—one that regards the nation as pledged to oppression, not liberation.

To the extent that the 1619 Project caused Americans to learn more about black history, and to view the civil rights struggles of past generations in light of the American covenants of liberty, it has served an honorable purpose. But it accomplished this only to the degree that readers "repulsed" the metaphor that the project offered. Everything, in fact, that makes America great originates in the fact that Americans do not take the sale of human property in August 1619 as the source of their nationhood—that, on the contrary, they are disgusted by what doing so would say about their nation.

1. Sandefur states that the 1619 Project distorts the founding metaphor of the United States. What does he mean by this statement?
2. Why does Sandefur feel the 1619 Project's metaphor about our nation's founding fails?
3. Why does Sandefur think it is notable that other minority groups have suffered mistreatment in the U.S. but this fact was not discussed in the 1619 Project?
4. Why does Sandefur believe adopting the metaphor of the 1619 Project runs contrary to the founding ideals? Do you agree with his conclusion? Explain your answer.

Slavery, Rights, and the Meaning of the American Revolution

By Jack D. Warren, Jr.
June 16, 2020

In the lead essay of the “1619 Project,” Nikole Hannah-Jones claims that the American Revolution was fought to perpetuate slavery and that the nation’s founding ideals were a fraud. She couldn’t be more wrong. The American Revolution secured the independence of the United States from Britain, established a republic, created our national identity and committed the new nation to ideals of liberty, equality, natural and civil rights, and responsible citizenship that have defined our history and will shape our future and that of the world.

Committing the new nation to the principle of natural rights—the idea that people possess certain rights inherent in the human condition—was the achievement on which the others depended. That commitment was the foundation for the long campaign to end slavery and to secure the rights of all Americans. The American Revolution didn’t perpetuate slavery. It set slavery on the path to extinction.

This idea—the idea that all people possess what we call natural rights—is so fundamental to us that we find it hard to imagine a time when it was not widely accepted. But in the third quarter of the eighteenth century this idea was just beginning to gain acceptance.

The idea that Africans, free or slave, possessed rights depended on a theory of natural rights—of rights inherent in the human condition rather than the possession of a particular people, won through their historical experience. The idea that all people possess certain fundamental rights seems obvious to us, because we live in a world in which the idea has wide assent, but it was, as late as 1770, a theoretical construct. No government acknowledged the existence of natural rights. The American Revolutionaries were the first to apply it to the construction of governments.

Principled opposition to slavery, which had previously been expressed by a few, mostly on religious grounds, grew with the development and spread of natural rights theory. Many well-read people in England, and well-read Americans like Benjamin Franklin, were growing uncomfortable with slavery in the last years before the American war.

It is not surprising that the people in England who were most uncomfortable with slavery tended to be vocal defenders of American rights and supporters of the American cause, even during our War for Independence against Britain. They did not see, as Hannah-Jones does, the Revolution as a movement fomented by slaveowners to defend their human property.

The war forced Americans to reconsider the nature of government authority and to embrace natural rights as the proper basis of government. This was a truly and deeply radical moment in world history. It changed what had been, up to that moment, a regional dispute about legal rights under English law into a revolution in favor of an entirely new theory of rights and consequently a wholly new foundation for government.

Hannah-Jones’ claim 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” is not supported by the evidence. Seven months after the Times published this astonishing assertion,

the editors changed it to read “some of the colonists decided.” But the difference between “the colonists” and “some of the colonists” is not a matter of nuance or context. It’s a distinction between truth and falsehood.

In fact, both statements are false. No evidence has been advanced to support the claim that anyone supported independence because they feared for the future of their slave property. Hannah-Jones’ contention is based on the false belief that the British Empire—in which slavery was the basis of enormous wealth—was somehow less congenial to slavery than Revolutionary America. Both depended on slave labor, but an American slave owner who looked with concern at the earliest development of antislavery sentiment in England was surely as disturbed by the early development of antislavery sentiment in the revolutionary American states. It seems logical that any slave owners who were concerned by the earliest anti-slavery thought should have rejected the American Revolution and its basis in natural rights theory.

The British did not abolish slavery in their empire earlier than the United States because they were more humane than Americans. The difference in timing was driven by the market. The power of the West Indian sugar interest declined precipitously along with the price of sugar in the 1820s. Slavery was abolished in the empire in 1833.

In the United States, principled anti-slavery sentiment could not overcome the tobacco and rice planters’ dependence on slave labor and achieve the abolition of slavery in America during the Revolution or its aftermath, and this proved to be a tragedy of incalculable proportions that led to suffering and death for millions of African Americans for generations, and millions of white Americans in the Civil War. Despite growing repugnance for slavery, little effort was made to abolish slavery at a national level. Many Revolutionary leaders, whether slave owners like George Washington or James Madison or opponents of slavery like John Jay or Alexander Hamilton, believed that an attempt to end slavery by federal law would endanger the fragile union of the states. Benjamin Franklin was willing to risk that, and in his last public act, just two months before his death, he signed a petition asking Congress to abolish slavery in the United States.

Washington and Madison both seem to have expected slavery to decline as the economy changed in the states where slaves were most numerous. Tobacco appeared to Washington and other observers like a staple crop without much future. They did not imagine that cotton—a minor crop previously restricted, like rice, to a narrow coastal region—would race across the South and create a demand for enslaved people comparable only to the insatiable demand of the West Indian sugar plantations. The unexpected invention of a simple machine to remove the seeds made it profitable in bulk and doomed unborn generations to the brute labor of planting, cultivating and harvesting it. Growing demand for cheap textiles drove the mills of the industrial revolution.

For all of the good the Revolutionaries did—securing our independence, creating the first modern republic, knitting together the fragile union and creating our national identity, and committing the new nation to ideals of liberty, equality, civil rights and citizenship based on the revolutionary implementation of the idea of natural rights—their failure to dismantle slavery will forever haunt their memory as it has stalked our history.

But it does not convict them of hypocrisy. Indeed, Hannah-Jones makes no effort to explain why a revolution she claims was founded on a desire to retain slave property should have, quite perversely, adopted a political philosophy of natural rights so utterly antithetical to slavery. That philosophy, after painful decades of political struggle and decades of human suffering, led to the

abolition of slavery and to the drive to secure the personal liberty, legal equality and civil rights denied to African Americans. The revolutionary commitment to natural rights is, in the final analysis, the foundation upon which Hannah-Jones' own outrage rests.

The American Revolution did not perpetuate racial hatred and oppression. It challenged a world that was profoundly unfree. The principle of natural rights asserted by the Revolution led ultimately to the overthrow of slavery and now challenges every form of oppression, exploitation, bigotry and injustice. The American Revolution was the most important moment in modern history, and its ideals are still the last, best hope of our world, where too many are still denied their natural rights.

1. According to Jack Warren, what commitment made by the Founding Fathers led to the abolition of slavery in America?
2. What proof does Warren provide that Hannah Jones claim that "one of the primary reasons some of the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery" is false?
3. What economic develpoments led to the abolition of slavery in Great Britain but led to its expansion in the United States?
4. Why does Warren beleive that the Framers were not hypocrites in advocating for natural rights but failing to dismantle slavery?
5. How does Warren believe the concept of natural rights helped abolish slavery?