

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. It deeply embarrassed me. I had been taught, in school, through cultural osmosis, that the flag wasn’t really ours, that our history as a people began with enslavement and that we had contributed little to this great nation. It seemed that the closest thing black Americans could have to cultural pride was to be found in our vague connection to Africa, a place we had never been. That my dad felt so much honor in being an American felt like a marker of his degradation, his acceptance of our subordination.

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. Through back-breaking labor, they cleared the land across the Southeast. They taught the colonists to grow rice. They grew and picked the cotton that at the height of slavery was the nation's most valuable commodity, accounting for half of all American exports and 66 percent of the world's supply.

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. They built vast fortunes for white people North and South — at one time, the second-richest man in the nation was a Rhode Island “slave trader.” Profits from black people's stolen labor helped the young nation pay off its war debts and financed some of our most prestigious universities. 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.

1. Why was Hannah-Jones originally ashamed of her father's patriotism and flying of the American flag?
2. What event occurred in 1619 that is the subject of this essay?
3. The slave trade to the West Indies from west Africa began in the early 1500s and the slave trade to Virginia and other American colonies did not begin until the 1660s. Why do you think the author and many historians focus on the year 1619 in particular?

4. In your opinion, is the year 1619 as important to the American founding as 1776 as suggested by Hannah-Jones? Explain your answer.
5. List three things slave labor helped build in America.
6. What does the author mean by the phrase “America was founded on both an ideal and a lie?”
7. In what ways were the rights of slaves reduced or taken away entirely in colonial America?
8. Why does the author feel that America would not be a democracy at all today without the contribution of Black Americans?
9. Do you agree that Black Americans are as much the true “founding fathers” of America as the signers of the Declaration of Independence and the drafters of the Constitution? Explain your answer.

Now read an excerpt from: The Founders Were Flawed. The Nation Is Imperfect. The Constitution Is Still a 'Glorious Liberty Document.'

As part of its ambitious “1619” inquiry into the legacy of slavery, The New York Times revives false 19th century revisionist history about the American founding.

By TIMOTHY SANDEFUR | 8.21.2019 11:00 AM

Across the map of the United States, the borders of Tennessee, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Arizona draw a distinct line. It's the 36°30' line, a remnant of the boundary between free and slave states drawn in 1820. It is a scar across the belly of America, and a vivid symbol of the ways in which slavery still touches nearly every facet of American history.

That pervasive legacy is the subject of a series of articles in The New York Times titled "The 1619 Project." To cover the history of slavery and its modern effects is certainly a worthy goal, and much of the Project achieves that goal effectively. Where the 1619 articles go wrong is in a persistent and off-key theme: an effort to prove that slavery "is the country's very origin," that slavery is the source of "nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional," and that, in Hannah-Jones's words, the founders "used" "racist ideology" "at the nation's founding." In this, the Times steps beyond history and into political polemic—one based on a falsehood and that in an essential way, repudiates the work of countless people of all races who have believed that what makes America "exceptional" is the proposition that all men are created equal.

For one thing, the idea that, in Hannah-Jones' words, the "white men" who wrote the Declaration of Independence "did not believe" its words applied to black people is simply false. John Adams, James Madison, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and others said at the time that the doctrine of equality rendered slavery anathema. True, Jefferson also wrote the infamous passages suggesting that "the blacks...are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind," but he thought even that was irrelevant to the question of slavery's immorality. "Whatever be their degree of talent," Jefferson wrote, "it is no measure of their rights."

The myth that America was premised on slavery took off in the 1830s, not the 1770s. That was when John C. Calhoun, Alexander Stephens, George Fitzhugh, and others offered a new vision of America—one that either disregarded the facts of history to portray the founders as white supremacists, or denounced them for not being so. Calhoun scorned the Declaration precisely because it made no color distinctions. "There

is not a word of truth in it," wrote Calhoun. People are "in no sense...either free or equal." Indiana Sen. John Pettit was even more succinct. The Declaration, he said, was "a self-evident lie."

It was these men—the generation after the founding—who manufactured the myth of American white supremacy. They did so against the opposition of such figures as Lincoln, Charles Sumner, Frederick Douglass, and John Quincy Adams. Yet their work is never discussed in the Times articles.

The Constitution contains no legal protection for slavery, and doesn't even use the word. The founders had called slavery both evil and inconsistent with their principles; they forbade the slave trade and tried to ban it in the territories; nothing in the Declaration or the Constitution established a color line; in fact, when the Constitution was ratified, black Americans were citizens in several states and could even vote. The founders deserved blame for not doing more, but the idea that they were white supremacists, said Douglass, was "a slander upon their memory."

Even some abolitionists embraced the white supremacy legend. William Lloyd Garrison denounced the Constitution because he believed it protected slavery. This, Douglass replied, was false both legally and factually: those who claimed it was pro-slavery had the burden of proof—yet they never offered any. The Constitution's wording gave it no guarantees and provided plentiful means for abolishing it.

Still, after the war, "Lost Cause" historians rehabilitated the Confederate vision, claiming the Constitution was a racist document, so that the legend remains today. The United States, writes Hannah-Jones, "was founded...as a slavocracy," and the Constitution "preserved and protected slavery."

The reality is more complex, more dreadful, and, in some ways, more glorious. It was precisely because millions of Americans have never bought the notion that America was built as a slavocracy—and have had historical grounds for that denial—that they were willing to lay their lives on the line, not only in the 1860s but ever since, to make good on the promissory note of the Declaration. Slavery certainly happened—but so, too, did the abolitionist movement and the ratification of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. The authors of those amendments viewed them not as changing the Constitution, but as rescuing it from mythmakers who had tried to pervert it into a white supremacist document.

In fact, it would be more accurate to say that what makes America unique isn't slavery but the effort to abolish it. Slavery is among the oldest and most ubiquitous of all human institutions. What's unique about America is that it alone announced at birth the principle that all men are created equal—and that its people have struggled to realize that principle since then. As a result of their efforts, the Constitution today has much more to do with what happened in 1865 than in 1776, let alone 1619. Nothing could be more worthwhile than learning slavery's history, and remembering its victims and vanquishers. But to claim that America's essence is white supremacy is to swallow slavery's fatal lie. As usual, Lincoln said it best. When the founders wrote of equality, he explained, they knew they had "no power to confer such a boon" at that instant. But that was not their purpose. Instead, they "set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere." That constant labor, in the generations that followed, is the true source of "nearly everything that has truly made America exceptional."

1. In what way does Timothy Sandefeur think that the 1619 Project went astray?
2. What proof does he provide that Hannah-Jones' assertion that the Founders did not believe the words of the Declaration is false?
3. When does he believe the myth that America was premised on slavery and White supremacy began to be perpetuated?
4. What in Sandefeur's view makes America unique?
5. Hannah-Jones asserts that the Founding Fathers did not believe the phrase "all men are created equal" was true for 1/3 of the population. Sandefeur disagrees. Whose assessment do you think is more accurate? Cite two pieces of evidence to support your opinion.
6. Whose assertion about the intellectual founding of America do you find more persuasive--Sandefeur's or Hannah-Jones'? Cite two pieces of evidence from the articles or other material you've read about the founding of America to support your conclusion.

Third, read this Excerpt from “The Case for Black Patriotism.”

An African-American economics professor looks at the United States and sees the greatest force for human liberty on the planet.

Glenn C. Loury

Spring 2021 The Social Order

Editor’s note: The following is an edited version of a lecture delivered in a webinar at Arizona State University’s School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership on February 1, 2021.

There is a fashionable standoffishness characteristic of much elite thinking about blacks’ relationship to America—as exemplified, for instance, by the New York Times’s 1619 Project. Does this posture serve the interests, rightly understood, of black Americans? I think that it does not.

Indeed, a case can be made that the correct narrative to adopt today is one of unabashed black patriotism—a forthright embrace of American nationalism by black people. Black Americans’ birthright citizenship in what is arguably history’s greatest republic is an inheritance of immense value. My answer for black Americans to Frederick Douglass’s famous question—“Whose Fourth of July?”—is, “Ours!”

Is this an immoral and rapacious bandit-society of plundering white supremacists, founded in genocide and slavery and propelled by capitalist greed, or a good country that affords boundless opportunity to all fortunate enough to enjoy the privileges and bear the responsibilities of citizenship? Of course, there is some warrant in the historical record for both sentiments, but the weight of the evidence overwhelmingly favors the latter.

African slavery flourished at the time of the Founding, true enough. And yet, within a century of the Founding, slavery was gone and people who had been chattel became citizens of the United States of America. Not equal citizens, not at first. That took another century. But African-descended Americans became, in the fullness of time, equal citizens of this republic.

Our democracy, flawed as it most surely is, nevertheless became a beacon to billions of people throughout what came to be known as the “free world.” We have witnessed here in America, since the end of the Civil War, the greatest transformation in the status of a

serfdom people (which is, in effect, what blacks became after emancipation) to be found anywhere in world history.

This narrative of human liberty begins in the incredible trauma of the Civil War, with more than 600,000 dead in a country of 30 million. Some say that the war wasn't fought to end slavery; it was fought to preserve the union. Lincoln, they say, would have been happy to see the union preserved even if slavery had persisted. I expect that this is correct, though he surely abhorred slavery. But the fact remains that the consequence of that war was, together with the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, to make the chattel—the African slaves and their descendants—into citizens.

It shouldn't have taken 100 years; they shouldn't have been slaves in the first place. True enough. But slavery had been a commonplace human experience since antiquity. Emancipation—the freeing of slaves en masse, the movement for abolition—that was a new idea. A Western idea. The fruit of Enlightenment. An idea that was brought to fruition over a century and a half ago here, in the United States of America, liberating millions of people and creating the world we now inhabit.

Slavery was a holocaust out of which emerged something that actually advanced the morality and the dignity of humankind—namely, emancipation. The abolition of slavery and the incorporation of Africa-descended people into the body politic of the United States of America was an unprecedented achievement.

To those, like the influential writer Ta-Nehisi Coates, who dismiss the American dream as irrelevant to blacks or worse, I would ask, “Have you noticed what has happened here in the United States in the last century?” In 1944, the modal occupation for African-American men was farm laborer, and the typical occupation of African-American women was domestic servant. The median family income of blacks relative to whites was about 50 percent. The status of African-American education, voting rights and citizenship, and access to the professions was abysmal. This is within my lifetime.

In the last 75 years, a vast black middle class has developed. There are black billionaires. The influence of black people on the culture of America is stunning and has global resonance. Some 40 million strong, black Americans are the richest and most powerful population of African descent on the planet. There are 200 million Nigerians, and the gross national product of Nigeria is just about \$1 trillion per year. America's GNP is over \$20 trillion a year, and we 40 million African-Americans have claim to roughly 10 percent of it. We have access to ten times the income of a typical Nigerian.

The central issue, then, is a question of narrative. Are we going to look through the dark lens of the U.S. as a racist, genocidal, white supremacist, illegitimate force? Or are we going to see it for what it has become over the course of the last three centuries: the greatest force for human liberty on the planet? The narrative we blacks settle upon about the American project is fundamentally important to our nation's future.

1. What is Professor Loury's answer to Frederick Douglass's question "Whose Fourth of July is it?"
2. What does Professor Loury believe is the greatest legacy of the Civil War?
3. Why does Professor Loury believe Blacks should have national pride in America?
4. How does this view contrast with Hannah-Jones' belief (expressed in the "Idea of America") as to why her father flew the American flag so proudly? What additional reasons (besides pride in the contributions of Black Americans) could Hannah-Jones' father have had for proudly displaying the American flag despite experiencing racism and inequality?
5. What evidence does Professor Loury provide for this idea that Black Americans should take pride in America?
6. What does Professor Loury believe is the central issue as to how the United States should be perceived? Which viewpoint do you think he adopts? Explain your answer.