

Who Made America?
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Readings

From Isaiah, chapter 58

Is not this the fast that I choose:
To loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house?

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,

You shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.

From the *1619 Project: A New Origin Story*, by Nikole Hannah-Jones

What happened in 1619 [when the first enslaved Africans were brought to this land], the tragic origin story unveiled throughout this book, set in motion the defining struggle of American life, between freedom and oppression, equality and racism, between the lofty ideals of democracy and the fight to make them real. We must confront the four-hundred-year war between those opposing forces, and then we must make a choice about which America we want to build for tomorrow. The time for slogans and symbolism and inconsequential actions has long passed. Citizens inherit not just the glory of their nation but its wrongs too. A truly great country does not ignore or excuse its sins. It confronts them, and then works to make them right.

If we are to be redeemed, we must do what is just: we must, finally, live up to the magnificent ideals upon which we were founded.

Sermon

Who made America?

Well, many hands of course made the United States of America, our nation: Indigenous hands, Black and brown hands, white hands, hands of those born here, hands of those who arrived from elsewhere, whether by choice or by force.

But the way our nation's history has more often than not been taught, certainly the history I was taught in school growing up, centers the hands of the European colonists and the so-called founding fathers of the Revolutionary War generation – extraordinary men... and mostly slaveholders; centers the hands of Lincoln – an extraordinary president who “freed the slaves” and who didn't quite believe in the full human equality of those same women and men even when they were, at least on paper, free.

Yet we know and of course should be more often taught that those first English settlers in this part of the world, for example, may not have even survived were it not for the Wompanoag, Massachusetts, Nipmuc, and other first nations people who taught them some of the ways of this land – land which the colonists thought of as wilderness, whereas those who had been here for millennia knew this land as home.

And we know and of course should be more often taught that without the enslaved hands and strong backs of millions of enslaved Africans, the wealth of our nation that “we” now enjoy (though radically unequally shared) would not have been possible.

Instead, we are taught, if we are taught much at all about slavery, that yes, it was a terrible sin, inflicted much suffering, but that it ended with the end of the Civil War... and now everyone is free. All because of the ideals, the wisdom, and the generosity of the Founding Fathers, of Lincoln, of white abolitionists.

That suffering amidst slavery? Too easily glossed over and diminished in collective white minds and standard public school curricula. But not so easily diminished, much less forgotten, by those whose ancestors were the ones who had suffered... amidst the separation of families... the slave patrols... the torture of any enslaved person who dared to revolt or question... the brutal working conditions, for example from first light to last on plantations better named, as Nikole Hannah-Jones does in her book, forced labor camps.... And so on.

Hannah-Jones writes:

School curricula generally treat slavery as an aberration in a free society, and textbooks largely ignore the way that many prominent men, women, industries, and institutions profited from and protected slavery. Individual enslaved people, as full humans, with feelings, thoughts, and agency, remain largely invisible, but for the occasional brief mention of Douglass or Tubman or George Washington Carver.

And yes, too easy to forget as well – at least for some of us – that the institution of slavery was baked into the Constitution, quite contradicting the ideal of equality in Jefferson's Declaration of Independence as well as in the preamble to the Constitution itself.

Good news, though, is that Jefferson himself was deeply aware, though not aware enough, of the contradiction, apparently somehow holding on to the ideal, putting it into words in our founding documents, even as he also held on to those human beings he enslaved.

Even so, good news, since the best, highest ideals within the words of the Declaration and the Constitution still ring and still call us to the best we can be as a nation in the midst of continuing systemic racism and inequality.

At the March on Washington in 1963 Martin Luther King, Jr., in words still relevant almost sixty years later, referenced those words of equality when he affirmed that those gathered were there to “cash a check” – what he called the “promissory note to which every American was to fall heir... a promise that all men – yes, black men as well as white men – would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

But then King went on to declare that America “had defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned.”

Indeed, he said that America had issued a “bad check which has come back marked insufficient funds.”

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

And... after all... who did make America? Yes, all those hands of many colors when it came to the economic development, including the hands of the millions enslaved Africans, for better and worse, of our nation.

But when it comes to the ideals of freedom and equality about which we are so proud? Well, yes, it was white hands that wrote the words in our founding documents, a white hand that signed the Emancipation, white hands that wrote the words of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution which formally abolished slavery.

But whose hands and hearts have time and time again been at the forefront of the continuing struggle to bring the ideals in all these documents to fuller life? Whether in the midst of slavery, in the midst of the segregation and lynchings of Jim Crow, or in the midst of the continuing and in all too many ways now rising legacy of systemic racism in its many forms?

Yes, of course whites have been part of that work, but as Nikole Hannah-Jones wrote in her concluding essay in *The 1619 Project*:

The efforts of Black Americans to seek freedom through resistance and rebellion against violations of their rights have always been one of this nation’s defining traditions...

Though we are seldom taught this fact, time after time throughout our history, the most ardent, courageous, and consistent freedom fighters *within* this country have been Black Americans.

Hannah-Jones goes on to lift up example after example: The various and many rebellions of enslaved people against their white oppressors. The many free Blacks who were among the leaders of antebellum abolitionism. An Ida B. Wells, the late 19th century journalist and educator “who with her fiery pen condemned lynching and violent and legal efforts by white Southerners to deny newly freed Black Americans the vote.” And we see it in 20th century Black academics, writers, activists, and preachers from W.E.B. Debois, to Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, of course to Dr. King, and most recently, to the leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement and the Black Voters Matter movement.

The list is long.

But if we want to honestly answer the question “Who made America?” we need to name, with deepest gratitude, those who have had every reason to give up on the American dream of genuine equality and freedom, but who haven’t, who instead have consistently and courageously led the rest of us in the struggle.

Who made America? Yes, hands of many colors, souls from many cultures, yet more often than not led by our Black fellow citizens, as together we weave the continuing story of the struggle for freedom and equality – even, especially, in the midst of rising racism – with hands and hearts, with poetry and music, with unflagging spirit and energy.

May we, all of us in this land of high though as yet not fully realized ideals, continue, each in our own way, to be part of the journey towards Dr. King’s promised land, beloved community, of true freedom for all.

May it always be so.